

Callback

A full-length play

by Butch Maxwell

The Characters

Hugo — He organized the reunion. He has organized everything.

Margot — She said yes before she'd decided to.

Parker — She stayed. She has been making the same decision for ten years.

Jack — He finds the mechanism in everything.

Noah — He needs this to work.

Amanda — *Absent.*

Setting:

A rehearsal room in a community arts center. The parking lot outside it.

Time:

The present.

Production Note about Improv Scenes

The games in this play have structure but not fixed content. The specific questions, offers, and escalations should be generated fresh in each production. The scenes must be genuinely funny. If they are played as illustrations of theme, something has gone wrong.

Scene 1: The First Rehearsal

A rehearsal room in a community arts center.

Not rundown enough to be charming. Fluorescent lights. Scuffed floor. Stackable chairs against one wall. A faded poster for an improv festival from twelve years ago curling slightly at the corners.

PARKER is already there arranging chairs into something that will later become a circle.

MARGOT enters carrying a tote bag, a coffee, and her phone wedged between shoulder and ear.

MARGOT

No, if he says he hates bananas now, don't make him—

She stops to shift the bag before it falls.
I know he liked them yesterday. That's different.

Parker glances up.

PARKER

Good. Start the reunion stressed. Authenticity.

Margot laughs despite herself.

MARGOT

Hold on.

(Into phone.)

No, it's fine, I'm here.

(A beat.)

No, no — call me if he starts throwing things again.

She hangs up. Small exhale.

PARKER

How old now?

MARGOT

Three and a half.

PARKER

That's the throwing age.

MARGOT

Everything is apparently the throwing age.

Parker nods. Accepts this as scientific fact.
You always were early.

PARKER

I still live eight minutes away. That's the difference between me and the rest of you. Geography won.

MARGOT

I sell houses now.

(A beat)

Turns out, I've gotten good at reading rooms.

PARKER

That tracks.

MARGOT

Yeah, it really does.

Margot sets her bag down. Looks around.
It's smaller.

PARKER

No, we're older.

Margot laughs.

MARGOT

God, this room.

PARKER

Mm-hm.

A beat.

MARGOT

I can't believe he talked me into this.

PARKER

Hugo talks people into things. That's sort of his—

The door opens. HUGO enters carrying a banker box full of old binders and cables.

HUGO

—loveliest quality?

He sees Margot and immediately crosses to her with the momentum of someone resuming a conversation paused ten years ago.

There she is.

They hug. Slightly too fast for it to quite become a choice.

You look exactly the same.

MARGOT

That is biologically impossible.

HUGO

I reject biology when it inconveniences me.

He sets the box down.

I'm so glad you said yes.

A beat and she beholds him.

MARGOT

I almost didn't.

HUGO

But you did.

He smiles warmly. Already moving on.

Jack texted "parking is oppressive," so he'll be here in four minutes announcing he'd rather die than pay a meter.

PARKER

Consistency matters.

The door opens again almost on cue. JACK enters with NOAH behind him carrying coffees.

JACK

Parking is fascism with painted lines.

NOAH

He circled the block six times out of principle.

JACK

And principle nearly cost me six dollars.

Noah sees Margot.

NOAH

Oh my God.

He hugs her. Unlike Hugo, Noah waits half a beat first.

You actually came.

MARGOT

Apparently.

NOAH

That's still how she answers questions. Good.

(A beat)

I really thought this was going to end up three people and hummus.

Jack points at her.

JACK

You cut your hair.

MARGOT

That was your takeaway?

JACK

I notice structure.

NOAH

You notice women changing their hair because you're eighty-seven years old internally.

JACK

That's fair.

Hugo claps once.

HUGO

All right. Before we all become memoirs, circle up.

JACK

Absolutely not.

Hugo just looks at him.

...Fine.

They move automatically into a circle.

Zip Zap Zop.

HUGO

Oh God.

NOAH

We still know this.

PARKER

Muscle memory is a disease.

JACK

Margot starts.

HUGO

Why me?

