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Do Not Disturb

A Comedy

Michael Pertwee

Samuel French – London

New York – Sydney – Toronto – Hollywood



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CHARACTERS

Jay

Darlene

Sonia

Rose

Mary

The action of the play takes place in a studio flat in North-West London

ACT I Jay Spencer's studio flat. Late afternoon

ACT II

SCENE 1 The same. The action is continuous

SCENE 2 The same. Later that night

Time—the present

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Jay must be at least forty years of age but he could be fifteen years older. Only a few lines have to be changed to suit any age between forty and fifty-five.

The character of Rose must be cast to suit the age of the actor playing Jay.

ACT ONE

A studio flat in North-West London. Late afternoon

It is a one-room apartment, which includes a bedroom alcove. There are three doors—a front door, a door to the bathroom and a door to the kitchen. It is expensively and tastefully decorated, but the decorations are not entirely complete. One section of wall has not been papered, and rolls of paper, pots of paint and a step ladder are evidence of incompleted work. The furniture is expensive, comfortable and in good taste. There is ample evidence that the occupier has only just moved in, including an open and unpacked suitcase, and a tea chest, filled with objects wrapped in newspaper. UR is a square alcove, which houses a round bed, with pillows, a sheet and a duvet on it. The rear wall is taken up with a range of fitted cupboards. On the R wall is a single, sash window. The alcove can be concealed from view by curtains which are opened and closed by a remote control instrument, similar to that which operates TV sets. In the UR corner is a small round table, with a lamp on it. The alcove, and an area below the curtains, are on a rostrum. This rostrum is carpeted. Further down, in the centre of the R wall, is a double-sashed window, set in a small alcove. Through all the windows, houses on the opposite side of the street can be seen. Opposite the double window, and still on the rostrum, is a round dining-table and four chairs. DR is the door to the bathroom, which opens inwards. To the L of the alcove in the rear wall, and set some feet further downstage than the rear wall of the alcove, is the front door, which opens into the room. It has a letter-box in it. When the door is open, it is possible for the audience to see a landing. To the L of this landing is a bannister belonging to the staircase. Across the landing is the front door to another flat. To the L of the front door is a fitment of shelves, which houses hi-fi equipment, a clock, books, various ornaments and other objects, carelessly arranged. On the L wall is a door to the kitchen. When open, a section of the kitchen may be seen. DS of the kitchen door, against the wall, is a desk on which is a push-button phone, some telephone directories, tumblers, a bottle of gin, a bottle of whisky, a pencil and paper, a pocket tape-recorder. DSR is a pouffe. Centre stage, facing the audience is a comfortable, low-backed sofa. To the L of the sofa is a large, square coffee table. DSL is an armchair

When the CURTAIN rises Jay Spencer is discovered on the phone, half sitting on the desk, facing R. Jay is somewhere into middle-age, and would readily agree he does not look it. He is casually dressed

Jay *(on the phone)* We'll go with a nice plant, I think. An azalea would be fine. . . . A card? Yes. . . . "Thanks. You were gr—" No, scrub that. Sorry. Just put: "Well! Well! Well! Who'd have thought it?" That's all. . . . No. No signature. *(Opening a wallet and searching for a credit card)* J for

Jason Spencer, with a C. I'll pay by American Express. (*Searching among several cards*) I won't pay by American Express. I seem to have lost it. You take Barclaycard? (*Picking up a Barclaycard, and squinting at it a bit myopically*) F, four-eight-three-seven-eight-one-o-two-one. . . . Yes, delivery tomorrow morning will be fine. Bye. (*He hangs up, replaces the cards and frowns. He picks up the pocket tape-recorder from the desk, switches it on and talks into it*) Miss Parfitt. I seem to have mislaid my American Express card. Is it anywhere in the office?

