

Backstage

by Michael Olsen

Characters: Marcus, 20s
Alice, 20s
Berne, 20s

We are backstage at the premiere of a new play, St Joan and the Soldier.

Alice is dressed in a very simple dress with a red cross on it. Berne is dressed in something that loosely approximates a man of war.

Berne is on edge, but under control: he is going through his elaborate warm-up routine, which involves some very strange-looking stretching routines. Alice, on the other hand, is a bundle of nerves: unfocussed, pacing up and down, totally horrified by the prospect of the play she is about to star in.

Marcus, the stage manager, enters, busy and efficient, with a clipboard in his hand and a pencil behind his ear to prove it

MARCUS: Five minutes, guys.

Alice nods silently. Marcus walks across stage and gives an encouraging nod to Alice. He totally ignores Berne, then exits.

ALICE: I am Joan of Arc. I am Joan of Arc. I am Joan of Arc. Sword in one hand, faith in the other. Sword in one hand, faith in the other. I can't get it, I can't get it. I'm going to forget my lines, I just know it. And everyone will know I've dropped my lines. I don't know how much more I can take of this, Berne. I don't know if I can go on, Berne. Berne, I'm serious.

BERNE: Relax, Alice. Chill out. It's OK. Don't put so much pressure on yourself. Look, we both know this is the first time you've performed publicly, but that's what you're bringing to the role: a freshness, a vitality—something new.

ALICE: You think so?

BERNE: I know so. Trust me. I wrote the role with you in mind.

ALICE: Really? I mean, you're not just saying that, are you?

- BERNE:** Of course not.
- ALICE:** And I'm not just here because of Dad?
- BERNE:** What do you take me for? The fact that your father's the Arts editor of the Daily Globe has got nothing to do with you being in this play.
Pause He is here tonight, isn't he?
- ALICE:** Yes.
- BERNE:** Good.
- Berne keeps on warming up. There is a heavy pause.*
- ALICE:** You wouldn't bullshit me, would you? I mean, about whether I'm good or not. I really need to know right now.
- BERNE:** Alice, come here.
- They hug. Berne pulls a face unseen by Alice.*
- BERNE:** Alice, Alice, Alice. How long have we known each other? Two years? You're made for the part, OK? Just enjoy it. That's one reason why we act, you know.
- ALICE:** I don't know how you can be so cool about it all!
- BERNE:** It's technique. I've actually incorporated a little Zen in my warm-up routine.
- ALICE:** And it works?
- BERNE:** Try a little bit now.
- ALICE:** What? Master three thousand years of tradition in (*looks at watch*) three minutes?
- BERNE:** What the hell have you got a watch on for?
- ALICE:** What?
- BERNE:** The watch!
- ALICE:** Shit—I forgot all about it.

Alice removes the watch.

BERNE: If I'd wanted Joan of Arc to wear a watch I would have put it in the script!

ALICE: I'm sorry. I'm all over the place, I know. I don't mean to upset you.

BERNE: It's alright. I just have to find my centre again.

ALICE: Did you lose it?

BERNE: Yes!

ALICE: I'm sorry. I didn't know it was that important. Go ahead.

BERNE: Thank you.

Berne continues his routine with his eyes closed, this time getting into the "Zen" aspect of it. It involves slow movements, pushing, pulling, with appropriate wheezing and noises. Alice tries to imitate what Berne is doing, but not very well at all. It looks like a parody, though she is really trying to get into it. Marcus re-enters from the same side he exited from before.

MARCUS: Three minutes, guys.

ALICE: Thanks Marcus.

Marcus exits. Long pause.

ALICE: Berne, can I ask you something?

Silence from Berne: he continues his warm-up routine.

ALICE: Berne? Berne? Berne!

BERNE: Yes?

ALICE: You know the scene in Act II, where the two of us fight, St Joan fights the soldier because he's trying to ravish her?

BERNE: What about it?

ALICE: I think we should change it.

BERNE: Are you serious?

ALICE: I think we should.

BERNE: We're about to go on and you want to change it—just because you think we should?

ALICE: I—don't think it works.

BERNE: We've spent weeks on that one scene, blocking it, getting it right. It's the highlight of Act II, if not the whole play. We've worked it so that when I throw you across the stage, you won't get hurt.

ALICE: It's just that: I don't want you to get so—physical with me.

BERNE: Physical! Physical! It's a very physical play. If you think I'm changing a scene like that just before we go on, you've got another thing coming. Why the hell do you want to change it anyway? And don't bullshit me.

ALICE: I can't tell you.

BERNE: Of course you can tell me. We're friends, aren't we?

ALICE: OK. (*Big breath*) I'm pregnant.