

When is a Clock

Matthew Freeman

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



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WHEN IS A CLOCK was first produced by Blue Coyote theater Group (Kyle Ancowitz, Robert Buckwalter, Gary Schaefer, Stephen Speights) at the Access Theater in New York City on April 15, 2008. The performance was directed by Kyle Ancowitz, with sets by Robert Monaco, lighting by Daniel Meeker, and sound by Brandon Wolcott. The cast was as follows:

- GORDON** Tom Staggs
- BRONWYN** Tracey Gilbert
- ALEX** Beau Allulli
- SEAN** Ian Gould
- CAROLINE** Laura Desmond
- COP** David DelGrosso
- LUCY** Megan Tusing
- CALDWELL** Matthew Trumbull

CHARACTERS

GORDON - a middle aged man

BRONWYN - a middle aged woman

ALEX - Gordon and Bronwyn's son

SEAN - who owns a bookstore in Cornersville

CAROLINE - a co-worker of Gordon's

COP - a Cop

LUCY - a young woman

CALDWELL - a co-worker of Gordon's

SETTING

Various settings, some real, some imaginary, in Pennsylvania

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The text of *WHEN IS A CLOCK* was aided immeasurably by the dedication, insight and passion of Blue Coyote Theater Group; especially Kyle Ancowitz, director of the original production.

My thanks and love to Pam, whose eclectic tastes inspired much of this play's magic.

My apologies to Pennsylvania, where I was born, raised, and learned to love the theater.

(Lights rise on GORDON, in his late forties or early fifties. He is not particularly hearty, and not particularly harmless. He speaks to us. He's puzzling it through, for us.)

GORDON. I bloom. I molt. I get well. I get ill.

(pause)

My skin, when unattached, becomes dust. This dust is what my wife, when we were married, would clean from my shirts with soaps that, were I to drink, would kill me. After all that, I wore the shirts, then clean, and my skin came off all over them. With a little wind in the right places, the skin wound up attached to bookshelves, to the television set, to the floor. Everyone in my house would sneeze. I would check the pollen count in the spring, and blame flowers...just because I couldn't keep myself from shedding.

(pause)

One morning there was a book sitting on my wife's bed-side table. The book was by a writer from Oregon, who had driven around the country in a VW Bus in the 1970s. The bookmark seemed rather deep into the book.

(pause)

She had read almost the entire book, according to the green bookmark, without my having seen the book once. It also had no library card. It also had no dust jacket. So she had gotten from a flea market. Maybe. Maybe. Or she had borrowed it from someone. Maybe. Maybe.

(pause)

The book's binding was grey, the bookmark green. The bookmark, which I still have...

(He produces it, reads it to us:)

Prima Materia Books. There is no full address, only the name of a town. The town of Cornersville. No state. No giveaway.

(He turns to BRONWYN, his wife.)

Prima Materia Books?

BRONWYN. Hand that over.

GORDON. Where's Cornersville?

BRONWYN. Why? Are you taking a day trip?

GORDON. Is it somewhere I could drive?

BRONWYN. Depends on how much gas you have in the tank. Now give me my book.

GORDON. Is that where you got this book?

BRONWYN. No.

(pause)

I'm borrowing it. The bookmark was in it when I borrowed it.

(pause)

I'm almost finished with it, though. So I can give it back. So please give it back.

(She holds out her hand.)

GORDON. *(to the audience)* The things I didn't say include:

"Who are you borrowing it from?"

"Why didn't I notice this book before?"

"How long have you had it?"

"Is it any good?"

I won't say, for certain, that I should have asked these things. I simply know that I didn't ask these things. I just gave her the book. A week later...she was gone and did not come back.

(SEAN appears.)

SEAN. Is there some reason you're just standing in front of my house?

GORDON. Is this your house?

SEAN. We've established that it isn't *your* house.

GORDON. So we have.

SEAN. Yes.

GORDON. And I'm standing in front of your house.

SEAN. Yes.

GORDON. Do other people live in your house?

SEAN. No.

GORDON. And there are no other houses around?

SEAN. Right.

GORDON. So why are we keeping our voices down?

(- to the audience -)

That house was in Cornersville. There is one house there that I found. And a barber. The grocery store, such as it is, is actually outside the town limits. It's barely a town. If not for the factory. They make copper wire. It's an industry that's being destroyed by fiber wire. But there you have it.

