



DRAMA

PILOT EPISODE

KAREN HINES

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first edition

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for Gordon W. Tisdall

Production Notes

In the pages of this book, there are some stage directions one might describe as impossible stage directions for an imaginary production. They owe their sensibility to neo noir, to television procedurals and to the graphic novel more than they do to the technology and budgets of most actual theatres or to the laws of physics.

Descriptions of rain and snow, glowing body parts and live animals and insects came into being along with the world of this play as it emerged, and seemed an integral part of its atmosphere throughout the play's development. My collaborators, Blake Brooker and Vicki Stroich, and I decided to keep some of these stage directions in the production script because, while totally improbable, they have informed the production in some way. My editor, Alana Wilcox, thought to keep some of them in the book, and I am happy to see them here.

Setting

The play takes place in an Alberta boom town at the peak of the next boom. The city is not unlike Calgary, though it sits nearer to the foot of the Rocky Mountains and gets much more rain. Most of the scenes in the play take place in or near the Hotel Nakwaga, a boutique hotel/condo/commercial hybrid.

The Set

The action of the play takes place in at least a dozen locations: office suites, cocktail lounges, a bedroom, a lobby, as well as in some less earthly locales. While I would be curious to see a production that realized each space, our first production was in repertory with two other shows and set on a thrust stage. Such variety was impossible. So our director, Blake Brooker, and designer, Scott Reid, devised staging and a unit set that was modular, minimalistic, stylish and wild. The following detailed set description is not meant to be prescriptive, but it may help the reader to imagine possible geographies.

The stage is a thrust with a tall proscenium arch at the upstage end. Wooden floors are stained the dark espresso native to many if

not most boutique hotels. Two soaring light columns flank the proscenium and suggest everything from interior lobby lighting to condo towers.

Four Chinese red leather-upholstered benches or chaises longues (each about the length and width of a low twin bed) and one low table are the only furniture in our production. They are streamlined enough not to suffocate the playing area, but substantial enough to be stood upon at times, as secondary stages of a sort. They are moved occasionally and function as everything from cocktail lounge banquettes to psychiatric sofas to poolside hotel deck chairs. Sleek and attractive, inspired by hyper-contemporary design aesthetics, the pared-down set has the effect of ‘disappearing itself’ such that light and sound and the actors ultimately define each location. Scene changes can be brief, and the very human performers and stagehands who shift the furniture remain the driving forces onstage. The dense text and layered realities are given room to breathe – yet all the while, these elegant red chaises never give up quietly iterating and reiterating the boom town’s boutique aesthetic.

The other central component of our set emerged from a stage direction that described ‘a fireplace over top of which there hangs a huge cow skull, which is actually attached to the entire cow’s skeleton, which is nailed to the wooden beams and wide planks.’ Director Blake Brooker (who had long been bent on the idea of bison skulls featuring in the set, and who inspired me to write them in in the first place) mused aloud to designer Scott Reid about how great it would be to actually have a cow skeleton onstage. Scott thought it no joke: he immediately set about finding one and swiftly had it shipped and assembled and hung, nine feet in length and six feet from the ground. It is spectacular, beautiful, horrific, very real, and informs to greater or lesser degrees, every scene of the play.

There are also three large bison skulls suspended high above the stage. They are raised and lowered, very occasionally.

The juxtaposition of these elements – the animal bones and the boutique design aesthetic – creates a tension that is in sympathy with similar tensions in the script and supports the interplay between various layers of reality and levels of existence.

Props

A red flocked bust of Freud is the icon around which the action swirls.

Other props are minimal and limited to necessities: food that is eaten, water that is drunk, psychiatrists' notepads, cellphones, as well as eusocial creatures, from time to time. All props are meant to carry some significance beyond their utility. The glasses of water described in the script have been replaced in our production with tiny plastic bottles of Evian, for safety. Either way works as long as the presence of water, and its container, are meaningful to the performers.

