

THE CABOT COMEDIES

One-Act Plays

featuring the First Family of American Theater

by

Greg Hatfield

THE CABOT COMEDIES

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THREE SISTERS IN REPERTORY

Characters: (3W, 3M)

EVE FLEMING F, early 40s. The oldest sister. Wry and wisecracking. Warmhearted, but sassy.

ROZ FLEMING F, 30s. The middle sister. Smart, witty, and sophisticated.

VIRGINIA FLEMING F, early 20s. The youngest sister. She takes acting very seriously.

ED. M, 50s. The stage manager.

CHARLES CABOT M, 20s. The leading man of the repertory company.

He's a good actor, from a family of actors. Charles should be age appropriate for Virginia.

TEDDY M, 30s. Virginia's boyfriend from New York.

PLACE: A theater and the sisters dressing room in upstate New York. The theater scenes can be performed on a bare stage. The dressing room should have three areas that have the sisters' makeup tables, random costuming and other accessories that actors would have. Since this is a touring company, it doesn't have to be elaborate.

TIME: 1926.

THREE SISTERS IN REPERTORY

SCENE 1

Lights up on a rehearsal for the last scene from Shaw's Pygmalion. VIRGINIA is playing Eliza Doolittle and CHARLES is playing Henry Higgins. There are two chairs on a bare stage. During the scene, Charles is acting broadly, making eyes at her, getting closer, showing a romantic side. This makes Virginia even angrier, and she shoots glances at him during the scene.

VIRGINIA. You know I can't go back to the gutter, as you call it, and that I have no real friends in the world but you and the Colonel. You know well I couldn't bear to live with a low common man after you two; and it's wicked and cruel of you to insult me by pretending I could. Don't you be too sure that you have me under your feet to be trampled on and talked down. I'll marry Freddy, I will, as soon as he's able to support me. *(She sits defiantly.)*

CHARLES. *(He sits down beside her.)* Rubbish! You shall marry an ambassador. You shall marry the Governor-General of India or the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, or somebody who wants a deputy-queen. I'm not going to have my masterpiece thrown away on Freddy.

VIRGINIA. You think I like you to say that. But I haven't forgot what you said a minute ago; and I won't be coaxed round as if I was a baby or a puppy. If I can't have kindness, I'll have independence.

CHARLES. Independence? That's middle-class blasphemy. We are all dependent on one another, Every soul of us on earth.

VIRGINIA. *(She rises determinedly.)* I'll let you see whether I'm dependent on you. What a fool I was not to think of it before! You can't take away the knowledge you gave me. Oh, when I think of myself crawling under your feet and being trampled on and called names, when all the time I had only to lift up my finger to be as good as you, I could just kick myself.

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CHARLES. By George, Eliza, I said I'd make a woman of you; and I have. I like you like this. *(He moves in closer.)*

VIRGINIA. *(breaking character)* What the hell is this?

CHARLES. What do you mean? Why did you stop? This was great!

VIRGINIA. Those eyes, those gestures. What in the world were you doing?

CHARLES. What are you talking about?

VIRGINIA. You were trying to woo me the entire play! Higgins and Eliza. They're not in love. They're not getting married.

CHARLES. Some think so. I do. I've given it some thought. I think they love each other.

VIRGINIA. Are you delusional? Even Shaw says that Eliza marries Freddy.

CHARLES. Aha! *Probably.* He says "probably." Likely. Not definitely. Besides, audiences love a happy ending. Don't you? I know I do. Let's leave them with a little hope. Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, director and original Higgins, I might add, changed the ending in 1914 when the play opened in London, with Mrs. Patrick Campbell as Eliza, to give the audiences hope that Eliza and Higgins would be married.

VIRGINIA. Shaw was appalled, Charles. Tree did it behind his back! Shaw wrote to Tree saying his new ending was "damnable and he ought to be shot."

CHARLES. Yes, but Tree wrote back, "My ending makes money. You ought to be grateful."

VIRGINIA. Oh, you're insufferable. *(She runs off and exits.)*

CHARLES. *(calling after her)* Yes, but I'm making sense.

(Virginia goes into her dressing room. It is a simple room, with three makeup areas for each sister. EVE and ROZ are in the room at their makeup tables as Virginia enters.)

VIRGINIA. That's it. I've had it. I quit. *(She goes to her makeup table.)*

EVE. You can't quit. We just started and still have ten more weeks to go.

ROZ. And we haven't even blocked *Earnest*. Or been paid.

