

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
An Improvised Comedy

by Rae Mansfield and Linda Lau

Cast of Characters

VICKY: 70s, female, bossy, know it all, believes she is a theatre expert

WALTER: 80s, male, wants to meet ladies

CHARLOTTE: 80s, female, soft-spoken, not sure what to expect

BRILEY: 70s, female, attentive, observant, and diplomatic, actually good at improv

Time

Present

Place

A retirement community

Setting: A multipurpose room at a retirement community.

At Rise: VICKY is staring at a rolling white board. CHARLOTTE enters.

VICKY

Hi, I'm Vicky!

CHARLOTTE

Hello. I'm Charlotte. Are you the instructor? Someone told me that it'd be an Asian woman.

VICKY

It's great to meet you, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE

So you're the —

(BRILEY enters. WALTER enters behind her.)

BRILEY (cheerfully)

Hello everyone!

(WALTER wanders around checking out the room and observing the others from a distance.)

VICKY

Would you like to join us? We're going to get started soon.

BRILEY

Hi, I'm Briley.

VICKY

Vicky. And this is...what's your name again?

CHARLOTTE

Charlotte.

VICKY

(to WALTER)

And who are you?

WALTER

Don't mind me. I don't want to be a part of the class.

VICKY

Then why are you here?

WALTER

I wanted to see what kind of ladies would come to an improv class.

BRILEY (laughs)

What a question!

WALTER

You seem like a fun bunch of gals.

CHARLOTTE

(to VICKY)

Can you tell me what we're going to do?

VICKY

(reading white board)

Risk. Fail. Risk again. Never deny. Always reply. Never ask why.

BRILEY

That sounds exciting. I guess I'll sit over here.

VICKY

No, take this seat.

BRILEY

Why can't I sit there?

CHARLOTTE

Should I move?

VICKY

Yes, you should move.

(CHARLOTTE gets up.)

WALTER

I don't want to sit down.

VICKY

Then you're going first. Freeze!

WALTER

What?

VICKY

Freeze!

BRILEY

Wait! Hold on. Aren't you going to tell us the objective and give us some background about yourself and what to expect from the class?

VICKY

Well, I would, but I'm not the teacher.

CHARLOTTE

You're not?

BRILEY

Then what are you doing?

VICKY

The teacher doesn't seem to be here and I ran lots of corporate events, so I'm taking charge.

WALTER

Why do you get to take charge?

VICKY

You're not even in the class! You don't get to have an opinion.

WALTER

What if I changed my mind? What if I want to be?

VICKY

Well, then...you'll have to sit down.

BRILEY

He doesn't have to sit down. You don't have to sit down.

CHARLOTTE

I'm not sitting down.

VICKY

We need to do something.

BRILEY

We can sit here and wait until the instructor gets here. It's not easy finding parking around here, especially on a Saturday when *everyone* suddenly wants to visit because they feel guilty.

WALTER

Tell me about it. My nephew said he's coming to brunch. Brunch?

BRILEY

Is he in your will?

WALTER

Nope. And a western omelet isn't going to change my opinion.

VICKY

Let's play two truths and a lie while we wait.

WALTER

What's that?

VICKY

Each person goes around the group and makes three statements. Two are truths, one is a lie.

WALTER

I'll go first!

VICKY

Alright.

WALTER

I'm a man. I'm rich. I'm a frog.

CHARLOTTE

You mean you're French? Isn't that offensive?

WALTER

A frog. I'm a frog.

BRILEY

I don't think he understands the instructions. Let's just sit here and get to know each other. I think that'll be easier.

VICKY

You're no fun.

WALTER

I came here for theatre improv. Thought you ladies would be making dirty jokes and doing weird stuff like they do on *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* When's all that going to happen?

CHARLOTTE

Walter, the instructor isn't here yet, so we can't get started.

BRILEY

Yes, she's not here, so we're all waiting.

VICKY

I know how to do improv. People have always told me I'm good at making stuff up and being funny. I took acting last year.

BRILEY

Well, I don't consider myself an expert, but I used to play theatre games with my students way back when I was teaching elementary school.

VICKY

I don't think that's the same. That's kids' stuff. I took a real acting class at the community theatre.

BRILEY

We played simple machines. Or we'd have all the kids pretending to be animals doing "people activities." It helped kids who were shy.

VICKY

I don't know what you're talking about. That makes no sense. And it doesn't sound funny.

CHARLOTTE

I don't know. A giraffe going to the grocery store sounds kind of funny.

(VICKY scoffs.)

BRILEY

Okay, would you like to show us something funny, then?

WALTER

Finally.

(WALTER sits down.)

VICKY

(in a *very* dramatic quasi-British voice)

The quality of mercy is not strained/

BRILEY

Oh good lord.

WALTER

I'm not getting it.

CHARLOTTE

I think she's reciting from Shakespeare?

VICKY

It's *The Merchant of Venice*, you heathens.

BRILEY

Does anyone want to play a game with me? I think you'd enjoy it.