Staging

The stage at ATP is set in the thrust configuration and it has both prescribed and inspired Blake Brooker's staging that sets the action deep in the upstage distance, boldly centred or practically tipping into the audience's lap. Mr. Brooker describes his staging aesthetic as favouring 'economy, relaxation and precision.'

Furniture moves are rare but they are executed by humans – performers and our ninjas (a.k.a. our stage management team). Transitions are highly theatrical and feature everything from line dancing to oyster-swallowing to a shadowy, naked dream-woman shooting the bust of Freud with a ladies' revolver. Characters may crawl, gallop or apply lipstick as they move from scene to scene – but their moves are always logical, whether the logic is Jungian or empirical. In this way, the story keeps being told by the performers even as rolling benches thunder around them.

Again, the minimalism of the set has made way for a rich dream-like scenography that pops out from it and which is in tune with the play's playful psychiatric references, as well with as the bald theatricality that lies at the core of the play's title.

Lights

Psychological horror is nothing without its dark shadows. David Fraser has tapped deeply into the noir aesthetic, preserving the classic graphics of the Nigerian blind while updating the whole with

film loops and moving lights that slice through a misting of haze for fog (which nicely disorients those of us who know how arid these parts actually are). Projections have been eschewed in favour of less literal effects that create images one might encounter in a nightmare or a dream, and yet the look is in keeping with the most sophisticated of television procedurals. Saturated hues play on the cow skeleton and bison skulls from time to time and vivify the glorious ex-beings. Spirits and ghosts come and go via beams of eerie, beautiful light.

Costumes

Costume Designer April Viczko has used graphic novels and stylish television dramas like *Damages* as her guide: real clothes from actual stores, looks that are ‘on trend’ but not trendy. She has favoured classic lines: nothing that has come violently into fashion or that threatens to go violently out. The look skews oil town – lots of very tall boots, super body-conscious silhouettes on the women, western business casual on the men (i.e., no ties – Noah wears a bolo, the Sage a flowing scarf). The juxtaposition between the recognizable looks and the sometimes extreme nature of the world keeps the comedy ship tight (in our experience, anything too ‘crazy’ or clownish on the actors tips the hand and diminishes the impact of the performances and the text). April has created a wardrobe for our cast that is stylish, elegant, flattering and, in its smoky monochrome, delectably grounds the prime red set pieces and the white of the bones. Even the stage management team are coiffed and look like they just stepped out of a *Sin City* strip.

Sound

Richard McDowell has created a spare but potent sound score that evokes urban, noir, western and Rocky Mountain wilderness all at once. It exists largely between the scenes, escorting the characters from place to place while also offering the audience a moment of deeper reflection under his cover. He has combined the theme from *The Beverly Hillbillies* by Earl Scroggs with ‘The Opening Number’ by the Northern Cree Singers and laced it all through with drum and bass. Animals feature prominently and we hear everything from a

howling wolf to a barking labradoodle to elk moos. There is an ‘approaching’ grizzly bear. The brief tracks have momentum and infectious rhythms and are usually scary. The dream world is alive in them.

Tone and Style

Blake Brooker describes the performance style as ‘artificial realism’: the situations are artificial, the feeling is real.

Drama: Pilot Episode is a drama. It is also a satire, whose tone is never one of ridicule. It is highly theatrical but borrows style from television. It is meant to be restrained in its delivery. That said, it is highly melodramatic at times. As I was writing the play, I drew on graphic novels and neo-noir as stylistic templates. Noir’s emphasis on psychology offered an attractive intellectual ballast for a story that could run up on the potentially soft shoulder of soulfulness, or dismiss itself through its comedy and occasional absurdism. And while one might describe the play as parodying certain gritty television shows (*Damages*, anything *CSI*, *The Unit*), it never veers into spoof – and certainly never into classic film noir Bogey-isms or forties Manhattan dialects. *Drama* is not meant to mock television; rather, the play *uses* television genres in an investigation of tv’s effect on the human soul – and theatre itself is not spared in the inquiry.