VIRGINIA. I'm just so frustrated, that's all. I don't know how much more I can take of that Charles Cabot. Can't we just pack it up and go back to New York?

EVE. Because Teddy's there?

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ROZ. I sense loneliness creeping in.

VIRGINIA. No, that's not it. Although, it would be nice to have someone that would actually listen to me for a change.

EVE. Been there, kiddo. It's not as glamorous as you might think. After a while you get tired of hearing your own voice.

VIRGINIA. Roz, don't you miss Anthony?

ROZ. You know, I've never even thought about it.

VIRGINIA. Doesn't he miss you when you're traveling?

ROZ. I don't think so. He's busy, um, working, I believe he calls it. Besides, he likes it when I'm gone so he can impress me when I get back.

VIRGINIA. Sometimes I don't understand why you're even married.

EVE. She doesn't either. We can't all be fun bachelorettes like me.

ROZ. Oh, hush, Mrs. Four-Time Married Woman.

EVE. I will keep trying till I get it right. Did I ever tell you about the time I dated Noel Coward?

ROZ. Only a million times. You do know you were a front, right? *(A knock at the door)*

EVE. I could have turned him.

ED. *(offstage)* Are you ladies decent? It's me, Ed, the stage manager.

ROZ. Yes. Come in, Ed. We know who you are.

ED. *(He enters.)* Evening all. *(to Virginia)* Great rehearsal tonight, Miss Fleming. We have a full house for tomorrow's opening.

VIRGINIA. Oh, shut up.

ED. What did I do?

ROZ. Nothing, she's just suffering from post-final rehearsal blues.

EVE. She's hoping tomorrow night, she'll actually get some fresh flowers for the opening scene.

ED. Oh, yeah, sorry about that, Miss Fleming. But I thought the fake ones were very believable. You really sold it.

VIRGINIA. Ed, you can stop right there. Tomorrow night, I will not go on without fresh flowers. And if that Cabot fellow doesn't do the part right, I may not go on at all. How easy is it to replace him?

ED. Oh. Well, it's not...um

EVE. Ooh, and if you don't go on, then I get to play Eliza. I am your understudy, did you know that, Ginny? *(heavy Cockney accent)* "Guv'nor,

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the rahn n span fahalls manly on duh plun.” Is that how you do it, dear?

VIRGINIA. Why is everyone against me? Why? What did I do?

ROZ. You became a rather good actress, dear. But it’s not your fault. You had good teachers (*gestures toward Eve and her*).

ED. Hey, I’ve got some news. Can I talk now?

EVE. No one’s stopping you. We always spend the hours after a show waiting for the stage manager to stop by and pass the time. As a matter of fact, I think we’d prefer you to talk. We’re sick of hearing ourselves talk.

ROZ. I think the stage manager in Pittsburgh once brought us some biscuits to celebrate the opening.

EVE. But no tea. We had to provide that.

ED. Ladies, please. Let me say what I have to say and get out of here.

VIRGINIA. Go on, Ed. I think they’re through. (*She shoots them a look.*)

ED. (*bows*) Thank you, Miss Fleming.

EVE. She’s spoken for, Ed. Take it down a notch.

ROZ. Some guy in New York named Teddy, I think.

EVE. Besides, we all know Ed likes me best.

ED. Miss Fleming, please. I never –

EVE. Did I ever tell you about the time I dated the stage manager from *Hedda Gabler*? He was twenty, I think, and I was a handful in those days.

ROZ. Why, no. Tell us. I think Ed would love to hear that story. Wouldn’t you, Ed?

ED. (*To Eve and Roz*) Miss Fleming, Miss Fleming. Please, let me get on with it.

ROZ. By all means, Ed.

EVE. You have the floor.

VIRGINIA. Yes, Ed, do go on.

ED. Thank you. (*pause*) I forgot what I wanted to say.

VIRGINIA. Concentrate.

ED. Oh, right. Thank you, Miss Fleming. We’re blocking *Earnest* tomorrow morning.

VIRGINIA. *Before* the opening? Oh my god, that’s impossible.

ED. I’m sorry. Can’t be helped. That’s the only time we have.

ROZ. Let’s see. *Pygmalion* opens tomorrow night. *Hamlet*, the next night and *The Importance of Being Ernest* the next. Tell me again why I love to do

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repertory theater?

EVE. Because you love the theater, and you get to stay away from Anthony.

ROZ. Oh, yeah, I forgot.

