

Circling the Drain (1998 (excerpt))

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ACT ONE

Scene One

Setting

An empty warehouse in downtown Seattle. It is very old, built of brick and thick timbers; the sort of ancient building which is protected against destruction by the law and then left to neglect and decay. There are three doors: Two small ones leading to interior rooms and a third large double door for freight. In this is set a small personnel door leading to the street. We see a folding table, a cot, and piles of cardboard boxes. Strewn about are various items of a theatrical and personal variety.

At Rise

Late afternoon of a hectic moving day. SOUND: Traffic noise and rain.

We find PAUL He is 30, very neat and respectable looking. He is organised to the point of being in a rut. Also GWEN. She is 26 with a laid back theatrical manner and a somewhat flamboyant taste in clothes. The impression she gives is the opposite of Paul; someone who follows dreams even if it means leaving reality a bit behind.

GWEN

I'm not giving up the show, Paul.

PAUL

I'm not saying give it up. I'm saying let's leave it for awhile. Next year. Next year is good. Then we can get some proper backing and a decent theatre space, not this... What I'm saying is... I don't want you to be disappointed.

GWEN

(Wavering.) Paul...

PAUL

I haven't seen more than your shadow since you've started putting this theatre together, and a guy can only live on cold showers for so long. I've missed you. I was thinking... We've got that fire back at my condo.

(They kiss)

SOUND: Door knock

PAUL

Oh, Hell!

GWEN

You'll have to bank that fire for tonight, dear. We've got company.

(Goes to answer door.)

PAUL

(Stamps at something on the floor.)

Hopefully it's the exterminator.

Enter TREVOR. He is British, 40's, with an air of an actor of the old school. He is bundled up against the rain and cold.

TREVOR

Thank God! A port in the storm! Hello, Gwen. It is filthy out there!

GWEN

Trevor, you look like a drowned rat.

TREVOR

The top of Larry's convertible was stuck down. I was bailing all along Aurora Avenue.

GWEN

Larry's here?

TREVOR

In an over-soaked pruney sort of fashion. He's parking the car, though good luck to him in downtown on a rainy Saturday. Hello, Paul. Didn't see you there. Are you acting in this thing?

PAUL

No, just managing the business side of things. You know me.

GWEN

Give me your hat and coat Trevor. You're dripping.

TREVOR

Cheers, Gwen. Anyone else appeared yet?

GWEN

You're the first.

PAUL

Gwen said you weren't sure you be moving in.

TREVOR

Wasn't a case of being unsure. I had a couple of things to sort out is all. By the bye, who's directing this epic?

GWEN

I had Philip Hagen lined up but he's... otherwise engaged.

TREVOR

Doing what?

PAUL

Six months. He thought paying income tax was voluntary. The IRS had other ideas. Gwen, why don't you do it?

GWEN

Me? Direct? I can't. I've got too much on my plate as it is.

TREVOR

Want to have a go, Paul?

PAUL

Not a chance. I don't know the first thing.

Pause.

TREVOR

Don't look at me. My only time out as director ended with H.M.S. Pinafore imitating the Titanic. I'm afraid acting is the only widow's mite I can throw into the kitty.

GWEN

Don't trouble yourself, Trevor. I'm the producer and it's my headache. Let's talk about something nicer. I hear you had a TV audition.

TREVOR

Local commercial for second-hand cars. I don't hold out too much hope for it.

PAUL

Why are you trying for piddly little local TV? I thought you'd be going for the big stuff.

TREVOR

Such as?

PAUL

You know. LA. I mean, you did do that sci-fi series.

TREVOR

(Shudders.) Star Lords! Please don't mention that crap. I've been trying to live down those three years for the past twenty.

PAUL

Oh, come on. It's real popular. They even have conventions and things.

TREVOR

And airs twice a day on cable. Did you ever watch it?

PAUL

As a kid. I thought it was pretty good.

TREVOR

Rubber monsters, wobbly sets, and ray guns that fell apart in my hands; Star Lords may be popular, Paul, but popular crap is still crap.