Drama: Pilot Episode is a trans-genre piece. That is, it is itself. Performance benefits from a light touch ... until, as Mr. Brooker would say, ‘You have to go there.’ All characters, in the end, are fighting for salvation, simple as that. That said, as in the classic films noir, any catharsis should only momentarily pierce the sheen of anxious cool.

Cast of Characters

The Sage: A renegade frontier psychiatrist. Ageless – but perhaps circling sixty.

Fyg: A fifteen-year-old girl. A spirit.

Dr. Penelope Douglas, M.D., Ph.D.: Thirty-five. An ex-forensic psychiatrist who has fled her government post at the Toronto morgue to counsel the living in an oil town.

Columbia: Thirty-five. Penelope's oldest friend. An Oil Wife.

Noah: Perhaps thirty-three. A young Content Provider in the television industry. Then, a ghost.

Deedee: A Decision Maker in the television industry. Forty, give or take. Never without her small baby.

Lily: Twenty-nine. An Actress in the television industry.

Concierge: Played by the actor playing Fyg.

A Delivery Man: Played by the actor playing Noah.

Petra: An oil wife, played by the actor playing Deedee.

Realtor: Played by the actor playing Lily.

Waiter: Played by the actor playing Noah.

Thai Masseuse: Played by the actor playing Fyg.

Production History

As this book goes to print, *Drama: Pilot Episode* has played to two preview audiences, but has not yet opened; therefore, this ‘history’ exists in present and future tense. The play opens February 10, 2012.

The world premiere of *Drama: Pilot Episode* is being presented as part of the Enbridge playRites Festival of New Canadian Plays 2012 produced by Alberta Theatre Projects, with special support from Mr. Hugh McGillivray.

The cast is as follows:

Deedee: Lindsay Burns
Columbia: Mabelle Carvajal
Noah: Christian Goutsis
Lily: Alana Hawley
The Sage: Allan Morgan
Fyg: Amy Sawka
Dr. Penelope Douglas: Daniela Vlaskalic

Direction is by Blake Brooker
Dramaturgy is by Vicki Stroich
Set Design is by Scott Reid
Costumes are by April Viczko
Lighting Design is by David Fraser
Sound Design is by Richard McDowell.
Production Stage Manager: Johanne Deleeuw
Assistant Stage Manager: Patti Neice
University of Calgary Intern: Kara Sturk.

For Alberta Theatre Projects
Artistic Associate Festival: Vicki Stroich
Producer: Dianne Goodman
Artistic Director: Vanessa Porteous

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It is difficult to articulate the debt of gratitude I owe my inspired collaborators, director Blake Brooker and dramaturg Vicki Stroich. They recognized this play before I did, and they offered their beautiful ideas openhandedly. They saw it through with skill and patience, and helped me to be brave. The play would not have come to be without either or both of them.