VIRGINIA. Well, that's impossible. I can't possibly concentrate on another part and do Eliza the same night.

EVE. You'll be fine. Besides, I can play Gwendolen, if I must. Can I borrow your hat and coat for the part?

VIRGINIA. Absolutely not. They're my good luck charms.

ROZ. Those old rags? You bought them at the hand me down shop.

VIRGINIA. I did not! They have been with me for every play.

EVE. They were a gift from our father when she left the fold to come with us, sealing her fate of ruin and utter disgrace.

ROZ. I always thought we were living life at the top. Could I have been mistaken?

ED. It's been fun, as always, but ladies, I have to go. I'll leave you to it and see you tomorrow morning at 9:00 a.m. (*Ed exits.*)

VIRGINIA. Grrr. Now I have to study.

ROZ. I wouldn't have expected anything less. What else were you going to do?

VIRGINIA. I don't know. Think about my life, I guess.

ROZ. Plenty of time to do that on the train to the next town. It's what many of us do to pass away the hours. That and sex.

EVE. (*She starts for the door.*) Let's go get something to eat. I'm starved. Anyone else hungry?

ROZ. Great idea. Ginny, coming?

VIRGINIA. No, I'm going to stay here for just a while longer. You two go and I'll see you at the boarding house. I'll grab something on the way.

EVE. Alright, don't stay too late. (*They exit. Virginia sits and looks through her script. Pause. There is a knock at the door.*)

VIRGINIA. It's open, Ed.

CHARLES. I was hoping I'd find you here.

VIRGINIA. I'm very tired, Charles. What do you want?

CHARLES. I was thinking about what you said about Higgins and Eliza.

VIRGINIA. And?

CHARLES. What if I did tone it down a bit? I'd still like to give the

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smallest ray of hope that Higgins and Eliza might end up together, but maybe make it less obvious. Could you live with that?

VIRGINIA. Yes, I could live with that. Even though she was Higgins' experiment, she is clear-headed enough to realize that it was in her the entire time. She doesn't want to lose that.

CHARLES. Higgins is Higgins, if that makes sense. This is the only life he's ever known. Eliza actually opened up his mind to the outside world and when he thinks he's going to lose her, he slides back to his cocoon and pretends he doesn't need her. But he does, Virginia. He needs her. I want to play it that way.

VIRGINIA. As long as you give me the space to show Eliza's fierce newfound independence, then we have a deal.

CHARLES. Good. This is going to be great. I think we make a great team.

VIRGINIA. We have a busy day tomorrow, don't we?

CHARLES. Yes, we do. Have you ever done *Earnest*?

VIRGINIA. No, I haven't. Have you?

CHARLES. I played Algernon a few years back in prep school, but never Jack. I'm looking forward to it. It's so funny.

VIRGINIA. Oh, I know. I love comedy.

CHARLES. You know, the original production of *Earnest* only ran for eighty-nine performances. During the run, Oscar Wilde was arrested, on a bogus charge, and his name stricken from the program and all advertising.

VIRGINIA. I think it was eighty-three performances, but it was a tragedy all the same.

CHARLES. Eighty-three, huh? How do you know so much about theater, anyway?

VIRGINIA. You can thank my sisters for that. We talked about it all the time. Plus, I dated Grigori Stalinski for a time and we talked theater constantly.

CHARLES. Wait. You dated "The Great Stalinski", the world's greatest Shakespearean actor?

VIRGINIA. He wasn't "The Great Stalinski" then. He was just "The Pretty Good Stalinski", struggling like everyone else in the theater.

CHARLES. (*pleased with himself*) It's turned out to be a pleasant day, after all.

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VIRGINIA. (*as Gwendolen from The Importance of Being Earnest*) Pray don't talk to me about the weather, Mr. Worthing. Whenever people talk to me about the weather, I always feel quite certain that they mean something else. And that makes me so nervous.

CHARLES. (*as Jack from Earnest*) I do mean something else.

VIRGINIA. I thought so. In fact, I am never wrong.

CHARLES. I would like to be allowed to take advantage of Lady Bracknell's temporary absence . . .

VIRGINIA. I would certainly advise you to do so. Mamma has a way of coming back suddenly into a room that I have often had to speak to her about.

CHARLES. (*nervously*) Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you, I have admired you more than any girl . . . I have ever met since . . . I met you.

VIRGINIA. My ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Earnest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Earnest, I knew I was destined to love you.

CHARLES. You really love me, Gwendolen?

VIRGINIA. Passionately!

