



TOP OF SHOW

An Original One Act

by

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Directed by Brendon Martin

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Scene 1

NARRATOR: Stagehand survival tip #3: Keep the stage clean. Debris on the stage distracts the audience and stray nails can be dangerous for actors and tech crew alike.

Stage is set for the top of a show: Romeo and Juliet. An elaborate throne sits center stage. Work lights wash the entire stage unromantically. A beat. JEFF HADLEY, run crew, enters pushing a wide, janitorial broom. He is 20 and clad in all black, head down in concentration as he sweeps. Three sharp, experienced pushes to the broom propel him center stage. As he crosses in front of the throne, he stops. A beat. He looks sidelong at the set piece, then up at the spotlight, then at the broom. Looks at the set piece. The broom. The set piece. With impulsive movements he makes a decision—dragging to broom behind him, he goes to the throne, leans the broom against the arm, and flops onto the seat. Hands behind his head, triumphant, almost giddy. A beat.

JEFF: Wanna hear a joke?

A disembodied voice booms over a microphone. This is ELIZABETH, the stage manager. Her place is in the booth, watching the show from behind the audience. She is also clad in black, and a bulky headset rests around her neck. She holds a “God mic,” a handheld microphone whose output can be heard onstage.

ELIZABETH (OS): No.

JEFF: C’mon. It’s a really good joke.

ELIZABETH (OS): No.

JEFF: So, three actors walk into a bar...

As Elizabeth speaks, the lights go up on her in “the booth.” It would be great if the entire theater could be incorporated as a stage and the real booth could act as “the booth,” but nothing is lost if the booth is some sort of side platform or section at the back of the stage, just as long as it is obvious this is its own separate section independent of “the stage.”

ELIZABETH: Get off the set piece, Jeff.

JEFF: Man, Lizzy, I'm not gonna hurt it.

ELIZABETH: Off. And don't call me Lizzy.

Jeff rises resentfully.

JEFF: They give you a God mic and all of a sudden you're Fidel Castro.

ELIZABETH: Where's Paul? Tell him to get up here, I'm about to open the house.

JEFF (*shrugs, picking up the broom again*): Wasn't my turn to watch him. (*Looks up, hopeful*) I could tell you a joke while you wait, though.

ELIZABETH: No joke.

ELIZABETH descends from the booth and joins Jeff on the stage.

JEFF: You know, someday, you'll wake up in the middle of the night regretting the fact that you never heard this joke. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but someday and for the rest of your life. (*He winks*)

ELIZABETH: (*taking the broom from Jeff*) Find Paul for me, will you?

JEFF: Get your lackey to do it. Here. MANDY!

MANDY, small, nervous, organized and excitable, runs on from backstage. Like Jeff and Elizabeth, she is clad in black. She carries a beaten up binder with a copy of the script, a pencil in her hand and a pencil behind her ear. She is the Assistant Stage Manager.

MANDY: You called me. Loudly.

JEFF: Yeah. Wanna hear a joke?

MANDY: Sure!

JEFF: Okay, so—

ELIZABETH: Mandy.

MANDY: Yes.

ELIZABETH: Focus.

MANDY (*visibly snaps into Assistant Stage Manager mode*): You're right. It's 7:32, the house should have opened 2 minutes ago, and I'm guessing by the fact that Paul's nowhere to be seen that he's off sulking somewhere and that's why we're late. And you asked Jeff to find him, but he's being a baby and wants me to do it. Got it.

MANDY marches off to find Paul. JEFF watches her go, shaking his head.

JEFF: You made a monster.

ELIZABETH: Beautiful, isn't it? (*beat*) Don't you have something you should be doing?

JEFF snatches the broom away from her and grudgingly begins to sweep again.

JEFF: You know, you could sweep.

ELIZABETH: Stage managers don't sweep. You're the brawn. I'm just administration.

JEFF: It's really fun. Man, I bet you wish you were sweeping right about now.

ELIZABETH: Don't you pull that Tom Sawyer bullshit on me, Hadley. After this, work on the sightlines. And we still have to finish painting the set.

MANDY runs back on, still with all her ASM gear.

MANDY: Alright. I talked to Andrea, who talked to JoJo, who was hanging out with Chelsea who ran into Taylor who was getting her hair curled by Gunther who thinks he saw Paul wandering through the halls by the dressing room but when I checked I didn't see him anywhere.