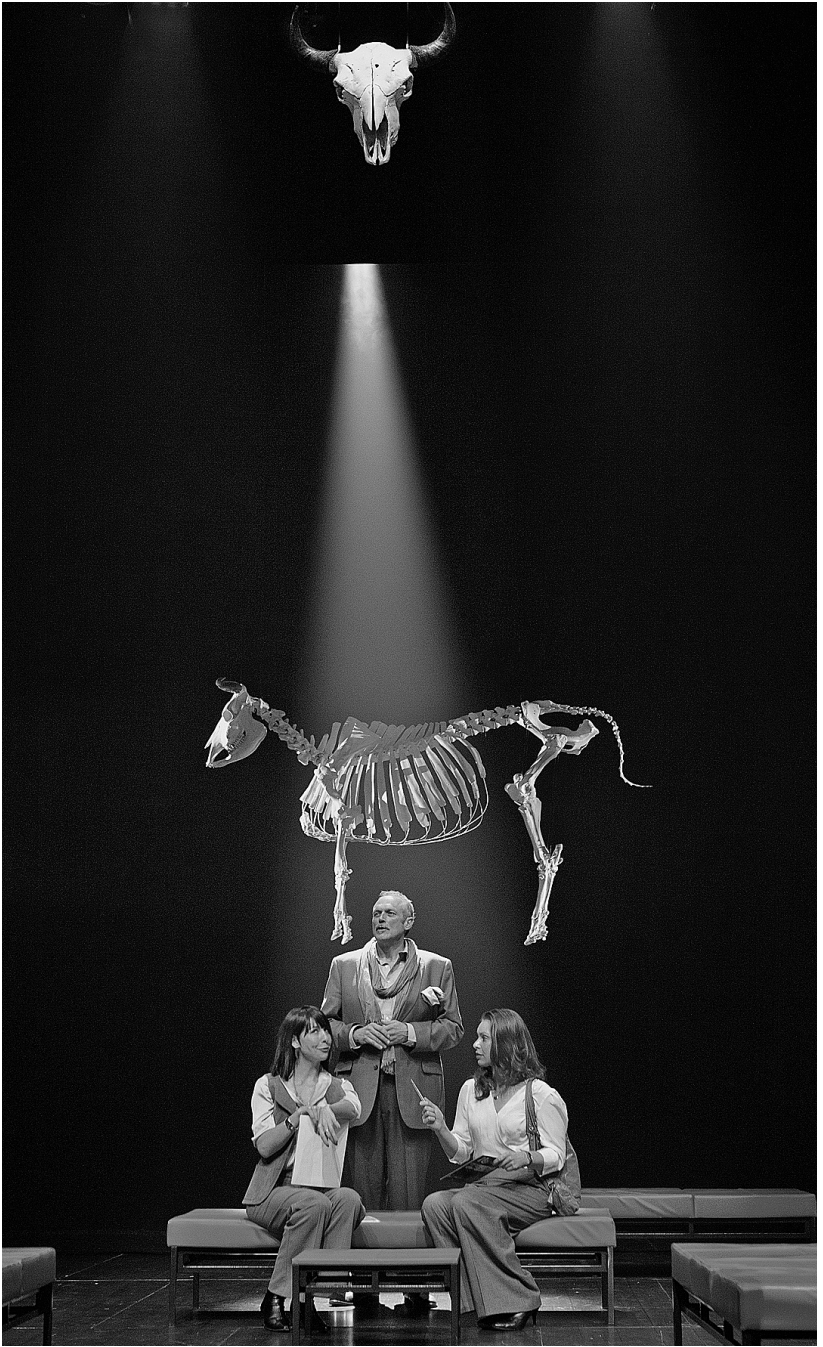
The process of bringing any new play to stage is taxing. The script of *Drama* went through enormous changes during its rehearsal and right up to its first performances. The cast of this production are my heroes. Their contributions have been invaluable and their grace under pressure astounding. Our stage managers have created a rare and warm atmosphere – also vigilant, they have been our treasured wingmen. The designers incited us all when we stepped from the hall to the stage; they reminded us that theatre is magic. The stagecraft has been extensive and beautifully, skilfully accomplished by the production team. The company of the inaugural production is everywhere in these pages and I can never thank them enough.

I wrote the play largely while I was playwright in residence at Alberta Theatre Projects and might not have done so without their support and protection from the elements. May the gods of drama bless them for their continuing commitment to new work.

Development assistance from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts has been essential.

I am profoundly grateful to the brilliant Alana Wilcox for choosing to make this book back when it was in pieces. Her faith has been a driver.

I acknowledge the following writers and thinkers, whose words and ideas have influenced me in the making of this play: Elisabeth Badinter, Eric Bentley, Blake Brooker, Charles Darwin, Philippe Gaulier, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, Jane Kramer, Lao Tzu, Jeannine Locke, Larissa MacFarquhar, David Mamet, Derek Parfit, Richard Pochinko, Janet Radcliffe Richards, Anne Sexton. Their bold inquiries into everything from biological destiny to the eleven o'clock song have been my signal lamps.



