



## PREVIEW SCRIPT

# *The Ladybirds*

# **The Ladybirds**

By Tony Layton

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# THE LADYBIRDS

## Cast

Marge :	officious, domineering, retired civil servant.
Betty :	quick witted, retired matron.
Faye :	aspiring actress who has missed the boat, an aesthete.
Francesca :	young director, enthusiastic and ambitious, angry.
Julie :	college girl with a fresh innocence.
Babs :	general dogsbody.
Agatha Frost :	the Vicar's wife, chair of the Community Council.
Drama Judge :	adjudicator at the drama competition
Jenny :	a prize-winner (non speaking role)

## Synopsis

The village drama group has lost all their men. The future looks bleak until a bright, young director, Francesca Delmarco, agrees to help them out.

She is professionally trained and she has a plan that will give the group a new lease of life. She persuades them to enter the 'Dame Agnes Wragg Festival of One Act plays for an All Female Cast' with a play she has written herself.

Francesca's play is controversial; it concerns a lesbian couple who want to have a baby. When the word gets out, the vicar's wife, Agatha Frost, attempts to ban the production. However, The Players have their own way of dealing with misguided authority.

## Set

A village hall. Various posters representing local groups are scattered on the back wall. A large centrally placed hand painted poster reads "Upper Plumtree Players present The Merry Wives Of Windsor by William Shakespeare". A simple wooden cabinet containing crockery and all things needed to make tea is positioned down stage right. There is a bench up stage. There is a stack of chairs down stage left. A single bare light bulb hangs centre stage.

## THE LADYBIRDS

*Marge enters stage left carrying a small pile of scripts which she places on the cabinet stage right. The sound system is heard being switching on and someone breathes into a mike to test the sound. Marge is curious.*

**Babs** (Offstage, on microphone) One, two, three ... one, two, three ... one, two, three. And the next object is a 'dildo' ... a 'dildo'.

**Marge** Babs! Is that you? Babs!!

**Babs** (Singing) "I can't give you anything but love, baby". (Marge exits stage right). "Love is just the thing I've plenty of, baby. Dream a while, scheme a while ... doo de do do do ...

*The singing is quickly interrupted offstage. The dialogue until Marge and Babs enter is heard through the sound system as Julie enters stage left, carrying a plastic shopping bag. She listens intently.*

**Babs** Oh! Hi Marge. Testing the system.

**Marge** So I hear. Now turn it off please. Now, please.

**Babs** Yes, your majesty.

**Marge** Thank you. We can do without dildos. (Enter Marge and Babs, stage right). Not a good idea to amplify filth around the parish, Babs!

**Babs** Sorry, I thought ...

**Marge** You know as well as I do the Young Farmers are just waiting to pounce. They would love to take this place over.

**Babs** I wouldn't mind being taken over by a young farmer.

**Marge** I'm sure you wouldn't. I don't know. What's happening to the world? It's sex mad.

**Babs** I've never tried a dildo. Have you, Marge? Have you got one?

**Marge** No, and I don't want one, thank you.

**Julie** We've got one. It comes in handy.

**Marge** Really?

**Julie** It's in the sitting room. We hang pictures from it.

**Marge** Pictures? Julie, what are you talking about?

**Julie** The dado rail. We find it very handy. Of course, most of the pictures are high up but we have these special pictures low down, hanging from the dado rail for little Bobby to reach. He's two. Bobby. My baby brother. What?

**Babs** Julie love ... oh never mind. Did you fetch the milk and biscuits?

**Julie** (Handing over the bag) Mrs Lucas in the shop told me to tell you that she won't be coming back because her back's playing up again, and anyway, she's had enough of drama.

**Marge** Just as well. She could never remember her lines.

**Babs** They're dropping off like flies.

*Enter Betty shaking an umbrella.*

**Betty** It's pissing down. And of course, dear Gerald's got the soddin' car for the evening. Is this it?

**Babs** Faye's on her way. She can't miss 'The Archers'.

**Betty** Poor bugger. Saw your article, Marge. Good idea that.

**Marge** Someone has to do something. We're desperate for new members.

**Betty** (Sarcastically) Well done! I notice they're not exactly banging the door down, are they, these new members!

**Marge** Betty, you always did have a remarkable sense of observation.

**Babs** Betty, you won't believe this, but Marge doesn't have a dildo.

**Betty** Get off! You're pulling my knicker elastic!

**Babs** Funny, isn't it, because I read somewhere that for most modern women it's an essential piece of equipment.

**Marge** For God's sake!

**Betty** Yes! I thought dildos were standard issue for retired civil servants.

**Julie** Oh, dildo! I thought you said dado. Most of my friends got one for Christmas last year.

**Marge** I beg your par.....

**Julie** Only for a joke.

**Marge** I don't believe it. When I was your age I was in the Guides ... sitting around a camp-fire singing "Gooly-gooly-gotcha-ging-gang-goo". That's what we did for entertainment.

**Babs** Nothing's changed. It's goolies all the time on tele now.

**Marge** That's it! Make a joke. Very funny. Everything is geared to the lowest common denominator these days. We are all being over-fed on a diet of sex ... and all we can do is joke about it. Human decency is being frittered away and no one seems to care.

