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DUETS

A Comedy in Four Acts

by Peter Quilter

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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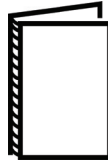


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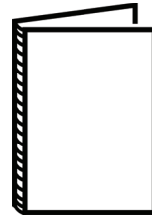
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Duets had its USA premiere at the Aurora Theatre in Georgia, and its European premiere at the Cultural Centre in Vilnius, Lithuania

The play was then re-structured and presented in its current form for the first time at the Ensemble Theatre in Sydney, Australia. The premiere took place on 20th August 2009, featuring actors Barry Creyton and Noeline Brown, and was directed by Sandra Bates.

CHARACTERS

Duet I - Blind Date	WENDY, JONATHAN
Duet II - Secretarial Skills	JANET, BARRIE
Duet III - The Holiday	SHELLEY, BOBBY
Duet IV - The Bride-To-Be	ANGELA, TOBY

The setting throughout is the living room of an apartment

Time: the present

PRODUCTION NOTES

Duets is comprised of four short plays, each with two characters. Companies can present the play using eight performers (4f, 4m) or can choose to double-up some of the roles (4f, 2m, etc).

There is one set – the living room of an apartment – some of the features and props of which will change for each of the four plays. The apartment has a door leading outside, a second door to the bedroom, and a window. There is a sofa, chairs, a cabinet of glasses and drinks, a full length mirror and a coffee table plus a phone, etc. There is an open plan kitchen which forms part of the living room. There are several features which change for each play – a vase of flowers, a painting on the wall, a large ornament, a plant, a lamp, the floor rug, the sofa cover – these should be changed each time to match the personality of the characters and location.

It is suggested that the characters of Duet II are American and that the characters of Duet IV are British. But companies should feel flexible about this if they don't want to be tied to a particular accent.

Scene changes should happen as quickly as possible and a famous song duet, subject to separate copyright clearance, should be heard in each scene change. Companies are free to make their own choice of music for these changes. But the songs should always be a duet between two singers and reflect in some way the themes of the plays. Larger scale productions might choose to show videos of these song duets in the scene changes, or perhaps even have live singers and a piano.

Peter Quilter

Peter Quilter would like to dedicate
this play to

Sandra Bates

and

Francisco Martín Hernández

and

Juan Carlos Martín Medina

ACT I

Duet I – Blind Date

Both characters in the play are in their late fifties or older and have dressed nicely for a first date—but neither has good taste. WENDY wears glasses. JONATHAN wears a ginger toupée.

Lights rise on the empty apartment.

A knock at the door. JONATHAN enters from the bedroom, checks his appearance, then opens the door. WENDY stands beyond the doorway. She is wearing a coat, and carrying a dating magazine and a huge block of cheese.

JONATHAN Are you Wendy? “Fifty-three, brunette, medium build, glasses” ...? (*Adjust this description to match the actress playing the role*)

WENDY I am. Are you Jonathan— (*Reading from an entry in a dating magazine*) “Tall, slim, olive skinned...thirty-seven?!”

JONATHAN strikes a youthful pose, despite the description being clearly a couple of decades short.

JONATHAN I am.

WENDY Oh.

JONATHAN I’m afraid the “olive skin” has faded a little. At the time of writing the description, I’d just come back from Crete. A delightful place, I did enjoy myself—though travelling on your own is never quite the same, is it? You have the freedom, of course, the liberty to do whatever you want and whenever you please—and you see the most marvellous things. But

then there's nobody to witness these marvels and you go back to your room with no evidence that you were there at all and was there indeed much point as there's nobody to discuss it with. And suddenly the freedom isn't half so desirable and you wonder if you might have been better off at home watching National Geographic and making one of those trifles that comes in a packet. I've just realised you're still standing in the doorway. I'm so sorry—do come in.

WENDY *enters the room; nervously.*

I do tend to just talk in these situations. Only at the beginning—eventually I do shut up. If not, please feel free to hit me across the head with a large saucepan. Otherwise I'll just keep yapping for no reason at all—much like I am now... Can I take your coat, your magazine and your...block of cheese?

WENDY *(having momentarily forgotten about the huge block of cheese in her hand)* Oh yes! That's for you. *(Handing it to him, along with her coat and the magazine)* Have some cheese.

JONATHAN Oh. Well—that's—well, there you go—that's left me speechless.

WENDY *(nervously)* ...Well, I don't drink, you see. Not generally. So I thought it would be silly to bring wine, because then you'd feel awkward about opening it just for yourself. Plus I'd buy the wrong kind and we'd end up with some terrible bottle of Spanish plonk. And I couldn't bring juice or mineral water because you'd think me a bit strange.

