

David Henry Wilson

ON STAGE, MR SMITH

A Play in One Act

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CHARACTERS:

MR ABRAMS
WILLIAM SMITH
MRS SMITH
MICHAEL SMITH
SUSAN SMITH
HEADMASTER
JEAN

TIME: Present.

PLACE: On Stage.

THE SET: Initially a desk and two chairs stage right of a closed curtain. When this opens, it will reveal sets as detailed in the text.

Mr Abrams' office, in front of the curtain. A desk and two chairs. There is a knock.

ABRAMS. Come in ! Come in !

(WILLIAM SMITH enters)

ABRAMS. Come in.

SMITH. Good morning.

ABRAMS. Good morning.

SMITH. It's . . . er . . . it's about your advertisement. Theatreputics.

ABRAMS. "Theatreputics. Theatre therapy, guaranteed to cure depression."

SMITH. Yes.

ABRAMS. Good, good. Do sit down, won't you?

SMITH. Thank you.

ABRAMS. That's it. Good. So you saw my advertisement.

SMITH. Yes. I am very depressed at the moment.

ABRAMS. I'm so glad to hear it.

SMITH. I thought perhaps you might help me.

ABRAMS. Of course, of course. Now, tell me about yourself.

SMITH. Well my name's Smith. William Smith.

ABRAMS. How do you do? My name's Mr Abrams. I'm so pleased to meet you.

(He gets up and reaches out his hand. SMITH also rises to shake hands with him.)

Do sit down

SMITH. Oh, thank you.

(They sit.)

ABRAMS. William Smith. And how old are you, Mr Smith?

SMITH. Forty.

ABRAMS. Amazing.

SMITH. What is?

ABRAMS. Forty. Everyone is forty. I have been inundated with forty-year-olds. One forty-year-old after another.

SMITH. You mean you don't need any more?

ABRAMS. Oh, there's always room for more. I was merely observing that forty seems to be a very popular age.

SMITH. You've had a lot of replies?

ABRAMS. Overwhelming.

SMITH. I ought to tell you, Mr Abrams, I've never acted before. And . . . well . . . I don't really know what theatreputics are. I've just come because I'm . . .

ABRAMS. Depressed.

SMITH. Yes.

ABRAMS. I understand, I understand. It's quite simple, Mr Smith. I run a theatre, and I'm constantly, inexhaustibly, searching for and auditioning new talent.

SMITH. And you guarantee a cure for depression?

ABRAMS. Absolutely. Now then, Mr Smith, we must get on. You're forty. And no doubt you're married.

SMITH. Yes,

ABRAMS. Unhappily.

SMITH. Yes.

ABRAMS. Wife's age ... thirty-five?

SMITH. Thirty-six.

ABRAMS. Missed by one. Sex life, not too good.

SMITH. Bad.

ABRAMS. Bad. Children ... two?

SMITH. A boy and a girl.

ABRAMS. Classic. Ages?

SMITH. Boy, sixteen; girl, fifteen.

ABRAMS. Awkward.

SMITH. Why are you asking me these things, though.?

ABRAMS. To build up the picture, Mr Smith, nothing more. I must have a picture before I can put you on the stage.

SMITH. You think you'll have a part for me?

ABRAMS. Of course. Now, your job. You look like a teacher.

SMITH. I am a teacher.

ABRAMS. And you can't stand it.

SMITH. No.

ABRAMS. And you can't stand your family.

SMITH. No.

ABRAMS. Job, and family. Classic, quite classic. You're sick of your job, and you're sick of your family, and you would like a change.

SMITH. That's right.

ABRAMS. I'm delighted to hear it. Mr Smith, I'm very glad you've come. My theatre extends the warmest welcome to you.

(He stands up and reaches out his hand to SMITH, who also stands, to shake hands with him.)

SMITH. Thank you.

ABRAMS. Do sit down.

SMITH. Oh.

(They both sit down.)