CHARLES. Darling! You don't know how happy you've made me.

VIRGINIA. My own Earnest!

CHARLES. But you don't really mean to say that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Earnest?

VIRGINIA. But your name is Earnest.

CHARLES. Yes, I know it is. But supposing it was something else? Do you mean to say you couldn't love me then? I think Jack, for instance, a charming name.

VIRGINIA. Jack? No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. The only really safe name is Earnest.

CHARLES. Gwendolen, I must get christened at once—I mean, we must get married at once. There is no time to be lost.

VIRGINIA. Married, Mr. Worthing?

CHARLES. Gwendolen, will you marry me? (*He goes down on one knee.*)

VIRGINIA. Of course I will, darling. How long you have been about it! I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.

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CHARLES. My own one, I have never loved anyone in the world but you.

VIRGINIA. Yes, but men often propose for practice. I know my brother Gerald does. All my girl-friends tell me so. What wonderfully blue eyes you have, Earnest! They are quite, quite blue. I hope you will always look at me just like that, especially when there are other people present.

CHARLES. *(getting up, breaking character)* I may have to practice getting up from one knee.

VIRGINIA. *(laughing)* Well, you have until tomorrow morning. Oh, look at the time. I have to go right away, otherwise I'll never make rehearsal tomorrow on time.

CHARLES. Good night, Virginia.

VIRGINIA. *(She gently kisses his cheek.)* My friends call me Ginny. *(She exits. Charles puts his hands in his pockets, starts strolling and whistles a tune as he exits off stage.)*

SCENE 2

At curtain rise, there is chaos backstage as Roz and Eve are rushing around, applying makeup, fixing their costumes, and dashing to and fro.

ED. *(He enters, checking the clipboard in hand, getting in the way, nearly getting knocked down by Roz.)* Come on, people, it's nearly time for places. *(calling)* Miss Fleming?

ROZ. and **EVE.** Yes?

ED. Not you two, the other one. Where is she?

ROZ. No idea.

EVE. She wasn't in her room this morning.

ROZ. Oh, my God, what if she did quit?

EVE. No, she wouldn't do that.

ED. I'm holding you two personally responsible if she quit. Who's understudying Gwendolen?

ROZ. and **EVE.** *(pointing to each other)* She is! *(Virginia enters, looking especially sunny.)*

VIRGINIA. Morning, all. Hi, Ed.

ED. *(nicely)* Morning, Miss Fleming.. *(stopping)* Hey, I'm mad at you. You're late.

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VIRGINIA. *(She goes to Ed and holds his hands.)* Am I? Don't be silly, Ed. I'm right on time. Are the flowers all set for tonight?

ED. Yes, ma'am. I picked them up myself. They're lovely. You're going to love... *(He pushes her hands away.)* Hey, stop that. I'm still mad. We're ready to go with *Earnest*.

VIRGINIA. Tell everyone I'll be there in two minutes. Off you go. *(Ed exits. Virginia sits at her dressing table.)* Morning, Eve. Morning. Roz. It's a beautiful day, isn't it?

ROZ. What is up with you? Are you drunk?

EVE. And if you are, why weren't we invited?

VIRGINIA. Goodness, can't a girl be happy for a change?

ROZ. What caused this big change? Last night, you were ready to quit. Do I want to know?

VIRGINIA. Oh, Charles and I had a very nice talk last night after you left. He's such a nice man and a good actor, too. Did you know he loves theater history as much as we do?

EVE. Oh, does he now?

VIRGINIA. Yes. We straightened everything out. I can't wait until you see the performance tonight. And the rehearsal this morning! Oh, it's going to be wonderful.

EVE. He must have had a wonderful "performance" last night to make you feel this way about him.

VIRGINIA. Don't be crude, sister. It's unbecoming.

ROZ. We'd better get this show on the road before I forget the lines from whichever play I'm doing. I swear I'm going to go onstage and play Lady Bracknell in *Pygmalion*.

EVE. That might be interesting.

ROZ. I did that once in Wichita. I was doing Lady Macbeth and Desdemona in rep and switched the lines midway through the play. No one noticed. Not even the actors. Fine lot, they were. *(Ed enters.)*

ED. Everyone, please! Places!

(Everyone dashes out. We hear appropriate piano music, beginning The Importance of Being Earnest. Offstage male voice: "Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?" Just then, TEDDY enters, carrying flowers, looking around.)

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TEDDY. Ginny? Virginia! I'm here to take you back!

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