JONATHAN I wouldn't dream of thinking you strange. At least, not before I'd got to know you.

WENDY The thing is—that you men have it so much easier, don't you? You can turn up with flowers or chocolates and you can't go wrong there. But what does a woman bring to a man's house? So I thought—what do men like? Cheese! Men like cheese. So I brought cheese... Do you like cheese?

JONATHAN I love cheese.

WENDY Oh good! Well—there you are. Now you have cheese.
Lots and lots. Enough to feed a small country.

JONATHAN Yes. (*Smelling it*) I'll pop it in the fridge.

WENDY Yes, you should. It's been on the bus.

JONATHAN *heads for the fridge.*

It's goat's.

JONATHAN Oh. Will he want it back?

WENDY No—I mean it's made with milk from a goat, it's goat's
cheese... Or were you making a joke?

JONATHAN Just a little one.

WENDY Oh, yes. (*She forces a laugh*)

JONATHAN It was rather a feeble attempt at humour.

WENDY No, no. I shall really laugh later in bed. (*Suddenly
realising*) Oh, no! I didn't mean to suggest—

JONATHAN I hope not. I was thinking—now steady on there!

WENDY Oh, dear!

JONATHAN Let's get to know each other first.

WENDY Yes!

*They both force a laugh. Which is followed by total
silence.*

JONATHAN Do have a seat. (*He hangs up her coat, but still has
the magazine in his hand*)

WENDY *sits down.*

Terrible, really, these magazines, aren't they?

WENDY Oh—yes.

JONATHAN Not that I'm not glad that we've had this chance to meet. I just mean the—putting the advert in—it's such a—

WENDY Yes.

JONATHAN You feel a bit pathetic, don't you? Advertising yourself. It's like putting a billboard outside in your front garden— "Wife needed! Apply within!"

WENDY But it works sometimes—gets results.

JONATHAN Yes—well, here *we* are. (*Flicking through the magazine*) ...And of course—we're not the worst, are we? I mean—some of these... (*Reading one of the adverts*) "Ex-army bald-headed man looking for companion to share love of rattle snakes and Peruvian cinema."

WENDY *forces a chuckle.*

(*he reads another*) ... "Seventy year-old man seeks female... to start a family!"

WENDY No!

JONATHAN Oh yes! (*Showing her the magazine*) It's right there next to the advert for Viagra.

WENDY He should be their spokesman.

JONATHAN He should. (*He forces a chuckle*)

WENDY (*taking the magazine and reading out another advert*) "Belgian man into scuba diving, crochet, alligators, leather bondage, fantasy role play, handcuffs, Bavarian cookery and spanking...seeks similar...!"

They both laugh at this, less forced this time.

JONATHAN How awful!

WENDY Yes—*Bavarian* cookery...!

JONATHAN He sounds shocking.

WENDY Yes. That's why we only went out the one time... Joking!

JONATHAN Ah! You got me back... Can I get you some—erm, juice? Or—cheese?

WENDY Orange juice?

JONATHAN I think we can manage that.

WENDY Perfect. Thank you.

JONATHAN returns to the kitchen and pours two glasses of orange juice.

It was very understanding of you to agree to just a fifteen minute chat, before—well...rather than jumping straight into dinner.

JONATHAN It struck me as perfectly sensible. Jumping into dinner can be very messy. And you don't always want a full dinner with a stranger, do you? You don't know whether it's going to be—

WENDY —And sometimes you know by mid-way through the appetiser that it's not right.

JONATHAN —And you're just stuck there through the main course and everything.

WENDY It can be horrible.

JONATHAN I know. And expensive.

WENDY Yes. You have a horrible, embarrassing meal—and then you have to pay for it.

JONATHAN I always hate that moment when one of you has to be brave enough to ask, "Shall we have dessert?" You might as well just ask, "Do you find me remotely attractive, or shall we throw the towel in now?" "Yes" to the pudding means "Yes, you're attractive". "No, I'm full up" means "I want to get the hell out of here and you're a hideous freak of nature." (*He gives her the orange juice*)

WENDY You're not.

JONATHAN Not?

WENDY A hideous freak of nature.

JONATHAN Oh...thank you... That might be the worst compliment I've ever had.

WENDY Oh dear...

JONATHAN Oh well...

They drink their juice.

WENDY ...But this is better, I think. Just meet and have a quick chat and see if...see if we want to have dinner...some other time.

JONATHAN At least that way, we know whether dessert is likely to be on the cards or not.

WENDY My thoughts exactly. I'm so glad you agree. Thank you for inviting me over.

JONATHAN Not at all.

