

DIVA

A solo play in one act
By Craig Houk

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Synopsis

A celebrated aging actress is cast in a fringe play and is compelled to share a dressing room with an up and coming star. A torch is passed in an unexpected way.

Cast of Characters

EILEEN 76 years old. She is aging but has her wits about her. She's a bit haughty but also sympathetic.

Place

New York City

Setting

Backstage at a Theater

Time

Late 20th Century

EILEEN

(She strikes a match and then lights a candle before lighting her cigarette. She takes a quick drag off her cigarette and then places it in an ash tray. She then begins applying her makeup, preparing to go onstage. As she does, she becomes increasingly impatient with a young actress who is chattering away next to her. She begins with cover-up under her eyes and then moves on to foundation before she's had enough. She addresses the young actress.)

I must say, before you go any further, that I am, in no way, accustomed to sharing a dressing room with anyone.

(She pauses and then takes a sweeter tone.)

Please don't misunderstand me. When I was your age – and darling, that was a long time ago – I had to pay my dues. I once had to share a dressing room no bigger than a shipping pallet with two women and three men, one of whom was gay. Suffice to say, I'd share a dressing room with a gay man any day.

(She resumes applying foundation.)

I realize that you're impressed and that you're honored to be in a production with me. And I am flattered. But really, darling, I don't take well to worship. I'm not some untouchable god and I'm certainly not comfortable with some young girl ogling me from across the stage night after night. You really need to concentrate on your own work.

(An even sweeter tone.)

And, darling, every evening, I walk into this dressing room, and I swear you get diarrhea of the mouth.

(She applies blush.)

You're always gushing with compliments and with words of support and encouragement. And I just don't need it. Not at my age. And certainly not with my experience.

(She reaches for the cigarette, which is still burning in an ashtray.)

I've been an actress for nearly sixty years. The producers could prop my corpse up on stage and still sell tickets, that's how popular I am. I was never and will never be box office poison.

(She takes a drag off the cigarette.)

I'm also no fool. When you've lived nearly a century, you begin to realize that there aren't a lot of roles for women who've had so many facelifts that the doctor has to start using calf skin to fill in the gaps. So, when a small, fledgling company from Manhattan asks me to star in an original play written just for me, I take it. It satisfies my need to be on stage and it brings in audiences.

(She takes another drag off the cigarette.)

I'm not delusional, darling. I'm one of the few fortunate divas who has emerged with her ego intact. And her mind. The rest of me, I've already donated to science.

(She reaches for a cup of coffee.)

Don't just sit there with your mouth wide open. Do you realize that you're applying mascara to your upper lip? And not many women your age can successfully apply mascara to their upper lip. You should really have that taken care of.

(She sips her coffee.)

Whatever is the matter with you?

Oh, I see. This is the first time I've spoken directly to you since we've started this process, isn't it? Well, I do have a reputation to uphold, you know. Over the years, I've been called difficult, vulgar, self-absorbed, hateful... Well, the list is endless. And published.

Oh, you've read my tell-all book. It is fabulous, isn't it? Truth be known, I didn't really tell all. I could've destroyed lives and ruined careers with the information that I have stored in my nearly octogenarian brain. But I would never do that. I may be a bitch. But I'm a bitch with a heart of gold.

(She applies eyebrow pencil.)

The scathing gossip that I included in my book only served to revive some otherwise dead careers. Dear friends who haven't worked in decades are now making special appearances in movies, television commercials, situation comedies, soap operas, theatrical productions... And all because I care. Deep down. Now, of course, if you share this information with anyone... Well, keep in mind that I have very good connections with the Mafia. Sinatra was a very dear friend of mine.

(Sips her coffee.)

Nancy Sinatra, but still...

I have been watching you, you know. On stage. And I must say I'm very impressed.

Now, don't start foaming at the mouth dear. Your mascara will run.

I'm giving you a compliment. And you deserve it. You're a talented young actress. Your choices are bold and, oftentimes, I think you go a little too far. But, believe me, it makes for an extremely interesting performance. I'll take bold over boring any day. Oh, and the audiences seem to like you as well.

That, I can do without!

