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SF PERUSALS

Playing Sinatra

A play

Bernard Kops

Samuel French - London
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PLAYING SINATRA

First performed at the Warehouse Theatre, Croydon, on 1st October 1991, with the following cast of characters:

Norman	Ian Gelder
Sandra	Susan Brown
Phillip	Stefan Bednarczyk

The play directed by Ted Craig
Designed by Michael Pavelka

The play was subsequently presented at the Greenwich Theatre on 25th March 1992, with the same cast and director

The action takes place in a large Victorian house in Streatham, London

Time – the present

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I

SCENE 1 Late afternoon
SCENE 2 Late morning

ACT II

SCENE 1 Two weeks later. Sunday afternoon
SCENE 2 Later that night and a few days later

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ACT I

Scene 1

The play opens in darkness

When the Lights come up we discover a huge ramshackle and overcrowded living-room in a Victorian house in Streatham. This room also contains two spaces on either side. These are the bedrooms of Sandra and Norman Lewis

Posters and photos of Frank Sinatra are all over the place. One particular photo looms, Sinatra's face dominating everything. The house has been totally neglected and there are areas of damp on the walls. But to offset this there are also Russian and Persian wall-hangings, obvious heirlooms that could be quite valuable. Huge grotesque Chinese vases stand on sideboards. Old prints seem to cover every possible space. The furniture is huge and overwhelming. Tables, chairs and wardrobes that were obviously hand-made in immediate post-war Shoreditch. There is also an appalling three-piece suite made of pink uncut moquette

There are two sources of the music that runs throughout the action. One source is from the large radiogram, set in a mahogany cabinet. This is used when Norman and Sandra listen more deliberately to their hero singing. The other source comes from an ultra-modern CD player (perhaps the one real indulgence of our characters). This is used whenever our characters want snatches of Sinatra

There is a specific deep cupboard in the living-room. This is where Norman and Sandra keep all their packets of food, bread, drinks, utensils, crockery, etc. This cupboard also contains a microwave oven. All food that the couple prepare has been pre-cooked, bought at Marks and Spencer, and will be brought to table readiness here. The microwave will always "ping" when the food is ready. Norman and Sandra may sometimes enter this cupboard to "cook" or make tea, but we need never see the interior of this space. There is also a bookbinding workbench where Norman Lewis is usually busy, repairing the bindings of antique volumes

All in all the room contains an overbearing sense of foreboding

With the Lights we discover Norman sitting on top of his workbench, in foetal position, clutching one of his volumes

Norman (*inspecting the volume*) Fantastic! Beautiful! Half vellum. Not even Mr Zaehnsdorff could do better.

Sandra Lewis, his sister, enters. She goes to Norman and kisses him

Sandra Mr Zaehnsdorff's dead, remember? And his firm's been closed down more than twenty-five years.

Norman (*not showing surprise that she's there*) You telling me? I loved that man.

Sandra You hated him.

During this scene Norman helps Sandra off with her coat and she sits on the sofa. She is tired. He takes off her shoes, quickly takes her coat to her bedroom, whilst rummaging through her pockets. Then he returns

Norman He taught me all I know.

Sandra What's for dinner?

Norman Guess.

Sandra Something nice?

Norman You bet. Fish.

Sandra Fish? You know I hate fish.

Norman Today I am preparing something really special. Dover Sole meunière with devilled courgettes, lightly brought to perfection in butter, parsley and organic garlic. And pommes duchesse.

Sandra You know I hate fish.

Norman Fish is good for you. It goes straight to the brain.

Sandra My brain is overloaded.

Norman goes to the bureau, takes out a dagger, slowly he goes towards her plunges the dagger into her back, she screams. He laughs. It is obviously a trick dagger

Norman! I nearly died of fright. (*She laughs*) Norman! When are you going to grow up?

Norman I'm working on it Sandra.

She ruffles his hair, he replaces the dagger back in the bureau and pours two glasses of cherry brandy. Note: many of their actions together are automatic and ritualistic. As if they had been doing these things in exactly the same way for years and years

It happened again.

Sandra Oh!

Norman This morning.

Sandra Really.

Norman Yes. And this afternoon.

Sandra How many times?

Norman Three times this morning; twice this afternoon.

Sandra Did they ring off after three rings?

Norman Yes. Same as usual.

Sandra Pathetic.

Norman Did you hear them again in the night? The dogs?

Sandra Yes.