ABRAMS. Acting, Mr Smith, is not difficult at all. You merely have to be yourself, and continue as if there were no one watching you. We all do it all the time. The only problem is whether you can sustain the interest, but that we shall see in due course. When I say "no one watching you", I mean no audience. When your class watches you at school, you act for them, but they are interrelated with you. It's when an inspector comes along that you might find yourself acting acting. Never act acting. Simply act. You follow my drift?

SMITH. I think so.

ABRAMS. Then let us proceed.

SMITH. You mean I'm going to act?

ABRAMS. That's why you've come, isn't it?

SMITH. Yes, but . . .

ABRAMS. Of course. So let's open the curtain, and put you on stage.

(MR ABRAMS gets up and opens the curtain, revealing the Smiths' living room. In it are a table, four chairs and a sideboard. MRS SMITH, MICHAEL and SUSAN are sitting at breakfast.)

SMITH. But . . . but that's my living room! It's my family!

ABRAMS. Of course. On you go. Good luck.

(He pushes SMITH on stage.)

MRS SMITH. Oh. Nice of you to honour us with your presence.

SMITH. What are you doing here?

MRS SMITH. We happen to live here. Which is more than can be said of you sometimes. Where were you last night?

SMITH. I went out.

MRS SMITH. I noticed that you weren't here. What I'm asking is where you were.

SUSAN. Want some cornflakes ?

SMITH. Yes. And some coffee.

(He joins them at the table, at the side nearest ABRAMS.)

Why aren't you two at school ?

MICHAEL. It's Saturday.

SMITH *(feeling his head)*. Oh.

MRS SMITH. Well?

SMITH. Well what?

MRS SMITH. Where were you?

SMITH. I . . . I don't remember.

MRS SMITH. From the look of your suit, you slept in a bird sanctuary.

SMITH. I may have done.

MICHAEL. Smells more like the cow shed.

SMITH. That's enough from you.

MICHAEL. They call him Smelly Smith at school.

SMITH. I said that's enough.

MICHAEL. You going to give me a hundred lines?

SMITH. I'll give you a smack around the ear if you don't watch it.

ABRAMS. Very good! Very good!

SMITH *(to ABRAMS)*. This isn't fair.

ABRAMS. Excellent. Keep it up, Mr Smith. You're doing well.

(The rest of the family are unaware of ABRAMS.)

MRS SMITH. Nice civilized conversation for the breakfast table.

MICHAEL. Nice civilized smell, too.

SMITH. Theatre therapeutics!

MRS SMITH. I beg your pardon?

SMITH. Nothing.

MRS SMITH. The headmaster rang yesterday evening, while you were out drowning your sorrows.

SMITH. What did he want?

MRS SMITH. You. Or more probably he doesn't want you. You're to go and see him at eleven this morning.

SMITH. Christ! He didn't say what for?

MICHAEL. What for's what he'll give you.

MRS SMITH. He did mention that you weren't at a meeting you were supposed to attend. The meeting you said you were going to when you left here.

SMITH. Oh!

MRS SMITH. He asked where you were, so I told him.

SMITH. What did you tell him?

MRS SMITH. One out of six possible pubs.

SMITH. Christ. What did you have to do that for? Couldn't you have told him I was ill, or in the hospital or something?

MRS SMITH. I could, yes, but I didn't.

SUSAN. By the way, I'm pregnant.

SMITH. What . . . what's that supposed to mean: "By the way, I'm pregnant"?

SUSAN. I thought you ought to know.

SMITH. Oh, thank you. Very considerate of you. Who's the father?

SUSAN. Nobody you know.

SMITH. That's a great consolation.

MRS SMITH. There was another phone call, too.

SMITH. Oh?

MRS SMITH. Someone called Jean.

SMITH. Oh!

MRS SMITH. She was very upset. She said she was going to kill herself by midnight if she didn't hear from you.

SMITH. Oh, my God.

MRS SMITH. And the baby, too.

SMITH. What did you tell her?

MRS SMITH. I recommended sleeping pills. For simplicity and painlessness. Who is Jean, as if I didn't know?

SMITH. She's a . . . friend.

MRS SMITH. Surprise, surprise.

MICHAEL. She's his mistress.