He wanders R, looking around, perhaps slightly shifting the position of the armchair on the way. He mounts the rostrum and approaches the dining-table. He leaves the recorder on the table, and picks up the control instrument which operates the curtains at the alcove. He presses a button. The curtains start to close with a pleasant hum. He presses another button and they open again. He enjoys this. He lies down on the bed and starts to close the curtains. We hear the sound of a loud female sneeze from the direction of the front door. Jay stops the curtains

The front door opens very slowly and Darlene puts her head in. She cannot see Jay

Darlene is pretty, waifish, downbeat and probably still in her teens. She is barefoot, and wears nothing but a large, man's shirt, disturbingly unbuttoned. She clutches a paper tissue to her nose. She glances round the room then, watched in silent fascination by Jay, she moves L towards the kitchen door. What ensues will instantly convey to the audience that this is a girl who is accident prone. She pauses by the fitment, and seems to be searching for something on the shelves. She upsets an ornament, just rescues it from falling to the ground but, in so doing, knocks an expensive-looking clock to the ground. She picks it up and shakes it, then listens to see if it still ticks. It makes a noise which indicates that its works are now in many pieces. She replaces the clock and steps back. In so doing she evidently treads on a pile of plates, concealed from view by the armchair. She bends down and picks up a plate which is broken in two pieces. She wonders what to do; considers concealing them behind a cushion in the chair, decides against this, and settles on concealing the two pieces under the chair

Darlene exits into the kitchen, knocking over something on the way

From the kitchen comes the crash of something else breaking. This brings Jay to his feet and out of the alcove

Darlene comes out of the kitchen and heads back towards the front door

How do you do.

Darlene gives a start and sees him. Her mouth opens but she says nothing

(Approaching her) We haven't met, have we? (Taking in her attire) Chilly weather for . . . (He leans forward politely to listen)

Darlene lets out a tremendous sneeze

(Rocking back on his heels) Bless you! That's a nasty cold you're offering me.

Darlene (*wiping her nose*) Nrr a crr. Aeriery. Ayus.

Jay I didn't catch that.

Darlene Not a cold. Allergy. Sinus.

Jay That's a relief.

Darlene sneezes

(*Winning*) One doesn't catch sinus, does one?

Darlene sneezes again

I hope.

Darlene How are you off for money?

Jay (*in a slightly Jewish accent*) I'm comfortable.

Darlene Can you let me have some?

Jay Ah. There we have a problem. My accountant gets extremely angry with me if I loan . . .

Darlene (*producing a pound note from the breast pocket of her shirt, and proffering it*) I need some change, some ten p's.

Jay Oh! Ah! (*Patting his pockets*) Afraid I can't help.

Darlene For the gas meter. I want to use the oven.

Jay (*turning out both pockets*) Nothing. See? Terribly sorry.

Darlene You got a razor?

Jay You want to shave? I have, but I'm a little fussy about lending it to strangers and, anyway, I don't know if the plug fits here.

Darlene Not electric. (*Making a somewhat lethal gesture*) A razor with blades.

Jay No. I gave them up shortly after I first married. Women do strange things with razors. They only have to look for them and they go blunt.

Darlene What about a kitchen knife, sharp, with a point?

Jay I honestly wouldn't advise trying to shave with a kitchen knife. (*Looking at her closely*) You don't need a shave, anyway.

Darlene (*grimly*) It's not for shaving.

Jay Good, but I'm afraid it's no again. I'm just moving in and only have the bare essentials.

Darlene What about a bread knife?

Jay No. Not being very helpful, am I?

Darlene (*turning to leave*) No sweat.

Jay Are you collecting information for some census?

Darlene No. I'm staying across the hall.

Jay With no bread knife.

Darlene I use sliced bread.

Jay A very good reason for not having a bread knife, and you're better off than me . . . I don't even have any bread.

Darlene moves back towards the front door

Darlene (*turning and looking around*) You've done a lot in here haven't you?

Jay Not as much as I'd planned. (*Indicating the unfinished section of wall*) My builder's disappeared on the job.

Darlene When did you get here?

Jay About an hour ago.

Darlene (*nodding*) You dropped something didn't you?

Jay That tea chest—on my foot. I hope my language didn't carry?

Darlene (*nodding again*) Yes. The man who lived here before was a pervert.

Jay Was he?

Darlene He did rude things at the top of the stairs—and once out of that window.

Jay You'll be relieved to hear that isn't one of my failings.

