

Two Women & a Chair

by Michael Olsen

Characters: JESSIE — late teens/early 20's, a novice actor

MARTINE — mid to late 20's, an experienced actor

Lights come up on an empty dance studio. Across the length of the downstage area, there is a huge mirror, so when the characters look as if they're looking into the audience, they're looking into this mirror.

There is a large black shiny high-backed wooden chair centrestage facing out. It has arms, and a number of bits and pieces coming off it that make it look vaguely organic, as if growing out of the floor.

JESSIE enters upstage left. She wears a nice floral dress and a nervous feeling of great uncertainty. Gingerly at first, looking around then discovering nobody, she walks up to the mirror and checks her teeth. She walks along beside the mirror, then stops and turns to face herself in the mirror, as if trying to catch herself out, but everything's OK.

She places her bag on the floor, and seems to calm down somewhat. Eventually, she walks over and inspects the chair. She touches it, discovers the chair is wet. She wipes her hand.

Jessie takes out a flyer and checks it again, frowns for some reason.

We hear footsteps offstage. Quickly, Jessie snatches up her bag, shoves the flyer in, and moves downstage right.

MARTINE enters upstage left, all rugged up in a coat, cargo pants and T-shirt, fumbling with a bundle of books and papers she almost drops on the floor.

MARTINE: Hello. This is the audition for the play *Le Jeu*? Yes?

JESSIE: *(nodding)* Yes.

MARTINE: Good. Sorry I'm late. I got caught up in traffic. *(Pause)* Well, here I am. *(Pause. Just getting a blank look from Jessie.)* Oh, you're here to audition too.

Martine laughs.

JESSIE: Yes.

MARTINE: Silly me. You didn't—you know?— look like—an actor.

JESSIE: How is an actor supposed to look?

MARTINE: Sorry. I didn't mean—*(extending her hand)* Martine.

JESSIE: *(shaking hands)* Jessie.

MARTINE: Hi.

Seeing nowhere else to put her books, Martine plops them on the floor. She then takes off her coat, but finding nowhere to hang it, she drapes it over her arm. Martine inspects the room.

MARTINE: This is some mirror, isn't it?

JESSIE: Yes.

MARTINE: This must be a dance studio, I suppose, so you can see yourself.

Jessie nods. Martine goes up and checks her lippy, pinches her cheeks.

MARTINE: I suppose you're going for the role of the servant.

JESSIE: Why do you say that?

MARTINE: I just thought—

JESSIE: I'm going for the role of the lady.

MARTINE: Oh right.

JESSIE: You?

MARTINE: I was thinking of going for the lady as well.

JESSIE: *(nodding)* OK.

Pause. Martine goes over to the chair, studies it.

MARTINE: Quite bizarre, isn't it?

JESSIE: Yes.

MARTINE: It almost looks—I don't know—organic. Like it's alive.

JESSIE: It must be in the script.

MARTINE: What makes you say that?

JESSIE: Well it's here, isn't it? We're here. Makes sense.

MARTINE: I don't even want to sit on it.

JESSIE: Neither do I.

MARTINE: It's wet. *(Pause)* It looks sort of commanding, though, don't you think?

JESSIE: Commanding?

MARTINE: Like it's daring you to sit down in it. It's the first piece of furniture I've seen that looks as if it's frowning.

Jessie smiles.

MARTINE: So why are you here?

JESSIE: What do you mean? I'm here to try out for this part.

MARTINE: I know, but why? Why do you want to act?

JESSIE: Because I've always wanted to. Ever since I was a young girl, I've dreamed of being on the stage, in front of people, performing. My father always thought I could do it, so here I am. What about you?

MARTINE: I'm acting all the time. I can't help it. It's an addiction.

JESSIE: Is it?

MARTINE: All the great ones thought it was an addiction.

JESSIE: Oh. So what do you know about this play *Le Jeu*? It's French, isn't it?