MARGOT

You were late.

HUGO

I was not late—

MARGOT

She's already pointing.

Zip.

Zap.

NOAH

Zop.

PARKER

Zip.

JACK

Zap.

HUGO

The rhythm catches instantly. Too instantly. Five people slipping into old timing.

JACK

Zip.

MARGOT

Zap.

NOAH

Zop.

PARKER

Zip.

HUGO

Zap.

Faster. Bodies leaning before choices happen.

MARGOT

Zop.

JACK

Zip.

NOAH

Zap.

PARKER

Zop.

Margot's phone buzzes in her bag. Reflex. Her eyes flick toward it.

HUGO

Zip.

A fraction too late—

MARGOT

...Zap.

Everybody stops. Not angry. Immediate.

JACK

Dead.

MARGOT

Sorry.

HUGO

No apologies. Stay ahead of it.

MARGOT

Right.

HUGO

Again.

(A beat)

Zip.

PARKER

Zap.

NOAH

Zop.

JACK

Zip.

MARGOT

Zap.

Faster now.

PARKER

Zip.

Margot answers before she's fully ready.

MARGOT

Zap—

Too quickly. Reflexive.

She hears herself do it and laughs. Small. Real. Nobody comments. Which somehow makes it louder.

NOAH

Zop.

JACK

Zip.

HUGO

Zap.

PARKER

Zop.

Then Noah deliberately fires one recklessly across the circle.

NOAH

Zip!

JACK

Jesus Christ— Zap.

The circle collapses. Laughter.

PARKER

Coward.

NOAH

Adapt or die.

JACK

I adapted beautifully.

HUGO

Again.

JACK

Hugo, we are fifty.

HUGO

And yet somehow still slow.

JACK

That's ageism.

NOAH

No, ageism is when I help you stand up later.

Jack flips him off. Hugo is already resetting the circle.

MARGOT

Do audiences know how stupid this looks from outside?

PARKER

No. They think it looks intellectual.

JACK

The greatest trick improv ever pulled.

NOAH

People hear “yes-and” and suddenly a man pretending to be a haunted printer becomes philosophy.

HUGO

It is philosophy.

JACK

No, philosophy has healthcare.

The room falls out again. And for a second — just a second — they are genuinely wonderful together.

The laughter settles slowly. Water bottles opened. Stretching. Small overlapping conversation.

Jack points at Margot.

You still telegraph before the throw.

MARGOT

I do not.

NOAH

You absolutely do.

PARKER

Amanda used to cheat at Zip Zap Zop.

A beat. Tiny. Nothing yet.

JACK

That wasn’t cheating.

PARKER

Two zaps in a row is cheating.

HUGO

Discipline matters.

NOAH

She’d panic when she laughed.

JACK

Amanda used to laugh before she understood the joke.

PARKER

Once she laughed so hard, she hit a lamp.

MARGOT

Oh my God.

She remembers it now.

And Hugo acted like she'd driven into a school zone.

HUGO

The game has rules.

JACK

You gave a safety lecture over Zip Zap Zop.

HUGO

Because there are rules.

NOAH

Amanda laughed at everything.

A small silence. Warm.

PARKER

Zip.

JACK

Oh, absolutely not—

PARKER

Zap.

NOAH

Zop.

Fade to black out.

Scene 2: Later in the Rehearsal

Same rehearsal space. All five are present.

HUGO

Start with the bag. That's always the “in.”

JACK

Parker, you're just at a table. You don't have a character yet.

PARKER

I know. I've done this before.

A beat.

NOAH

Are we calling it, or—

HUGO

We're calling it.

Hugo rings a bell once.

Noah crosses to Parker. The setup is instantly familiar — casual, a little too much energy.

NOAH

Hey — I hate to ask — can you watch my bag for a second?

Parker: A fraction of a beat. Not long. Just a fraction.

PARKER

...Sure.

Noah grins. Jack laughs immediately.

NOAH

(Building)

And while you're at it — just this once — could you cover my shift?