PAUL

(Crestfallen.) I've still got the lunchbox.

Enter LARRY. 32. Very affable and full of energy. He is talking non-stop even before he gets in the door.

LARRY

That was close. It's a nightmare out there. An absolute nightmare. I don't know if this theatre of yours is Broadway material, but the parking is definitely on the same level. The car's soaked through, but it's legal. I put your bags inside the door, Trev. They were starting to float off the back seat. By the way, darling, my warehouse warming gift to you. (Hands GWEN a bottle of homemade wine.) Dandelion wine. My speciality. And there's more where that came from. Don't shake it or we'll blow the roof off.

GWEN

(Kissing LARRY on cheek.)

Thank you, Sweetie. How are you?

LARRY

Marvellous, darling. And you look as radiant as ever. (Sweeps GWEN into his arms.) When are you going to fly off to Rio with me?

GWEN

Not today, darling. My bikini is at the cleaners.

LARRY

Tragedy! It's San Tropez all over again!

GWEN

You nut. At least you've joined us.

TREVOR

Not quite, Gwen. Larry was just giving me a lift.

GWEN

What? Larry, how could you?

LARRY

I told you, my dearest heart, I'm all acted out this year. I've done five plays including that ghastly Christmas thing. I need a rest.

GWEN

(Only half-joking.) You're a heartless monster.

LARRY

And your forehead goes all puckery when you talk like that. I'm quite immune, you know. Forgive me?

GWEN

Only if you open a vein.

LARRY

That's my darling. So, this is the marvellous space you've been going on about, dearest? Looks a bit Spartan, don't you think? I like the cobwebs, though.

GWEN

I ordered them special. What have you been up to, aside from breaking my heart?

LARRY

Resting. It's pure heaven not having to spend every day running ragged from work to rehearsal to performance.

GWEN

Oh, Larry. "You'll make my heart go crack."

LARRY

You always were too young and beautiful to play Eleanor of Aquitaine. I said so at the auditions.

GWEN

But it won't be any fun without you.

LARRY

I'll come to your first night, I promise. Now, come and give me the Grand Tour. I adore Grand Tours. (To PAUL with mock severity.) As for you, open up that wine. This is a celebration!

Exit GWEN & LARRY

PAUL

He seems definite.

TREVOR

He's bored.

PAUL

Larry? Bored? But he's so busy all the time. Gwen tells me he can get almost any role in town he goes after.

TREVOR

Acting is no challenge to Larry. He's learned everything he needs to know. I think he's reached the point where

he quits acting, becomes the next Olivier, or commits suicide like George Sanders because he can't stand the ennui.

PAUL

Does Gwen know this?

TREVOR

We've talked about it, but I don't think she understands Larry's problem. That man could run his own rep company if he wanted to, but he'll never make it because he underrates himself. So, he stays a big fish on a small stage and tries to put up with the frustration. You should hear him in the dressing room...

LARRY & GWEN enter.

LARRY

Love the decor. Retro-squalor is so under-appreciated. No, really, darling. It has potential. Lighting is going to be a nightmare, I see it, but if you get it right it will work wonders in a space like this. What sort of stage are you thinking of?

GWEN

(Unsure, but taking a stab.) Thrust?

LARRY

Perfect. Just the right intimacy without being awkward. You'll have to watch stage right, though. That corner is going to make for bad sight lines. However did you find this...icebox. Really. Don't you believe in heat?

GWEN

Paul can't find the thermostat.

PAUL

Me?

LARRY

Never mind. Goose pimples are good for the complexion. No, this place has real possibilities.

GWEN

I really wish you would stay, Larry; move in with us...

LARRY

I'm not going to vanish, darling. I'll drop by from time to time. And you'd better duck on opening night, because there'll be a bouquet of flowers the size of a pig sailing at your head at curtain call.

GWEN

But I can't do without my Brian. You were born to play him.

LARRY

It's a gorgeous part and a beautiful play. Next year, maybe, but not now.

GWEN

Larry...

