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Corpsing

Four One-Act Plays

Peter Barnes

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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CORPSING

A volume of three duologues and one three-hander which encapsulates Peter Barnes' consummate skill of contrasting opposites and simultanously combining "the absurdly tragic and the tragically absurd".

In *Humour Helps* an actress hamfistedly tries to commit suicide, finally achieving her aim with the unwitting aid of a neighbour.

Waiting for a Bus has a pair of lovers interrupted in bed by the arrival of the husband — or are they actors rehearsing a new comedy *Waiting for a Bus* about a pair of lovers disturbed by the husband's arrival ...?

Acting Exercise opens with Rowan, an actor, delivering a soliloquy in a rehearsal room. From the shadows emerges a distraught husband demanding the actor give him back his wife. With a superlative performance, Rowan convinces the husband he is mistaken, but alone again he crows: "I could sell electric fans to Eskimos!"

In *Last Things* an elderly couple of thespians awake in bed to find themselves dead. Troupers that they are, they decide to go into the next world with their famous husband and wife sketch — to the applause of the heavenly host.

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HUMOUR HELPS

CHARACTERS

Hilda Grayson
Saunders

The action takes place in a modern apartment

HUMOUR HELPS

An immaculate, beautifully furnished, fifth-floor apartment, complete with subdued lighting, a white floor, gleaming table and white mugs R, *and french windows* L

Hilda Grayson sits on a sofa C, *drunk. She has been crying and drinking. There is a large half-empty bottle of whisky, a knife and a perfectly arranged plate of food on the table in front of her. A double-barrelled shotgun is wrapped in a long cardboard parcel under the table. The waste-paper basket on the floor beside her is filled with used Kleenex tissues*

Taking another drink, she reads a much crumpled letter, suddenly lets out a great despairing cry, and tears up the letter in a fury

Hilda No more! ... I can't bear it! ... Where has tenderness gone?! ...

She opens her handbag, empties the contents on the sofa and picks up a bottle of pills

I'm prepared, thick and thin ... End of the line, hitting the buffers ... I'm a brain blow-out, an inside-out schizophrenic, a head-to-tail spade-headed looney. My mind scratches glass ...

Grasping the arm of the sofa she heaves herself up and tries to open the bottle of pills

But the screw-top sticks and she turns it frantically, "click-click-click". As she struggles violently with it she knocks over the waste basket

She suddenly completely loses her temper and throws the bottle on the glass table, smashing the bottle to pieces, and spilling pills all over the floor. Cursing to herself, she falls on her knees to scramble for them, but instead crushes dozens of them into the carpet

Another dead day ... I want to spit in somebody's eye ... I've got a difficulty for every solution ... Go away, I don't want you!

She suddenly jumps up and grabs the knife from the table

She holds out her arm which waves violently and shakily brings the sharp knife to her left wrist. Closing her eyes, she slashes herself violently

As blood drips over the white floor, Hilda opens her eyes, sways, and groans loudly at the sight of the blood — and then discovers she has only cut her thumb

Why me? ... Why pick on me? ... The dark drives me on! ... Let me do it!

She stares at her bleeding thumb for a moment, then sticks it in her mouth and staggers back to the sofa still clutching the knife

She takes her thumb out of her mouth, takes a swig of whisky, and without warning plunges the knife into her chest

Unfortunately it doesn't even penetrate her expensive thick sweater

You see! ... That's what I've had to put up with!

In a fury she throws the knife down on the plate which smashes to pieces

She then sees that her bleeding thumb has spattered blood all over the carpet

Filthy! ... Filthy!

She wraps a pile of Kleenex round her thumb and tries to rub out the blood on the carpet with some of the used Kleenex

She suddenly stops

What do I care?! ... I'm going to die!

She pulls a long cardboard parcel from under the table

Once I put my mind to something ... I follow through ... Nothing stops me ... Nothing!

She rips open the parcel and takes out a double-barrelled shotgun and two cartridges without noticing she has knocked over a vase in her haste

I told them I was prepared ... No-one believed me ... Now they'll believe me ... Happiness and the pursuit thereof!

After taking another drink straight from the bottle, she clumsily breaks open the gun and inserts two cartridges. She closes the gun with great difficulty as the blood from her cut makes the gun handle slippery

This is the best way ... Do it *clean*! ... *Clean*!