WENDY We can ignore worrying about the bigger picture and just have a good old conversation.

JONATHAN Yes—a bloody good chat.

Silence. They drink more juice. JONATHAN finishes his and returns to the kitchen to pour himself some more.

WENDY Have you lived here long?

JONATHAN A few years.

WENDY It's very nice.

JONATHAN It serves its purpose. I'd like somewhere with a garden really. Do you like gardening?

WENDY I don't have the patience. It all happens far too slowly for me. When you get to my age, you want everything to get a move on. You can wait for *years* for a plant to flower. They say it helps if you to talk to them, to give positive energy. But I just end up screaming, "Hurry up and grow

you bastards!” which isn’t very positive at all. Sorry—I didn’t mean to swear.

JONATHAN No, don’t apologise. I swear all the time. Particularly when my neighbour starts playing music at two in the morning. He likes military band marches. I’m not sure if he’s trying to relax or planning an invasion. My language gets very colourful. But I try and curb my tongue with the ladies. At least until they’ve got to know me better. Then you can just be yourself, can’t you? If it ever gets that far which it generally doesn’t. But we keep trying. Love is out there somewhere.

WENDY Oh yes. But it hides itself very well, doesn’t it? ...Have you met lots of women? —From the magazine, I mean...

JONATHAN A few, yes. I used to always look for the vivacious ones, the young and beautiful ones. But it never worked out... So I thought I’d give you a try. (*Realising*) ...Which is not to say you’re not beautiful yourself—you’re extremely—fetching.

WENDY I wish I hadn’t worn my glasses. I think I look better these days with my contact lenses. But I’d said in the description that I had glasses and I didn’t want to be inaccurate.

JONATHAN No—it’s important that the descriptions are precise.

WENDY Yes... Yours says “thirty-seven years old”...?

JONATHAN Aha. (*Looking at her and realising she is unconvinced*) ...That’s a printing error of course, it’s not what I wrote on the form. Bloody annoying. It should say— (*Thinking for a moment*) ...*forty-seven*.

WENDY Should it?

JONATHAN ...My mother used to say that you’re as old as how you feel.

WENDY Then I must be a hundred and ten.

JONATHAN Well, you don’t look it.

WENDY ...Thank you. Though I think that's the worst compliment I've ever had...

They both share a chuckle at this.

(continuing to wander; finding a photo of JONATHAN taken on holiday) ...This looks a nice place.

JONATHAN Yes, that's the Canary Islands. Tenerife.

WENDY Tenerife? Don't they have a volcano?

JONATHAN That's right—in the middle somewhere.

WENDY It looks like the picture is just half of a complete photo. There's a hand round your waist but nobody else there with you.

JONATHAN The lone hand belonged to my fiancée. I had the rest of her chopped out. I have entire photo albums filled with half-torn images like that.

WENDY I suppose it's difficult to know if you should keep the memory as it is or—edit it.

JONATHAN I just prefer to keep the memory of the holiday. I liked the holiday. I think it would be wrong to erase the whole fortnight... Ironically, my fiancée liked the holiday too. Particularly the time she spent with our concierge Sergio. She liked it so much, she never left.

WENDY Oh... So, as we speak, she might actually be *at* the volcano.

JONATHAN Yes. Or preferably—*in* it.

WENDY I'm sorry that happened to you.

JONATHAN Thank you. I'm sorry too. She obviously wasn't "the one".

WENDY I sometimes think I'm not looking for "the one". I'm just looking for "anyone".

JONATHAN I can't believe that's true. I'm sure you'd make any man very happy. And he'd never be short of cheese!

WENDY That's my problem with men. They're all after my gorgonzola...!

JONATHAN (*laughing heartily at this*) You know, you can be very funny.

WENDY Yes—no wonder I'm alone. Nobody wants a funny lady.

JONATHAN Have you not ever been engaged yourself then?

WENDY Actually, yes. Twice. In my pre-funny days. The first engagement just drifted away. But I married my second fiancé.

JONATHAN What was he like?

WENDY His name was Alan. Worked in computer software, played golf. Unusually, I suppose, he was a strict vegetarian. No meat, no fish, no eggs, no honey.

JONATHAN No honey?

WENDY It exploits the bees.

JONATHAN I see.