ELIZABETH: Jesus, fine, I'll look for him myself. (*to Mandy*) You go take the curling iron away from Gunther. Who the hell gave Gunther a curling iron?

She and Mandy begin to leave.

ELIZABETH (*to Jeff*): If Paul shows up here, call me *immediately* and tell him to go to the booth.

They exit. Jeff resumes sweeping. PAUL, the light board op, enters, also in black, looking a little wide-eyed. When he comes in, Jeff looks up briefly and then goes back to sweeping.

JEFF: Hey, Paul. What's wrong with you?

PAUL: So, I, um, I decided to use the backstage bathroom instead of the one in the lobby, and...and...and do you know what they DO back here right before a show? Like...like, look at that! (*He points offstage*) That girl isn't wearing any clothes! That right there is a bra, and that right there's Wonder Woman panties and she smiled at me and she's not wearing any clothes! Jeff, did you see?!

JEFF: You get used to it.

PAUL: I'm back here at all the wrong times. Whenever I'm back here people are wearing t-shirts and hanging lights and eating pizza without washing their hands. Do you know how often I see naked chicks when I'm working in the booth? Very. Rarely.

An attractive ACTRESS (from another of the one acts?), carrying a costume piece, clad in a bra and skirt, crosses the stage, yelling:

ACTRESS: Mandy! MANDY!

She catches sight of Jeff and stops yelling. She makes a beeline for him and puts her hand on his arm as she whispers something seductively in his ear. He grins.

JEFF: Later.

She winks, then turns and continues her diva cry:

ACTRESS: MANDY! My costume broke!

PAUL: Is that...is that the Juliet?

Jeff shrugs yes.

PAUL: It must be good to be the only straight guy they see for three hours every day. Man, I picked the wrong job.

JEFF: Paulie, you have no idea. (*Pause. He studies Paul for a moment, like he's trying to remember something*). You know, Paul, I think I was supposed to tell you something. (*shrugs, resumes sweeping*).

NARRATOR: Stagehand Survival tip #6: If you want something done right, don't delegate it to the techie that smells like pot.

ELIZABETH enters with sure, angry strides.

ELIZABETH (*as she enters*): God fucking damn it, where the fuck is that douchebag? I swear to fucking God I'll—

She sees Paul. Instantly awkward.

ELIZABETH: Oh. Hey. I was...I was looking for you. Over there. Well, I mean, not *looking* looking, I just—you need to be up in the booth.

She tucks a runaway strand of hair behind her ear and hurries away. Jeff and Paul look after her as she goes. Pause. Jeff swings to face Paul. Paul says nothing for a beat, then breaks into a wide goofy smile and leaves. Jeff is alone, leaning on his broom, bemused.

JEFF: Well, that's new.

ACTRESS enters, with MANDY trailing behind, trying to zip up her fixed dress.

MANDY: Hold still or do this yourself.

ACTRESS pays her no mind. Mandy tries another tactic.

MANDY: It's gonna break again. Do you want it to break again?

Actress stops. Mandy finishes the adjustments she was working on.

MANDY: Finally. Thank you. *(Beat)* I've been in this theater too long. It's driving me crazy and I'm pretty sure my real life friends have replaced me with some girl named Candy. *(struck)* Where's my binder? Where's my binder?!

Mandy exits, leaving Jeff alone with the Actress.

ACTRESS: Run lines with me.

JEFF: You know, I do real work for this show.

ACTRESS: Run lines with me.

Shoves the script into his hand.

ACTRESS: From right there.

JEFF: I'm not playing the fucking nurse.

ACTRESS *(doesn't seem to hear. In a bad English accent, she falls immediately into character)*: Now, good sweet nurse—O Lord, why look'st thou sad? *(to Jeff)* Look sad.

Jeff complies, grudgingly and badly.

ACTRESS: Though news be sad, yet tell them merrily;
If good, thou shamest the music of sweet news
By playing it to me with so sour a face.
(visible break in character).

Now it's your line.

JEFF *(in grudging nurse character)*: Fie, how my...*(dropping character)* Know what, listen, Juliet—

ACTRESS: It's Patti.