**Julie** I had to do an essay on pornography a few weeks ago.

**Marge** You had to do what?

**Julie** An essay ... for English ... after we read 'Lady Chatterley's Lover'.

**Babs** I remember reading that in bed ... with a torch. Happy days.

**Julie** I said I thought that making love was more beautiful than making war and that it was pornographic to watch pictures of people trying to kill one another. That's what I said, anyway.

**Babs** Good for you. *(They are all temporarily stunned by Julie's statement, especially Marge)*. Julie, I think you've sent Marge into shock. When she comes round she'll tell you that when she was your age the Famous Five did it for her.

**Betty** Are these the scripts?

**Julie** Ooh! Let's see.

**Babs** Please tell me we're moving away from the nineteen twenties.

**Marge** What's wrong with the nineteen twenties? It's style ... it's glamour ... it's chic.

**Babs** Yawn! Yawn!

**Betty** Babs, we all know Marge must wear her red beaded dress and the fox tippet at least once a year.

**Babs** Of course. And not forgetting the ostrich feather hat. What sort of production would it be without the famous ostrich feather hat?

**Marge** Our audience expects class and I do try to provide it ... against all odds.

*Enter Faye, breathless.*

**Faye** So sorry. So very sorry. The cat brought this teeny-weeny mouse in. It was still alive poor thing, so I called the vet. Lovely man ... just moved down here from Esher. Lovely voice. Hands like silk. He was so kind. He made me a cup of tea. He could see I was shocked. A family man. Got three kids and a fourth on the way. She doesn't work. Used to be a travel agent rep sort of thing. That's where he met her. Kefalonia, on a nudist beach. I thought, "How romantic, sipping cocktails in the nude". So, what have I missed?

**Babs** What happened to the bloody mouse?

**Faye** Oh, it er, simply faded away as we chatted. Nature always knows best.

**Betty** Who's directing this?

**Marge** I don't mind taking it on, that's if ...

**Betty** I thought young Julie here might like a crack at it.

**Julie** What, me? Me?

**Marge** *(Sarcastically)* Brilliant idea, Betty. Inspired! What else can we do to lower our standards?

**Babs** We've all got to start somewhere.

**Marge** Are you offering?

**Babs** I'll write letters, I'll get props, I'll make the tea and that's your lot.

**Faye** When I went to drama college in London ...

**Betty** Here we go.

**Faye** Lovely ... lovely spot we were, just by the Thames. Felix, my mentor, super man, asked me to direct a short play by Anton Chekhov, 'The Proposal'. Gem of a play ... a real gem. When it was all over, I'll never forget, I was having my usual gin and tonic with the crew in the bar and Felix comes up to me, grabs hold of my shoulders, like this, looks me straight in the eye and told me that what I achieved with that small group of actors simply couldn't be taught.

**Betty** I bet.

**Faye** He said I had the gift. So, if you are desperate I am quite prepared to ...

**Betty** I vote Julie's given a chance.

**Julie** I couldn't. Honestly ... no ... I really couldn't. Thanks! No!

**Marge** *(Sarcastically)* Perhaps we'll do it by committee. How's that for a novel idea? I'll direct a line then you can direct a line and then you can direct a line.

**Betty** Anything's better than taking six weeks of flak from you, Marge.

**Marge** I beg your pardon.

**Betty** It's like working with a psychopath.

**Marge** I beg your par.....

**Betty** You can beg till the cows come home. No dice.

**Marge** Admit it. I get results.

**Betty** And I get headaches. I was on Prozac for weeks after 'The Merry Wives of Windsor'.

**Marge** A production, I am pleased to say, that didn't make a loss.

**Betty** No? It was a production, I will remind you Marge, that lost us all our men. Congratulations!

**Marge** Men? Is that what you call them? They were limp-wristed lefties most of them. Couldn't take orders. They wouldn't have lasted five minutes in my department.

**Betty** I think the crunch came when you told them, in your usual dulcet tones, that they were all basically cretins and you could get a better performance from a tribe of mentally retarded baboons. I had the feeling that they thought you had lost the plot ... just a tad.

**Marge** A director has to be firm.

**Betty** It cost me a small fortune in drinks to get them back for the opening night.

**Marge** And, knowing you, I assume you dipped into petty cash?

**Betty** What petty cash? You don't mean the five-pound note you keep locked up for emergencies?

**Faye** Actually, I used that fiver on the second night to stop Falstaff walking out.

**Marge** So, it was you. What is the point of having a constitution if members are going to ride roughshod all over it. I am the treasurer. That £5 was entrusted to my care.

**Betty** We had a consultant like you ... a big red-nosed bastard. Thought he was God almighty. He treated nurses like shit on his shoe.