WALTER and CHARLOTTE

Yes!

VICKY

You go ahead.

BRILEY

Great! Now this is going to be a very easy, but difficult game.

VICKY

That makes no sense.

BRILEY

So Charlotte, ask Walter, "What are you doing?"

CHARLOTTE

What are you doing?

BRILEY

Now Walter, give Charlotte something to do. It can be anything. As complicated or simple as you want.

WALTER

Dancing the can-can.

BRILEY

Now Charlotte, start pretending to dance the can-can.

(CHARLOTTE starts dancing the can-can to the best of her ability. She swings her legs up and down and hums "Orpheus in the Underworld.")

CHARLOTTE

I don't really know how to dance the can-can!

BRILEY

It's alright! Just keep going.

(CHARLOTTE continues swinging her legs up and down and humming "Orpheus in the Underworld.")

BRILEY

Walter, now *you* ask Charlotte, “What are you doing?”

WALTER

What are you doing?

BRILEY

And now Charlotte responds.

CHARLOTTE

I’m yelling at my neighbor who keeps letting their dog go on my rose bushes!

BRILEY

Okay, now...

WALTER

I spend five grand a year in HOA fees to keep the grounds tidy. And you can’t clean up after your damn dog? I got poo on my favorite pair of sneakers. It’s *disgusting*.

BRILEY

That’s great. You got the hang of it. Now I’m going to join in. What are you doing?

WALTER

I’m telling off my nephew who thinks taking me to brunch will get him back into my will after being awful to his kids.

BRILEY

You can’t buy my love with pancakes and coffee!

CHARLOTTE

What are you doing?

BRILEY

I’m making a blueberry pie.

(CHARLOTTE starts making a pie.)

WALTER

What are you doing?

CHARLOTTE

I’m finally competing in Olympic figure skating!

(WALTER starts skating. VICKY walks over to them.)

VICKY
What are you doing?

WALTER
I'm sitting on top of an elephant in Thailand.

VICKY
What? I can't do that.

BRILEY
Just go with it.

VICKY (hesitantly)
Fine.

(She sits down in a chair again.)

BRILEY
What are you doing?

VICKY
I'm getting my hair and nails done.

(BRILEY starts to act out getting a manicure, but VICKY also starts to do the action.)

WALTER
You're NOT supposed to do what you say!

BRILEY
I do what you say and you stop.

VICKY
Okay. I got it.

BRILEY
Let's try again. What are you doing?

VICKY
I'm making a Thanksgiving turkey.

(VICKY starts doing the action again.)

WALTER
You're not supposed to do that! *She's* supposed to do that. Those are the rules.

CHARLOTTE

Maybe if we do it together, we can help her.

VICKY

I can figure it out.

BRILEY

What are you doing?

VICKY

I'm looking at expiration dates for the canned food in my pantry.

(VICKY starts miming this. WALTER sighs and throws his hands up.)

CHARLOTTE

Let's do it together. It's not so easy.

BRILEY

That's a great idea.

(CHARLOTTE stands next to VICKY. BRILEY and WALTER stand together opposite of CHARLOTTE and VICKY.)

BRILEY

And why don't you two start first?

CHARLOTTE and VICKY

What are you doing?

(BRILEY looks at WALTER and gestures to let him answer.)

WALTER

Making a martini.

(CHARLOTTE and VICKY start making martinis.)

WALTER and BRILEY

What are you doing?

VICKY

I'm reading a book.

(VICKY starts reading a book.)

WALTER

No! *You're* not reading the book. *We* are.

VICKY

I don't want to play anymore. I don't like this game.

CHARLOTTE

We did our best. That's what matters, right?

WALTER

I guess?

BRILEY

Sure. We can't learn if we don't try new things.

CHARLOTTE

Exactly. Try something new every day, I always say.

WALTER

I saw on the flyer that this class is supposed to help us "live in the moment."

BRILEY

I thought you didn't actually want to take the class.

WALTER

I thought I might get a date you know. "Live in the moment." Isn't that code for sex?

BRILEY

No. That's code for being present. One day at a time. Being in the now.

CHARLOTTE

For spontaneity.

VICKY

Improv is about being funny.

BRILEY

It can be, but I don't think that's the point.

VICKY

My acting teacher said I was funny.

WALTER (aside)

How much did you pay them?

CHARLOTTE

Maybe you can teach us something you learned in your acting class.

(WALTER rolls his eyes.)

VICKY

We did follow the leader.

WALTER

We used to play that when we were kids.

VICKY

It's *not* a kid's game. It's an acting game.

WALTER

We still played it when we were kids.

VICKY

Fine. I'll *let* you start. We'll follow.

(They line up in the following order: WALTER, CHARLOTTE, BRILEY, and VICKY. WALTER starts walking around the room and the rest follow. He waves his arms around slowly. He starts patting his head and rubbing his stomach. VICKY sighs loudly.)

VICKY

Okay. Switch. Back of the line, Walter.

(WALTER goes to the back of the line and CHARLOTTE leads. She walks more slowly and paces left, then right, then left and right again. She makes circle motions with her arms.)

