

Places

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A Play in Ten Scenes

By Butch Maxwell

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Characters

SARAH MORRISON – 42, a former theatre critic turned suburban mom, married to Tom for 14 years with two sons.

ELI PARKER – 44, recently divorced, works in marketing communication

MARLA HENDRICKS – 75, a former soap opera actress attempting a return to live theatre in her hometown.

TOM MORRISON – 43, Sarah's husband. A wealth management broker who values stability and conventional success.

THE DIRECTOR – Can be male or female.

JAKE MORRISON – 11, Sarah's son, never seen, but on mobile phone

The Time: The present

The Setting: A community theatre stage and dressing room and a neighborhood bar

Scene 1: Callbacks

Lights up on a community theatre stage. A few folding chairs are arranged as audience seating. A card table with scattered scripts sits empty – no director visible. SARAH sits alone in one of the chairs, cell phone pressed to her ear, an audition notice for The Importance of Being Earnest in her other hand.

SARAH

[Into phone, bright and engaged]

No, I know you're right about the budget...

[Voice diminishing]

Of course, you know more about economics than I do.

[Pause, conceding]

Yes, I probably misunderstood the article...

[Shifting to practical matters, sounding more like herself]

Just make sure the boys have finished their homework before they watch TV, okay? And Jake needs his cleats for tomorrow's practice — they're in the mudroom.

[Back to diminished voice]

Yes, I picked up your dry cleaning on the way here; it's in the car... No, don't wait up. I know you have that early meeting, and we both sleep better when... *[Trailing off]* Just get some rest.

A longer pause. She wants to say something, but swallows it.

Love you too. See you tonight.

She hangs up, stares at the phone, breathes deeply.

[To herself, rehearsing]

"Hi, I'm Sarah Morrison... and... oh God, it's been fourteen years since I've done this."

[A beat]

"Things are good. The boys, the job, the husband with the color-coded calendar. Everything's fine."

[She hears how it sounds, laughs quietly.]

Fine — the critic's word for "nothing to see here." Not good, not bad, just... fine.

[Straightening, taking a breath]

But this — this I remember how to do.

She pauses, looks at the notice again — “The Importance of Being Earnest.” A flicker of recognition. Quiet amusement, then a softer line slips out almost involuntarily.

[Softly, to herself]

Maybe this will... be enough.

ELI enters with a script. Sarah shifts quickly into her bright, rehearsed manner.

THE DIRECTOR enters from the back of the house.

DIRECTOR

[Energetic, but frazzled.]

Ah! Perfect timing. Sarah, Eli — you two were my standouts from Monday and Tuesday’s auditions. Sarah, meet Eli. He’s done a couple of shows here. Eli, this is Sarah. You both have excellent diction, and you look good in period costumes. Well, I assume you will. We’ll find out.

They shake hands. A moment of mutual recognition — not romantic, but artistic. Both sense they’re with someone serious about the work.

Here’s the deal: supporting cast is sorted. I need to see how you two work together before I can decide on Jack and Gwendolen. We’ll start with cold readings. Then we’ll wait for Lady Bracknell... Marla Hendricks — yes, *the* Marla Hendricks — returning after twenty years on “*Passion’s Promise*.”

ELI

Didn’t she do those kitchen knife infomercials? “Slice your way to happiness.”

SARAH

She was actually pretty good in those.

DIRECTOR

[Defensively]

Paying the bills! Her real work is classical theatre. But community theatre is where she got her start.

[Beat.]

Community theatre, friends: Where the coffee is cold, the budgets tight, and sometimes you get Broadway-level talent. Or at least, soap opera talent.

Let's do Act One, Scene Two. Sarah, read Gwendolen. Eli, Jack. Manners, wit — very proper, very British.

They find their places in the text. The Director watches from the front of the house.

ELI

[As Jack]

"Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you, I have admired you more than any girl I have ever met since... I met you."

SARAH

[As Gwendolen]

"Yes, I am quite well aware of the fact. And I often wish that in public, at any rate, you had been more demonstrative."

She nails the precision, cutting beneath the politeness. Eli responds with more sincerity than performance.