**Marge** I resent that.

**Betty** And I resent the fact that you, dear Marge, have reduced this society to five members. Well done!

**Julie** I've got this friend at college said she might come along.

**Marge** Thank you for your support Betty. It really is appreciated.

**Julie** She's a bit shy.

**Betty** You'll get my support when you deserve it.

**Julie** On the other hand ...

**Marge** If I had one word of encouragement from you I'd die of shock.

**Betty** Don't tempt me.

**Julie** I don't think I'll ask her.

**Babs** Ask who what?

**Julie** Pardon?

**Babs** You said, "I don't think I'll ask her". So I said, "Ask who what?" So?

**Julie** Wouldn't work. She's too tall ... got buck teeth and a lisp ... and she's very shy.

**Babs** Sounds like the perfect leading lady to me.

**Betty** Shall we make a start?

*They all grab a chair and sit centre stage in a semi-circle. Marge hands out the scripts which are old and covered in dust. Each member brushes dust off the cover in their own individual way. They each flick through the script, occasionally looking at it in more detail. Gradually they become more and more despondent. Marge puts on a brave face. There is much changing of glances which Marge follows with a keen eye.*

**Faye** Yes! I see. So it's a country estate in Surrey ... 1920's.

**Betty** Cast ... ten men ... six women. Ideal. Stroke of genius there, Marge.

**Marge** We double up.

**Betty** Costumes ... mainly formal evening dress.

**Julie** Does that mean I've got to play a man?

**Babs** Looking at this you'd have to play young Lord Jacob Flint, his teenage brother, Andrew ... Forbes, the gamekeeper ... and Flint's fiancée, Lady Jasmine Smythe

**Julie** But ... look ... Lord Jacob and Lady Jasmine they're always on stage together.

**Babs** So? On your left side you're dressed as Jacob and on your right side you're Jasmine. Simple.

**Betty** Julie, love. She's pulling your leg.

**Julie** Oh, well ... really I only came along this evening to say I've got mocks, and ...

**Marge** Here it comes.

**Julie** And ... and ... exams are important, and ...

**Marge** And you lack the moral fibre to keep going when the going gets tough. Right?

**Betty** Ignore her, Julie. You bugger off if you want to.

**Marge** That's it! Encourage her. We would certainly have lost the war with that attitude.

**Betty** Which war?

**Marge** You know very well which war, Betty

**Betty** What do you remember of that war? You must have been a kid.

**Marge** I was ten when it started, if you must know. In fact, I can remember Mr Chamberlain coming back from Berlin, waving that paper above his head. "Peace in our time". Bitter, bitter memories.

**Betty** Ten. So that must make you ... seventy-five. You told me you were sixty-seven.

**Babs** Oh!

**Julie** I thought I might pop off, if that's all right. I said I might go round to a friend's later, so ...

**Betty** In fact, why don't we all pop off. Let's all pop off and get fantastically pissed.

**Babs** Now that sounds like a good idea.

**Marge** And what happens to The Players?

**Faye** Yes. What happens to us?

**Marge** The Upper Plumtree Players ... one of the oldest societies in the county ...

**Betty** Formed by a distant relative of that eminent actor, Sir Max Beerbohm Tree. We know! It's been in every programme since the year dot.

**Babs** Marge, I've got to know. Why did you choose this script? Ten men?

**Marge** Because ...

**Betty** Yes?

**Marge** Because, if you must know, I was hoping, that my call for help in the paper would have elicited some response.

**Betty** You've certainly had a response, Marge. The men have given their answer, loud and clear.

**Babs** So ...

**Faye** So.

**Betty** So.

**Babs** Plough And Harrow?

**Faye** The Feathers?

**Betty** Good pint in the The Crown.

**Faye** It's a bit noisy. Full of the rugby crowd. More select in The Feathers.

**Babs** What's wrong with The Plough And Harrow? Cosy in the snug. Real fire.

**Faye** And full of smoke. Ugh!

**Marge** That's it! That's it! Give up. Walk out. Destroy what's left of culture in this village. Who cares? *(She collects the scripts)*. Julie, whatever you do don't get like this lot when you grow up. The world is full of apathy. Our culture is rapidly being undermined by rampant apathy. This country is fast becoming a cultural desert. We've all been dumbed down and I, for one, refuse to be dumbed down.

**Betty** The day you're dumbed down is the day Hell freezes over.

**Marge** And as for you, Betty, I don't have much time for you, but I thought at least you, were a fighter.

**Faye** The Feathers, then?

**All** (except Marge) The Feathers.

**Betty** Come on, Marge. I'll buy you a pint.

**Marge** I don't want a pint, thank you.

**Betty** Come on, you miserable old bugger. Loosen your corset. You're a long time dead.

**Marge** I grieve for this village, I really do.

**Babs** Talk about melodramatic ...

**Marge** Yes ... you can scoff, Babs. You can all scoff as much as you like.

*Enter Francesca, stage left. She is dramatically dressed in a black trouser suit, with a cape and a long scarf. She looks and acts as though she has just stepped off a chic catwalk. She watches unobserved.*

**Faye** Can I say ...

**Betty** Marge, you might as well stop pissing about like a bloody martyr and face facts. It's over. Finito! And you played your part.

**Faye** Can I say ...

**Marge** I have always tried my level best ...

**Betty** And before you say anything else you have always got to be in control.

**Faye** Can I say ...

**Betty** Always!

**Marge** There has to be someone with vision.

**Betty** Vision? Ha!

**Faye** I'd just like to say ...

**Betty** You've got as much vision as a bat.

**Faye** If I could just ...

**Babs** For God's sake, spit it out Faye.

**Faye** Well, I'd just like to say that I for one will be very upset to see us finish. Upper Plumtree Players is my second home and it means so much to me ... and I'd miss it ... I'd miss all of you. So, a big thank-you to Marge for everything she's done over the past twenty odd years. Well done, Marge!