Darlene Are you retired?

Jay From doing rude things out of windows?

Darlene From work.

Jay (*looking hurt*) Do I look that old? Don't answer that. No. I still totter in to my business.

Darlene What do you do, then?

Jay I'm a communications consultant, a hydra-headed beast combining PR—that's Public Relations—with Advertising and Motivation Research.

Darlene You sell something?

Jay No, I force the public to buy what it doesn't want, at a price it can't afford. That's the PR side.

Darlene (*blankly*) Huh?

Jay The Motivation Researcher probes your subconscious mind because, more often than not, you have no idea why you buy a particular brand. If I discover what motivates you then I steer you safely in the wrong direction. A shameful trade which I am shortly abandoning for good.

Darlene I don't know what you're talking about.

Jay Put simply, I might persuade you that Daz is a much squarer deal than Square Deal Surf.

Darlene Oh, you're in washing powders.

Jay Brainwashing.

Darlene My dad was a commercial traveller, too.

Before Jay can correct her on this, Darlene gives a slight wave and exits through the front door, almost shutting it behind her

Jay Too? (*He goes to the front door*)

The door opens and Darlene re-appears

Darlene You wouldn't have an axe, or a gun?

Jay (*after a short pause*) No, I wouldn't. One of my reasons for moving in here was to try and put thoughts of murder permanently behind me.

Darlene gives a little "tck" of irritation and exits

(Imitating her "tck" and closing the front door) Axe? Gun?

The doorbell rings

(Mimicking Darlene) What about an Exocet missile? (He throws open the door. He freezes slightly but his face remains expressionless. He stands back)

Sonia enters. She is in her late twenties, dressed to accentuate a voluptuous

figure. She carries a handbag. She has a penchant for large costume jewellery. She looks, and is, a starlet. She has a somewhat schizoid personality, one moment a violent, extremely foul-mouthed child, the next intelligent and reasonably articulate

Sonia And what, precisely, is all this?

Jay Precisely, Flat Four, Twenty-Two, Pottersby Road, NW Three, Seven, AA. Studio apartment of character with exceptional view over Primrose Hill, a distant glimpse of St John's Wood and, with the aid of binoculars, Willesden, or is it Neasden? I hope it's Willesden. I've always loathed the sound of Neasden.

She lights a cigarette. Her movements betray pent-up nerves

Sonia Inane chatter won't put me off, or aren't I entitled to ask why I find you holed up in what I assume is some kind of love nest?

Jay Definitely entitled.

Sonia Thank you. So, about this dump, whose is it?

Jay Until two thousand and one—mine.

Sonia You setting someone up here?

Jay No. Well, yes—me. *(After a short pause)* I've left you, Sonia.

Sonia Just like that? Without a word? Or did I miss a farewell note on the mantelpiece?

Jay *(shaking his head)* It seemed—tidier this way.

Sonia Tidier! That is the most despicable, cowardly thing I ever heard.

Jay *(nodding)* Yes, but I've always been a coward where you're concerned.

Sonia You can't seriously have intended to disappear?

Jay Of course not, but the first step was to summon up the courage to make the break. How did you find me? Is there a mole in my office?

Sonia Betrayed by the perfect Miss Parfitt? No! That cow is well cowed. You've been acting oddly for weeks, so . . . *(a trifle nervously)* I hired a private detective.

Jay *(startled)* Really? I'm flattered. *(He has a sudden idea)* Wait! A little tache and a big arse? You know, an aggressive arse with a blue feather; not in his arse, in a pork pie hat?

Sonia's silence gives consent

(Moving to the window) So he was a private eye, and I thought he fancied me! Yes, there he is. *(Opening the window and looking out)* Hullo! Cooe! It's me. Remember? I blew you a kiss outside Chalk Farm station. Look, your lady is here, so there's no point in hanging around. Push off home—and well done. *(To Sonia)* He's not budging.

Sonia *(nervously, chewing a nail)* Oh, forget him.

Jay No! Standing about like that could give him athlete's foot, or piles or something. I suppose he called you from that phone box, so, when you got here, why didn't you tell the poor chap to knock off?