SMITH. Now listen . . .

MICHAEL. Every master has a mistress at our school. And the headmaster sleeps with the secretary.

MRS SMITH. How old's the baby ?

SMITH. One.

MRS SMITH. So she's lasted two years, then, has she?

MICHAEL. Course she hasn't. She wouldn't be killing herself if she had, would she?

MRS SMITH. Your father's enough to drive anyone to suicide, Michael, faithful or unfaithful.

SUSAN. Haven't seen you knocking back the sleeping pills, though, Mum.

MRS SMITH. I have my wonderful children to live for.

MICHAEL. And grandchildren soon.

MRS SMITH. Such joy.

(SMITH gets up and crosses to ABRAMS.)

SMITH. I refuse to go on with this. I came to you to get away from them!

ABRAMS. But it's a marvellous show. You're doing splendidly. So natural, so convincing.

SMITH. Of course it's convincing. It's real.

ABRAMS. That's acting! That's the secret!

SMITH. I do not wish to act with them!

ABRAMS. It's the best possible part for you. Superb performance.

SMITH. I want to do something different, something completely different.

ABRAMS. And so you shall. Believe me, this is only the beginning. When you've finished with this, there'll be all kinds of new things.

SMITH. When will it finish?

ABRAMS. Let it take its course. You can't step out of a play once it's started.

MRS SMITH. There are two letters for you on the sideboard.

SMITH. What?

MRS SMITH. Two letters, on the sideboard. One's from your parents, and one's from the bank. Your parents are dying of cancer, and your bank account has died of overexertion. Your parents want you to go up there, and the bank manager says you mustn't leave the district.

SMITH. I can't go on.

ABRAMS. Perhaps we should change the scene. Give you a bit of variety.

SMITH. Anything but them. I can't stand them.

(MR ABRAMS draws the curtain on the family.)

ABRAMS. Then we shall draw the curtain on them. For the time being. But I must congratulate you again on a fine performance. An outstanding debut. You have great talent, great promise.

SMITH. I don't see how you can tell from that, when I wasn't doing anything.

ABRAMS. Oh, but you were, you were! The spontaneity of your reactions . . . quite exemplary. And the bit about giving him a smack around the ear, that was exactly right – beautifully delivered.

SMITH. I meant it.

ABRAMS. That's why it was right. You can't be an actor unless you mean it.

SMITH. But I don't want to act myself! I want to act in a play!

ABRAMS. Yes.

SMITH. What do you mean, "yes"?

ABRAMS. You are acting in a play.

SMITH. A real play.

ABRAMS. A real play. Good! That's the sort of language I like.

SMITH. Not real life, but a play.

ABRAMS. Quis separabit?

SMITH. As a therapy, this is useless. Everything's as hopeless as it was when I started.

ABRAMS. No, oh, no, believe me, Mr Smith, whatever else you may think, don't think that. The therapeutic effect of your performance is incalculable. Incalculable. I like that word. Incalculable.

SMITH. I don't see how it can be incalculable if I can't feel it.

ABRAMS. Perhaps it's incalculable because you can't feel it. You'll be a new man soon.

SMITH. I'll be a dead man if I have to stay with them.

ABRAMS. Even a dead man is a new man. Nothing stands still, that's the beauty of it all. Of course, in the theatre, everything moves fast, which is what makes it exciting. We take away the waters of time, and are left with concentrated life. Let's put you in your next role, shall we?

(MR ABRAMS draws the curtain, revealing the HEADMASTER in his office. A desk and two chairs are in the office.)

SMITH. Oh, no!

HEADMASTER. Ah Smith. Come in. I've been waiting for you.

SMITH. Good . . . good morning, headmaster.

HEADMASTER. Come in, Smith, don't try and fade into the corner. Sit down.

(SMITH sits down.)

I rang your home last night. After the meeting.

SMITH. Yes, sir.

HEADMASTER. Your wife said you weren't there, either.

SMITH. No, sir.

HEADMASTER. She said you were "getting pissed," I believe was the expression. In fact, I believe she used the word "again." "Getting pissed again."