*Faye applauds. The rest stand in silence.*

**Francesca** Is this an improvisation? *(They all turn to look at her, as she moves forward)*. Hello. My name is Francesca Delmarco. I understand you need help. I thought I could be of some use. I am a professional director. It turns out I have a window before my next professional engagement and I would be very happy to work with your group ... that's if you need my help. *(They all pause, dumbstruck)*. I take it you do need help?

*They all nod.*

**Babs** Do we?

**Francesca** I've just bought a little retreat close to here and I read your heart-rending plea for help. So here I am. You have no men, I understand.

**Babs** Not a sausage.

**Francesca** Then ... who needs them.

**Faye** You're a professional director?

**Francesca** I've just finished a season in Edinburgh and I start in Chichester in the autumn.

**Faye** Marvellous! I'm Faye ... this is Betty ... Marge ... Babs ... and this is Julie.

**Francesca** And this is everyone?

**Babs** What you see is what you got.

**Francesca** Wonderful! Perfect!

**Marge** When, exactly would you like to start?

**Francesca** That depends. I mean ... are you all happy for me, a complete stranger, to work with you all.

**Betty** Can I ask ... how much? Is there a fee?

**Francesca** Fee? Certainly not. I do this for art ... for my soul.

**Marge** My God!

**Betty** In that case ... welcome to the Upper Plumtree Players. We're all yours.

**Francesca** Good! When shall we begin?

**Faye** Well ... now?

**Marge** Yes. Now's good.

**Betty** Fine with me.

**Julie** Cool!

**Francesca** Then, we'll begin? Everyone find a space!

*Fade to black. SFX of 'scurrying' music to suggest urgent and energetic activity. Fade out SFX. Fade up LX to reveal the cast standing exhausted centre stage with Francesca standing apart, down stage right.*

**Marge** Would you mind if I had a drink of water?

**Francesca** Go ahead! In fact, let's take five.

*Marge drags herself offstage left. The rest flop into chairs.*

**Babs** Five?

**Francesca** Problem, Babs?

**Babs** It's just that normally we have a break for tea and biscuits ... and then we have a raffle.

**Francesca** I see. And how long does this take?

**Babs** About twenty minutes, gave or take ten.

**Marge** (*staggering back in carrying a glass of water*) So that's a warm up.

**Francesca** Everything all right, Marge?

**Marge** Fine! Fine! But exactly which Olympic event are we supposed to be entering?

**Francesca** Well, in fact, I do have something in mind for you all.

**Betty** If it's the Marathon, count me out.

**Faye** I would love to have been an Olympic gymnast. I did have the figure years ago.

**Babs** Yea, we've all been flat chested once upon a time, love

**Julie** I had a bra when I was eleven.

**Betty** Well done, Julie. So, Francesca, what evil plan do you have in mind?

**Francesca** Before I came here today, I did a bit of research. From what I can make out, the Upper Plumtree Players have never been ambitious.

**Babs** Oh, I don't know. We have a coach trip to Blackpool every year to catch up with the shows.

**Betty** One year we nearly went to the West End but it was all too expensive.

**Marge** I wanted to go but I was voted down.

**Julie** I went on a school trip to see 'Cats' once. It cost me fifty quid and I got food poisoning.

**Betty** That's the West End for you. For fifty quid you expect something more than food poisoning. It should at least have been cholera.

**Julie** Cholera?

**Babs** You can't beat seeing a show then walking along the breezy prom with a bag of fish and chips in your hand. Lovely!

**Marge** In the wind and the rain. And stepping over lager louts who are vomiting curry everywhere.

**Julie** Ugh! That's horrible.

**Francesca** I suppose you've all heard of the Dame Agnes Wragg drama award? You know ... the competition for one act plays ... held every year ... with prizes?

**Betty** We've never been in to prizes.

**Marge** It's always at the wrong time of year for us.

**Babs** Basically, to be honest, we haven't got the bottle.

**Faye** Babs!

**Babs** We haven't. I've seen you lot on opening nights ... six old dears in the audience ... and half of those are complimentaries ... and you're in the dressing room shitting yourselves.

**Marge** Babs, please!

**Faye** All artists are nervous before a performance. It's natural. Larry always had them, you know.

**Julie** Larry who?

**Faye** Larry who?? There's only one Larry, Julie. Sir Lawrence Oliv...

**Babs** (*To Faye*) I'd like a fiver for every time I've pulled your head out of the toilet.

**Julie** Actually, I think prizes are quite a good thing ... because ...

**Betty** Because?

**Julie** Well ... I think they're good because ... well ... they're well good ... and they're a challenge ... basically.

**Betty** "Well good", I see. That's a very lucid and convincing argument. You could be a politician, Julie.

**Julie** And when you win you get your picture in the paper, sometimes.

**Francesca** Ladies, we've got two months. I can get you into shape and I've got the play for you. It all depends if you've got the 'bottle'.