Placing the muzzle of the gun under her chin, she bends down to fire it only to discover the gun is too long and she is too short to reach the trigger

What idiot made this thing?! ... Clean! ... Do it clean! ... *Clean*!

As she strains down to reach it, the gun falls over

It's a conspiracy! *Things*'re against me. It's always *things* ... People as well, but mostly things!

In utter frustration she tries to find a position where she can pull the trigger so she crouches down and wraps herself around the gun barrel, panting

Clean ... Do it clean! ... Absolutely clean!

She unwraps herself and tries kneeling with the gun, only to nearly poke her eye out with the weapon

Why have I always been like this? It takes me an hour to cook Minute rice so this is nothing new. I must be the living proof of reincarnation, no-one can be as dumb as me in one lifetime ... But I'll do it clean ... I will! I *will*! ...

She falls on her back, kicks off her shoes and tries to pull the trigger with her toes

But she can't so she lurches up, puts the gun at a grotesque angle and reaches down. Her hands get nearer and nearer the trigger. But her bloody fingers slip off, she knocks herself under her chin with the end of the gun barrel. Staggering back she finds the gun barrel entangled in her sweater

When things go wrong, there's nothing you can do about it, par for the course ...

In savagely pulling the barrel free, she puts the gun butt through the french window

After Hilda opens the window to extricate the gun she has another desperate idea

If I can just hook the trigger ... You've got to get up pretty early in the morning to beat me — about twelve noon!

She undoes her belt, puts the mouth of the gun under her chin and uses the buckle of the belt as a fish-hook to pull the trigger

Concentrate and you'll catch the big one ...

After a couple of attempts she manages to get the belt buckle round the trigger. She lets out a cry of triumph and then realizes her skirt is falling down

Don't you dare! ... Up, keep it up! ...

As she struggles to pull up her skirt, she inadvertently pulls the trigger, the gun fires, blasting a hole in the ceiling

As Hilda is showered with lumps of plaster, there is a cry of panic from the flat above and a leg comes crashing through the hole in the ceiling as someone above starts to fall through it

Covered with plaster and blood, her skirt falling down, Hilda looks round the once immaculate but now devastated room

She slumps to the floor in despair as the leg in the hole in the ceiling is painfully withdrawn, sending down another shower of plaster on her

A man's voice, Saunders', shouts down from above

Saunders (*off*) What're you doing down there?!
Hilda Trying to kill myself.
Saunders (*off*) What?
Hilda I'm trying to kill myself!
Saunders (*off*) Do you need any help?
Hilda No. I can do it myself.
Saunders (*off*) Would you like me to ring the Samaritans?
Hilda *Please*, anything but that! ...

Saunders' face appears, peering down through the hole in the ceiling

Saunders The name's Saunders ... You realize you've made a hole in my floor? I've just had it done — parquet.

Hilda I'm sorry.

Saunders I guess it was an accident. Nobody deliberately shoots a hole in somebody's floor.

Hilda No.

Saunders Would you like to come up for a drink? I've got to go out in half an hour, but we can have a quick one.

Hilda I've had a number of quick ones.

Saunders Do you still feel like doing ... ?

Hilda Oh, yes. I'm just getting my second wind.

Saunders You know it's going to be a lovely day tomorrow.

Hilda No, it's going to rain.

Saunders Is it? You can never take weather forecasts seriously. Shouldn't you take some medication or other. Valium maybe, or a placebo. You know I used to think a placebo was a Spanish singer. Listen, you should talk about this before you do anything too drastic. We're intelligent people. I'm sure we've got an IQ of 188 — between us, of course. I'll bet you can do Chinese take-aways in your head. What's your job?

Hilda I'm an actress.

Saunders Well, we all have our problems. My best friend's an actor. He hasn't had a part for two years but he can't give it up, after all it's his living ... My sister used to sing but she couldn't carry a tune if it had handles.

Hilda What about you?

Saunders I'm an unemployed history teacher — no class.

Hilda Tell me about the Battle of Hastings?

Saunders The what?

Hilda The Battle of Hastings.

Saunders 1066 ... Between Harold, King of England and William the Conqueror. Everybody knows the story ... Harold sitting on his horse with an arrow stuck in his eye and all his friends giving him advice like "Keep blinking, it'll soon work its way out" ... "Have you tried sneezing?" ...

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