SMITH. Yes, sir.

HEADMASTER. Indicating a certain regularity in the habit.

SMITH. Yes, sir.

HEADMASTER. How often do you get pissed, Smith?

SMITH. As often as possible, sir.

HEADMASTER. I see. You will recall that the meeting was called specifically in order to discuss the disciplinary problems relating to Form 4C. Your form, Smith.

SMITH. Yes, sir.

HEADMASTER. Furthermore, to work out a uniform approach to your two forthcoming court cases, the one concerning the assault on Andrew Martin, and the other for the attempted rape on Julia Sutherland. You recall, Smith?

SMITH. I'll never forget it, sir.

HEADMASTER. Every single member of the staff was kind enough to sacrifice his Friday evening in order to be there. Every single one, with the exception of you, Smith.

SMITH. Of me, sir?

HEADMASTER. Of you, Smith. You were not there.

SMITH. No, sir.

HEADMASTER. You were getting pissed.

SMITH. Yes, sir.

HEADMASTER. Again.

SMITH. Yes, sir.

HEADMASTER. The meeting was mercifully short, once it had been confirmed that you were not coming. We simply took a decision, which I am pleased to say was unanimous.

SMITH. I'm glad to hear that, sir.

HEADMASTER. We decided that you should be asked to leave the school at once, and never return. Miss Bryant, my secretary, was kind enough to come in early this morning to make sure your insurance card was up to date, and I have pleasure in handing it over to you.

(He gives the card to SMITH.)

SMITH. Thank you, sir.

HEADMASTER. We shall therefore only have occasion to meet once more in our lives, I'm happy to say.

SMITH. When will that be, sir?

HEADMASTER. In court, Smith, in court, when I and the rest of the staff will be giving evidence on behalf of Andrew Martin and Julia Sutherland. If you should ever apply for another job elsewhere, you can rely on me to give full details of your career to the establishment concerned.

SMITH. Thank you, sir.

HEADMASTER. Good-bye, Smith.

SMITH. Good-bye, sir. I hope your wife doesn't mind too much about Miss Bryant, sir.

HEADMASTER. What do you mean by that, Smith? Smith! Come back here . . .

(But MR ABRAMS has closed the curtain on him.)

ABRAMS. Good! A nice touch that, at the end. You're developing nicely.

SMITH. It's not what I want. It's not how I see myself.

ABRAMS. How do you see yourself?

SMITH. Not like that. An actor has to be somebody else – I'm not satisfied.

ABRAMS. But you're doing wonderfully well.

SMITH. You may think I'm doing well, but I don't.

ABRAMS. It's the audience that decides, you know. An actor can't tell an audience what it should think. Now I'm the audience, and I think you couldn't do better.

SMITH. I want to act lines that somebody else has written. I don't want to act my lines, I want to act somebody else's lines.

ABRAMS. What makes you think those were your lines?

SMITH. They were my lines.

ABRAMS. Were they?

SMITH *(uncertain)*. Of course they were.

ABRAMS. Did you write them?

SMITH. No, of course I didn't write them.

ABRAMS. Ah! Then where did they come from?

SMITH. I made them up.

ABRAMS. Did you?

SMITH (*uncertain*). Of course I did.

ABRAMS. When the headmaster spoke to you, did you know what he was going to say?

SMITH. No. Not exactly.

ABRAMS. And while he was speaking, did you know what you were going to say?

SMITH. No. Not exactly.

ABRAMS. And while you were speaking, did you know what words were going to come out next?

SMITH. No. Not exactly.

ABRAMS. Then how do you know you made them up?

SMITH (*uncertain*). Of course I made them up.

ABRAMS. How do you know they were not placed there? (*Silence.*) You're an actor, Mr Smith. A born actor. Any audience would love you. I can't understand why you should be discontented.

SMITH. For one thing, I haven't *got* an audience.

ABRAMS. You have me. Wildly enthusiastic, laughing at every joke, applauding every gesture.

SMITH. Well, it's very kind of you . . .