**Marge** What play is this?

**Francesca** I think it's a play that's ideal for this group.

**Faye** Interesting.

**Francesca** A play for an all female cast.

**Faye** Oh!

**Marge** Does it have a name?

**Francesca** It does. ‘Sally and Frances are Married’.  
**Betty** Never heard of it.  
**Marge** “Sally and Frances are married”! Wasn’t there a film?  
**Faye** You’re thinking of ‘When Harry Met Sally’, Marge. Very funny.  
**Marge** No, I don’t think so. Isn’t Francis a Roman Catholic priest and he renounces everything to live with a blind servant girl in Tuscany. Terribly sad ... but very moving.  
**Francesca** No, Marge. This hasn’t been published yet. In fact, I only finished it recently.  
**Marge** Oh. We’ve never done anything unpublished, have we girls.  
**Babs** We’ve never done anything modern.  
**Marge** Excuse me. We’ve done Noel Coward.  
**Betty** True. We certainly have. We’ve done him to death.  
**Faye** All female?  
**Francesca** All female.  
**Faye** So, when you say, “all female”, does that mean that Frances is a woman?  
**Francesca** She is.

*Apprehensive looks from the rest of the cast.*

**Babs** Tea?  
**Betty** Bloody good idea.  
**Marge** Yes. Large mug please, Babs.  
**Babs** Julie?  
**Julie** Yes?  
**Babs** Tea?  
**Julie** Sorry. Yes. Ta.  
**Babs** Tea Faye?  
**Faye** Pardon?  
**Babs** Tea?  
**Faye** Super.  
**Babs** Francesca?  
**Francesca** I’m looking around ... and I can feel the tension. It’s tangible. It’s good. It’s dramatic. It’s the calm before a wonderful explosion of cathartic energy. *(There is confusion from the rest as to what is expected of them)*. Shall I light the blue touch paper? *(Pause)*. Ready? When I say the next word I want you all to say the first word that comes into your head. Don’t hold back. Just yell it out. Ready? Here it is. Lesbians!  
**Marge** Oh!  
**Betty** Bloody hell!  
**Faye** My God!  
**Julie** What?  
**Babs** Oh shit!  
**Francesca** Excellent! Now, all stand up and get into pairs. Marge, you go with Betty. Faye ... you go with Julie.  
**Babs** And I’m getting a brew on.

*Exit Babs, stage right.*

**Marge** Before we go any further, you want us to perform a play about lesbians?  
**Francesca** I want you to perform a play about women drawn together to share a spiritual and human bond. It’s a play about repression and prejudice and how, with fortitude, we all have the power to be ourselves, no matter what.  
**Marge** So, I’m right. It is about lesbians.  
**Betty** Francesca, love. You don’t understand this village. If you so much as whisper “lesbian” in the village shop, within twenty-four hours there’d be half a dozen coronaries and a witch hunt banging on your door.  
**Francesca** Wonderful! Imagine the publicity.  
**Marge** It will be Salem all over again.  
**Julie** I did that for ‘A-level’. The Crucible.

**Francesca** Good for you.

**Julie** Didn't like it.

**Faye** You know Roger Hughes? He's homosexual, you know.

**Betty** What! Roger the builder? Big fella ... married with three kids ... drives a Land Rover.

**Faye** It was when he was laying my patio a couple of weeks ago. We sat chatting and it all poured out. He was gay. Couldn't even tell his wife. He ran off with some Mexican on the internet.

**Betty** When?

**Faye** Last week. Packed his bag and ... whoosh! Off!

**Marge** Swine.

**Betty** Bugger me! Now who's going to do my rendering?

**Francesca** Fascinating. That's what I love about village life ... it's like a cauldron ... simmering. Behind those delicate lace curtains there's black thoughts and intrigue.

**Julie** They only watch tele in our house.

**Francesca** Ah, yes. But do you know what they're thinking?

**Julie** No idea.

**Francesca** Fine. Okay everyone, face your partner. Now, hold their hands. Don't be shy. *(Betty and Marge have great difficulty in touching one another)*. Now, one of you is 'A' and one of you is 'B'. First of all I want 'A' to tell 'B' what it is they like about them. Okay? Come on!

**Marge** It's no use. I can't do this. I'm not a lesbian. Never have been ... never will be. I find the whole idea absolutely revolting.

**Betty** And for a moment there I thought there was a spark between us, Marge.

**Marge** Betty ... not funny. I know it's only acting. I know all that ... but you know our audience. They'll put two and two together and make five. I can hear them now ... "No smoke without fire". I don't want to be walking down the street and have people staring and wondering, "Is she or isn't she".

**Julie** My dad likes lesbians.

**Faye** Your dad?

**Julie** I heard them talking, mum and dad. He downloads pictures off the internet, and mum found them. They were all lesbians.

**Francesca** You see how our little cauldron bubbles. Marge, come and stand in front of me. *(Marge is a little uncertain. She moves over to Francesca, who takes hold of her hands firmly)*. Marge, you are a strong, assertive woman. Look at me, Marge. Look at me! Look in my eyes. That's it. What colour are they?

**Marge** Hazel. Bluish!

**Francesca** Close enough. You've got beautiful brown eyes. They're warm and intelligent. You are capable of deep, passionate feelings but they are locked away. Where is the key, I wonder? *(She gently releases her hands and then wraps her arms around Marge in a close bear hug. Marge is unsure of where to place her arms. She gradually puts them around Francesca, although she is very hesitant)*. You don't feel threatened, do you Marge?

**Marge** No.

**Francesca** How do you feel?

**Marge** Warm. Very warm.

**Francesca** That's good. Let the tension go away. Let it all go. Can you feel my heart beating?

**Marge** Well, no ... I ... er ...

**Francesca** Place your left hand on my breast.

**Marge** *(Hesitating)* Sorry! I can't.

**Francesca** Let me help you. *(She takes hold of Marge's hand and places it on her breast)*. There! That's it. Now can you feel it?