WENDY The wedding reception was problematic, because he wouldn't have any animal products at the buffet. So it was all mushroom paste and sautéed zucchini. There was nothing that looked edible. The first toast was to "absent friends" and the second one to "absent food". A lot of people left early when word got out there was a Burger King in the next village. At first, I didn't really mind living on a strictly vegetarian diet. Though it amazed me that you could put different combinations of vegetables, pulses and spices into a blender and the result always came out looking and tasting like an old pond. It's silly really because I probably didn't even need to become vegetarian. But he didn't eat meat, so I didn't eat meat. He played golf on a Sunday, so I played golf on a Sunday. He liked jazz, so I liked jazz. It's as though he was some giant machine that sucked away my personality. He was a big blonde Hoover. And it's a shame because I had very high hopes. Which is a mistake, of course. The higher

you put your hopes, the more it hurts when you fall down onto your arse... Sorry—there I go again.

JONATHAN No, I thought it was perfectly phrased and summed up the experience with great clarity. Here's to us and our bruised backsides. *(He raises his glass in a toast)*

WENDY *does the same.*

Can I make your juice a bit more interesting? A splash of lemonade, or perhaps—a tiny drop of vodka...?

WENDY Vodka? Well...a little drop, then. But only a tiny, tiny bit.

JONATHAN OK. *(Taking her glass)* You just tell me how much. *(He heads into the kitchen and locates the vodka bottle)*

WENDY *follows to stand nearby.*

Here we are. Smirnoff—direct from Russia...via Tesco. So—just say when.

JONATHAN *upturns the bottle to start pouring but is stopped by WENDY's gestures to be less generous. Each tiny movement of the bottle is met with a reaction even though no liquid has actually come out of it yet. Eventually, the tiniest of dribbles plops into the glass and WENDY stops him there.*

WENDY That's it! Thank you.

JONATHAN I'm not sure you got any.

WENDY I don't want to get paralytic.

JONATHAN No danger of that.

WENDY Do please have some yourself.

JONATHAN I'm fine. *(Half whispered)* I had some earlier. *(Handing over her drink)* ...To build up courage.

WENDY For me?

JONATHAN I get a bit nervous around the female of the species.

WENDY Why?

JONATHAN Oh, I'm not sure. I just get a bit self-conscious, I suppose. Nobody ever teaches you what you're supposed to do on a date. They make you take lessons for a dozen weeks before you can drive a car, but we go off on these trial relationships with no skills and no map.

WENDY And no safety belt.

JONATHAN Precisely. Somebody's bound to get hurt. I think the hardest thing is that with female company—well, we just never know what you're thinking.

WENDY We don't know what you're thinking either.

JONATHAN Oh, but we're not thinking of anything. No—put us out on a date with an attractive woman and a great fog descends. The brain goes into auto-pilot. So we just take it one pointless sentence at a time and hope for the best. Also, I personally try not to reveal too much at those first dinners, which I suppose keeps me quiet after my inevitable initial bout of yabbering. I don't like somebody to know everything about me in the first ten minutes. One likes to have a little air of mystery... Not that I'm secretive or have anything to hide. There's nothing in my past to be ashamed of.

WENDY I'm sure.

JONATHAN On the contrary, I think—well, there are things I've done which might be regarded as—quite colourful.

WENDY Oh good. What things exactly?

JONATHAN I've travelled very widely. I've enjoyed the arts. I was—yes, I was a volunteer fireman for several weeks...till I burnt my finger. And—I, erm— (*He gets stuck for a moment*) —Oh yes—I won second prize in a dancing competition!

WENDY You did?

JONATHAN Yes, when I was in my twenties back in nineteen-seventy— (*Suddenly correcting himself*) —in erm, nineteen-eighty—ninety—in erm. Back in...my youth—I

have a trophy! (*Dashing to a cabinet and carefully extracting the trophy from amongst assorted decanters and glasses*) It's right here... That's it. (*He shows it to WENDY*)

WENDY How exciting. (*Reading the plaque*) Oh— “Ballroom Dancing” —That's quite an unusual thing for a young man to have been involved in.

JONATHAN It happened by accident. I worked in a shop and the owner was a great expert at all that—waltzes and polkas and everything. He had this weekly class and I went along just for a laugh, really. Or perhaps because I was intrigued. And he taught me a few steps, a few moves and—I liked it. There were lots of elderly ladies there and I was a young chap, of course, so I became the object of their desires. I was flattered by the attention. It's always nice to be the youngest man in the room—any room. So—I became a regular and eventually I took part in a local competition and—

WENDY You came second.

JONATHAN I did. It was only a small local thing.

WENDY What a shame you didn't get first prize. I'm sure you deserved it.

