

STATE OF THE ART

A backstage comedy for four actors

CHARACTERS

MARGOT: glamorous leading lady, not as young as she used to be, begins the play very much the grande dame

CHLOE: the ingenue, slightly naughty sweet-young-thing, ambitious

MARTIN: an older actor in the Barrymore mold

COLIN McCone: attractive and idealistic young man, just out of drama school, physically fit

and

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF HELENE: the stage manager

Note to actors: Slash marks (/) denote the moment at which the next speaker interrupts.

Four actors go on the road: One on a high horse. One on the fast track. One on the wagon. One hanging on for the ride. Will Boy get Girl? Will the show move to Broadway? Will the glamorous leading lady find happiness...as a character actress? In a comic love letter to the theatre, actors seek love and find work.

Scene One: CASTING

COLIN stands down left, holding a chair and reading the directions from his script while executing them.

COLIN

"The young man is carrying a chair."

HE puts the chair down and continues to read.

"He places the chair with care, then observes it for a moment, before adjusting its position slightly."

HE picks up the chair, retreats a few steps, resumes his position and places the chair with care.

"The young man is carrying a chair. HE places the chair with care, then observes it for a moment, before adjusting its position slightly. She enters, Buh buh buh, dressed simply, but expensively in a pale pastel, buh buh buh. When HE hears her HE spins around."

HE returns to his starting position and re-executes the moves,

"When he hears her he spins around." When he hears her he spins around.

He tries a few things - ie. putting his foot up on the chair, then turning around suddenly; sitting backwards on the chair, before spinning around and so forth; feeling for a cigarette, then turning around suddenly. After a few moments of this, MARGOT, dressed simply, but expensively in a pale pastel, enters from up right, carrying a script under her arm. SHE is putting on hand lotion. COLIN spins around, is amazed to be occupying the

same space as MARGOT. As MARGOT crosses down on the diagonal, her cell phone rings. SHE struggles to get her phone out of a pocket without getting hand lotion all over her clothes. COLIN makes a move toward helping her out. SHE smiles at him, but waves him off.

MARGOT

(Moving left as she speaks, diva-style, on the phone)
Hello...Oh, hi Suzanne. Thanks for taking care of the Travel rider. First class when we fly. That's all set...What?...No, I'm not bringing the dogs this time, so the only other thing is: the Tea Service rider ...Right...Right...No Styrofoam...Right...China with saucers... or...Right...We're just on a short break...I'm sitting in on the final callbacks for the young man...*(Switching to a conspiratorial voice)* Well, some of them are just adorable...Okay, talk to you later.

COLIN has resumed work on the script. When MARGOT slips the phone into her bag, he glances up.

MARGOT

/ Are you...?

COLIN

You're...I knew you were doing this, but I had no idea I'd meet you...today. *(HE smiles broadly and nods at her, tongue-tied.)*

MARGOT

(Charmed and charming, every inch the star) Oh? Hi...I'm / Margot

COLIN

I know.

MARGOT

And you're...?

COLIN

Colin... / Colin McCone

MARGOT

(full-voiced) I'm delighted to / know you.

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF HELENE

(From left) Margot? We're starting / again.

MARGOT

(Calling) Be right there, Helene. *(Gesturing to his sides)*
Isn't it a lovely play?

COLIN

Um...Yeah.

MARGOT

I've got to get back. *(loud whisper)* Good luck.

SHE exits left. COLIN gives a silent Cheer and does a little dance. He goes back to his script. CHLOE enters from up left, diva-like, in hat and sunglasses. When she sees COLIN she drops the diva pose and becomes the twenty-something she is.

CHLOE

No way.

HE spins around, sees her.

COLIN

Way.

CHLOE

Are you up for this?

COLIN

(sarcastic) No. I just hang out outside audition rooms hoping something will turn up.

CHLOE

They're supposed to match us up by size and coloring today.

COLIN

Yeah.

CHLOE

Don't tell me we're reading together!

COLIN

Probably. Is yours at / 2:40?