JEFF *(patronizing, waving off the correction)*: —fine, listen Patti. The show starts in like 15 minutes and I'll bet you anything once Mandy tracks down her binder—and I guarantee it's on the desk in the green room cuz she always loses it on the desk in the green room—she'll be on the prowl to make sure I'm doing my job. She's little but she can kick my ass, no kidding. I've got floors to sweep. I've sightlines to fix. And see those big rope thingies? Those are called flies. They hold up great big heavy parts of the set, and if they hit you in the head—

ACTRESS puts her hand behind his head and pulls him into a fierce, brief make-out session. During this interlude, Mandy has entered and watches them with professional disgust. They separate.

JEFF: Have I told you you're a *really* great actress?

MANDY *(to Jeff)*: You're sick. *(to Actress, pulling lipstick from her pocket—she's too prepared for words)* Here. Go fix your makeup.

ACTRESS runs offstage. MANDY continues her grossed-out glare.

ELIZABETH *(from booth)*: Alright. Paul's here so I'm opening house in one minute. Mandy, let the actors know, then get on headset. Jeff, can you bring in the red?

MANDY darts offstage. JEFF sits down on the throne once again.

JEFF *(to Elizabeth)*: What're we gonna do tonight, Brain?

ELIZABETH *(from booth)*: Make it through the show alive. *(Beat)* Get off the set piece, Jeff.

Scene 2

NARRATOR: Stagehand survival tip #33: A show is made or broken by sound quality. A finicky mic on a main character can ruin the experience, so it's essential to fix glitches as soon as possible.

ACTRESS stands in the center of the stage, performing her bad Shakespeare, during the lines of the last scene of Romeo and Juliet Act I. Her mic is cutting in and out. Jeff and Mandy stand in the "backstage" ASM-y area and watch.

ACTRESS: My only love sprung from my only hate!
How early seen unknown and known too late!—

If Elizabeth and Paul could be sitting in a visible booth at this point, that would be great, but if not, her lines could be cut—it's mostly just to show the chain of command and establish the standby-go concept.

ELIZABETH: It's the battery pack, Mandy.

MANDY: I'm on it. She's got an exit in less than a line. If only she were smart and knew to come to us as soon as she gets offstage. C'mon, little actor. Cooooome on.

Mandy makes big, overemphasized gestures of "Come!" that distract the Actress. She casts glances offstage as she speaks her final words.

ACTRESS: Prodigious birth of love it is to me
That I should love my own worst enemy!

Runs offstage to Mandy.

MANDY: Great. Jeff, change her battery pack. Liz, I've got her back here and Jeff's taking care of it.

ELIZABETH: Perfect—as soon as he's got that, tell him he's got a warning to fly in the garden.

JEFF begins to take Actress's mic pack out of her costume to fix it, but she tries to start a little mini make-out sesh.

JEFF: Thank you, thank you, that's very nice, now turn around so I can fix your mic.

She does, disappointedly. As he works, MANDY turns to him.

MANDY: Warning to fly in the garden. Line set 12.

JEFF: Cool. Hold still.

He finishes changing the battery and ACTRESS turns back around to face him.

ACTRESS: My hero.

She tries to kiss him. Jeff accepts it but he really does have other things that need to be done. He quickly turns and picks up a roll of mic tape from Mandy's ASM station.

ACTRESS: I want a kiss.

JEFF: Well I want a pony. *(he tries to tape the mic to her face and she attempts to nuzzle his cheek)* Hey, hey be careful with that, that mic's not stuck on there with glue.

ELIZABETH *(to Mandy, through the headset)*: Stand by on line set 12.

MANDY *(to Jeff)*: Stand by line set 12. Jeff. Line set 12. Are you listening to me?

JEFF: Yeah, 12, I'm on it, standing by.

ACTRESS runs a hand through his hair. Whispers something in his ear. He reacts less well than she expects.

JEFF: Seriously? *Seriously?* What do you think I am, a machine? Know what? Take that mic tape and cement that thing to your cheek, cuz I'm not fixing it anymore. Don't you have some vocal warm-ups to do or something? Go. Go on, git. Shoo. Shoo.

Actress is shocked, pouty, and appalled.

ELIZABETH: Line set 12 go.

MANDY: 12 go. JEFF.