SOUND: Jaunty shave-and-a-haircut door knock. Enter SCOTT, 28. Insufferably handsome and charming, he is dressed in a manner which suggests an impeccable sense of fashion which mere poverty will dare not deny.

SCOTT

Hi, everybody. Is this where the party is?

LARRY

Only one going that I know.

TREVOR

Oh, dear. Another refugee from the storm.

GWEN

Scott, Hello. You're not showing up to say you're not showing up, are you?

SCOTT

(Momentarily confused.) No, of course not. I'm here as actor and angel. Wouldn't miss it for the world. Hello, Paul. How's the exciting world of real estate brokering doing these days? Still sailing through the heady seas of retail property conversions?

PAUL

Doing very well, thank you. How's the world of the unemployed?

SCOTT

I prefer to think of it as the idle rich.

PAUL

I never heard of anyone getting rich on state benefits.

SCOTT

I get fed by the ravens. It helps make ends meet.

PAUL

Maybe you should try working to make up the difference.

SCOTT

I do work. Every day. Look at this tan. Not easy in this climate.

LARRY

(Aside to GWEN.) Fifteen love. Game to Scott, I think.

GWEN

(Changing the subject before blows break out.) Scott, didn't you bring any luggage?

SCOTT

Not this trip. I had to leave in a hurry. I'll go back for my toothbrush when things cool down.

TREVOR

Cool down?

GWEN

Scott? Where's Vykee?

SCOTT

Who?

GWEN

Vykee? Your girlfriend? Remember?

SCOTT

Oh, her.

LARRY

Uh, oh. Lover's tiff?

SCOTT

It was until she threw that vase at me.

GWEN

(Accusingly.) What did you do?

SCOTT

Me? What makes you think I did anything?

GWEN

You're the man, dear. Law of nature.

SCOTT

Everything was going fine. Then she flipped and started using me for target practice.

LARRY

What happened?

SCOTT

Nothing. Nothing at all. We were talking about whether or not we were going to do the play when she said that there was a rumour going around that she was too old for the part. She said it was bullshit.

GWEN

And what did you say?

SCOTT

I agreed with her. I said she didn't look too bad for her age. Next thing I knew the air was thick with Chinese vases.

LARRY

You said she didn't look "too bad?"

SCOTT

(Defensive.) What's wrong with that?

LARRY

(Chuckling.) Do you often waltz into minefields? You might as well have said she hadn't put on that much weight.

SCOTT

I'm not walking into that particular minefield again, thank you. I'm through with that immature loon after what she called me. Do you think I'm a shallow, self-centred, badly dressed egotist?

GWEN

Oh, Scott. You're never badly dressed.

SCOTT

(Vindicated.) See? I hope you don't mind my taking up the offer so late, but I could use a roof over my head while I put some space between me and Vykee.

GWEN

Nonsense, Scott. You're more than welcome.

PAUL

(Dubiously.) Quite.

SCOTT

And I'm sorry I screwed things up. I'm sure we can find someone else to fill in for her. Any place where I can wash up?

GWEN

Through there. Second door on the right. Mind the pots and pans.

SCOTT

What?

GWEN

We're in a warehouse, so we have to be creative. It's a kitchenbathroom, so to speak.

Exit SCOTT

TREVOR

Seems like we'll be doing a lot of that sort of thing.

PAUL

If we can't make up her share of the expenses the whole thing will be moot anyway.

GWEN

Paul...

LARRY

This is all fascinating, but I really must be toddling along. I hope it all works out, Gwen.

GWEN

But, Larry...

TREVOR

Before you fly, Lar, did you get a chance to do more than skim over the script?

LARRY

I never skim. It's against my religion. Why?

TREVOR

I wanted your opinion on something I've been wondering about. Did you say that "The Dancing Flea" would work best if we staged it in the round?

LARRY

Thrust, dear boy. Thrust. I already told Gwen that it was the only way to go.

TREVOR

Really? I would have thought a small play like this would need something a bit more inclusive.

LARRY

Don't think so. Round's too diffusing.