MARTINE: For some reason it rings a bell. *Le Jeu. Le Jeu.* It's funny, I was in France a couple of years ago and—oh well, it'll come to me.

JESSIE: Do you know who this Jean-Marie—

MARTINE: Jean-Marie Wankair.

JESSIE: No, it's Jean-Marie de Vank.

MARTINE: I know. I know. It's about this lady and her servant. I know that much. They're locked in some room and eventually they go crazy, as only the French know how.

JESSIE: Sounds great.

MARTINE: What do you know about it?

JESSIE: No more than what Damian told me. He made it all sound quite intriguing.

MARTINE: How do you know Damian?

JESSIE: He came to an acting class and afterwards he asked if I'd like to audition. Do you know him?

Pause.

MARTINE: I've worked with him before. Between you and me, he's a pretentious shit, but hey—aren't they all?

JESSIE: I don't really know him well, but I thought he was nice.

MARTINE: He can do nice very well. What did he say to you?

JESSIE: He said he thought I had something unique to bring to the character.

MARTINE: That's what he told me.

JESSIE: Really?

MARTINE: Typical director. They'll blow sunshine up your arse as soon as they look at you. They're all the same. The only thing that doesn't change about the theatre is the size of the director's ego. It's always ginormous.

JESSIE: He seemed very sincere.

MARTINE: They always seem very nice when they want something from you. Like all men, they'll tell you they love you just before they come.

JESSIE: *(disgusted)* Oh, really!

MARTINE: The sad thing is, he's not a bad actor. I saw him last year in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *(falling to her knees)* "Stella! Stella!" He was so good even I wanted to fuck him. It's sad. Some people are like that, they're only good when they're on stage.

JESSIE: Did you ask him about the parts?

MARTINE: He said both characters are trapped in their upbringing, and won't grow and evolve if they don't push themselves beyond the programming of their early years. Makes them sound like bloody computers, doesn't it?

Jessie takes out a notebook and pen, and is busily writing.

JESSIE: Go on.

MARTINE: That's about it. The lady is cool, and remote, and a total bitch. The servant is calculating, and greedy, and a total weasel. All in all it's got the makings of a great lesbian love story.

JESSIE: We don't kiss, do we?

MARTINE: What if we do?

JESSIE: Oh, well, I don't know if I—

MARTINE: You're an actor, aren't you?

JESSIE: Yes, but—

MARTINE: You should be able to do it right here, right now, just do it, and not give it another thought.

Martine moves over to Jessie.

JESSIE: Oh no, I couldn't.

MARTINE: Come on. We could practice.

JESSIE: No!

Martine smiles.

MARTINE: *(in a Clint Eastwood accent)* Man's got to know his limitations. *(normal)* I suppose you've found yours.

JESSIE: Well, it has to mean something. I'll do it when I need to do it. *(Pause)* You're not, are you?

MARTINE: What's the time?

JESSIE: It's just after 10:30.

MARTINE: It can't be. I was running late.

JESSIE: Oh bum, my watch has stopped.

MARTINE: Great.

Pause.

JESSIE: I would have thought there'd be more people here.

MARTINE: Yeah, so would I. Oh well, I guess we just wait. This is the actor's lot in life. Waiting.

Pause. Jessie takes the flyer out of her bag, and looks at it again. She frowns.

MARTINE: What is it?

JESSIE: Do you mind if I look at your flyer? You did bring it, didn't you? The one Damian gave you?

MARTINE: Sure.

Martine hands hers over. Jessie studies them.

MARTINE: What's the matter?

JESSIE: This writing. On the side here. Do you see it?

MARTINE: Oh yes. I did notice that. It says: "Whoever this first sit in the and nev go." Someone stuffed up on the printing.

Jessie puts the two flyers on the floor side-by-side.

JESSIE: Well, you put it together with my one and it says: "Whoever reads this first should sit in the chair and never let it go."