JEFF *(runs offstage(?) to line set)*: Line set 12 moving.

Actress stomps off.

JEFF *(unfazed, in same calling tone)*: Actress 1 moving.

Scene 3

NARRATOR: Stagehand Survival Tip #8: If at all possible, avoid romantic involvement with other crew members. If the reasoning behind this tip isn't readily obvious, you've never lived in a small village.

PAUL and ELIZABETH sit in "the booth" and watch Act II Scene I. Paul's headset is around his neck so that he can better listen to Elizabeth's instructions. However, because of this, he can hear nothing of what's going on backstage. Elizabeth's headset is over her ears. JEFF stands stage right in an area made up to look like an ASM's station backstage right.

ELIZABETH: Cue 25 go.

PAUL: Thank you.

ELIZABETH: Cue 26 stand by.

PAUL: Elizabeth—

ELIZABETH: Stand by.

PAUL: Liz—

ELIZABETH: Cue 26 go.

PAUL: We need to talk.

ELIZABETH: We are talking.

PAUL: That's not—

ELIZABETH: Did 26 go?

PAUL: Yes, I—

ELIZABETH: You say "thank you."

PAUL: Thank you. Now, Liz—

ELIZABETH: Cue 27 stand by.

PAUL: You can't ignore yesterday.

ELIZABETH: I said stand by.

PAUL: Fine. Standing by. We—

ELIZABETH: Not now. Stand by.

PAUL: Then when?

ELIZABETH: Cue 27 go.

PAUL: Thank you. Last night—

ELIZABETH: Let's forget last night.

PAUL: I don't want to.

ELIZABETH: Please. 28 stand by.

PAUL: Standing by. Yesterday happened.

ELIZABETH: Let's pretend it didn't.

PAUL: But it *did*.

ELIZABETH: Hence *pretend*.

PAUL: I don't want to.

ELIZABETH: Why not?

PAUL: It was important.

ELIZABETH: It was an incident.

PAUL: I meant what I said.

JEFF (*to everyone*): Know what I wonder?

ELIZABETH (*presses a button on her pack to turn on her headset*): What the hell are you doing on com?

PAUL: Is that Jeff? What's he say?

JEFF: Mandy's handling an issue.

MANDY rushes into the pool of light, pulls the mic of the headset away from Jeff and speaks into it herself.

MANDY: An issue. *An issue?* Liz, Jeff dumped another one. In the middle of the show. She's gotta go on in 5 minutes. I swear to God, if I have to comfort one more crying actress I'm quitting. I hope you're happy, Casanova.

The ACTRESS invades the pool of light, this time crying her eyes out. She shoots Jeff a devil glare and folds into Mandy's arms. Mandy goes off with her. As she exits:

MANDY: I know, honey, I know. He's a bad, bad man.

ELIZABETH (*flatly*): Jeffrey, stay away from my actresses. Cue 28 go.

PAUL: Thank you.

JEFF (*undeterred*): Know what I wonder? I wonder why people come to this show.

ELIZABETH (*on headset*): Don't jinx it.

PAUL: What's he *saying?* (*He hastily pulls his headset from around his neck to rest on his ears*) What are you saying?

JEFF: I was just saying—

ELIZABETH (*to Paul, but on headset so Jeff can hear*): It's got nothing to do with you; cue 29 stand by. (*to Jeff*) Jeff, I've got a cue for you coming up too, so stand by for the balcony scene change.

PAUL: Standing by. Liz—

ELIZABETH: Not again. I told you, we're not discussing this now. I'm calling a show, Paul.

JEFF: Really, though. I mean...okay, Romeo dies. SHOCKER. Didn't mean to spoil that for anyone. I feel like 400 years later that would've gotten old, you know? It's always the same, and it's not even convincing. Raise your hand everyone that buys how fast Juliet forgives Romeo for killing her cousin. Her *cousin*. If some chick I was dating killed my *dog* in the heat of battle I'd dump her ass faster than—

PAUL: She loves him, Jeff, now shut up.

JEFF: But, I was just saying—

PAUL: I know, I know, you were saying.

ELIZABETH: Cue 29 and balcony go.

PAUL: Thank you.

JEFF (*pouty*): You didn't have to yell at me.