ELI

[As Jack, but looking at her, not the script]

"For me you have always had an irresistible fascination. Even before I met you, I was far from indifferent to you."

SARAH

[As Gwendolen]

"We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines."

She delivers the absurdity with intelligence. They exchange a quick look; something real passes between them.

DIRECTOR

Good, good! Very crisp. Sarah, more frivolous! Eli, bigger gestures — very theatrical!

Sarah mutters under her breath, just audible.

SARAH

Don't be too earnest.

They share another quick look.

ELI

[Quietly, to Sarah]

Want to try it again with more... frivolity?

SARAH

[Dryly]

Not sure I know how to make intelligence frivolous.

ELI

[With genuine admiration.]

Well, you sound like you've been doing this forever.

SARAH

More like I haven't done it in forever.

ELI

You'd never know it.

DIRECTOR

All right, from "Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you..."

*Before actors can begin, the theatre doors burst open.
MARLA sweeps in like a hurricane, draped in scarves,
sunglasses on, oversized handbag in tow.*

MARLA

Darlings! I bring with me the scars of battle: Detours, honking, the indignity of a parking meter. And yet here I am — triumphant! Cordelia, Lady Macbeth, seventeen years on "Passion's Promise." Three Daytime Emmy nominations. A lifetime of triumph. And now, here I am — returning to where it all began. Forty years away. You'd think I'd be nervous, but...

[A beat, more vulnerably]

I forgot how good it feels to have people actually look at you instead of through you.

She lets the oversized bag tumble into a chair with practiced drama, then peels off her sunglasses as though the footlights were waiting for her.

DIRECTOR

[Awed]

Marla! Welcome back to your hometown stage! Sarah, Eli, meet our Lady Bracknell.

MARLA

[Waving dismissively]

Oh, let us not dwell on the **television show**. Such a small medium. But this — this is where real art happens. The risk, the connection!

[A beat.]

Now, given my credentials I could simply accept the role, but I believe in collaboration. So, I've prepared something special — Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene. I believe it shows my range.

SARAH

[Under her breath]

From soap opera to Shakespeare. Ambitious.

Marla begins with surprising dignity and genuine Shakespearean gravitas.

MARLA

"Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One: two: Why, then 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier, and afeard?"

So far, so good. Sarah and Eli are impressed despite themselves.

[Starting to lose the thread]

"What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much —" ... "so much —"

She pauses, clearly blanking on the line. But instead of stopping, she channels her years of television training.

[With renewed dramatic fervor]

"..so much blood!" And also tears! Blood, sweat, and tears!

Marla poses dramatically. Sarah covers her mouth to hide a laugh. Eli blinks in amazement. A long beat. Marla's arms slowly lower. The performance drains from her face.

[Quietly, almost to herself]

I forgot the line.

[A beat, then recovering with forced brightness]
But I found the truth of the moment! That's what matters.

She looks at Sarah and Eli, needing them to agree.

DIRECTOR

[After an uncomfortable pause]
Well. That was... interpretive.

MARLA

[The mask snapping back into place]
Exactly! The Stella Adler paraphrasing technique.

Adler always said: "The word is not the thing." Feel the meaning, darlings, and the right words will follow. Or close enough.

DIRECTOR

[Weakly]
Marla, Oscar Wilde's words are... fairly essential to Oscar Wilde's play.

MARLA

[Waving dismissively]
Wilde would understand. He was all about truth beneath the surface. Besides, I've been paraphrasing on television for seventeen years. Never got a single note. Let the truth come first; the wit will follow.

She picks up her oversized handbag.

You know, someone sent me flowers on my birthday last month. Beautiful arrangement. I had them for a week before I realized...

[Catching herself, laughing it off]
Well, the card was very thoughtful.

[A beat, then briskly]
Now, shall we run it again with the actual words?

Sarah and Eli exchange a look — amused, intrigued. Lights shift to move forward.

Scene 2: Early Rehearsal

One week later. The community theatre stage. Sarah and Eli are center stage with scripts. A few props have been added — a small table, two chairs. The space feels more lived-in now.

DIRECTOR

All right, let's work on the proposal scene. Jack finally declares himself to Gwendolen. Victorian formality, passion underneath. Gwendolen is obsessed with the name Ernest.