Sonia *(irritated)* Because he wasn't there; at least, I couldn't see him.

Jay Aha! Had to slip away for a minute, which raises an interesting point.

(*Leaning out of the window again*) I say! Could you come a bit closer? I want to whisper. Oh, all right, don't. (*Loudly*) When you're tailing someone on your own, what do you do about having a pee? No, not you, madam. So sorry! I'm talking to the gent in the pork pie hat, who is a *detective*. (*To Sonia*) He's turned his back. Looks huffy. I've noticed that before. People with those aggressive arses often lack a sense of humour.

Sonia If you've quite finished your comedy spot, is it too much to ask for an explanation?

Jay (*walking away from the window*) Darling, if I tried to explain you wouldn't understand.

Sonia You're the public relations whizz. That's your strong suit, conning the gullible into believing a pack of lies. Go on, then! Sell me the joys of Primrose Hill!

Jay (*finding it difficult*) I don't want to hurt you . . .

Sonia But it's all my fault!

Jay Irrelevant, darling. The survivor of an earthquake doesn't care which particular fault caused the disaster. He's just happy to survive.

Sonia God! I talk about our marriage. You talk about a disaster.

Jay Then we're talking about the same thing.

Sonia Oh, witty!

Jay Sorry. I do bring out the worst in me, don't I? But what marriage, Sonia? Maybe actresses shouldn't marry. I know I wanted a wife, and all I got was a frustrated career.

Sonia (*hotly*) How can you say that . . .?

Jay With sincerity. You wouldn't have a child. Why? Because of the stretch marks. Stretch marks! It isn't a partnership, it's a conflict, a competition. The more successful I become, the more you seem to resent it, compete.

Sonia So it *is* all my fault.

Jay No! Of course not. Initially, we both got together for all the wrong reasons.

Sonia Oh? And what wrong reasons prompted me to marry you?

Jay Partly the aspiring actress's inevitable insecurity, and the knowledge that my PR connections could hoist you off page three of the *Sun*, up to the dizzy heights of Hickey, Dempster and the other gossip columns.

Sonia Nothing about being in love?

Jay I don't think you're capable of love, Sonia.

Sonia What does that mean?

Jay You're too busy hating yourself.

Sonia Oh, blimey! Lead me to your couch!

Jay You'll never be able to love, until you can accept love, and you won't accept love until you've learned to love yourself.

Sonia (*leaping up*) You pompous little . . . (*She threatens to throw an ashtray at him*)

Jay (*gently restraining her by the wrist*) Sonia, no. We've hurled our last insults and heavy objects. The war is over.

Sonia (*near to tears, sitting down and lighting another cigarette*) All right, so suddenly you decide to walk out. Why?

Jay I'm starting a new life with a radical new philosophy of my own creation.

Sonia And when did this revelation hit you?

Jay Initially in the bath. I was lying in the bath one morning thinking about death.

Sonia Death!

Jay It's my age. The first thing I used to read in the morning paper was *Peanuts*; now it's the obituary column to see who I've survived.

Sonia You're sidetracking yourself.

Jay No. There was this old member of my club. Ninety-one he was, but bright as a button. He always lunched there and everybody loved him. Never a day passed without someone saying: "It'll be a sad day for us all when old Cecil Hobday goes." Well, he duly went. I was at the club, reading the notice announcing his death when one of his closest cronies came up and stood beside me. "Good Lord!" he said. "Old Cecil's snuffed it. I wonder what's for lunch?"

Sonia What the hell has that to do with anything?

Jay A lot. It made me realize how few people are really affected when someone dies. In fact, only one person in this world will be completely shattered by my death.

Sonia I'll buy it. Who?

Jay Me.

Sonia How could you be affected? You'd be bloody dead.

Jay But if nobody really cares whether I'm alive or dead why shouldn't I live the rest of my life exactly as I want?

Sonia Don't you always? What's new?

Jay For a start, having decided that the Public Relations man is the lowest form of human life, I shall close the office. No more scrabbling after gimmicks, no more crawling. I can't tell you what a kick I shall get from telling important clients to go stuff themselves.