(pause)

Strictly speaking...there must have been more houses there. More people. Hidden, as one might say, in the brush. I never saw those other houses. Never saw those other people. Nevertheless, there may have been, or must have been, homes to be found in Cornersville besides that one, beside the factory, on Route 33, in front of a creek, just at the bottom of an incline.

BRONWYN. *(to GORDON)* What is completely satisfactory to me, completely, is the way in which you comb your hair. That's the best part of you. You comb it in this very organized way.

GORDON. *(to BRONWYN)* It never looks organized by the end of it.

BRONWYN. It would look like you were vain, if you were vain. But you're not vain. You just do it the way you know how to do it.

GORDON. My friend Jim, in Junior High, used two combs. Straight down each side, with a little gel.

BRONWYN. You know what I like about you? You're not Jim.

GORDON. Jim was a card. Never had much luck.

BRONWYN. When I was a little girl, I thought to myself, "I like a man who combs his hair."

GORDON. I comb my hair.

BRONWYN. We're star-crossed.

GORDON. I spit on brushes. My comb is my bond.

BRONWYN. How could I have known, when we met, that this could be so perfect?

GORDON. *(to the audience)* Connections between us were often uncovered this way. She was addicted to those little points where we were drawn together. Those synchronicities. She used to hate it when I would call us magnets, because magnets repel one another. She would say that I was iron and she was a magnet. That description, as a metaphor, felt better to say when we were in bed. It wasn't apt. In the long run, and the short run, and when standing still, it wasn't apt.

(pause)

You might well ask me, if you were the one speaking, why I so clearly remember the afternoon that my wife disappeared. Because time, for all its faults, is essentially the way we see things change. We barely notice it when things don't change.

(GORDON sits at a desk. CAROLINE, a co-worker, approaches. She's around his age. Their banter is automatic, dispassionate.)

CAROLINE. Thirty three. That's the figure, and they say "Take it or leave it."

GORDON. Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke.

CAROLINE. Exactly! Exactly. Now, what Jim said...you know Jim?

GORDON. The one from downstairs?

CAROLINE. Jim on Eight.

GORDON. So upstairs.

CAROLINE. Right. Jim on Eight. He said that we should take thirty-three, and just thank them for it and call it a day. He said if we get the contract then we'll have thirty-three now and that pretty much guarantees that we'll have a long future and more opportunities to hit higher numbers.

GORDON. Like ninety.

CAROLINE. Sure. Or seventy.

GORDON. Ninety hits the goal.

CAROLINE. Seventy is in line with projections.

GORDON. Thirty-three is nothing. I spit on it. I find it insulting. What would Jim say to that?

CAROLINE. He'd say think long-term.

GORDON. Between you and me. Between us. Between me and you. The problem with long-term thinking is that it tends to compromise the immediate victory. For example, we could absolutely, absolutely hit forty tomorrow if we asked for it. Especially if we mentioned seventy as what was projected. They're throwing thirty-three at us because they're expecting us to think long-term. What if we said "Fuck 'long-term.'" Right now, we expect seventy." They'll give us forty.

CAROLINE. Hey, don't look at me. I don't work on Eight. That's their whole job. Can't expect them to do less than their job, can you? No. Not at all. They aren't allowed to think like we do, because they'd be fired for thinking like we do. Our job is to look at thirty-three and get insulted. Their job is to think about ninety in ten years. Somewhere in the middle we get sixty or seventy. But if it was just us or just them...what would it be? Chaos. That's why I stick to my department and so does Jim. Still though. Thirty-three? The wrong fucking way. Like all sane human beings, we piss upon it with our skirts up.

GORDON. If I were to order Thai, would you...

CAROLINE. Hell yes.

GORDON. Where is the bitch with the menus?

CAROLINE. That's downstairs Jim.

GORDON. I'm going to get coconut lime soup. That is what I get.

CAROLINE. I hate it when you get that. That's revolting.

GORDON. I know. I know you hate it.

CAROLINE. You're talking to a gal that gives deeper throat than Watergate and that shit makes me gag.

GORDON. You know what makes me gag? Jim. I spit on Jim. I spit on all men named Jim. When I was a kid, I had a friend named Jim who would comb his hair with two combs.

CAROLINE. Was he retarded?

GORDON. No. No, he was just trying to be unique.

CAROLINE. So he's in jail now, right?

(pause)

GORDON. Yes, he's in jail now.

(Elsewhere, BRONWYN and SEAN, not long ago.)