Sarah flips through her script.

SARAH

Right. She's in love with an idea rather than a person.

DIRECTOR

Exactly. Eli, Jack is nervous but determined.

Sarah and Eli take their positions. She sits primly; he stands awkwardly.

ELI

[As Jack, reading from script]

"You know that I love you, and you led me to believe, Miss Fairfax, that you—"

[Stumbling, looking up, frustrated]

Sorry. Let me try that again.

SARAH

[Teasing, as Gwendolen]

Take your time, Mr. Worthing. A proposal should never be rushed.

Eli looks at her, caught off guard by her playful tone.

ELI

[Trying again, looking at Sarah]

"You know that I love you, and you led me to believe, Miss Fairfax, that you... loved me."

The delivery is less formal, more genuine. Sarah notices.

SARAH

[As Gwendolen, with theatrical flourish]

“Yes, I am quite well aware of the fact. And I often wish that in public, at any rate, you had been more demonstrative. My ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest.”

She hits the comedy, staying on the surface. Eli watches her intently.

ELI

[Still as Jack, quieter]

“You... you love me because of my name?”

SARAH

[As Gwendolen, precisely]

“There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest.”

DIRECTOR

Beautiful, Sarah! Perfect comic timing. Eli, bigger gestures — you’re declaring your love!

SARAH

[Calling out to the Director]

Actually, can I ask something? Gwendolen says she’s “in love with the name Ernest” before she knows anything about Jack. Wilde’s playing with the difference between loving an idea versus loving a person. Should we lean into that? Let her brittleness peek through?

DIRECTOR

[Delighted]

God, remind me to petition the board again for an actual dramaturg. Or maybe I’ll just steal Sarah. We desperately need someone who reads the script as closely as I pretend to.

ELI

[Impressed]

That’s more than reading. That’s understanding what the playwright was doing.

SARAH

[With a slight smile]

A critic’s leftover habit. Subtext jumps out at me.

DIRECTOR

Exactly. All right, again — give me that brittleness.

Eli watches her differently now.

ELI

[As Jack]

“What if Ernest wasn’t my real name?”

SARAH

[As Gwendolen]

“It is a divine name. It has a music of its own. It produces vibrations.”

ELI

[Quietly]

Vibrations.

DIRECTOR

Good. Let’s reset! Eli, more confidence this time!

Eli’s phone buzzes. He takes it out and glances at the screen, then looks up.

ELI

[To the Director]

Sorry — just need to reply quickly.

DIRECTOR

In that case — take five.

The Director exits. Eli types a brief response. Sarah watches, curious.

SARAH

[Casually]

Everything okay?

Eli puts the phone away.

ELI

Yeah. My ex — coordinating drop-off times for our daughter.

SARAH

[With warm interest]

Oh, I didn’t know you had a daughter.

ELI

[Softening]

Heidi. She's eight.

[With his own slight smile]

Last time she critiqued my line readings — told me I was
“trying too hard to sound fancy.”

SARAH

Smart kid.

ELI

[Softening]

Smarter than both her parents.

A small moment.

SARAH

[Lightly, out of character]

You know... the Director keeps begging for bigger, but I think
it works because you don't perform it. You just... say it.

[A tiny beat.]

You make it look easy, you know — meaning what you say.
When you say the lines, it feels... honest. And it makes me
notice where I'm not.

It's like at home — everything's scheduled. Predictable. I
always know exactly who I'm supposed to be.

[A beat.]

Here, it's an exploration.

ELI

[After a beat]

And do you like knowing who you're supposed to be?

SARAH

[Deflecting]

It's comfortable.

[A beat.]

Or it used to be.

Her glance at the script lingers, betraying something else.

This — this rehearsal — feels less rehearsed than my real life.

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Lights dim slightly as they prepare to run the scene again, both aware they're not just talking about Jack and Gwendolen.

