

(DRAFT: 10 May 2019)

Brute Farce

A play in two acts

By Craig Houk



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CHARACTERS

Alistair McHugh	Theater Critic
Killian Black	Actor
Deirdre Shepherd	Stage Manager
Reggie Brimble	Stagehand
Fiona Bainbridge	Actress
Veronica Pruitt	Actress
Quinn Ponsonby	Actor

SETTING

An old theater. A dusty, unkempt basement/storage area perhaps, which has been transformed into a crude dressing room.

LOCATION

London

TIME

Present

ACT 1**Scene 1**

(At rise we see Alistair, who is unconscious on the floor. A moment passes before we hear him moan. He rouses, tries to take in the space, and then carefully and slowly rises to his feet in grave pain. He moves a few steps before realizing he's been restrained by chains, which are anchored to the floor. He has difficulty focusing as he tries to inspect the restraints. Suddenly, Killian enters carrying a blunt object. He strikes Alistair over the head. Alistair collapses.)

KILLIAN

We're not ready for you.

(Deirdre enters.)

DEIRDRE

House opens in thirty minutes, Killian. And bring that with you. We'll need it for fight call, won't we love?

(She is referring to the blunt object.)

KILLIAN

Is Veronica here?

DEIRDRE

She's in hair and makeup - do you know she's gone through three stylists since we've started the run? And Quinn phoned to say he'll be late - again. Fiona just got here - she's in the loo.

KILLIAN

Is she shitfaced?

DEIRDRE

Not this time, no...

KILLIAN

..Good to hear...

DEIRDRE

...She's coked up.

KILLIAN

What!?

DEIRDRE

Well, I can only assume it's cocaine. I mean, I'm no expert. Perhaps I'll take an occasional nip or two from the bottle of Teeling that I keep in the booth, but otherwise I most assuredly wouldn't know the difference between nose candy and nose drops.

KILLIAN

Bloody hell...

DEIRDRE

...Relax. I went through her things and got rid of anything that looked remotely suspicious, including some prescription pills.

KILLIAN

Well, she may need those.

DEIRDRE

Oh, I don't know. Might be interesting to see how it affects her performance without them.

KILLIAN

I expect it could only be an improvement.

(Alistair stirs. Deirdre kicks him.)

DEIRDRE

(Referring to Alistair.)

This guy. Am I right?

(Beat. She checks the time.)

Okay. Make that twenty eight minutes before we open the house. Fight call at a quarter past.

(She exits. A beat. Reggie enters. He carries a wooden panel on which are mounted a line of colored light bulbs, a line of clear light bulbs, and a small buzzer. Loose wires hang from the back of it.)

REGGIE

(Referring to Alistair.)

He's still here?

KILLIAN

Well, of course he's still here. Why wouldn't he be?

REGGIE

I was thinking maybe you dodgy plonkers had come to your senses by now?

KILLIAN

What have you got there?

REGGIE

Deirdre asked me to install it.

KILLIAN

What is it?

REGGIE

Well, since we're holding this bloke hostage such a long distance from the stage, I needed to find another way to let you actors know when you're due your entrances. I mean look, I can't be running back and forth between here and there as well as managing the props and moving furniture, now can I?

KILLIAN

So...?

REGGIE

So, after I get this panel wired and mounted, we'll test the system.

KILLIAN

Which is...?

REGGIE

Right. Well, about one minute before any of you are due to be onstage, you'll hear a buzzing sound followed by one of these bulbs lighting up. Each color represents a different actor. The line of clear bulbs below the colored ones will remind you what scene you're in.

KILLIAN

Okay. And which colors have you assigned to whom?

REGGIE

I haven't. I thought maybe you could sort that out amongst yourselves.

KILLIAN

More than half of us are incapable of sorting our own knickers. Just assign the colors. All right?

REGGIE

Certainly. Okay... You...

KILLIAN

...Killian.

REGGIE

Right. Mr. Black. You will be blue.

KILLIAN

Fine. Mr. Black is blue.

REGGIE

Miss Pruitt will be red. Miss Bainsbridge will be green. And Mr. Ponsonby will be yellow. Have I missed anyone?

KILLIAN

No, Reggie. You haven't missed anyone. There are four actors in this production. There have always been four actors in this production. And that's been the case since when we started rehearsals three months ago. And even on opening night last weekend. And it's all due to the simple fact that there are four characters identified in the script.

REGGIE

I never understood why they didn't bother to hire understudies.

KILLIAN

Any proposed budget for understudies was immediately sucked up by Veronica's demands for a bigger salary.

(Beat.)

All right. Just so I have this all in order. I'm blue. Veronica's red. Fiona is green. And Quinn is yellow.

REGGIE

I'm more familiar with your surnames.