TREVOR

I'd think you'd need that with such an intimate play.

LARRY

(Ideas rapidly pouring out of him.) No, no, no. It's very intimate, but it has a raw emotional core. It needs a physical background to anchor it. Give it a proper sense of space. Look at the second act. Blocking that in the round would be a nightmare. Imagine the bedroom scene. You're John. Stand there. Gwen, you're Sylvia. There. Lovely. I'm Brain, the loveable, scene-stealing desk clerk. Here. Imagine that wall is the cyclorama. Strong light stage right. See? Perfect tableau to start and finish the scene on. Defines the whole thing. See?

TREVOR

(Laughs.) I can't argue with that. Gwen, I think you should pick Larry's brains. He has some good directing ideas.

GWEN

(Taking the hint.) Oh, no, Trevor. I expect Larry has things to do. I wish I could change your mind, Larry.

LARRY

Sorry, darling. Next time.

GWEN

I know. It's a shame. I'd hoped you might consider... But, no. You need a rest.

LARRY

Consider what?

GWEN

Nah, it's silly.

LARRY

What?

GWEN

I thought you might consider... directing us.

LARRY

Me?

GWEN

It was just an idea.

LARRY

You can't be serious.

GWEN

Well, I thought you could... but never mind.

LARRY

I've never directed before.

GWEN

This play could practically direct itself.

LARRY

But, directing...

TREVOR

Change is as good as a rest, they say.

LARRY

Hang on, hang on.

GWEN

Yes, Larry?

LARRY

Are you serious, darling?

GWEN

It would be a big favour to me. I'd really owe you one.

LARRY

But we only have three weeks before opening and there's so much to do.

GWEN

You'll manage and Paul can help you move your things so you can concentrate. Won't you, Paul?

PAUL

I don't know if I have the time...

GWEN

There you are, all settled.

PAUL

But, Gwen...

Enter VYKEE . Enter VYKEE, 26, with a suitcase and a bag. Though she is the same age as Gwen she looks noticeably younger and has a level of maturity which is even younger. Though she does it because she doesn't know any better, she is not above doing some low game-playing to get her way. She is very angry with a rage that she has built up so that she can make a Carefully rehearsed, suitably dramatic, sympathy-catching entrance.

VYKEE

Oh, of all the dirty, low-down things to say! I've never seen such a rotten, dirty... rotten! If he thinks he can go running off after without me around he can think again! I don't believe it! What a jerk! Too old, am I?! I'll give him too old! What does that bastard know? Do you know what he said to me? Do you?! (Pauses to count the house. Becomes genuinely miffed and loses steam when she sees SCOTT is not present.)

GWEN

Vykee? Oh, God. I think I hear Scott coming.

LARRY

It'll be like the Exxon Valdez and a large match if those two hit.

PAUL

Oh, Hell.

LARRY

Where's that wine? (Takes VYKEE by arm and scoops up the wine bottle)

Come on, Honey. Tell Uncle Larry and his friend Vino all about it.

Exit LARRY and VYKEE. Enter SCOTT by other door.

GWEN

(Calling after. Covering) You'll love doing "The Dancing Flea," Larry. It's the best play this town has seen in years.

SCOTT

Oh, come on, Gwen. It's not that good.

GWEN

Of course it is.

SCOTT

No, it isn't. I said from the first that the plot was overloaded. And as for the characters...

GWEN

What's wrong with them?

SCOTT

(Laughs.) What's right? The first act is like Noel Coward on Prozac.

GWEN

It's fine as it is. You're too harsh a critic.

SCOTT

You're...

PAUL

Scott, why don't you ease off?

SCOTT

What?

PAUL

Gwen knows what she's doing. If she thinks this is a good enough play to put on, then that's good enough. You've no right to criticise it.

SCOTT

What are you talking about?

PAUL

I said stop bad mouthing this play.

SCOTT

If anyone has a right to bad mouth it, I have.

PAUL

No, you don't.

SCOTT

What the Hell does it have to do with you?