ELIZABETH (*to those on headset*): Nice scene change, guys. Now take a breather while she “wherefore-art-thou”s for a while. (*She wheels away from her desk and stretches, rubs her eyes, looks tired.*)

PAUL (*to Elizabeth*): Hang on, Liz, I need to talk to you. (*to Jeff*) Stop pouting, you pansy. I wasn't yelling at you.

JEFF: I was just wondering. I was just wondering a perfectly fine thing to wonder and you yelled at me.

PAUL (*to Jeff*): I did not yell at you, I spoke sharply with you.

JEFF: I was just wondering it, that's all.

ELIZABETH: Warning on cue 30—that's gonna be a light change on Romeo as he comes out of hiding.

PAUL: Liz, we've got tons of time before that cue. Can I talk to you?

ELIZABETH: Warning on 30.

JEFF: Just minding my own business wondering. And it's a valid thing to wonder. I mean, the house is packed. The house is packed for a play everyone knows all the lines to.

PAUL (*on headset, looking at Elizabeth*): These people are here because they're all romantics. They're in love with the language and they always root for Romeo. They can't help it.

A pause.

ELIZABETH (*to Paul*): It was a mistake.

PAUL: Not for me.

ELIZABETH: A big mistake.

PAUL: Not for me.

ELIZABETH: Very, very stupid.

PAUL: I didn't think so.

ELIZABETH: Let's forget it.

PAUL: I can't.

ELIZABETH: Why?

PAUL: It was important.

ELIZABETH: It was cast party.

PAUL: Hey, Romeo and Juliet met at one big cast party.

ELIZABETH: It didn't mean anything.

PAUL: Maybe not to you.

ELIZABETH: Not to you either.

PAUL: What are you—? Lizzy, look at me.

ELIZABETH (*She looks at him*): I hate that name.

PAUL: That was the most important kiss I've ever had.

ELIZABETH: You think that now.

PAUL: I know that now.

ELIZABETH: This is theater. Nothing's real in theater.

PAUL: I swear to God, that wasn't a cast party kiss or a theater kiss or whatever. It was real. I like you. That's real.

ELIZABETH: Are you kidding? Okay. Okay, this is how it is. You don't *really* like me just like I don't *really* like you. I've been living in this little box with you, just you, for the past month of my life, eating burritos and telling stupid jokes and I've made up this whole world where this...this...this *thing* matters, but it doesn't. It's all pretend. When the run is over I'll go back to my friends and you'll go back to your friends and we'll forget about each other until the next tech week when we set up this little world all over again and we play the same stupid game and convince ourselves that the things that happen in this theater matter. They *don't* matter, and I don't want to play. So, don't do this right now, Paul.

PAUL: This is what I know. You crack your knuckles when you're nervous. You pretend you named your computer Herman after Melville, but secretly you did it cuz you love *The Munsters*—you've never even read *Moby Dick*. You collect bottle caps. You didn't learn to tie your shoes til you were ten. And sometimes, when you're not paying attention, you hum Taylor Swift songs. *(Beat)* I'm not going anywhere.

ELIZABETH: Paul, I...I'm not very good at...I mean... I just wanna—

PAUL: Should 30 standby?

ELIZABETH: Shit.

ELIZABETH looks down at her script, flustered, trying to recover herself.

ELIZABETH: Thank you.

PAUL: You're welcome.

Pause.

JEFF *(awkwardly)*: That's real cute guys, but you gotta learn to turn off your mics.

NARRATOR: Stagehand Survival Tip #42: Always use the headset wisely.

Scene 4

NARRATOR: Survival tip #16: Never, EVER lose your cool.

From the blackout.

ELIZABETH *(hysterical)*: Where are the lights? Paul, *where are the lights?*

PAUL: I can...I can fix this. I can fix this.

ELIZABETH: Fix it fast or my Juliet's gonna break her leg.

PAUL: Nothing's unplugged here. I can get the work lights on if you want; it must be something on the other end. I've gotta go check. I'll have to bring in the line-set.

ELIZABETH: Check? You can't bring in a line-set in the middle of the show!

PAUL: Your options are have Juliet die in darkness, have Juliet die in work lights, or let me figure out the problem.

ELIZABETH: How long will that take?

PAUL: I don't know. Calm down.