BRONWYN. I'll go to jail.

SEAN. You'd never get caught. It works like this. You change. They see you, they say "Oh, how beautiful." They give us the money. You go, you stay, and when no one's looking...you come home to me.

BRONWYN. Then we do it all over again.

SEAN. Exactly.

BRONWYN. How many times?

SEAN. Until we've had enough. Until we've got enough.

(pause)

Until we're finished. Until you've had enough.

(GORDON continues speaking to the audience.)

GORDON. When I got home that afternoon, I found my son eating Campbell's Soup directly out the can, without

even heating it up. He sucked soup into his mouth like an anteater at an anthill.

(Lights on ALEX, Gordon's son.)

ALEX. Jesus Christ. Jesus Motherfucking Christ. One of the nuns today went off. She just went insane. Fucking shit she went insane. Ok, ok, ok, so we're just standing outside and Sister Ashkelon comes out and tells us that Saint George had milk for blood. Ok, yes. Good. We're listening because we have no choice, right? Then she says that the dragon that Saint George supposedly slays actually represents a pagan cult. And that Saint George was a Roman who fought in Turkey. Ok, whatever. Why tell us all this, right? What's the fucking point?

(pause)

Then she, right, she starts to tell us that there's this rated R version of it. That basically the dragon was offered a princess as a human sacrifice because if she doesn't get fed to him, then they can't have water in this town for whatever reason. And it's like 2 A.D., right? So they can't think of things to do to fix it. So they're like, "Short straw, Princess. Down the dragon's gullet."

(pause)

So this soldier named George shows up from the Roman Army and he says, "You know what dragons dig? Tits." He takes off the Princess's bra, and then wraps it around the dragon's head and this whole thing hypnotizes the dragon and he winds up like, enchanted by her boob nets.

(pause)

Groovy. Then, right...this soldier leads the dragon back into town and what does he do? He totally shows off. He's like, "Take a gander, fellows and fellowladies. I am going to kill this totally zombified dragon, because I know how to handle a D cup." And then he kills the Dragon in the town square and everyone, I don't know,

dances in its blood like Caligula and all that fun stuff. *This* is the story she tells us. This story about tits and stabbing stuff.

(pause)

Here's the obvious question. Should I whip it out for this nun? Because it appears as if she wants to get nailed.

GORDON. I ask him where his mother is. His lips, thin like mine, seemed unable to move in any direction useful, slaves to the whims of his head. I watch him and know that it was my genetic code that made him so uncontrollably idiotic. I also knew that, unlike my Father, I was soft and was raising my son as soft. My son would be unable to keep any job that was difficult, unable to pay much attention to things that did not, expressly, demand his attention. Recognizable as this behavior was, it was occurring to me, or starting to, that only through a sort of mild abuse would I cure him of this type of behavior. I wasn't strong enough to be abusive. Some men are too weak to be kind. Either or, none of us are completely good fathers. We can always be to blame.

(pause)

I asked him again: "Where is your mother?" He ate his soup. I went upstairs, watched a movie, and went to sleep. I woke up without my wife.

(GORDON crosses to ALEX. They are at home, together, alone.)

ALEX. Morning.

GORDON. Go to school.

ALEX. No school today.

GORDON. No school today?

ALEX. No. It's a holiday.

GORDON. Which one?

ALEX. It's Memorial Day.

GORDON. Oh.

ALEX. Didn't remember Memorial Day.

GORDON. Right.

ALEX. Want eggs?

GORDON. You have eggs?

ALEX. No, but you could make eggs. I want eggs. Do you want eggs?

GORDON. Sounds good.

ALEX. So...

GORDON. I'll make eggs.

(Years ago. BRONYWN, elsewhere, speaks to GORDON.)

BRONWYN. In the grand scheme of things...I'll always have only my eyes. My hands. My wrists. You read stories about women who can have orgasms by penetration alone, and women who get plastic surgery and you read about women who decide, these days, that marriage is this very old, traditional construct that has no basis in modern life. I'm none of those people. I can read about them, but I'm not them. I can't be them, and the only way I can even imagine what it's like is to read magazines and books and watch them on television. They can, in return, only imagine what it's like to meditate and believe in biorhythms and have hips that are actual size. I have just as much in common with a man who mediates as I do with a woman who's got her original nose. I know I'm supposed to feel a kinship with other women, automatically...but I don't. I mean, do you feel like just because someone is male, you automatically have some understanding of how they feel or felt? No. You feel a bond with whomever you identify with. That the sort of freedom I want. Thinking whatever I think no matter when I was born, where my genitals were grafted.