PARKER

(The beat again, slightly longer)

...Yeah. Okay.

Jack laughs. Real.

NOAH

Could you pretend to be my girlfriend? Ten seconds. Maybe twelve.

PARKER

(A beat)

I— okay. Fine.

JACK

(Quietly)

There it is.

HUGO

Keep going.

NOAH

Could you hold this ferret?

A beat.

PARKER

Is it a real ferret?

NOAH

That's not—

PARKER

I'm asking for practical reasons, I just—

Laughter — real, overlapping.

HUGO

No, the hesitation — the hesitation was right before—

PARKER

(Back into it)

Fine. Yes. I'll hold the ferret.

NOAH

Could you officiate our wedding?

PARKER

(Faster now, the rhythm taking her)

Oh God, no, I— ...yeah. Okay.

The room erupts. Jack already calculating. Hugo watching Parker the way you watch a mechanism working.

NOAH

Could you raise our children if we die?

PARKER

(A beat — the longest one)

...Which ones?

Hugo rings the bell several times quickly. The room is still laughing.

HUGO

(Hand on Parker's shoulder)

That's the game.

Parker nods. Flushed. Not embarrassed — something more complicated.

Margot is still watching. She's been smiling the whole time. She catches Parker's eye for just a moment, then looks away.

MARGOT

It's a good game.

Hugo is already moving. Next thing.

The room shifts into break. Noah follows Hugo into the hall, still talking. Jack's phone is already at his ear — he drifts toward the door.

Parker begins resetting the circle. Not because it needs resetting.

Margot gets her coffee. Watches Parker for a moment. You were good at that.

PARKER

At what?

MARGOT

The hesitation.

PARKER

Sometimes people don't know they're saying "yes" until they've already—

She stops herself.

It's just the game.

MARGOT

No, I mean — you found something real in it.

Parker doesn't answer.

PARKER

Hugo's still Hugo.

MARGOT

Yes, he is.

A beat. Margot looks around the room.

Do you ever talk to her?

Parker stops.

PARKER

She's around.

Small silence. That lands wrong. Parker hears it.

She came into the bookstore last spring. I was — I was already in the back. So.

A beat. Margot looks at the parking lot.

It's a small town.

MARGOT

I know. Is she—

PARKER

She's fine.

Too fast. Both of them feel it.

MARGOT

I wasn't going to ask that.

PARKER

What were you going to ask?

A beat. Margot almost has it.

MARGOT

Do you think she—

From the hall, Hugo's laugh. Close.

PARKER

(Already turning)

Jack still drops his shoulder before the throw. Did you catch that? He's been doing it since year two.

Margot watches her.

MARGOT

I caught it.

Hugo enters, Noah behind him, mid-argument about something else entirely.

HUGO

—the callback only works if the first plant is invisible. If they see you plant it, you've already lost—

Parker hands him a water bottle. He takes it without breaking stride.

Margot looks at the chair Parker just straightened. Then looks away.

Hugo claps his hands to signal a transition.

Translations. Noah, you're speaking. I'm translating. Room, you know this one.

NOAH

What's my situation?

HUGO

You're trying to return something to a store. No receipt.

Hugo rings the bell once.

Noah steps forward. Deep breath.

NOAH

Blendorf. Mishka ven plaata.

HUGO

(Immediately, to the room)

He says he purchased this item in good faith, and while he acknowledges the receipt situation is technically his fault, he

feels the store's policy reflects a broader cultural hostility toward—

NOAH

(Louder, more urgent)

Blendorf—

HUGO

—toward the working consumer. Yes, I heard you.

Laughter.

NOAH

Plaata mishka VEN.

HUGO

He's willing to take store credit. He's not an animal.

NOAH

(Gibberish that is clearly "That is not what I said")

HUGO

He stands by that.

The room is loud now. Jack watching. Margot genuinely laughing.

NOAH

(Long string of escalating gibberish, pointing at Hugo)

HUGO

(Pause. Considers.)

He says I've been a wonderful translator and he has no notes.

As the room falls out, Hugo rings the bell several times quickly.