ABRAMS. Think nothing of it. My pleasure, my pleasure.

SMITH. But these things, they're . . . they're painful. I'm suffering.

ABRAMS. Acting, Mr Smith, is an art. And what is art without suffering? Believe me, the more you suffer, the greater the performance.

SMITH. I don't want to suffer.

ABRAMS. But you do want to act.

SMITH. I wanted to act because I thought it would get me out of my suffering. I don't see where the therapeutics comes in if I still have to suffer.

ABRAMS. All in good time, Mr Smith. You're too impetuous. You want everything at once. Remember, you're still being tested. This isn't the final show – it's just an audition, you know. What sort of part do you see yourself acting?

SMITH. I don't know. A lover, perhaps. Romantic hero.

ABRAMS. Good. Just what I imagined.

(MR ABRAMS draws the curtain, revealing Jean's small, poor studio apartment, where JEAN is sitting on her bed.)

SMITH. Oh, no!

ABRAMS. The lover.

JEAN. I thought you weren't coming. I was going to kill myself.

SMITH. Why did you phone my house? I've told you. . .

JEAN. I haven't seen you for a week.

SMITH. I've been busy.

JEAN. So have I, trying to look after your child, trying to stay sane, trying to keep up appearances. I can't go on like this. My father knows about us.

SMITH. What!

JEAN. Someone told him.

SMITH. He knows about . . . me?

JEAN. Yes. He was here.

SMITH. I was going to him for an overdraft.

JEAN. Don't. He'll kill you. I'm surprised he hasn't been to your house. He says you'll never get another loan or another job as long as you live.

SMITH. Another job?

JEAN. They're making him chairman of the council. He'll be mayor next year. He's also on the board of the building society. I hope your payments are up to date.

SMITH. This can't be real,

JEAN. Oh, yes, it is. And so am I. And so's Jamie. And so's this dump you've dumped me in. Love! You were going to give me the earth, weren't you? And earth is about all you have given me. Or dust, to be more precise.

SMITH. I haven't got any money.

JEAN. How very romantic.

SMITH. I'm finished.

JEAN. How am I going to live?

SMITH. Maybe your father'll...

JEAN. He won't.

SMITH. I'm finished.

JEAN. Well, I'm not. I've got Jamie to think about. If you can't come up with something, I'll go to court. When you seduced me, I was still a minor – don't forget that.

SMITH. The end of the line.

JEAN. I'll tell the world about you. There won't be a street you'll dare show your face in.

SMITH. Terminus.

(He wanders in a daze toward MR ABRAMS, who closes the curtain.)

Draw the curtain and turn the light out.

ABRAMS. A masterly tragic hero. And a very, very fine lover.

SMITH. I'm giving up.

ABRAMS. But you've hardly begun.

SMITH. I'm finished.

ABRAMS. When you came in here, I could see at once that you were an actor of stature, but this has surpassed all expectations. I haven't enjoyed a performance so much since that comedy about . . . what's his name . . . Oedipus. But you must go on. To maximise the benefit from the therapy, you must complete the course.

SMITH. What therapy? What course? You got me here under false pretences! You've given me nothing, you've done nothing for me! I'm in exactly the same situation I was in before I came here.

ABRAMS. That, of course, is true, there's no denying it. And a very interesting situation it is. A work of art, Mr Smith – a genuine work of art.

SMITH. Your idea of acting isn't mine.

ABRAMS. On the contrary, Mr Smith, our concepts are identical.

SMITH. Actors do not have to act their own lives.

ABRAMS. Except in their own lives. A flower, Mr Smith, is a flower. But in a frame it is a picture. A woman, Mr Smith, is a woman. But on a pedestal, she is a statue. A life, Mr Smith, is a life. But on a stage, it is a play. All the world's a stage, n'est-ce pas? Now let me watch the great scene, the dénouement. Don't spoil your performance by skimping your greatest moment.

SMITH. I'm not, doing any more.

ABRAMS. I hate to tell you this, but you are.

SMITH. I'm not. You can take your theatrepeutics, and stuff them down your...