KILLIAN

Oh, for fucksake. Black - blue. Pruitt - red. Bainbridge - green. Ponsonby - yellow.

REGGIE

I should write that down. I'll grab a pen and paper after I've put this up.

(He will install the panel during the following. Fiona enters carrying a makeup case and a bag.)

FIONA

Good evening everyone.

(She settles herself somewhere and begins to unpack things.)

REGGIE

Hallo, Miss Bainbridge.

KILLIAN

(Lackluster.)

Fiona.

FIONA

I've had better days, thank you both for asking..

REGGIE

Is she all right?

KILLIAN

Not likely.

FIONA

...This morning I awoke to the smell of smoke, only to discover that my bed was on fire.

KILLIAN

Oh my God.

FIONA

Well, I wasn't in it at the time..

REGGIE

...That's lucky..

FIONA

...The man I brought home last night was.

KILLIAN

What!?

FIONA

Oh, he's fine. Just a little first-degree burn on his backside. We'd lit some candles late in the night for some ambiance and then fell asleep after a massive shag. I must've gotten up at some point, perhaps to get a glass of wine, who knows really. Except then I woke up on the floor several feet from the bed in a cloud of smoke and to the smell of burning flesh.

(Beat.)

Has someone been going through my things?

KILLIAN

Why do you ask?

FIONA

There are some items that have gone missing.

KILLIAN

Like what?

FIONA

I'm not sure that's any of your business, Killian.

KILLIAN

Well then I supposed I'm in no position to assist.

FIONA

I suppose not.

(She notices Alistair.)

And who do we have here?

REGGIE

That's Mr. McHugh.

FIONA

Who?

KILLIAN

Oh for fucksake, Fiona - Alistair McHugh.

FIONA

The theater critic?

REGGIE

From the Daily Telegraph.

FIONA

Well, what's he doing here? And why is he chained to the floor?

KILLIAN

Are you...? Have you gone completely...? I mean honestly, just the other day, we spent hours discussing... Never mind. I will go over it again...

(At some point during the following, Fiona will begin to powder her face, and then happily discover that she had replaced the face powder with cocaine. She will then, to some extent, discreetly set up several lines to snort.)

You see, this mustachioed Billy no-mates right here is, without equal, the single largest threat to the continued existence of the whole Actors' Guild of Great Britain. He has been relentless in his efforts to undermine and, at times, completely shut down any production that doesn't suit his impossible standards. And he's been particularly vicious as it relates to various actors in those productions, repeatedly castigating them in his reviews, and thereby ultimately putting an end to their stage careers. And because of that, we all agreed - I know you agreed, Fiona, because you were in the room when it was all decided - we all agreed that this fucking bastard right here is finally going to get his comeuppance!

(Deirdre enters.)

DEIRDRE

Five minutes to fight call.

ALL

Thank you 'fight call'!

(Deirdre starts off.)

KILLIAN

Wait. Where's Quinn?

DEIRDRE

I've already told you. He's phoned to say he'll be late.

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KILLIAN

Well, we can't quite have fight call without Quinn, now can we?

DEIRDRE

Oh, I don't know. I wouldn't mind watching you thump *yourself* for a change.

(She grabs the blunt object from Killian and exits. A beat. Veronica enters. She is fresh from hair and makeup and is in full costume. She carries a bag or purse.)

VERONICA

This place is filthy.

(She sees Alistair.)

Oh God. So, we're actually going through with it, are we?

KILLIAN

Yeeeeeeesssssss!!!

VERONICA

You seem on the fence.

REGGIE

I promise you, he's not.

VERONICA

You know, it took me forever to figure out how to get here. I'm not certain I'll be able to find my way back.

KILLIAN

We need to be as far away from the stage as possible. We can't risk having the audience catching sight of him if he escapes or hearing him if he cries out. I mean honestly, were any of you listening when we decided *all* this just a few days ago?

VERONICA

I get paid to *talk*, not to *listen*. And I'll have you know that my being compelled to wait my time out in this bedraggled den of ineptitude is in direct violation of my contract, which clearly states that I am to have my own dressing room with swift and unobstructed access to the stage.

REGGIE

Not to mention your own bathroom to include toilet paper that matches your complexion.

(Fiona guffaws blowing coke powder into the air.)

VERONICA

And speaking of complexions... Fiona, you should really be using a darker shade of powder. Whatever that is, it's far too pale for your skin.

(Fiona's head falls to her makeshift dressing table.)

KILLIAN

Oh, for fucksake.

(He moves to Fiona.)

Fiona? Fiona...

(He checks for a pulse and lifts her head. He lowers her head.)

VERONICA

Is she...?

(Deirdre enters.)

DEIRDRE

Quinn's arrived.