(She takes the young actress in.)

You are a beautiful young woman, though. Despite that issue with your upper lip. Which, of course, can easily be remedied with a visit to...

(Confidentially.)

Well, darling, here's the name and number of a gentleman that I see regularly.

(She retrieves a business card from a drawer in the dressing table.)

He can take care of that minor nuisance for you. When you speak to him, however, speak slowly. He's Peruvian. His name is Javier. And tell him Eileen said you should call. And tell him it's urgent!

(She retrieves her cigarette.)

However – and pay close attention now, dear – no matter how hard he may pressure you, do not allow him to schedule you for surgery. You are far too young for that. I mean, what could he possibly do to make you look more youthful? Reattach your umbilical cord?

(She takes a drag off her cigarette before throwing herself into a deliberate tirade.)

Where the hell is that idiot stage manager? I swear to God, if I get another eight and one-half minute call, I will strangle the little bastard. Whatever happened to giving a call every quarter hour? And a five-minute call to places. “Thirty minutes, Miss Shaffer.” “Fifteen minutes, Miss Shaffer.” “Places, Miss Shaffer” I mean, how difficult is that? I'd like a little consistency in my life. There was a time when all I had to do was snap my fingers and I could get anything I wanted. Now, when I snap my fingers, all I get are calluses. Stage managers used to be so dedicated. Now, they're just little director wannabes who couldn't expel gas on cue let alone call a cue.

(She applies eyeliner.)

I am sorry, dear. But occasionally, I do go on little tirades. Reminds me that I'm human. Also reminds me that I'm the star.

Oh, and I shouldn't be putting out all this negative energy, now should I, dear? Not moments before we go on stage. It isn't right. So, I apologize if I've caused you any distress.

(The young actress is crying.)

Oh, dear. I have, haven't I? Is that a tear I see streaming down your cheek? Now, don't turn your face away from me. You should never be ashamed to cry. Of course, I always recommend saving those emotions for your performance. But, at your age, I'm sure you have tears to spare.

(She puts on her shoes.)

I know that I'm not responsible for your crying, now am I, dear?

I loosely overheard bits and pieces of your conversation with the producers earlier today.

They're letting you go, aren't they?

I can't imagine what their reasoning is. I have never seen an actress so devoted and so committed to her work. Well, not since I first stepped on to the stage. And I must say I am extremely surprised. And... a little... overwhelmed, I guess. I rather enjoy your company. And I meant what I said about your talent, dear. I don't just casually pass out compliments.

They'll have a difficult time replacing you, that's for certain.

(She applies lipstick on her lower lip with a brush.)

I hope you don't mind me asking, but – Well, if it's too difficult to discuss, you don't have to say a word, you can just tell me to mind my own damned business, but – Well, I'm curious. Why?

You what?

Well, darling, that's fantastic news. You've been asked to take over the title role in the hit Off-Broadway production of MELINDA'S DREAM. That's fabulous! Oh, and it's by that phenomenal new playwright. Oh, dear, what is his name?

Yes, that's it. Vinny Moretti. Oh, he is talented. And handsome. And gay. No surprise there. Gay men are definitely a notch above, there's no disputing that.

So darling, why all the tears then? You should be happy. You've arrived!

What?

Well, that's utter nonsense, so you can just forget about that.

Really? You're crying because you'll... miss... me. For the first time in my life, I have no idea how to respond.

(She applies lipstick on her upper lip before she addresses the young actress sternly.)

You need to stay focused, young lady. And you need to keep a level head and a distant heart if you want to survive in this business. And no matter what, never let anyone – Not a friend, or your family, or a lover – Let no one interfere with your ambitions. And you will have to accept

that you will be alone for the rest of your life. Now, when I say alone, I mean you'll be hard pressed to find anyone who'll stay with you through it all. Because it is a difficult ride. Especially when you're just a passenger.

(She looks off.)

Well, darling, there's our eight and one half-minute call. And look, I didn't strangle the little bastard. I must be softening.

(She reaches for her powder puff.)

So, let's powder away our tears. And head on out. Oh, and darling... I'll miss you, too.

(She blows out the candle. End of Play.)