Norman It was three in the morning. Dead on. As usual.

Sandra Was it?

Norman Sandra! I consulted my clock!

Sandra Norman!—Dogs bark.
Norman They've got to be stopped. I phoned the police.
Sandra (*humouring him*) Did you? Good.

They toast their glasses

Oh God, I'm so whacked. (*She picks up the volume he has just bound*) You're right. It is very beautiful. It's not a book, it's a work of art.

He goes over, kisses the top of her head. She smiles and raises her hand towards him, returning the affection. Norman admires his handiwork, then he puts the book in a drawer

Norman I'm posting it off tomorrow.
Sandra You should have posted it this afternoon.
Norman I only just finished it. It had to be perfect. I'm taking it to the post office and posting it tomorrow.
Sandra You finished it on Sunday, Norman. And you really must leave the house sometimes. You must go out.
Norman What are you talking about? I love going out.
Sandra (*knowing otherwise*) Oh yes. (*Sensing his anger rising she pretends to be in pain to divert him*) Oooh!
Norman Stiff?
Sandra Please Norman!
Norman With pleasure. (*He starts to massage her neck*)
Sandra Oooh. Your hands. Magic.
Norman Yes. The hands of a bookbinder. Sensitive to all the nuances of life, contained in books. All the vagaries, the possible suffering and joy of this earthly experience. People rot but books are eternal. Are holy. Definitive. They are law, a religion unto themselves. Books are more than words. Take a typed sheet—the words are arbitrary; they carry no weight, no real validity. But now take those same words, and set them together and print them, and stitch those sheets together and bind them into a book, and presto! Suddenly those words have changed. There has been a transformation. Like the Catholic holy mass. A trans-substantiation. Now those words have authority, inevitability; have become the truth. I was privileged to be an initiate in the art of making truth. I was allowed into the inner sanctum of the craft. I'm jacking it all in next Wednesday.
Sandra Oh yeah!
Norman I'm sick of it. I've been enslaved by bloody bookbinding long enough. Good-night. That better?
Sandra Oh, Norm. That's wonderful. Take up massage.
Norman Sandra. You think I'm joking. I kid you not. I know my bookbinding has helped to keep us in cordon bleu, but enough is enough.
Sandra Norman, whatever you want is OK by me.
Norman That's what you say. But I know what you're really thinking. Well, I'm sorry, mate. I'm posting this parcel off tomorrow morning and that's the end of it.
Sandra Yes, Norman.

Norman If the game is dead let it stay dead. Why should I pretend to keep it alive? They don't want class any more; they want quiz shows.

Sandra Whatever you say, Norman.

Norman This is the age of pre-digested pap. Food. Books. Music. Show Biz. Entertainers. Singers. Only one remains. It's all gone down the drain. Nothing lasts. Everything is perishable. Nothing gets better.

Sandra Yes Norman. No Norman.

Norman This is the age of Junk. Let's all climb aboard and go down with the sinking junk. (*Pause*) That's good. Oh, that's very nice, feeling so good now. So, how's been your day?

Sandra (*laughing*) My day? Don't talk to me about my day. How should my day be?

Norman What's wrong?

Sandra Nothing.

Norman That boss again?

Sandra He's a pig.

Norman Shall I go and sort him out?

Sandra (*joking*) Yeah! With a sledge hammer.

Norman (*joking—but*) Listen. You could lure him back here—— (*He goes to the food cupboard and puts a chilled package of food into the microwave*)

Sandra Yes. I could wear alluring silver lurex to the office tomorrow.

Norman You could bring him here, ply him with Cherry Brandy, coax him into the bath, shampoo his hair until he's gurgling in bubbles. And all pink and expectant. Then I could come in with your hairdryer and drop it in the bath. Goodbye Mr Oliver McKendrick. Then we'll chop him up and mince him, and feed him to those Rottweilers.

Sandra (*laughing*) Norman! You're awful. Positively evil.

Norman Then why are you laughing?

Sandra This is better. I can actually turn my neck. I'm famished. OK, I suppose fish will have to suffice.

Norman Millions starve in Africa. She turns up her nose at Dover sole.

Sandra Is it ready?

Norman Yes. (*Consulting his watch*) Almost.

Sandra So, what are we waiting for? Norman!

Norman Sandra! The food is ready when the food is ready. Anyway, I was instructed to massage your neck. I haven't got two pairs of tentacles.