CHLOE

Mine's 2:40.

COLIN

Then we're reading together

CHLOE

God, I can't believe you're up for this. I thought they wanted someone...

COLIN

...What?

CHLOE

...else.

COLIN

My agent told me it's down to me and two other guys.

CHLOE

Oh, God. Do they know we used to...?

COLIN

Why would they?

CHLOE

God! This is just my luck.

COLIN

It's not That bad. We don't have any scenes together besides /the

CHLOE

Are you kidding? There's that whole part where we first meet up and that whole thing in the second act after I flirt with the Old Guy. And then a couple of / scenes with everyone.

COLIN

My sides were all from the first /few

CHLOE

You haven't read the play?

COLIN

I only had twenty minutes to look it over and then they gave me /sides. (*HE shows her the sides.*)

CHLOE

You haven't read the play?

COLIN

I was up for three commercials this / week

CHLOE

(*With scorn*) You haven't read the / play?

COLIN

and I was on / *Law and Order*.

CHLOE

You haven't read the - Wha'd you do on *Law and Order*?

COLIN

I was in the beginning.

CHLOE

Wha'd you do?

COLIN

I play the deceased.

CHLOE

What?

COLIN

(*Doesn't want to admit this*) I was the dead body.

CHLOE

You were so busy being the Dead Body that you haven't read the play?

COLIN

Would you stop saying that?

MARTIN, a fifty-something actor in the Barrymore mold, enters

*carrying the full script,
preoccupied. HE crosses from left
to up right and exits. When he is
out of earshot of COLIN and
CHLOE:)*

COLIN CONT'D.

Wasn't that...what's-his-name?

CHLOE

Uh huh.

COLIN

He'd be good as...the older guy.

CHLOE

Oh, God. What if we both get this? We're going to be on the road for...ever.

COLIN

(delighted about this)

I've got friends in five of the cities we'll be touring to.

CHLOE

You haven't read the play, but you've memorized the itinerary?

COLIN

I haven't memorized the itinerary

CHLOE

I can't believe I'm leaving New York in the company of the one person in the entire city I never want to see again.

COLIN

...Maybe you won't get it.

CHLOE

I'm going to get it.

COLIN

How do you know?

CHLOE

I'll tell you when we're in *(mocking it)* Dubuque.

COLIN

We don't go to Dubuque.

CHLOE

You memorized the itinerary.

COLIN

Do you know how many actors would give their... (*considers "tits," discards it*) toes to get this tour?

CHLOE

I know. I / know.

COLIN

This is Work. Right?

CHLOE

It's not in New York.

COLIN

Neither is most of the country.

CHLOE

We'll be playing a zillion different theaters.

COLIN

(*HE likes the idea*) Seventeen.

SHE looks at him.

(*On the defensive*) I counted.

CHLOE

Who will I talk to?

COLIN

(*HE still loves her.*) How should I know?

CHLOE

I'm serious.

COLIN

Bring a phone.

CHLOE

What will you do?

COLIN

(Solemnly) Learn Italian. Knit a sweater.

CHLOE

Really?

COLIN

(As if, "Obviously I was kidding.") No. Not really.

CHLOE

Oh, I thought you meant

COLIN

I meant: there are endless possibilities.

CHLOE

Not endless

COLIN

Okay, not endless

CHLOE

Just so you don't expect that we'll get back / together

COLIN

I never expect anything

CHLOE

Okay. ...Let's try the scene.

COLIN

There's an idea.

CHLOE

Don't mock me

COLIN

I'm not...You start.

CHLOE

"With all your pretty speeches, I don't believe you really love me."

COLIN

...Where does it say that?

SHE has the entire script. She flips through to find the speech.

CHLOE

Page 75. You say, "You're toying with me and it's not a nice way to behave."

COLIN

That's not in my sides. Let's do the One-seven scene.

CHLOE

I'm not in One seven.

COLIN

It says right here, "She runs toward him and leaps into his arms."

CHLOE

That's not my part, you idiot. That's Margot.