DRAMA: Pilot Episode

Act One

Map of Penelope

In near darkness, a hotel concierge desk. In the dimness, we can see the slight form of a concierge behind it. Above the desk, there hangs a huge bison skull, which is, in fact, attached to the bison's entire skeleton, which is nailed into the Blackfoot Moss stone wall.

From the shadows:

SAGE: Imagine a map. A satellite map in green and black and turquoise blue.

A man is revealed in a Rod Serling-style Twilight Zone shaft of light. He is the Sage.

Imagine this map framed over the Americas and, to the west, a rugged domain: big sky, fertile soil, chinook winds ...

Alberta, since roughly 1882.

Named by the Marquis of Lorne for his cheating wife, the Princess Alberta. Little tail-wagger. A land of freedom and beauty named for love, some kind of love, this place was wild, even then.

Zoom in now on the core of this territory: an intersection of emerald rivers. A stylish frontier town laid down over bubbling crude. Oil men, oil women, monster houses, tiny jeans ...

Gradually, a stylish hotel lobby is revealed. People with suitcases checking phones, drifting.

Now zoom down through the zen-scaped rooftop of one sleek boutique hotel, down through the terry-cloth-clad bodies of the travel-worn guests and into one blackstone-and-glass pool-side lobby –

A telephone rings. Light reveals the concierge. She looks to be fifteen.

CONCIERGE: (*into phone*) Good afternoon, Hotel Nakwaga ...

SAGE: – and tunnel inside the pearl-grey coils of the high-end brain of one very eastern psychiatrist.

Enter Penelope Douglas: chic trench coat, apple-red Heys suitcase on wheels.

SAGE: Eastern born. Eastern bred.

CONCIERGE: (*under*) ... yes ...

SAGE: Bright mind. Dim spirit.

CONCIERGE: (*under*) ... yes ...

SAGE: Penelope Douglas, M.D., Ph.D.

Penelope slips off her sunglasses, looks around. She is cool, poised.

Forensic psychiatry was Dr. Douglas's specialty, back east. Forensic psychiatry: typically the assessment of an individual's fitness to plead in a court of law.

In Penelope's case, the science involved the retroactive psychiatric analysis of persons. Usually dead ones. That was Penelope's 'thing.'

CONCIERGE: (*whispering*) ... yes.

SAGE: Penelope Douglas was known for a time as the 'it girl' of the Toronto morgue. Foxy shrink with ice in her veins and an unearthly capacity to think the thoughts of the newly dead. Not afraid of bodies, this one.

CONCIERGE: (*hanging up*) Checking in?

Penelope breezes to the desk.

PENELOPE: Douglas.

CONCIERGE: You're the new doctor.

PENELOPE: (*nodding*) Psychiatrist.

SAGE: Historically, people move west more than east. People go east only when invited. When opportunity knocks.

People go west when all bets are off: a reputation in ruins, a love gone wrong. When they need to save their sorry souls, folks head for the frontier.

CONCIERGE: Welcome to the Nak.

SAGE: Mini-bar. Small shampoos. Clean slate.

PENELOPE: And I'd like a taxi, please.

The other guests stop whatever they are doing.

SAGE: Taxi and a soul ...

CONCIERGE: Oh, we don't have taxis any more.

PENELOPE: You don't *call* taxis any more?

CONCIERGE: I mean in the city. There are no taxis now. Out with the tumbleweeds. Would you like an espresso though?

PENELOPE: I need to get somewhere.

CONCIERGE: We can rent you a car.

PENELOPE: I don't know the city.

CONCIERGE: It's super-easy. All on a grid.

PENELOPE: I don't actually drive.

CONCIERGE: The limos are booked. Banff Television Festival. (*She gazes up and out.*) Right there in those mountains. Folks come

from all over the world. (*then, directly to Penelope*) You'll have to drive.

PENELOPE: I don't have a licence. (*Beat.*) I was born in Toronto.