VICKY

Switch.

(CHARLOTTE moves to the end of the line and BRILEY leads. BRILEY has them all do a Temptations-style side step.)

VICKY

Switch.

(VICKY walks very fast, stops suddenly and the others nearly crash into her. She turns around, walks backwards, and everyone struggles to follow her movements. She makes fast gestures with her hands, trills her lips and hums. CHARLOTTE, WALTER, and BRILEY are confused and doing everything wrong. VICKY goes faster and faster, spinning around

and turning abruptly. WALTER bobbles, almost falling, and BRILEY and CHARLOTTE steady him. They lead him to a chair.)

CHARLOTTE

Are you okay?

VICKY

Couldn't keep up, could you?

WALTER

I'm fine. Just a nick.

BRILEY

Didn't you notice that we weren't following you?

VICKY

Yes. You *all* couldn't keep up.

CHARLOTTE

Then why didn't you slow down? We're supposed to follow the leader.

VICKY

You were all boring. I made it fun and I won!

BRILEY

I don't think that's the point of the exercise.

WALTER

What kind of acting teacher did you get? Was he a former drill sergeant or the leader of a marching band?

CHARLOTTE

I don't know much about improv or theatre, but I thought we're supposed to work together.

VICKY

Not if you want to be a star. Ask Katharine Hepburn. My acting teacher told me she was invited to join some theatre group, but they didn't want any individual to shine, so she declined.

BRILEY

And Dorothy Parker said that Katharine Hepburn's acting "ran the whole gamut of emotions from A to B".

VICKY

But she was a *star*. Everyone knows her. That's what matters.

CHARLOTTE

I don't care if anyone knows me. I've always shied away from drawing attention to myself.

VICKY

Don't you want people to remember you after you die?

BRILEY

I want people to remember me now.

WALTER

There's no point to be remembered. Once we're gone, we're gone. My mother taught me that the important thing is that you have friends who want to spend time with you when you're alive. That's why I try to meet new people and go to weird stuff like this. Gotta make new friends when your other ones die.

CHARLOTTE

I'm glad to have you as a friend, Walter.

BRILEY

Me too.

VICKY

You mean, you *all* don't care about having a legacy? Being someone of importance?

CHARLOTTE

No. I just want to be a good person.

VICKY

What's the point of your life then? Don't you want accomplishment and success?

CHARLOTTE

I published a novel that made the *New York Times* bestseller list. It got made into a movie. That's how I bought my condo.

BRILEY

My students write to me every month and some of them still visit. That's enough for me.

WALTER

I've made millions. That's why I have so many annoying relatives who keep taking me out for breakfast.

CHARLOTTE

What did you do?

WALTER

Chew-resistant dog toys that you can hide treats inside.

BRILEY

That's interesting.

VICKY (sarcastically)

You must *love* dogs.

WALTER

Actually, no. I just feel bad for them. When I was in Thailand I saw so many street dogs. I just wanted to do something nice for dogs. Didn't expect the toys to take off the way they did.

CHARLOTTE

How about you? What are your accomplishments? You must have so many if it matters to you so much.

VICKY

I was M.O.D. at a hotel.

WALTER

MOD? Like Swinging Sixties London?

BRILEY

No. Manager on Duty. I was an M.O.D. when I was getting my masters.

CHARLOTTE

What did you get your masters in?

(VICKY starts crying.)

VICKY

I just want to be good at something. My parents are dead. My sister won't talk to me. My kids hate me. And my dog died last year.

WALTER

My niece runs a dog fostering program. If you'd like to borrow a nice dog to stay with you I can introduce you at brunch.

(VICKY cries louder.)

CHARLOTTE

That's a nice thought, but I don't think she's ready for that yet.

BRILEY

I can understand why it's so difficult for you. And we're here to support you.

VICKY

I should go.

You're not leaving.

WALTER

What?

VICKY

We're friends now.

CHARLOTTE

Yes, we're all friends now and friends won't let you leave like that.

BRILEY

(CHARLOTTE and WALTER look alarmed and BRILEY gives them both a look.)

You really consider me a friend?

VICKY

(BRILEY gives WALTER another look.)

You think we'd let you boss us around if we didn't like you?

WALTER

Um...You really think I'm bossy?

VICKY

Yes!

CHARLOTTE, BRILEY, and WALTER

And a "know it all" too!

CHARLOTTE

And you're really really bad at improv!

BRILEY

Okay, okay. I get it.

VICKY

So if you want to be our friend, you'll have to stop bossing us around and actually have fun with us.

WALTER

How do I do that?

VICKY

CHARLOTTE

We play games.

WALTER

We work together.

BRILEY

And we let ourselves mess up. Can you do that?

VICKY

I'm a perfectionist...but I guess I can try.

BRILEY

That's all we want.

WALTER

Should we have another go at it?

CHARLOTTE

If you think you're up for it.

(VICKY starts leading the group and moves around slowly so everyone can follow.)

THE END