PAUL

I don't believe your gall! Gwen is good enough to offer you a part and you start trashing the play the minute you come in the door.

SCOTT

I've got a perfect right to say what I like.

PAUL

No, you don't. You've got no right at all to...

GWEN

Paul...

PAUL

...go on like a fault-finding idiot. This is a damn good play. I've never read better...

GWEN

Paul...

PAUL

...if you think you're so almighty talented that you can...

GWEN

(Beginning to laugh.) Paul...

PAUL

...say that sort of thing about a fine piece of drama, then I'd like to see you go out and do...

GWEN

Paul!!

PAUL

What!?

GWEN

(Trying not to laugh.) Scott wrote it.

PAUL

I don't care if he... What?

GWEN

"The Dancing Flea" is Scott's play. He wrote it.

SCOTT

(Hands PAUL a script.)

Don't you ever read a title page?

PAUL

"The Dancing Flea" by Scott Anderson. Oh, Hell.

SCOTT

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Enter VYKEE with LARRY following helplessly. LARRY's counsel has backfired and she is now drunk and angry, repeating her first entrance speech word for word.

VYKEE

Oh, of all the dirty, low-down things to say! I've never seen such a rotten, dirty... rotten! If he thinks he can go running off after without me around he can think again! I don't believe it! What a jerk! Too old, am I?! I'll give him too old! What does that bastard know? Do you know what he said to me? Do you?! (Pauses to count the house. Sees SCOTT and loses steam.) Scott?

SCOTT

Vykee?

PAUL

Oh, Hell.

SCOTT

(Shaking his head.)

Plastered. Pathetic.

LARRY

Leave her alone, Scott!

SCOTT

Well, she is!

LARRY

Lighten up. She's been through a lot.

SCOTT

Like I haven't?

GWEN

Scott...

SCOTT

Lord, this is so embarrassing.

VYKEE

(Takes GWEN aside.)

Gwen, can I tell you a little something?

GWEN

Sure, Vykee.

VYKEE

Oh, good.

Pause.

SCOTT

Well?

VYKEE

(With drunken magnanimity.) Gwenny, I want you to know that I'm not jealous.

GWEN

Jealous of what?

VYKEE

Who what?

GWEN

Who aren't you jealous of?

VYKEE

You. I understand, so I'm not jealous.

(VYKEE looks at GWEN as if She's just related a triumph of logic.)

GWEN

I'm afraid I'm not following you.

VYKEE

(Somewhat crestfallen.) No?

GWEN

No.

VYKEE

Oh.

LARRY

Vykee?

VYKEE

What?

LARRY

(Amused) How about filling in the gaps?

VYKEE

Oh, right! What I mean is that if Scott is here because he wants to get back with you, I don't mind. I understand and I'm not a bit jealous. Uh uh.

GWEN

(Sharing the joke with the others, but very soothing.) Vykee, don't be silly. There's nothing to be jealous about.

VYKEE

No?

GWEN

No.

VYKEE

Oh.

GWEN

(Not paying attention to what she's saying.) Listen. There is nothing for you to be jealous about. There is only one man in my life and that's Scott... I mean Paul!!

SCOTT laughs.

GWEN

(Horried babbling.) That's not what I...

PAUL

What the Hell?

GWEN

...meant. It just came out...

SCOTT

Your Freudian slip is showing, dear.

SCOTT begins to laugh louder.

GWEN

...wrong. Oh, God, I'm...

PAUL

(To SCOTT.)

Shut your face!

GWEN

...so sorry...

LARRY

Don't talk to Scott like that!

GWEN

...it slipped out...

PAUL

You keep out of it!

VYKEE starts to cry. LARRY and PAUL begin shouting at each other. SCOTT continues to laugh. GWEN babbles. Pandemonium sets in. TREVOR stands and clears his throat loudly like a patriarch silencing unruly

children. Sudden silence.

TREVOR

Children!

GWEN

(Trying to cover total panic with rigid calm.)

I believe I'll go make some coffee.

(Exits at walk that ends in nearly a run.)

LIGHTS DOWN