**Marge** Yes.

**Francesca** Now place your arm around me again. That's right. *(Francesca kisses Marge on both cheeks then slowly releases her. Marge gives herself a good shake down)*. There. That didn't hurt, did it. You see, everyone, this is what it's all about. We surround ourselves with these enormous psychological barriers. They're inhibiting. They stifle creativity. We must break them down. So, please, for me, in your pairs, embrace one another. Please. *(Marge and Betty face up to one another. Betty takes the plunge and grabs hold of Marge. Faye and Julie embrace gently)*. That's good. That's very good. Now, hands on your partner's heart. That's it. Feel the beat.

**Betty** Can't feel a thing ... only body armour.  
**Marge** *(Breaking away)* You see! You see!  
**Betty** It was joke. 'Course I could feel your heart ... pumping away there like a little steam hammer.  
**Francesca** Levity doesn't help, Betty. *(Betty pulls a face of which Francesca is unaware).* Now, I'd like you to gently kiss your partner on the cheek, say something complimentary to them and then kiss them on the other cheek. *(They all hesitate and look towards her).* Please ... do it for me. Please.

*Faye and Julie obey and demonstrate some sensitivity. Betty and Marge go at it in their usual confrontational manner. Babs enters with a tray of tea and biscuits to see both couples in a close embrace. She drops the tray. Snap blackout.*

*SFX of 'rapid' music to indicate the fast passing of time. This fades away as LX fades up. Marge and Faye are centre stage. Marge is playing the role of Frances and Faye is playing Sally. They are playing the roles in a coarse, hammy style. Francesca watches in horror.*

**Frances** *(Marge)* What else can I do? I've said I'd marry you. Is that not enough?

**Sally** *(Faye)* No! Yes! I don't know.

**Frances** *(Marge)* The truth is, you don't know what you want.

**Sally** *(Faye)* I need time.

*Frances (Marge) goes up to Sally (Faye) from behind and embraces her, kissing her on the cheek.*

**Frances** *(Marge)* I need love.

**Sally** *(Faye)* You know you have my love.

**Frances** *(Marge)* Are you afraid?

**Sally** *(Faye)* Not when I'm with you. When I feel your arms around me I'm whole ... complete.

**Frances** *(Marge)* It's your father, isn't it.

**Sally** *(Faye)* It's him, my brother, my mother ... people ... everyone.

**Frances** *(Marge)* I know.

**Sally** *(Faye)* My mother wants grandchildren. And the truth is, Frances, I'd like to have a child. I really would.

*Frances pulls away.*

**Frances** *(Marge)* We always come back to this.

**Sally** *(Faye)* Why won't you help me? I don't know which way to turn. You've had children. I need to have a child. I need to.

**Frances** *(Marge)* Yes, I had children, and yes it did make married life more bearable. But now where are they? They were angry when I left their father, and now I'm with you ... I no longer exist.

**Sally** *(Faye)* I thought you said you saw them at weekends.

**Frances** *(Marge)* I was lying. I didn't want you to worry.

**Sally** *(Faye)* Frances!

*Sally (Faye) goes up to Frances (Marge) and embraces her. Faye breaks away choking.*

**Faye** My God, Marge!

**Marge** Now what, Dame Edith?

**Faye** It's not fair, Francesca. She does it on purpose.

**Marge** What?

**Faye** She stinks of garlic. I can't work like this. She breathes it all over me on purpose.

**Francesca** I'm sure she doesn't mean ...

**Faye** I did ask you nicely last week, Marge. Please, I said, no garlic.

**Marge** And I said fine, as long as you stop wearing that cheap perfume.

**Faye** That is Chanel. I don't do 'cheap'.

**Marge** My clothes are reeking with it. Even my cats won't come near me.

**Francesca** Girls! Please? Let me explain. All of this is very healthy. What is happening, as I see it, is that the emotions you are going through in the roles are spilling over into your own reality. Does that make sense?

**Faye** The reality, Francesca, is that I'm a trained actress and Marge isn't.

**Marge** The reality, Francesca, is that some of us have natural ability and some of us don't.

**Faye** Oh, really?

**Marge** Absolutely!

**Faye** What you have, Marge, is the natural ability to louse things up. Who can't remember lines? Who can't remember moves? Who was 'Mistress Quickly' and was supping mulled wine in the dressing room when she should have been on stage?

**Marge** I explained all that. I was distracted. *(She moves to stage left).*

**Faye** We had to improvise for ten minutes. Not easy! We practically rewrote Act Two. *(She moves to stage right).*

**Francesca** Excellent! Excellent! I think that's cleared the air a bit. Do you think we could now get on with the scene?

**Marge** It was two minutes ... at the outside.

**Francesca** Marge, please! Thank you. Now, I'm sure I don't have to remind you both that this is a serious play ... yeah? That we don't play it for laughs ... all the time ... and we try to act naturally? Yeah? Let the emotion rise up from the soul...as in life. Remember, actors don't act...they are! Yeah? So! Girls, if you could ...

**Marge** Francesca, I am not a girl. I'm a retired executive civil servant who, occasionally, would like to be shown some respect.