Sandra Norman! Just serve it up. I've been slaving my guts all day.

Norman So what have I been doing? Sitting on my arse? Sandra, you're too much.

Sandra I'm not enough, Norm.

Norman Why do I let you rule my life?

Pause

Sandra So what did they say?

Norman Who say?

Sandra The police.

Norman Oh. Sandra, what do they always say? Ferocious dogs outside your door? In the middle of the night sir? Rottweilers? Funny! None of your

neighbours seem to complain. Aren't you feeling a little persecuted sir? Nothing, but nothing will make us accept their offer. Right?

Sandra Who? (*Straining to catch up*) Oh! Yes, the developers. Norman, nothing will ever make us accept. Nothing! They'll have to carry us out.

Norman Marvellous. I'm so happy. You're absolutely resolute.

Sandra Absolutely. I've told you five thousand times.

Norman I'm sorry. I just like to hear it.

There is a "ping" from the microwave

(*Intoning as if he were a priest*) The food is ready.

Sandra So come on, make it snappy!

Norman Coming! Coming! Whatever you say, Your Majesty. Just coming.

Sandra So please make with the calories before all my body protein ebbs away.

Norman Sandra! I'm puzzled. I hate you so much. So why do I stay with you? (*He brings the packages of food from the microwave*)

They both sit down, this ritual is routine, they have been eating like this for years. They will eat straight from the packages

Sandra (*admiring the food*) Oh, that smells quite nice. (*Dipping into the fish*) In fact it tastes quite nice. Help yourself.

Norman Thank you.

Sandra You stay because you have no choice. That's the way it is.

Norman I hope you're not going out tonight.

Sandra Eat and shut up.

Norman You said you wouldn't. You promised.

Sandra Come with me then. Play bridge.

Norman Every time I think of bridge I want to throw myself off.

Sandra Splash!

They share the joke

Norman, let's have some artificial respiration.

She picks up the remote control and switches on Sinatra who sings "That Old Black Magic". They both smile and sway to the music

Norman He's wonderful. He's the best. Without him the world would be very dark. I love him. I love him so much. (*He suddenly starts to sob*)

After a few moments Sandra turns Sinatra off

Sandra (*comforting him*) Please, Norman, darling. You'll be all right. Don't worry. We'll always be together.

Norman Good. Good. Why am I like this, Sandra? Why am I so stupid?

Sandra Because you're silly. You're special.

He smiles broadly and rubs her hair

Norman We must never move from here, Sandra. Promise?

Sandra Of course. Never. Streatham may not be heaven on earth, but it's where we are; where we've always been.

Norman It's all we know; all we ever need to know. That's true, isn't it Sandra?

Sandra Absolutely, my love. Absolutely!

Norman I'm so happy. (*He is. He laughs*) Now listen. Listen carefully. What were the words that Martin Sinatra uttered——

Sandra Easy!

Norman Wait! I haven't finished the question. What were the exact words the man uttered to his young and only son Francis Albert——

Sandra It was over breakfast and his exact words were "Get outta the house and get a job!"

Norman Yes. I'll accept that.

Sandra (*sarcastically*) You'll accept that? Thank you.

Norman My pleasure. Who was the song plugger who helped Frankie right from the start?

Sandra Easy. Hank Sancola.

Norman (*with sheer glee*) Hahahahah! Wrong! Sanicola!

Sandra I know. A slip of the tongue. And he's now his personal manager.

Norman Who doesn't know that.

Sandra My turn. Listen, this is hard. Who was the classical musician——

Norman Jascha Heifitz. Frankie listened to him play the violin day after day, hour after hour. He said—quote "his constant bowing without a break, carried the melody line straight on through, just like Dorsey's trombone".

Sandra One day darling you'll be wrong and I'll be ever so happy.

Norman Never. (*Laughing*) This is all we need, isn't it?

Sandra Yes. What did he think about *My Way*?

Norman He always loathed the song, hated it like poison.

Sandra *Send in the Clowns*?

Norman He loved it. Others couldn't understand the song. He said, "I just tell them one word. 'A circus.' It's two people who have had a wonderful life and suddenly it's a circus".

Sandra (*getting a notebook from her handbag*) What did Mr Sinatra say about nature?

Norman "I believe in nature. In the birds, the sea, the sky, in everything I can see or that there is real evidence for. If these things are what you mean by God, then I believe in God."

Sandra You're remarkable.

Norman I'm the best.