ELIZABETH: There are 300 people out there, what the hell am I supposed to do with them while you go play with your fucking lights? What, should I bring out my handy dandy dancing bear? Should I juggle?

JEFF: You can juggle?

PAUL: Would you quit it with the crazy lady routine? Not flattering.

ELIZABETH: Fine. I'm fine. My show is FALLING APART, but I'm fine. I'm coming with you. There's no way I'm sitting this fucking booth twiddling my thumbs while you fly giant pipes in and out. You forget to lock a line-set, fifteen thousand dollars'-worth of lights come crashing down and crush you and you get blood on them and they never loan us lights again. Listen to them out there. They're already getting all restless. Jesus, they're like two-year-olds. They've got the attention spans of goldfish. What are we gonna do with *them*?

PAUL: Just tell them there's been a slight technical malfunction and we're trying our best to fix it and...

JEFF: I have an idea! Liz, I have an idea!

Work lights go on (or a ghost light or a spot light, depending on how you want the end bit with Paul and Elizabeth to go). JEFF stands alone on the empty stage. He shifts from one foot to the other and eyes the audience.

JEFF: So...wanna hear a joke?

NARRATOR: Stagehand Survival tip #86: Be resourceful.

Scene 5

NARRATOR: Stagehand Survival tip #51: It's really simple. Tape down your cables or your lights will get unplugged and you will look like an idiot. Period.

Some time has passed—Jeff has pulled up a chair and now sits on it with legs spread and one arm draped over the back. He is still in charge of entertaining the audience. They seem to have become his own personal therapist.

JEFF: So, anyway, I think that takes us about through to 1999, and then the aunt that smelled like tortilla chips died, but it wasn't even that great because all she left me was

her cat and this Lay-Z-Boy that had tons of Craisins under the cushion and smelled just like her so my mom had to get rid of it cause she said it was stinking up the house.

Pause. JEFF has grown bored with telling his own life story and visibly switches gears.

Know why I like theater? The darkness. Wait, that came out wrong. I mean, at first I got into it because I liked building shit and the theater department had more money than the shop department at my middle school. And then when I discovered girls and found out 80% of the theater guys were of the male-male persuasion, that was a nice perk too. But I'd never have stuck with it for this long if it weren't for the darkness. You don't get darkness anywhere else like you do in a theater. When it's dark it's not just dark. It's a darkness that's just full of everything that could happen. I read about it in a book somewhere, about this girl who goes to the theater and loves to listen to the sound of Cue 2—well, she doesn't call it that, but I guess I've been listening to Elizabeth call cues for too long to think of it as anything else. Cue 2 is that moment when the lights in the house go halfway down and before you even think about it you can feel that the show's about start because this thrill just ripples through the crowd. I always used to wonder what would happen if you took the audience to Cue 2, to that cue 2 mental state, and then went back to Cue 1 again—just brought up the lights and pretended like nothing ever happened.

Actors, see, actors love the fantasy. That's the only reason I can give for why a girl like that would want a guy like me. Cuz let's be honest here—when I was 14 I memorized the entire *Star Wars* trilogy. In what world apart from theater would *I* be breaking up with *her*?

After a while in the theater, after a while just sort of manufacturing fake shit that's meant to come down in less than 12 hours of strike, you just want something that'll last, you know? Something *real*.

He catches sight of Paul and Elizabeth behind the upstage leg, and pulls it aside, just as Paul, still holding bulky lighting tools, leans in to kiss her, awkwardly. Rather than being deterred, he is egged on. He points at them as they scramble away from each other and try to regain some semblance of professionalism.

JEFF: Like that. That's what I want. *That's real.*

PAUL (*to the audience, professionally*): I'm, um, I'm really sorry about the delay, ladies and gentlemen, but thank you so much for your patience and we'll have you back to your show in just a minute.

ELIZABETH waits for him in the wings.

NARRATOR: Stagehand Survival Tip #1: your crew knows you better than you know yourself. Love them.

END.

An idea for after bows:

As they stand onstage taking final bows:

NARRATOR: Stagehand survival tip #87: After flying a heavy object, always remember to lock the line-set. Otherwise the suspended set piece or curtain could come crashing down at any moment.

The red crashes down. From behind it:

ELIZABETH: *Jeffrey.*

Outro music starts.