COLIN

Really? I'm going to be on stage with Margot for this whole....? *(HE turns a couple of pages)* Wo!

CHLOE

...You can resume normal breathing. Margot is just a regular person.

COLIN

She was here. Just a minute ago. She looks - *(HE searches for the appropriately reverent adjective.)*

CHLOE

/ Old?

COLIN

Fantastic.

CHLOE

Let's run Our scene.

COLIN

Okay. *(HE searches through his script.)* You're the one with the watering can!

CHLOE
Yes

COLIN
You'll be good in that.

CHLOE
I know.

VOICE OF HELENE
(From just offstage) Colin, Chloë, they're ready for you now.

SHE jumps up, straightens her clothes.

CHLOE
How do I look?

COLIN
Good. You look...really good.

SHE smooths her skirt; HE checks his fly; SHE fluffs her hair; THEY pick up their scripts, start to exit on the CROSSFADE.

A BREAK IN THE REHEARSAL Scene two

MARTIN is experimenting with a rehearsal walking stick while chatting with MARGOT who is fanning herself, making notes in her script and eating celery sticks. A bottle of water sits beside her.

MARTIN
So we're taking to the road, together again after...what, years?

MARGOT
Eons.

MARTIN
The casting is...interesting.

MARGOT
I think so.

MARTIN

The ingenue...what's her name?

MARGOT

Chloe.

MARTIN

She's delightful.

MARGOT

Chill Martin, she's a baby.

MARTIN

I wasn't...I hardly think...

MARGOT

Just don't think / with your

MARTIN

I wasn't planning / to...to

MARGOT

Good. Don't plan.

MARTIN

Maybe I'll adopt her.

MARGOT

She has a father.

MARTIN

She does? I mean, I assume she does, but how do you know -
unless you're her mother.

(MARGOT titters.)

Well, I'll bite. Who's her father?

MARGOT

If I tell you, you'll just hold it against her.

MARTIN

Why, is her father...an actor?

MARGOT

No...More of a Mover and Shaker.

MARTIN

...Are we playing twenty questions?

MARGOT

No, Martin. I'm working on my script and you are...talking.

MARTIN

You know I'll find out, so you might as well tell me.

MARGOT

I DO know. I know Much too Much about you, Love.

MARTIN

I've changed since those bad bad bad old days. I've changed utterly.

MARGOT

Oh? It doesn't show.

MARTIN

I'll take that as a compliment.

MARGOT

It wasn't meant as one.

MARTIN

Charming as always.

MARGOT

I have no intention of "charming" you during rehearsals, not to mention once we're on the road.

MARTIN

I'm not surprised. I hear you've found a very easy way to... butter your bread.

MARGOT

(Very British)

"Don't be disgusting."

MARTIN

Don't quote Noel Coward at me, dear heart.

MARGOT

I'll quote anyone I please.

MARTIN

But will you please anyone you quote?

MARGOT

Alice in Wonderland?

He gestures, dismissive.

MARTIN

Other than the fact that he's rolling in money, I don't know what you see in the Cheese fellow

MARGOT

The Cheese fellow?

MARTIN

Our illustrious money bags backer.

MARGOT

You call him the Cheese Fellow?

MARTIN

Isn't that where his zillions come from?

MARGOT

(Sings in a Munchkin voice)

Chunky Cheese Bits, Chunky Cheese Bites, Cheese Zoodles.

MARTIN

Faux Food.

MARGOT

It can be terrifically refreshing being around real people.

MARTIN

"Real" people?

MARGOT

Civilians.

MARTIN

Ah. Ordinary folk.

MARGOT

Non-theatricals. Like Raymond.

MARTIN
Raymond?

MARGOT
/ "The Cheese Fellow"

MARTIN
Oh! The Cheese / fellow

MARGOT
Raymond gets up early in the morning. He eats three meals a day, at predictable times. He plays golf.

(MARTIN shudders.)
He enjoys the theatre, but his life doesn't hang in the balance.