Sandra One day I'm going to catch you out.

Norman You'll have to get up very early.

They kiss

I love you.

Sandra Good.

Norman (*in an American accent*) And now, ladies and gentlemen, we are privileged to have with us tonight one of Mr Sinatra's biggest fans——

Sandra Please Norm! We did it last night. Maybe later.

Norman (*angry and pleading*) Sandra! (*Again going into American*) Tell me,

Miss Lewis, why? What is this reverence, this love, this—obsession you have with Mr Sinatra.

Sandra knows she has to join in the game

Sandra Listen, do you want to know what I see in Mr Sinatra? Why I love him? Listen. An entry in my diary; something I wrote last night. Frankie, I love what you say about women. It's so beautiful; it's a revelation. It makes me want to cry. I quote. "I believe in giving a woman a lot of time to make up her mind about the guy she wants to spend the rest of her life with. I'm very fond of women, I admire them". Isn't that beautiful, Norman?

Norman Beautiful. So I take it that as Mr Sinatra's greatest fan you are a prominent member of his fan club.

Sandra No! I don't belong. Neither does my brother.

Norman Oh, that's odd.

Sandra No. We are true fans. We worship from afar. We don't want to share our love with anyone. I could eat him for breakfast. I just love him.

Norman Why? Why?

Sandra The glow he brings. I can be in despair and he sings and everything changes. Nobody can understand the joy I feel when he sings for me. He possesses me. Nothing else exists. All the pain of the world evaporates. People scoff. Psychiatrists dissect. But Sinatra people don't cause wars or commit acts of terrible violence. We adore him because he is unique. He is sweet and gentle. His face haunts all our lives, gives us hope, purpose. He lights up the world with his amazing yet gentle power, his voice just ignites such love inside me. I love everyone, the world, everyone. I change things. Life has meaning. I change things. Thank you.

Norman Thank you.

Sandra (*now she is American*) Tell me Mr Lewis, as his second greatest fan, what do you see in Mr Sinatra?

Norman I'm not playing any more.

His sudden mood change causes her to react. To dissipate his gathering storm clouds she goes to the radiogram and starts a record. Now they both stand close on either side of the radiogram, watching the record playing. This is "Young At Heart". They watch and listen in awe and with great concentration, happy just to observe the record actually going around. Both of them mouth Sinatra's words. Then they dance

Silence. Darkness. Sandra exits in the black-out

A short time lapse reveals Norman alone. He picks up the remote control. Sinatra sings "Strangers In The Night". Norman goes to the mirror, places a typical Sinatra hat on his head, stands back, tries to effect a typical Sinatra stance, then mouths the words of the song. Now it is as if he is singing. Then he suddenly switches the music off and looks closely in the mirror

Norman Who is the greatest entertainer that the world has ever experienced? You are. You are Frankie. There's no one else. No contest. You

are the undisputed; the absolute. Thank you. Thank you very much. (*He takes off his hat*)

Dogs start to bark, the barking gets louder and louder. Norman holds his head as the barking seems to fill his brain, then he takes hold of a hammer, stands with his eyes closed. The barking subsides. He paces once or twice, then seeks some glossy magazines that have been concealed under his bed, he then sits on the sofa, opens one magazine and puts on the CD using the remote control. "The Tender Trap" plays

Suddenly there is laughter outside. It sounds like Sandra and someone else. Norman quickly stuffs the magazines under the sofa

Sandra enters, smiling

Sandra You still up.
Norman No. I'm someone else.
Sandra Oh dear, dear, dear. That was such a funny evening. You look tired. Going to bed, soon?
Norman Soon.
Sandra (*yawning*) Oooh! I'm going straight. So tired. Goodnight, Norm.
Norman Goodnight, Sarn, sleep tight. Don't let the Rottweilers bite.

She turns to go

Sandra . . .
Sandra Yes?
Norman Who saw you home?
Sandra Who saw me home? No-one.
Norman I heard you laughing. You were laughing outside the street door. You were sharing a joke.
Sandra (*minimizing*) Oh! Yes! That was Graham. You know him. He's no-one. Fancy you thinking that I could ever consider Graham. What a joke! I want to be sick. Norman, you know my attitude. You know what I think of men. You know I've never trusted them. And can you blame me? But they're not gonna get it. Not from me, they're not. Don't worry darling, you're not going to get rid of me that easily. I promise you. Nightynight. (*She goes to her room*)

Norman takes the magazines and conceals them in his room. He switches off the lights and the CD. Sandra takes out a photo album and sits on her bed. Norman now taps gently on her door

Sandra Yes, Norman, what do you want?
Norman I just wanted to say goodnight.
Sandra You said it.
Norman I want to say it again.
Sandra Say it.
Norman Good-night, Sarn.
Sandra Good-night, Norm.