Scene 3: Dive Bar – Two Weeks into Rehearsals

A neighborhood dive bar. Nothing fancy—worn wooden bar, a few small tables, dim lighting, the kind of place that's survived gentrification through sheer stubbornness. A jukebox plays music in the background. Sarah and Eli sit at a small table, each nursing a drink. The comfort of rehearsal banter lingers, but there's a charge beneath it. As Sarah speaks, Eli encourages her with nonverbal responses.

SARAH

In the city, I was a theatre critic — opening nights, late columns, red pens. But when Jake came along, Tom wanted family close. And this little town doesn't need a critic. I used to have this fantasy that I'd go back to criticism when the boys got older. Write about theater again, maybe even books. But somewhere along the way, I stopped reading reviews of shows I can't see, stopped seeing productions. It felt like... watching other people live the life I used to have. So, now my role is proofreader of contracts. Not exactly Wilde, but it pays.

ELI

[With a faint smile, remembering]

Roles again. You said that in rehearsal the other day.

SARAH

[Surprised, then deflecting with humor]

Did I? Well, typecasting is a curse.

She lifts her glass, but there's a crack in the mask now. The line lands heavier than she meant.

Her phone buzzes on the table. She glances down, sighs.

[Reading]

Tom. "Noah can't find his math homework. Where did you put it after helping him last night?"

She sets the phone aside.

[Shaking her head.]

That's my domestic drama.

ELI

[Dryly]

High stakes.

SARAH

[Laughing, then softer]

That's who I perform for now.

She replies to the text as she speaks with a faint, wry laugh.

Tom's a good man. Really. He works hard, he's steady, he loves the boys. But –

ELI

But?

SARAH

Somewhere along the way we stopped being married and started just... co-parenting with joint finances. I can't remember the last time he asked me what I was thinking about.

[A beat.]

Tom's convinced all the men in theatre are gay. It's convenient — he gets to feel secure without ever showing up to see what I'm actually doing.

ELI

[After a beat]

He doesn't see you.

SARAH

[Meeting his eyes]

No. He doesn't.

ELI

[Darker now]

I know that feeling. I've been stuck in a role too. Provider. Success story. The guy with the safe job. That's my act.

A beat.

[Quieter, truth spilling out]

I started in nonprofit — literacy programs. Thought I could change lives. Then Heidi was born, and my wife wanted something bigger. “We need stability,” she said. “A real income.” So, I put on the suit, learned the jargon, took the marketing job for a payday-loan company. Shackles dressed as lifelines.

He takes a long drink.

One of my first campaigns targeted single mothers: “Don’t let your kids miss Christmas.” Testimonials — smiling families, presents under the tree. What we didn’t show was the 400% interest rate.

Then a woman came in after seeing the ad. She brought her daughter — seven, maybe. Asked if she could extend her loan. Again. Third time.

A beat.

The little girl was holding a doll from our commercial.

He stares at his beer.

My boss loved that campaign. And why not? Two thousand new customers that month.

SARAH

[Quietly]

Jesus, Eli.

ELI

[Looking at her]

Yeah.

[A beat]

So, when my wife left and said, “You’re not the man I married,” she was right. I’d become someone else for her. And she left anyway.

SARAH

[Softly]

But she was the one who wanted you to change.

ELI

[Nodding bitterly]

Yeah. After the divorce, I told myself I’d quit. Go back to something meaningful.

[A beat]

But then there’s custody costs, and child support, and half my paycheck going to lawyers, and Heidi asking why we can’t go to Disney World like her friend Sophie...

[He trails off]

So, I stayed. Told myself it was temporary. That was three years ago.

SARAH

Why?

ELI

[After a beat]

Because I was afraid. Afraid I couldn't afford her. Afraid her mom was right.

[Another beat.]

You know, sometimes I wonder which is worse — being alone, or being in a relationship where you feel alone.

A long silence. The question lands between them like a confession. Sarah looks down at her drink, seeing herself in his words. When she finally speaks, it's barely above a whisper.

SARAH

[Quietly, almost to herself]

I practiced saying "you're right" in the car tonight. Three different ways.

ELI

[After a beat]

Does it work?

SARAH

I'm here instead of home.

She takes a sip of her drink, holding his gaze.

The jukebox shifts to a bittersweet melody. They sit quietly, not speaking, both more exposed than before.

Lights fade.