Sonia And then?

Jay The joy of freedom, knowing that never again will I spend five minutes with anyone I don't choose to.

Sonia Now we're getting somewhere! You're just trotting out every middle-aged man's fantasy of becoming a bachelor again.

Jay (*equably*) Maybe a touch of that. Who doesn't occasionally hanker after a little youthful irresponsibility?

The phone rings. Sonia swiftly beats Jay to it and answers it

Sonia (*on the phone*) Hullo? Yes. Who wants him? . . . Oh, just a moment. (*Covering the mouthpiece*) Here's your chance. It's number one Arab client, Sheikh Yalami, from the Mountford Hotel.

Jay How the hell did he . . . ? (*He takes the phone, and talks into it*) Spencer. . . . Yes, put him through. (*To Sonia*) Miss Parfitt must have given him this number.

Sonia How comforting to learn that dear Miss Parfitt doesn't need a detective to track you down.

He waves her to silence. When he speaks, there is a subtle change in his manner; a definite hint of subservience

Jay (*on the phone*) Yes, Your Highness, I am terribly sorry not to have got back to you, but it's been like a madhouse with half a dozen different things . . . (*Hastily*) No! No! I haven't been neglecting you. I'll have the full proposals ready for you the day after tomorrow. . . . Tomorrow? Right, tomorrow it shall be. I saw the architect and he reckons three months for the renovation of the foyer. . . . Two months? Well, I can but ask him. . . . I'll *tell* him. Right. Two months it is. Now, we do have one problem which I'm afraid is going to mean the loss of considerable revenue. Well, once it's officially announced that you, an Arab, have acquired the hotel the Bar Mitzvahs are obviously out. . . . (*Looking astonished*) The Bar Mitzvahs are *in*? Your Highness, with respect, you do know what a Bar Mitzvah is? . . . You do. Well, that's very . . . exceedingly broad. . . . Right! Right! I'll put an ad in the *Jewish Chronicle*. See you tomorrow, at seven. Seven p.m. it is. . . . Seven a.m. No! No! No problem. I'll be there. Goodbye, Your Highness. (*He hangs up, looking a little shell-shocked*) Oy ve! Maybe we should convert the ballroom into a synagogue.

Sonia (*clapping slowly*) That was really telling him! How to get an Arab prince to stuff himself.

Jay I said I was closing down, but not in one fell swoop. I have to eat—and so do you.

Sonia But how will you get by after the last Bar Mitzvah has sounded?

Jay (*shrugging*) I'll pounce off some rich woman, go back to serious writing, rob a bank. I dunno.

Sonia But how will you *live*? You've never made a bed or washed up a plate, and the only time you cooked supper you tried to roast a boiled egg.

Jay There's always the Moti Mahal.

Sonia looks bank

Indian restaurant across the street. They have fourteen wallpapers and forty curries. Or is it forty wallpapers and fourteen curries?

Sonia (*moving towards the bed*) Pathetic! A round bed at your age!

Jay A lifetime in oblong ones has got me nowhere, so what the hell?

Sonia It has to be someone else. Come on. Is it?

Jay (*after a pause*) All right—yes.

Sonia (*almost relieved*) So it is another woman.

Jay No.

Sonia What! What? It's a *man*?

Jay Well, yes. It's me.

Sonia stares at him

I have fallen in love with me.

Sonia I can't believe I'm hearing this.

Jay Why should you? As I said, you don't love you. I'm different. I've learned how great it is to be me, to live with me. I can honestly say I'm one of the best adjusted couples I know.

Sonia If you could listen to yourself!

Jay Oh, I do. I've just discovered the joy of talking to myself, agreeing with

everything I say. Never a cross word. The perception, the wit, the charm!
You think I'm crazy, don't you?

Sonia I know you are.

Jay No. A little over excited maybe, but why not? I'm re-born, you see. This isn't the sixteen thousand three hundred and thirty-first day of a routinely miserable existence. It is the first, joyous day of a brand new life.

Sonia Happy birthday!

Jay Thank you.

Sonia You know what your trouble really is?