PARKER

Do another one.

HUGO

That's not how—

JACK

Do another one.

Hugo looks at Noah. Noah, still in it, shrugs — which is already a yes.

Hugo gives the bell a single ring.

HUGO

You're breaking up with someone.

Noah turns to Margot. Margot raises her hand: Fine, fine.

NOAH

(Softly)

Bendra.

HUGO

He says this has nothing to do with you.

NOAH

(A beat, quieter)

Bendra... plekt.

HUGO

He says it's mostly about someone else, actually.

NOAH

(Gibberish that is clearly: That is NOT what I said)

HUGO

He stands by the “mostly.”

NOAH

(Escalating gibberish)

HUGO

He'd like to clarify that “mostly” was a strong word. He's open to “significantly.”

Margot presses her lips together. Staying in it.

NOAH

(Desperate gibberish, pointing at Hugo)

HUGO

He says you were always the best thing in the room.

Noah nods. Relieved gibberish.

He means the literal room. This restaurant has excellent lighting.

Noah turns to Hugo with a long stream of betrayed gibberish.

He hopes you'll remain friends.

NOAH

(Gibberish that is clearly: I did not say that)

HUGO

He's already following you on a different account. Just to make sure you're okay.

NOAH

(Horrificed gibberish)

HUGO

He says that came out wrong.

The room is gone. Margot has both hands over her mouth.

NOAH

(One last burst of gibberish. Plaintive. Final.)

HUGO

(Long pause. Considering.)

He says he's not sure you ever needed him at all.

Small silence. Then Margot laughs — genuine — and the room releases.

Hugo rings the bell several times quickly.

Parker is smiling. But she's watching Hugo.

He's already moving. Next thing.

Just This Once. You want to run it?

MARGOT

The bag game?

HUGO

Yeah.

A beat. Margot looks at the chair.

MARGOT

Sure.

She sits. Noah crosses to her. The setup is identical. Casual. A little too much energy.

NOAH

Hey — I hate to ask — can you watch my bag for a second?

Margot looks at the bag. Looks at Noah.

MARGOT

Of course.

Small silence. Noah waits. The room waits.

NOAH

(Again, finding it)

And while you're at it — just this once — could you cover my shift?

MARGOT

Yeah, which shift?

Noah blinks. A beat. Jack looks up.

NOAH

It's — that's not really—

MARGOT

Sorry. Yeah. I've got it.

Jack looks back at the floor.

NOAH

Could you pretend to be my girlfriend? Ten seconds.

MARGOT

(A small laugh)

Sure.

The room doesn't respond. Noah looks at Hugo. Hugo makes a small gesture: Keep going.

NOAH

Could you hold this ferret?

MARGOT

(Already nodding)

Mm-hm.

Silence.

NOAH

Could you—

(off balance)

—officiate our wedding?

MARGOT

(Genuinely trying)

Oh — I mean — I'd need to get certified but—

JACK

Too real.

A beat.

Noah looks at Hugo. Hugo makes a small gesture: Keep going.

NOAH

Could you—

(He's losing the thread)

—officiate our wedding?

MARGOT

(Already trying to solve it)

Well, online certification's actually pretty fast, I think—

Nobody laughs.

Noah waits.

HUGO

Stay in it.

MARGOT

(Not defensively, genuinely curious)

What am I supposed to do with it?

NOAH

(Quietly, trying to save it)

It's okay. Sometimes the room just misses by half an inch.

Parker finds a water bottle on a chair and moves it.

Noah stays standing longer than necessary. Margot still in the chair.

MARGOT

We can try it again.

HUGO

(Already somewhere else)

No, we've got it.

JACK

(Slowly)

It's not the "yes." It's — the game needs the person to be...

He stops. The room waits.

It needs a specific kind of...

He looks at the chair. Margot still in it.

Amanda was good at it.

A beat.

HUGO

She was great at it.

NOAH

Amanda used to save bad scenes before people knew they were bad.

Margot looks at the chair she's sitting in. Just for a second.