**Faye** You even speak like a Government circular.

**Francesca** Girls! Ladies! Please! Let's go from your speech, Marge ... "Yes, I had children". And I promise I won't interrupt. I want to see it run. I want to see it live. Yeah?

*Marge and Faye play the following dialogue with much anger, avoiding eye contact and demonstrating no signs of acting ability. They upstage each other at every opportunity and indulge themselves in curious stage business that has little or nothing to do with the play. Francesca watches in mounting horror and disbelief.*

**Frances** *(Marge)* Yes, I had children, and yes it did make married life more bearable. But now where are they? They were angry when I left their father, and now I'm with you ... I no longer exist.

**Sally** *(Faye)* I thought you said you saw them at weekends.

**Frances** *(Marge)* I was lying. I didn't want you to worry.

**Sally** *(Faye)* Frances! *(Sally [Faye] goes up to Frances and avoids embracing her. She wafts away the smell of garlic).* We'll be okay. I'm sure. It doesn't matter what other people think.

**Frances** *(Marge)* Maybe it doesn't.

*Sally (Faye) moves away from Frances (Marge). Betty and Julie enter to watch the performance, amazed. The sarcasm from the rehearsing actors is growing.*

**Sally** *(Faye)* Remember I told you about Harry.

**Frances** *(Marge)* Your exploration of normality.

**Sally** *(Faye)* If you want to call it that. I saw him last week. We had a long chat.

**Frances** *(Marge)* What about.?

**Sally** *(Faye)* Oh, you, me, the world ... babies.

**Frances** *(Marge)* I think if you ever thought about going back to him ...

**Sally** *(Faye)* I knew that's what you'd think. There is absolutely no chance of that happening, believe me.

**Frances** *(Marge)* I'd top myself. I really would.

**Sally** *(Faye)* You're serious. Oh, Frances!

**Sally** *(Faye)* How could I ever leave you? It's inconceivable.

**Frances** *(Marge)* There's a joke there somewhere, but in very bad taste.

**Sally** *(Faye)* I love your sense of humour. You make me very happy.

**Frances** *(Marge)* Good!

**Sally** *(Faye)* You know how much I love you. I don't say it every day, I know, but you do understand that you mean everything to me.

**Frances** *(Marge)* So, what did Harry say to you?

*Sally (Faye) moves away. Francesca thinks about intervening but changes her mind.*

**Sally** *(Faye)* We spent most of the time talking about you, about how we were going to get married.

**Frances** *(Marge)* I bet that went down like a lead balloon.

**Sally** *(Faye)* No. In fact, he said he was very happy for us, which was a relief because I know his family are very straight-laced.

**Frances** *(Marge)* I know the type.

**Sally** *(Faye)* And then he asked what was I going to do about babies.

**Frances** (Marge) Did he? I can see what's coming.

**Sally** (Faye) What?

**Frances** (Marge) I can just see him, with the hint of a sly grin on his face, trying to be the good Samaritan.

**Sally** (Faye) He wasn't like that.

**Frances** (Marge) He wants to give you a baby, doesn't he. He wants to get you into bed and plant his seed in your belly.

**Sally** (Faye) No! No, Frances. He didn't say he wanted that ... but I did. Yes, I asked ... no ... I begged. I held my hands together like this and I begged to have his child.

**Frances** (Marge) You would do that?

**Sally** (Faye) I would. I would.!

**Frances** (Marge) Can you imagine what that would do to me? The thought of a man touching you makes me feel sick.

**Sally** (Faye) I don't love him. I'm only using him.

**Frances** (Marge) He would be enjoying you. He would be inside you.

**Sally** (Faye) I would be thinking of you.

**Frances** (Marge) No you wouldn't. You'd be looking into his eyes, feeling his sweat dripping on to you.

**Sally** (Faye) Stop this! You're making it dirty.

**Frances** (Marge) That's exactly what it is.

**Sally** (Faye) I'm doing it for us. It will be our baby.

**Frances** (Marge) It will never be our baby. It will be yours and Harry's baby and you know what that means. He won't leave you alone. He won't rest until he has equal access. You'll get so worn down by litigation, you'll give in and take the easy way out.

**Sally** (Faye) Will I?

**Frances** (Marge) You'll marry him, Sally.

**Sally** (Faye) How could I?

**Frances** (Marge) Perhaps you think you won't, but you will. You'll break. The media will tear you apart until you do. Harry will be the good guy and you will be the evil, scheming lesbian who wants to marry an old tart.

**Sally** (Faye) So help me! Help me!

*Sally (Faye) and Frances (Marge) are standing back to back. There is a moment of stillness. The onlookers are horrified. Babs enters stage right with tea and biscuits.*

**Babs** At it again? Bloody good play this is. Tickets are selling like hot cakes. We've already sold two and there's promise of another half dozen. I saw Alan Parkin, the butcher, today. He's bringing his mate. He said he can't wait to see us all prancing around in the nude waving dildos everywhere. I told him he doesn't get that for three quid. Earl Grey for you, Francesca.