Jay Oh, dear! Here come the *Reader's Digest* snippets on the male menopause.

Sonia (*it's true*) No . . . I . . . well, actually . . .

Jay Wrong tack, darling. The menopausal subject dreads the future. I don't. I look forward to it. He is haunted by the spectre of old age; worried days, sleepless nights. Will I get it up? Will it stay up if I do get it up?

Sonia Now it begins to sound depressingly like you.

Jay *Touché!* But in recent weeks, neither my ego nor anything else has been uplifted by you hopping straight from my bed on to movie mogul Carlo Cassini's casting couch in Cavendish Cloisters. I say! What a lot of words starting with C—and I just thought of another.

Sonia (*clearly shaken*) Finally it comes. So that's what this is all about. How long have you known?

Jay More or less from the off—or should it be on?

Sonia And you said nothing.

Jay What did you want me to say: "Evening, darling. How many orgasms this afternoon?"

Sonia But you must have wanted to say something?

Jay Yes, "Evening, darling. How many orgasms this afternoon?"

Sonia But not a word . . .

Jay Making a scene wouldn't have stopped you; just ensured you were more careful.

Sonia (*awkwardly*) About Carlo . . .

Jay No need to fill me in on Carlo. I checked. One of the best lays of ancient Rome.

Sonia What do you intend to do?

Jay Don't worry. I'm not going to murder him. I can safely leave that to the film critics. Any movie entitled *Emanuelle And The Devil's Dyke* has to be slaughtered.

Sonia (*floundering*) It . . . isn't . . . like what you think it is; him and me.

Jay Surprise me.

Sonia I admit getting into his film is terribly important to me. It's my big chance, perhaps my only chance with the business in the state it's in. As to the—other side. Carlo not only believes in me as an actress, he's very much in love with me.

Jay You're not being a teensy bit gullible?

Sonia (*defiantly*) If I were free he'd marry me.

Jay Then he may have to put his money where his mouth is sooner than he thinks. Do you have a contract?

Sonia Not yet, because . . .

Jay Take my advice and get one, fast.

Sonia The thing is, I may not play the part he'd earmarked for me. I may play something different.

Jay Don't tell me you're the dyke?

She chews her nails

Nails!

Sonia There's something you don't know. Fiona Sutton has fallen out.

Jay Of what?

Sonia The film. She's asking too much money. She was playing Emanuelle.

Jay Oh? (*Getting the message*) You? You've got the lead?

She nods

Fantastic! I can see the headlines when I write my piece for the *Sunday People*. "I was married to Emanuelle the sixty-ninth."

Sonia Was married?

Jay I'm assuming we'll be cosily divorced by then. You might even be Mrs Cassini . . .

Sonia Look, Jay, this whole thing in Cavendish Cloisters . . .

Jay Thing? That's not a very nice way to talk about old Carlo. He's quite pretty—except for the ears.

Sonia (*sidetracked*) Ears?

Jay You haven't noticed? No, you probably don't walk behind him very often. (*Pushing his own ears forward*) Amazing—but handy for gliding out of bedroom windows in a hurry.

Sonia Shut up! Shut up!

Jay I apologize. That was uncalled for and if the rest of him stands out half as . . .

Sonia Oh, for God's sake! I'm trying to say I'm not in love with him and it probably won't last.

Jay I see. Get the film, make it, then ditch him. Meanwhile, you'd like me to hang around as a safety net.

Sonia I didn't mean that.

Jay Funny thing about safety nets. People don't appreciate their importance until suddenly they're not there any more.

Sonia (*with a hint of panic*) I know I'm impossible, a mess, but I do need you.

Jay Well you've got a bloody odd way of showing it.

Sonia I don't know what it is with me . . .

Jay I told you—insecurity, the compulsion to prove yourself irresistible to all men. (*Wearily*) I understand it but, suddenly, I can't live with it.

Sonia I realize things have been lousy, but, in a funny way, we're good for each other. You provide stability and I provide a—a—sort of stimulus, spur . . .

Jay "Creative conflict" they call it, don't they? Trouble is I'm a pacifist at heart.

Sonia Before we married you were considered unimaginative and old-

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