CONCIERGE: Oh. (*Pause.*) Let me ask Justin. He shuttles actors to Banff sometimes. (*discreetly*) A lot of them don't have licences either.

She lifts the phone. The other guests drift along.

SAGE: Once upon a time, Penelope Douglas was queen of her scene.

CONCIERGE: (*into phone*) Justin, I have a resident who needs a drive – she's the new psychiatrist. (*she continues softly, under the Sage*) No ... I don't know ... no ...

SAGE: Murders and suicides. Lake Ontario, Erie.

CONCIERGE: (*under*) I don't know ... No ...

SAGE: Now she's fled west to be part of the boom.

CONCIERGE: ... she's here right now.

SAGE: The post-boom boom.

CONCIERGE: (*hanging up*) Justin would be happy to drive you. He'll be just a minute. Perhaps I could bring you an espresso or a shot of something by the pool?

PENELOPE: It's October. It's snowing. It's 11 a.m.

CONCIERGE: It's Alberta. Deck's heated. It's 11 a.m.

As the little concierge leads Penelope onto the pool deck, lights morph: dappled, magical, as though by a lit pool on a dark October day. The Sage watches closely and seems to almost conjure the following events.

SAGE: (*quiet*) Now she's on the move in a boom-boom town in a sleek hotel, boutique as hell –

Something small drops onto the stones at Penelope's feet. There is a thunk. There are feathers. All freeze, watch.

PENELOPE: (*softly*) That's a bird.

CONCIERGE: Yes. Yes, it is. (*softly*) My apologies.

PENELOPE: (*shaken*) Is it dead?

CONCIERGE: Probably not. Not yet.

Though she does not move to help it, it becomes clear that the concierge is very affected by the fallen bird.

Would you ... (*her breath catches in her throat*) would you like me to have it taken away or would you like to blow air into its tiny lungs first? Just in case.

PENELOPE: In case ... ?

CONCIERGE: In case it's simply had the wind knocked out of it after having flown into what it thought was an endless sky.

Penelope kneels.

Dr. Douglas ...?

Little pause.

(*almost a whisper*) May I suggest blowing air into its tiny lungs?

PENELOPE: (*softly*) I'll catch something...

CONCIERGE: Just don't mouth it and wash your hands afterwards. You'll save its life.

PENELOPE: It's a little ... swallow.

CONCIERGE: (*admiringly*) No. It's a sparrow.

Are you going to blow air into its tiny lungs?

PENELOPE: (*unsteady*) Of course. I'm a doctor.

CONCIERGE: You don't need to mouth it. Its lungs are so tiny you can just blow air at its tiny nose.

PENELOPE: Its nose?

CONCIERGE: Those tiny holes in its little beak.

The Sage glides by Penelope and drops his handkerchief beside the little bird. Penelope does not see him. She lifts the bird with the handkerchief.

(*whispering*) Gently...

Penelope brings the bird close to her lips ... but can go no further.

Dr. Douglas?

Snow falls. A coyote howls.

Doctor ... ?

Penelope shrouds the bird with the handkerchief. The Concierge and the Sage meet eyes.

A young man, who has been watching from a lobby chaise, turns to the audience, stands and sings "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," a traditional cowboy song. The young man is sorrowful. As he hums the last verse, all the actors join him centre stage. There is a line dance: full cast. The dance is slow, dead serious, voluptuous. At the dance's end, all transform into versions of Japanese horror characters: gurgling, zombie-eyed.

All exit except the little concierge, who stands, stares out and seems to struggle for air for a terrified moment.

About the Author



Karen Hines is the author of *Hello ... Hello* and *The Pochsy Plays*, both published by Coach House. Her plays and short films featuring her character Pochsy have been presented internationally and have won many awards and nominations, including finalist for the Governor General's Award for Drama. A Second City alumna and long-time director of Canadian horror clown duo Mump and Smoot, Karen has also appeared in many stage, television and film productions. She lives in Calgary.