ALL

Thank you 'Quinn'!

DEIRDRE

What's happened with Fiona?

VERONICA

She's expired.

DEIRDRE

What!?

REGGIE

She's pegged out.

KILLIAN

No. No. No. No. No. She is not dead.

REGGIE

Well, she's not moving, now is she?

KILLIAN

She's breathing.

VERONICA

Then what's the matter with her?

KILLIAN

(Killian moves in closer to Fiona.)

She's... Well, it looks like she's...

DEIRDRE

She's what, Killian?

KILLIAN

She's asleep.

DEIRDRE

Asleep?

KILLIAN

Yes.

REGGIE

Hardly seems possible considering the amount of blow she's done.

KILLIAN

*(He slowly turns to Deirdre,
accusingly.)*

Deirdre...?

DEIRDRE

What? What have I done?

KILLIAN

Fiona's prescription pills...

DEIRDRE

What about them?

KILLIAN

Where are they?

DEIRDRE

I've thrown them out.

KILLIAN

Can you get them?

DEIRDRE

Perhaps I misspoke. What I meant to say was that I flushed them.

KILLIAN

You flushed...? Do you really think that was...? I mean, are you intentionally trying to...? Never mind. Listen, do you at least remember what they were for?

DEIRDRE

No. No wait, yes. Yes, I do remember. Er um... one of them was for anxiety and the other for psychosis - I know this because most actors are on those. There was a third one, though. Sodium something. Sodium... Ox bite... or maybe Ox bait.

REGGIE

Sodium Oxybate.

DEIRDRE

Isn't that what I just said?

REGGIE

It's nearly what you just said.

DEIRDRE

Well, I said "Ox bait", didn't I, love?

REGGIE

Correct. But that's incorrect. Because the word is ox-y-bate. Three syllables, not two. One word, not two. And it's got nothing to do with an ox.

VERONICA

Sounds a bit like a tomato/tomato [to-may-to/to-maw-to] thing to me.

REGGIE

Actually, no, it's nothing like that.

KILLIAN

I couldn't care less how it's spelled or how it's pronounced or whether or not it's got two syllables or three. I just want to know what the fuck it means.

REGGIE

She's got narcolepsy.

KILLIAN

(Quietly, troubled.)

Oh, no.

VERONICA

That's revolting.

(They all take this in. A moment.)

DEIRDRE

You're thinking of necrophilia, love. That's a very different thing.

VERONICA

Is it?

(Fiona's head pops up.)

FIONA

...Except then I woke up on the floor several feet from the bed in a cloud of smoke and to the smell of burning flesh.

(Quinn enters carrying the blunt object.)

QUINN

Can anyone here perchance explain to me why I've been standing all alone on an empty stage holding on to this for the past five minutes?

DEIRDRE

Fight call.

ALL

Thank you 'fight call'!

KILLIAN

What about Fiona?

FIONA

What about me?

DEIRDRE

(She pulls Killian aside a bit.)

I'll deal with her presently. In the meantime, I need you and Quinn onstage for fight call...

KILLIAN

..Well, we can't just...

DEIRDRE

..I'll deal with it. Okay? And I need Reggie -

(She turns to Reggie.)

Reggie?

REGGIE

Yes?

DEIRDRE

Have you finished with that, love?

(She is referring to the panel.)

REGGIE

Just.

DEIRDRE

Good. Now I need you to go and set up for act 1, scene 1.

REGGIE

Certainly.

(Reggie exits.)

DEIRDRE

Right.

(She checks the time.)

Okay everyone. Ten minutes 'til house open.

ALL

Thank you 'house open'!

DEIRDRE

Quinn and Killian, follow me. Fiona and Veronica, make yourselves comfortable. And keep a close eye on him.

(Deirdre, Killian and Quinn exit. A moment of silence. Fiona begins to clean herself up a bit, maybe fixes her makeup, and perhaps eventually gets into costume. Veronica tries to settle in, but the place is filthy, so it'll be a challenge. Alistair regained consciousness sometime during the previous, but has remained silent until now.)

ALISTAIR

I'm a theater critic who lives for bad theater. What can I say? It's my one weakness...

VERONICA

Is he allowed to speak? Are you allowed to speak?

ALISTAIR

...I exist because there are actors out there who are profoundly self-aware and who are grateful to hear the truth. And I persist because there are actors out there - like you lot for example - who take me too seriously when you shouldn't.

VERONICA

Is that a fact? Do you know, mental institutions are full to the gills with actors who have taken critics too seriously?

ALISTAIR

On behalf of reviewers all over the globe, I'm honored. But you exaggerate. And so, what? So, a trifling few of my criticisms have been a smidge unflattering at times...