MARTINE: How odd. *(Pause)* Don't you think?

JESSIE: Yes.

MARTINE: I wouldn't sit in that chair if you paid me.

JESSIE: Do you think this is part of the audition?

MARTINE: How could it be?

JESSIE: But the flyer.

MARTINE: Who knows?

Jessie and Martine look at each other, then both rush to sit in the chair. Jessie easily wins.

MARTINE: Oh this is so silly.

JESSIE: You're just saying that because you lost.

MARTINE: I didn't lose. It's wet.

JESSIE: You wanted to sit here.

MARTINE: You won. You're the winner. OK?

JESSIE: Well it is part of the audition.

MARTINE: What are you talking about?

JESSIE: Damian told me. He said never forget, the whole of the audition is the audition, from the moment you come in to the moment you leave. You're always being auditioned.

MARTINE: Typical Damian. Life is a stage.

JESSIE: Yes.

MARTINE: Well it would help if someone was here to audition for. You seem to have overlooked that little detail. I'd like to see the face of the director. I'd like a little bit of information about the play. I certainly need to know when they're intending to put it on. This is all bullshit. He's obviously fucking with our heads for some reason. Maybe you'll get the role now that I'm leaving. Good luck.

JESSIE: You can't leave!

MARTINE: I can. Watch me.

Martine goes to the door, but finds it locked.

MARTINE: Shit.

JESSIE: What's the matter?

MARTINE: We're locked in!

JESSIE: We can't be.

MARTINE: Come and see for yourself.

JESSIE: Good try.

MARTINE: What?

JESSIE: Trying to get me out of this chair.

MARTINE: For god's sake, who gives a shit about the chair? We're locked in!

JESSIE: Someone'll come. We should be starting soon.

MARTINE: What if they're not? No-one else is here. You'd expect a few more people for an audition, wouldn't you? Even a novice like yourself would have to admit that.

JESSIE: Maybe it's just us.

MARTINE: Maybe that's just nuts. *(calling out)* Help! Help! Anybody out there? We're locked in!

Pause. Martine listens.

JESSIE: I can't hear anything.

MARTINE: Shh. I thought I heard something.

JESSIE: What?

MARTINE: It's coming from the mirror.

JESSIE: The mirror? Now you're talking crazy.

MARTINE: I thought I heard something.

JESSIE: Look, just wait for Damian and it should be fine.

MARTINE: Yeah right.

Martine stares hard into the mirror, cupping her hands around her eyes to help her look, but she sees nothing. She slides to the floor.

MARTINE: Fuck.

JESSIE: Why do you have to keep swearing? It's so unpleasant.

Martine mouths "it's so unpleasant," taking the mickey out of Jessie.

MARTINE: What if this whole thing, the chair and everything, *is* the audition?

JESSIE: That's what I've been saying: the whole of the audition, is the audition.

MARTINE: I know, but something more. Something—bigger.

JESSIE: Bigger? I'm sure there must be a chair in the play.

MARTINE: Does it matter?

JESSIE: Well there's no point having a chair at an audition if there's no chair in the play.

MARTINE: You are so literal-minded. He could have a feather duster and we could still have the audition.

JESSIE: I'm sure the servant uses a feather duster.

MARTINE: Forget what's in the play! I have got a very very bad feeling about all this.

JESSIE: You're gonna look so silly when he walks in that door, and apologises for being late, and we get started.

Pause.

MARTINE: I didn't tell you everything about Damian, did I?

JESSIE: Like what?

MARTINE: Like, the fact that I pulled out of his last show.

JESSIE: You didn't.

MARTINE: I did. It was *Hamlet*. It was just over a year ago. I was playing Ophelia. He wanted me to strip naked in the mad scene.

JESSIE: Wow.