*Francesca is frozen to the spot. She takes the tea and slowly sits cross-legged on the floor. She places the cup by her side and then assumes a Yoga position. The rest follow suit as though this is now a well-drilled routine. Gradually they all hum in harmony. Babs slinks out.*

*Fade to black. Fade in SFX 'Link' music. Fade up LX. Fade out SFX. The cast are standing in a tableau. It's the marriage of 'Sally' and 'Frances'. Betty is wearing a dog collar. Faye and Marge are wearing large hats. Julie is wearing a long black wig. Francesca is taking a photograph.*

**Francesca** That's it! Hold it there. Julie move in a little. Marge could you look at Faye ... just for a second. Yeah? And Faye ... could we have a smile? (*Faye overreacts and gives an over the top smile*). A little less? (*Faye obliges with a sigh. Marge shakes her head*). Marvellous!

*Enter Babs with a tray of tea and biscuits.*

**Babs** Come and get it!

**Faye** You're a life saver. Ta Babs.

**Marge** Mmm! Garibaldi's! My favourite. Phew! I think I'm having a hot flush.

**Babs** I'm not surprised the way you two were going at it.

**Faye** It's a lovely play. It really is. Very demanding emotionally. D'you know, I get home from rehearsal and I'm like a limp rag. I fall into bed and that's me ... out.

**Babs** Sounds like my Jeff. He's always limp these days.

**Marge** Thank God I live on my own.

**Babs** Don't tell me you're too old for it, Marge.

**Marge** I can live without it, thank you.

**Faye** I'm not sure if I could be celibate.

**Babs** You get used to it.

**Marge** Give me a good book any day.

**Babs** Don't you miss the foreplay?

**Marge** I'd rather not discuss it.

**Babs** Jeff doesn't either. He shouts, "Coming, ready or not!" and that's it.

**Francesca** Notes everyone! *(The cast sit in various areas across the stage).* Julie!

**Julie** Yes?

**Francesca** Why the black wig? It's too 'Gothic horror' for me. Find a nice hat. Something chic. Yeah?

**Julie** I've got a straw hat with fruit around it?

**Francesca** Chic, Julie. Chic?

**Faye** I adore Gothic horror. I'd love to do that.

**Marge** Yes ... you could do well in that. 'Bride of Frankenstein'!

**Faye** Do you know, Marge, I've really enjoyed working with you.

**Marge** Really?

**Faye** You've provided me with such a rich vein of material I can use in future.

**Marge** My pleasure.

**Faye** I think I now understand the mind of the bitter and twisted older woman.

**Francesca** Ladies! Going back to the scene before the church ... that is really meant to be very, very sensitive. That kiss must be sincere. Marge, Sally has just told you she is pregnant. You embrace her. You love her. This is your turning point. You now accept this unborn child. Betty, could I borrow you for a second, please?

**Betty** Pardon?

**Francesca** Could you put your tea down for a sec? And could you come and stand next to me. *(Betty moves to her).* Okay Betty, I want you to say Sally's line, "Before we go in, I've got something to tell you. I'm pregnant". Got it? And Marge, watch my reaction. Yeah? Okay Betty. Now! You can ad-lib if you like. I want Marge to see my reaction. Go.

**Betty** Right! "Something I want to tell you. I've got a bun in the oven". *(The others laugh except for Francesca. Betty seizes the opportunity to act the clown).* Which is a miracle because I've been celibate for three years. I must have been visited by a spirit in the night.

*They all laugh. Gradually the laughter subsides, as they see that Francesca is not amused.*

**Francesca** You see, this is our main problem. You will not take this play seriously. We are supposed to be performing in the competition next week. I was hoping that we might even win a prize, but to be honest with you, I think you're wasting your time and so am I. I was wrong to try. It's all my fault. Perhaps we should have stuck with Noel Coward. So, I think I'll go. It's been interesting. I've tried my best and some of you have done really ... *(She sobs).*

*The rest are surprised by this emotional reaction. Betty places an arm around Francesca. Marge also places an arm around her. The rest gather around all ad-libbing their own gentle words of encouragement.*

**Betty** Sorry, love. I was only having a giggle.

**Babs** I'll warm up the kettle. *(She exits).*

**Marge** It's a lovely play.

**Julie** It's really cool.

**Faye** The best thing we've done.

**Betty** We always come good on the night, don't we girls.

**Marge** That's it, love. Have a little cry.

**Betty** And you can forget about going. I'll lock the bloody door if necessary, but you're going nowhere.

**Faye** *(Brings a chair over for Francesca)* Come on, Francesca. Sit here. Babs is getting a nice warm cup of Earl Grey for you.

*Francesca sits. Marge gives her an extra warm hug and kisses her gently on the cheek. Francesca looks up at Marge. The sobbing has stopped. She is now smiling. Her devious plan has worked.*

**Francesca** That's it, Marge. That's what I want to see. Warmth and tenderness. I knew you could do it. *(She jumps up, suddenly vitalised).*

**Betty** I thought ...

**Francesca** You really didn't think I would walk out on you, did you Betty?

**Betty** Well ...

**Faye** You certainly fooled me.

**Francesca** Now, before we lose all that lovely emotion, lets use it. Get into pairs. (Betty and Marge pair up and Faye and Julie pair up). Now, embrace. That's it! Now kiss, gently, on the lips ... and no cheating.

*As they kiss, Agatha Frost enters stage left. She is wearing tweeds and carrying a briefcase. She is embarrassed at what she sees, coughs loudly and turns her back on the action.*

**Agatha** Ladies!

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**... the remainder of this play has been deleted from this preview copy ...**

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