JONATHAN No, no, I—actually—yes. I really should have won. Everybody said so. But I knew deep down that I wasn't going to win. You know generally who's going to get the prize. The same old, same old. So, I knew that big glorious buggar of a trophy would not be mine. I remember sitting in my seat during the ceremony dinner and thinking, “Just enjoy it”. And I did. I sat and ate my slice of pie and merrily chatted with the other dancers. The various speeches came and went, and when they came to the prizes, I sat there completely content and relaxed, and then in those very final seconds, when they were opening the envelope—suddenly I wanted to win. I wanted to *win*—more than I'd wanted anything in the world. I wanted that huge gleaming trophy in my hands and I thought in those few seconds that it could be mine—and all eyes on me. My moment...but it wasn't. And

because I had let my guard down in those final seconds, I felt a great shudder of disappointment and my whole body deflated like an overbaked soufflé. I went up and collected *second* prize— “runner up” —and then I had to stand there like a lemon and congratulate some other person who didn’t desire that award half as much as I did. Who didn’t, in that moment, want it as much as I wanted it. As I needed it...

WENDY Oh...

JONATHAN Yes, my thoughts exactly.

WENDY But you did very well. You got this nice little second trophy.

JONATHAN Nobody wants to be a bridesmaid. We all want to be the bride.

WENDY Yes, that *is* true. If you *had* won the big trophy, where would you have put it? In the cabinet?

JONATHAN No... In the toilet, naturally. As though it meant nothing... The only problem with putting it in the loo is that you spend the entire evening desperate for your guests to go and have a pee, so they can see it. You catch yourself spiking their syllabub with laxatives. So you might just as well plonk it in the middle of the room and have done with it.

WENDY (*gesturing to centre of the room*) Right there.

JONATHAN Right there.

They stare for a moment at an empty space at the centre of the room.

WENDY It must be good to be a winner. It’s not something everyone gets to experience. I never won anything. Not even “runner up”. But I keep trying. I could do with some guidance I think—a few lessons.

JONATHAN Dance lessons?

WENDY I sort of meant life lessons, but...learning to dance might be a good idea too.

JONATHAN If you like—I could... I could show you.

WENDY What—now? Here? No, I don't see how that would—I mean, you're obviously very good, but...that would be a bit ridiculous, wouldn't it? There isn't even any music.

JONATHAN *claps his hands loudly twice and this sound automatically turns on his music system. It begins to play Charles Aznavour singing "DANCE IN THE OLD FASHIONED WAY". He waits for her to make a move.*

(feeling uncomfortable) I'm sorry, Jonathan, I don't think—

JONATHAN *(clapping his hands twice again and making the music stop)* That's fine. Sorry—it was only a thought. *(He takes the trophy and puts it back in or near the cabinet)*

WENDY ...And it was a lovely thought. But the music started so quickly, I was a bit—

JONATHAN It's an automated system. You just clap your hands.

WENDY Yes I saw that. How clever.

JONATHAN Sorry if it took you by surprise.

WENDY No, it wasn't that—I think I—I didn't feel comfortable all of a sudden.

JONATHAN That's quite understandable—don't give it another thought. You must have wondered if I was about to whisk you around the floor for hours. I was only intending to show you a few moves.

WENDY I realise that. It wasn't that I was— Oh, it's me being silly as usual. No harm in being shown a few dance moves. That would be fun, I'm sure.

JONATHAN *claps his hands again and the music re-starts.*

No, no! I didn't mean that I'd changed my— *(Clapping her hands twice this time to stop the music)* Oh—it works with my hands too! Sorry—that was rude of me, stopping the— Oh, Jonathan, I— Oh dear, I feel so bad that I did that.

JONATHAN It's fine, it's fine. *(He turns away)*

WENDY Please start the music again.

JONATHAN Shall we just sit down and have some more juice?

WENDY Yes.

He takes her glass and heads back towards the kitchen.

...No. (Clapping her hands twice again and re-starting the music)

JONATHAN *(being stopped in his tracks; speaking loudly over the music)* I thought you wanted juice.

WENDY *(yelling back)* I don't know what I want. Why do you think I'm single?

JONATHAN *shakes his head in confusion but looks at her and they share a little smile. He puts the drinks down and walks back to her. He holds his arms out towards her and she takes hold of one hand. He puts the other hand—gently and respectfully—around her waist. He then walks her through a few simple dance steps in time with the music. She picks up the steps quickly and they dance to the song. Occasionally, she loses the rhythm or treads on his toes. He responds to this with an “ouch!” but they make it part of the fun. The dance continues for a little while, until it is interrupted by the phone ringing in the apartment.*

WENDY That's your phone ringing.

JONATHAN It doesn't matter.

WENDY Don't you want to get it?

JONATHAN It's only— *(They stop dancing)* Yes, I'll just—

They both clap hands simultaneously and the music stops and starts and stops again amidst the confusing barrage of claps. JONATHAN crosses the room and answers the phone. He knows who it is without asking.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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