ABRAMS. Mr Smith, you have no choice. Once a play begins, it has to go on to the end.

SMITH. This isn't a play!

ABRAMS. Oh, but it is.

SMITH. You said it was an audition.

ABRAMS. That's true. An audition, in the form of a play.

SMITH. Well, I'm stopping.

ABRAMS. I don't believe you.

SMITH. I can't go on!
ABRAMS. You must.
SMITH. No!

(MR ABRAMS opens the curtain. The stage is completely bare.)

ABRAMS. Look! The final scene.
SMITH. No!
ABRAMS. On stage! You have no choice!
(SMITH goes "on stage.")
SMITH. Please!
ABRAMS *(relentless)*. Act!
SMITH. What am I to do?
ABRAMS. You've never asked me before what you should do.
SMITH. There were other people here before.
ABRAMS. You want them here again?
SMITH. No! No! I want different people. People I don't know.
(MR ABRAMS has gone.)

Did you hear? I said I want some different people here with me! *(No response.)* I can't have them, can I? I can't have anyone. Well, I don't want anyone. It would all be the same anyway. Theatre-bloody-peutics. If you think I'm going to give you a juicy finale, you can think again. I came in a free man, and I'll leave a free man. I'm leaving, you hear? I . . . I'm leaving. Christ, where can I go? I'm leaving! *(No response.)* I'm not leaving. That's the truth. I'm staying here. They can't get at me here. They can't touch me here.

(Enter a line of mourners: MRS SMITH, MICHAEL, SUSAN, the HEADMASTER, JEAN carrying a baby, and MR ABRAMS. One by one they will go to a point down centre, throw down a flower, say their piece, and go off. SMITH stands centre, watching them pass before him.)

MRS SMITH. You made a complete mess of our lives, but with the children growing up I'll soon be on my own. I'd rather have had you with me, but in many ways I think it's best that you've gone. *(Exit.)*
MICHAEL. You were a lousy father and a lousy everything else. We're better off without you, though Mum'll be left on her own. All the same, we're better off. *(Exit.)*
SUSAN. I'm sorry you've gone. You weren't all that bad. You were just stupid, that's all. At least people might feel sorry for us now, instead of laughing at us. *(Exit.)*
HEADMASTER. Damn good job you've done. Most sensible thing you ever did. *(Exit.)*
JEAN. Coward. You selfish coward. *(Exit.)*

(MR ABRAMS watches her leave, then goes up to SMITH.)

ABRAMS. There you are. The end of the show. I enjoyed it, I really did enjoy it. I must say I agree with what the critics have said, but I enjoyed it all the same.
SMITH. I'm unhappy.
ABRAMS. Yes.
SMITH. I don't understand what happened to me.
ABRAMS. No.
SMITH. It wasn't like this at the beginning.
ABRAMS. Evolution.

SMITH. I think you've cheated me. You promised me a cure. Theatrepeutics. You should have cured me.

ABRAMS. Oh, come now, come now, let's not spoil the fun with such pettiness, Mr Smith. You are what you are . . . or were.

SMITH. You didn't give me a chance,

ABRAMS. You performed splendidly. The audition is over, and you have been cast.

SMITH. Cast?

ABRAMS. In your role.

SMITH. What role?

ABRAMS (*with sudden chilling formality*). We'll let you know, Mr Smith.

(*He starts to walk away.*)

SMITH. Wait! What role?

ABRAMS. I can't spend any more time with you, Mr Smith. I have other customers.

SMITH. But the therapy!

ABRAMS. Is finished. There's no more you can do for me, Mr Smith.

SMITH. But the advertisement said . . .

ABRAMS. The advertisement said: "Theatrepeutics. Theatre therapy, guaranteed to cure depression!' And so it does, until the performance is over.

SMITH. But you haven't cured me! You haven't . . .

ABRAMS. Who talked of curing you, Mr Smith?

(*Pause.*)

SMITH (*horrified*). You mean . . .

ABRAMS. The therapy is for me.

(*MR ABRAMS closes the curtain.*)

LIGHTS OUT