(pause)

Am I making sense?

GORDON. *(to the audience)* She did make sense. She said that on the night we first took a walk alone together. She said it in Philadelphia, in Fishtown. We were, despite my attempts to sabotage it, just about to fall in love. I had gotten yelled at by a cab driver, by the waiter. I had talked at length about something in the newspaper. An article I hadn't remembered right. It came out garbled. I barely listened to her all night. Then she said, "the grand scheme of things" and I decided, then and there, there and then, that I was going to be in love with her.

(pause)

A few days passed and she didn't come home. I called her cell phone and found that it was ringing in her bag, which was in the bathroom, on the sink. I picked it up, saw my own phone number on the display, and the stuck it into its charger. Just in case.

(Lights on BRONWYN. Alone. Now. She speaks to us.)

BRONWYN. The book is called *Traveling to Montpelier* and it's, as much as any book can be, non-fiction. Its non-fiction, but it has flourishes. The writer's name is Daniel Wallers, if you're interested to know.

(pause)

Waller's writes like an alien visiting Earth. He describes Oregon, for example, as "one of those lonely places where nature is supposed to keep you company." Of writing checks he says: "You pick up this little slide and tear it out. It's got print on the front and back. You include your own print, and then write out the numbers in English." He wonders what checks look like in Spain, and what they look like in Romania. It occurs to you, when you read it, that you just assumed that checks were checks. Then you realize...they are checks, and Wallers is a misanthrope. Then you realize that he's transforming you into a misanthrope.

(BRONWYN and GORDON, as before.)

BRONWYN. Hand that over.

GORDON. Where's Cornersville?

BRONWYN. Why? Are you taking a day trip?

GORDON. Is it somewhere I could drive?

BRONWYN. Depends on how much gas you have in the tank. Now give me my book.

GORDON. Is that where you bought this?

BRONWYN. No.

(pause)

I'm borrowing it. The bookmark was in it when I borrowed it.

(pause)

I'm almost finished with it, though. So I can give it back. So please give it back.

(She holds out her hand. She turns to the audience.)

He gave it back to me. He didn't ask me who loaned it to me. I didn't tell him, because he didn't ask.

GORDON. Cornersville, Tennessee. Cornersville, Mississippi. Cornersville, Pennsylvania. There are three. We don't live anywhere near the first two. A few days of work and watching my son eat soup, and I was ready to find my wife.

(A COP enters. He looks and acts like a cop, whatever cops are like. The COP regards GORDON with cop-like skepticism.)

So how does this work?

COP. If you have a photo of your wife, that's a start.

GORDON. I do. Of course I do.

COP. Did she take anything with her when she...left?

GORDON. No.

COP. ...nothing at all? She left her cell?

GORDON. Right.

COP. We'll create a file. If she's gone for more than a month, we'll obtain dental records. We'll do a credit

check and check public records. There are lots of ways to track movement and behavior these days. We have computers.

GORDON. You need to check her teeth?

COP. Sometimes we do. Yes. She left her wallet?

GORDON. She did. She didn't even take any clothes.

COP. Not even the clothes she was wearing?

(pause)

GORDON. She was wearing an off-white blouse and a cream colored skirt and brown pumps. She put on a green scarf, tied with a pin. All of which was in the house, on the floor, when I got home.

COP. So she was...what? Naked? When she...left?

GORDON. Or she has clothes that...I don't know about.

(pause)

COP. I want to stress something to you before we go very far with this, because I know that sometimes people become really agitated and I get tired of explaining it. Especially after the fact. A few things. Number one, she might just come home. That happens. Number two, because she is an adult and not a minor, what has happened here isn't actually a crime. She's just not here. Despite what most perfectly nice husbands and wives think, there is nothing criminal about a grown woman not being where she's supposed to be. It's a crime for her to neglect your son, if you want to press charges of that sort. But this is simply the beginning of the idea that there *might* be a crime involved. You file a missing person's report and it says, "Listen, my wife might be dead. I don't know, but since she's not here and I can't find her, there *might* have been a crime."

(pause)

You see what I'm after? There isn't a crime. Not yet. Unless we find out you killed her yourself and are covering your tracks, or you're playing a game, or she stole things, or her absence is a sign that she was abused.