VERONICA

A smidge!? A smidge!? Do you have any idea the damage you've done?

ALISTAIR

Damage?

VERONICA

Yes. I mean, take poor, daft Fiona here for example -

(To Fiona.)

Fiona, darling, what vice is it this week?

FIONA

I've no idea what you mean?

(Her head drops to the table.)

VERONICA

(To Alistair.)

You see? She's been reduced to a hopeless, hackneyed, slaving nitwit.

FIONA

(Her head pops up again.)

That's a bit hurtful, isn't it?

ALISTAIR

Only a smidge.

VERONICA

(To Fiona.)

Well, it's not your fault, dear. It's not your fault.

FIONA

I suppose not, but whose fault is it then?

ALISTAIR

I expect I'm the culprit?

VERONICA

Indeed you are, Mr. McHugh. Indeed you are. You're like the living, breathing, looming Brexit of the theater world. And none of us are likely to survive the next decade intact.

ALISTAIR

And what are your plans for me, if I may so inquire?

FIONA

That's a terrific question. I'd like to know as well.

VERONICA

Well... If I'm to be honest, I have no idea as to our plans for you. Admittedly, I got a bit weary nearly five minutes into the conversation. I mean, Killian is quite famous for droning on and on without ever really coming to the point. Or perhaps he does come to the point and it's just that by the time he gets there, everyone's lost interest.

FIONA

And he's generally like that offstage as well, isn't he?

VERONICA

Well, what difference does it make anyway? We've come this far now, haven't we? We can hardly turn back. And I'm sure whatever Killian has planned for you will be appropriate.

ALISTAIR

Appropriate to what?

VERONICA

To your aggressions, Mr. McHugh. Your reviews are unreasonably harsh. And I'll accept that though it is the responsibility of theater critic to be critical, it doesn't mean that the critic should take pleasure in being cruel.

ALISTAIR

I don't take pleasure in being cruel. It's simply a by-product of years and years of exposure to dreadful scripts, second-rate productions, and vomit-inducing performances.

FIONA

(To Veronica.)

He's been particularly harsh on you, hasn't he?

VERONICA

What do you mean?

FIONA

I'm honestly surprised you're still able to find work. And in fact, I was shocked to see your name on the casting announcement.

VERONICA

What an awful thing to say.

FIONA

Well, it wasn't meant to be.

VERONICA

I'll have you know, there isn't a single director or producer in the whole of London who wouldn't kill for the chance to work with me. And at least I'm not compelled to go horizontal for the privilege.

(She stares hard at Fiona. A beat. Veronica then pulls a piece of

decomposing paper from her bag or purse. She unfolds it and hands it to Alistair, who does his best to take it in his chained hands.)

Read that.

ALISTAIR

(He squints at the paper.)

I would, except I can hardly make it out.

FIONA

I've a pair of reading glasses you can borrow.

(Fiona retrieves a pair of bejeweled glasses, takes them and places them on Alistair's face.)

Better?

ALISTAIR

I suppose. Except the words are all smudged. Almost as if someone had been crying into them.

VERONICA

(She pulls the paper from Alistair's hands.)

It's the review you wrote about my performance as Rosalind in *As You Like It*.

ALISTAIR

Well, I can't read it. Not in that condition.

FIONA

Not to worry. I've got a copy of it here.

(Fiona pulls a nicely framed copy of the review out of her bag.)

VERONICA

You've framed it!?

FIONA

Well, it's practically a work of art, isn't it?

VERONICA

Hand it over.

(Fiona does. Veronica seizes it and looks at it in disgust.)

Unbelievable.

(She passes it on to Alistair. He looks at it, possibly admiringly.)

Well, go on. Read it.

FIONA

I've highlighted in yellow the bits about Veronica.

VERONICA

I'll deal with you later.

(To Alistair.)

Go on.

ALISTAIR

(He squints a bit more, perhaps a little hesitant to read. He clears his throat.)

Veronica Pruitt, as heroine and protagonist, Rosalind, appeared rather long in the tooth as she grappled with a role typically reserved for an actress whose face hasn't thus far been narrowed beyond recognition. Miss Pruitt's advanced years only became more apparent when she endeavored to disguise herself as the supposedly young and handsome Ganymede. Was it her decision to go minimalistic with the foundation and blush or was it simply the aftermath of an embittered makeup designer out for revenge? To her credit, nonetheless, Miss Pruitt successfully tapped in to her inherent masculine qualities in a manner that will most assuredly win her the coveted role of Brutus in the National Theatre's upcoming winter production of Julius Caesar. "But what of her actual performance?" one might ask. It was, in a word, noticeable. As noticeable as a ring bearer toddler, shuffling down the church nave and pinching his willy determined to not wet himself before he gets to the alter.