But then he enters her bedroom

Norman Not again. You looking at that again?
Sandra (*far away*) Yes. Yes.
Norman They were so beautiful, Mum. Dad.
Sandra "The woods are lonely dark and deep, but I have promises to keep. And miles to go before I sleep".
Norman Sandra! Please!
Sandra Sorry. (*Some of this speech is in a childish voice; as if recorded in the past*) Yoohoo. Yoohoo Mummy! I've been a good girl. Please can I have an ice-cream? I promise. Daddy! I love you. More than anyone in this wide world. Catch me, Daddy. Catch me, Daddy. Look at us. How innocent. How sweet. But where are you, Norman? Why didn't you come with us? Who looked after you? Who had the courage to take you on? Don't grimace. Only joking. Can't you take a joke. They had no business, dying like that; within two weeks of each other. It's—it's sweet, but don't you just hate love birds? Imagine, still holding hands at sixty. I loved them with all my heart but they squeezed us out. Oh, look how beautiful I was. So how did I become such an ugly cow?
Norman Sandra!
Sandra Sssh!
Norman Not again.
Sandra Sssh! Look! Me on the sand. Burying Daddy's toes. Me doing cartwheels. Remember how thin I was. Like a waif. A gypsy child. Oh God, where did that sweet, smiling, mischievous girl go? She's escaped. She's upstairs somewhere, calling me, eluding me. Look! I'm as beautiful as a dream. I'm a girlie girl, remember? Why did they have to die? Why them? How could they do this to me?
Norman Don't torture yourself. When I can do it so much better for you.

She laughs. For a time they both look at the photo album in silence

Anyway, be thankful they left us this house. Without it where would we be?
Sandra On the Embankment. Anywhere. Anywhere rather than Streatham. You can't escape.
Norman What?
Sandra No matter how often you see it, it always comes out the same. Life.
Norman Sandra, I apologize.
Sandra For what?
Norman For everything I have done, and everything I have not done.
Sandra I love you, Norman.
Norman Thank you.

They kiss. He leaves her room, pretending to sleepwalk. His arms outstretched before him

Sandra Goodnight. A five-year-old boy, trapped in the body of a man. Unlike me, the child never escaped.

Norman goes to bed. Sandra gets into her bed. The Lights go out. Dogs bark. The phone rings three times. Norman laughs

Scene 2

Late morning

Norman is quietly working at his bench. Gentle Mozart plays. Norman goes to Sandra's room and frantically rummages around, searching for something. This often happens when he is alone in the house. He will also look through her pockets whenever he gets the chance. Now he finds nothing and returns to his workbench

Sandra enters from the street

Norman (*genuinely pleased*) Hello! How nice. You're home early.
Sandra I never went in.
Norman Oh?
Sandra It's such a nice day.
Norman Is it?
Sandra And it was such a magical morning. The sky crystal clear, the air like wine. I got to the West End then decided to take the day off.
Norman Good for you.
Sandra Tea?
Norman Love a cup.

Sandra is about to make tea

Hold on. Haven't you forgotten something.
Sandra Sorry. (*She goes over and kisses him*)
Norman So what did you do?
Sandra I phoned the firm. Told them I had to see the doctor about a woman's thing. That always works.
Norman So what happened after that?
Sandra I went for a stroll in Regent's Park, had a lovely cup of coffee and a croissant in the cafeteria.
Norman Very nice. (*He takes the Mozart record off and goes to the window*) You're right. It is a beautiful day. I must go out later.
Sandra We could go to the pictures.
Norman Yes. That sounds a wonderful idea. So what did you do after coffee?
Sandra Norman, where do I go when I have free time?
Norman The reference library.
Sandra Where else?
Norman Good. Anything new?
Sandra Lots.
Norman Great. Tell me.
Sandra I've turned up some really interesting early stuff.
Norman So tell me.
Sandra Later. Tonight. It'll keep. I met someone there.
Norman (*not listening*) I know! A snack! (*He looks into the cupboard*) Let's see? What do we have in stock?
Sandra I see. A snack.

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