MARTIN
This is a virtue?

MARGOT
He's regular in his habits and it's never Feast or Famine with him.

MARTIN
I would have thought it was always Feast...A Cheese feast.

MARGOT
(With wonder) His friends are businessmen, accountants, lawyers (MARTIN grimaces.) They talk about stocks and bonds and (her first time saying this out loud) exchange... traded ...derivatives.

MARTIN
(Deadpan) How thrilling.

MARGOT
It's a more mature relationship.

MARTIN
More mature than...?

MARGOT
Oh, Martin, Martin. Don't you want to look over One Three before we run it? God knows we have a LOT of work to do. And the first run-through for Dick and everyone is Friday.

MARTIN

As you know, I like to learn my words before rehearsals/
begin

MARGOT

Yes. But now you have to figure out who he is and what he
needs.

MARTIN

Are you suggesting that / I've fallen behind

MARGOT

I'm just suggesting you might want to pick up your script
during the break.

MARTIN

My dear you may be The Muscle on this production. You may
have wheedled Dick into hiring Freddy for costumes and
Helene to stage manage, and worked it out that rehearsals
would be here (*HE looks around despairingly*) so you can go
home at the lunch break and walk those infamous, snuffling
dogs of / yours.

MARGOT

Lunt and Fontanne are neither infamous nor snuffling.

MARTIN

You insinuate yourself into the publicity, into the choice
of photos, into the Props. The water must be chilled, the
tea must be hot, or you breathe fire.

MARGOT

I care about those things.

MARTIN

But you do not, however, Madame Dragoness -

(SHE hoots out a laugh.)

You do not have sway over when and how I prepare My role
and I will thank you to keep your wonderful ideas on that
subject to yourself.

*During the foregoing, CHLOE
enters.*

MARGOT

/I'm only saying

CHLOE

What's going on?

MARTIN

Margot and I were just re-living / old times.

MARGOT

I'll relinquish my chair to Chloe. I'm Working on my script. *(SHE exits regally.)*

CHLOE

I'm supposed to worship her...You know, in the play.

MARTIN

You can worship her jewelry.

CHLOE

Her jewelry. Yes. *(SHE laughs.)*

CROSSFADE. LIGHTS up on COLIN and MARGOT.

MARGOT

I'm loving the bit when you throw the boot.

COLIN

Oh, thanks. That works doesn't it? *(HE mimes throwing the boot, in a goofy way.)*

MARGOT

Ab-sol-utely. You're a wonderfully inventive actor.

COLIN

Thanks. I mean...Thanks.

MARGOT

This is where...as tradition would have it...You know, theatre etiquette, really...that you're...aren't you?...supposed to say..

COLIN

Oh...You...Well, I mean, it goes without saying you're... you're ...Well, y'know, I told my parents I was doing this play with you in the leading role and they flipped out. I mean you're...you're...bar none...my mother's favorite actress...Well, favorite American actress.

MARGOT

Oh?

COLIN

Well, I mean there's Vanessa Redgrave and Eileen Atkins and Judi Dench and Maggie / Smith

MARGOT

The previous generation

COLIN

Yes, but you know my mother thinks of them...of you all...as fantastic.

MARGOT

It's not a competition, darling. We are all fantastic.

CROSSFADE. LIGHTS up on MARTIN and CHLOE.

MARTIN

Chloe is a charming name.

CHLOE

...Thank you.

MARTIN

We'll be on the road a long time. We don't get back here 'til - what - April?

CHLOE

Yes.

MARTIN

It will be nice to have such a sweet face and voice along - such a lovely presence - when we get to Cleveland.

CHLOE

Oh...Thank you.

MARTIN

It is I who should thank...you.

CHLOE

I'm glad you feel that way...'Cuz, y'know, I just got the part because of Margot.

MARTIN

Really?

CHLOE

Yes. She recommended me to the producer.

MARTIN

Recommended you to Dick?

CHLOE

Yes. Said she wouldn't go on the road without me.

MARTIN

Oh?