MARTINE: Of course I didn't do it. It was so gratuitous. I couldn't believe it. We'd rehearsed for weeks, and then he turns around and thinks I should doff my gear. Just like that! If he couldn't have me, he'd just have a look, wouldn't he? All the bullshit he spouted to justify his decision! I swear we nearly came to blows about it. He wouldn't budge, and there was absolutely no way I was

going to do it, so I left. I didn't speak to him again until he rang up and told me about this *Le Jeu* thing.

JESSIE: So it's just revenge. All this.

MARTINE: Have you got a better explanation?

JESSIE: Father always says it's not productive to be vengeful.

MARTINE: The only thing longer than an elephant's memory is a director's. I should have known! It was staring me straight in the face and I just took him at face value. He must have been hanging on to this for ages! Working out what to do!

JESSIE: He didn't strike me as the vengeful type.

MARTINE: Well he wouldn't, would he? "Can you help me play with some actor's head for a little while? Thank you." He wouldn't have said that.

JESSIE: No, but—

MARTINE: (*calling out*) Where the hell are you, Damian? Are you behind there? Alright you've had your little fun, now let us out.

JESSIE: There's no-one there. It's just a mirror.

MARTINE: He's there. I can tell. He's watching everything we do, everything we say, and he's enjoying it. I bet he's even got his little friend, Samantha, back there. Backstabbing bitch! She'll fuck you over, mate, and laugh herself silly while she's doing it.

JESSIE: Who on earth is Samantha?

MARTINE: Samantha is Damian's girlfriend cum assistant cum back-up ego. She enjoys sucking the juice out of young actors and doing all Damian's dirty work. She is one really sick piece of work.

JESSIE: How can you say things like that about people? She's probably a lovely person.

MARTINE: I know. Believe me. You don't sleep with someone for two years without knowing what they're like.

JESSIE: Oh my god. You are a—

MARTINE: That's right. And if you're not careful, I'll come and get you too, because that's all that's on our minds.

Martine pokes out her tongue, licking provocatively. She moves on Jessie, who recoils. Martine smiles and moves away.

MARTINE: Grow up.

JESSIE: You're crazy! Stay over there!

MARTINE: I bet he's enjoying this. We're putting on a real show for him now.

JESSIE: There's no-one there!

MARTINE: But you do admit there's a problem, don't you? Well don't you?

JESSIE: It is—odd.

MARTINE: That's like the captain of the Titanic going "Oops! Iceberg." This is bizarre.

JESSIE: Alright, it's bizarre. But what can we do about it? No-one outside can hear us. We've just got to wait it out. Sooner or later someone'll come to use the room, which they will.

MARTINE: So logical.

JESSIE: Do you have any other ideas?

MARTINE: No.

JESSIE: Well then. *(Pause)* Maybe you can read one of your books.

Martine pokes her pile of books with her foot.

MARTINE: I don't feel like reading. Reading's for when you're bored on the train and the world's going by and you've seen it a thousand times before.

JESSIE: OK, so don't read.

Pause.

MARTINE: How does it feel?

JESSIE: What?

MARTINE: The chair.

JESSIE: It feels fine.

Martine walks around the chair.

MARTINE: Your backside'll be all wet.

JESSIE: Whatever you say, I'm not going to get up.

MARTINE: No no that's fine.

Martine shakes her head. Pause.

JESSIE: Makes you think, though, doesn't it?

MARTINE: It does?

JESSIE: You know, a chair. In history. Our culture. My father would have some interesting things to say.

MARTINE: Really?

JESSIE: The Thinker.

Jessie leans forward into the classic pose of Rodin's statue.

JESSIE: *(leaning into the armrest)* Or what about: "Scottie I need warp engines now, mister." *(leaning forward into a microphone, in an American accent:)* I have not now nor have I ever been a member of the Communist Party.

MARTINE: Oh that's good.

JESSIE: Or this one.

Jessie slaps her arms down on the arms of the chair and starts shaking, her teeth clenched. Her head finally slumps forwards, as if she's been electrocuted.

MARTINE: Don't.

Jessie doesn't move.