CHLOE

She and my dad are...involved.

MARTIN

Your dad is the Cheese Fellow?

CHLOE

World Cheeses. *(Same sing-song jingle Margot used.)* Chunky Cheese Bits, Chunky Cheese Bites / Cheese Zoodles.

MARTIN

Cheese Zoodles. Next thing you're going to tell me you have a run-of-the-play contract.

CHLOE

I do. Margot insisted.

MARTIN

Je-sus.

CROSSFADE, LIGHTS UP on MARGOT and COLIN.

MARGOT

You know, I probably shouldn't tell you this...

COLIN

What?

MARGOT

Did your agent tell you?

COLIN

My agent doesn't tell me anything. He calls me "young man."
I'm not sure he knows my name.

MARGOT

Well, there's a rumor going around...

COLIN

A rumor?

MARGOT

...that if we do well on the road the play will come in.

COLIN

Come in?

MARGOT

To New York.

COLIN

But, I mean, hasn't it already played New York?

MARGOT

Yes, but the producers think it can come in, again, to one
of the mid-sized houses, the Nabisco or the Philip Morris
or one of those...

COLIN

With this cast?

MARGOT

With the four of us. Unless Martin does something stupid
and gets himself canned.

COLIN

Wow! If that happens - I bet my agent will learn my name.

MARGOT

I bet he would.

COLIN

That would be...That's...I mean, that's fantastic! Don't
you think?

MARGOT

I do. I think it's fantastic. But it's entirely between ourselves. Let's make it our little (*sotto voce*) secret.

(CHLOE crosses to the lighted area, sees COLIN and MARGOT in a tete-a-tete. SHE fetches her water bottle with elaborate dignity and returns to where MARTIN is lounging as LIGHTS are restored there.)

CHLOE

I hope I haven't -

MARTIN

Not at all. It's just such a mad business we're in. It's a shame.

CHLOE

What?

MARTIN

I suppose I'll have to look elsewhere for a...distraction from the slings and arrows of touring.

CHLOE

My father would be absolutely livid if he thought I was...providing "a distraction"...for you.

MARTIN

Oh? *(HE laughs.)*

CHLOE

Yes. *(SHE laughs.)*

MARTIN

Ahh... *(HE laughs.)*

CHLOE

(Laughing) I love the way you say that, "Ahh..." *(Laughs.)*

MARTIN

You have the most musical laugh.

CHLOE

I do? *(SHE laughs.)*

MARTIN

Yes, you do.

THEY laugh together.

VOICE OF HELENE

(From off right)

Everyone back please.

CROSSFADE. LIGHTS UP ON COLIN and MARGOT.

MARGOT

Shall we?

COLIN

Sure. I'm ready to throw my boot at you again.

(MARGOT laughs.)

HELENE's voice from (off right)

Places. please. Act Two.

CROSSFADE. MUSIC.

First Preview, Scene Three

CHLOE, costumed adorably, enters from the house, carrying a watering can and fastening her collar. MARTIN enters from up right, trying out his walking stick. HE crosses the stage on the diagonal, meets CHLOE, says something to her sotto voce; SHE laughs; COLIN emerges from right, in time to observe this. MARTIN straightens CHLOE'S collar. COLIN exits quickly.

VOICE OF HELENE

(Heard over the intercom as MUSIC fades)

Electrics, are we set yet? *(SOUND of squawk box, unintelligible.)* This isn't working. Can we get this working? We'll be starting in just a few minutes, People. There will be just a few Very Supportive folks out in the house tonight. *(MARTIN exits on the diagonal, up left. CHLOE exits.left.)* But no stopping please, unless there's a real catastrophe. *(COLIN's head appears.)* There may be some wet paint in the garden, so don't touch the backdrop during one three. *(NOISE over the intercom, then)* There is a hold, but places will be called when we solve a couple of minor technical problems. *(There is a loud crash; the intercom is switched off abruptly. COLIN's head disappears.)*

For the rest of the play please contact the playwright.