

“PLAYING CHICKEN”:
AN EXPLORATION INTO
PLAYWRITING, SELF-DRAMATURGY,
AND DIRECTING

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PREFACE

When the Spring semester of my Junior year began, one plan of my honors project had fallen through. I was in a dejected state of mind artistically, and personally. The year previous, I had applied to direct one of Theatre TCU's Studio Series Shows, a new play by a fellow student, *Mister Major and The Minor Wife*. The theatre faculty granted me this opportunity given my good academic record and my conceptual essay. To say I was thrilled would be a gross understatement. I began concept presentations and ideas for casting starting the summer before my Junior year. During the whole of 2016, I struggled a great deal with depression and fatigue as a result. Unfortunately, that affected the 8 a.m. directing course that I needed to take before I directed in the spring. The faculty was made aware of my absences and Harry Parker, the Dean of Theatre, called me into his office to discuss what was affecting my usual academic performance, including missing my peer's tech. Upon revealing that I was taking fluoxetine, also known as generic Prozac, for treatment, Harry let me know that he was going to discuss with the faculty whether they felt I should still be taking on the project, which, as I stated earlier, would not be the case.

After this blow to what had been my plan for my work in the theatre department as well as my honors project, feelings of inadequacy became

near crippling. However, I knew I needed to present some kind of plan to my honors advisor regarding my Departmental honors project.

That same spring semester, I was enrolled to take Theatre TCU's Playwriting course with Dr. T.J. Walsh. While I felt emotionally and artistically drained, I didn't want to pass up the opportunity to learn something from someone who had written plays. While the scenario I received in the class was a bit too dramatic for my plot-writing abilities at the time, I improved a great deal on finessing my dialogue. I chose this project then as an opportunity to develop my skills further, examine some of the more prevalent themes in my life, and to make art myself.

ABSTRACT

In a nutshell, I intended this project as the combination and culmination of my theatre experiences. Since being at TCU, I've been fortunate to have many opportunities to explore different facets of theatre. The three most important that I have worked in are playwriting, dramaturgy, and directing. As a way to combine my skills, I decide to write, edit, and produce a staged reading of a play.

Playing against mine and the audience's ideas of who 'should' be the people that this story applies to, I cast three sets of the characters; one for each scene. I wanted to explore how the different ages, looks, genders and sexualities of the pairs affected or did not affect the dynamic of these characters. Ultimately, I'd hoped that each pairing felt true to the characters, but I was interested to see how an audience would react. I passed out response cards to gather more feedback.

I found this project to be challenging, engaging, and rewarding. I am eager to take what I've learned from this experience and apply it in the future to my next dramatic work.

PLAYWRITING

New Characters Made from Old Friends

In choosing what to write about now that I had the chance to choose for myself, I considered subjects that I am passionate about, experiences with my family, and experiences with dating in college, with men and women. What became most pressing in my mind after thinking of it happened to be miscommunication within queer relationships. So, using some of my own knowledge on the subject, I decided to write about the frustrating drawn-out process of systematically avoiding feelings for someone due to a misperception about the other.

There's a small tragedy that we see as a trope in countless films, television shows, and plays of the two people who should be together but are both too stubborn to admit it to each other or do anything about it. In my time in college, I have experienced this with someone who I never truly dated and also with someone whom I dated but then broke up with and then continued to spend time with whilst the underlying feelings still overshadowed our new friendship. Knowing the personality traits that create this type of situation made writing dialogue for these characters easier because I know better how certain people react to particular comments or moments.

I primarily created the character of ‘Sam’ taking inspiration from my own flaws, and then I created ‘Alex’ out of the main two partners I have had in my college career. The problem was that I started writing ‘Alex’ completely from the male partner I’ve had and then as time went on and my life changed, the character became more and more influenced by the female partner I had at the time. This resulted in a somewhat inconsistent character. ‘Alex’ as a character is completely non-confrontational in the first scene. In the second scene, there is a believable change, given the circumstances, to calling out ‘Sam’ for their self-destructive habits. However, in the last scene, in a more relaxed setting. ‘Alex’ is still the one to push the questions that haven’t been answered which goes against their nature in scene one.

The Convention of Gender Neutrality

As I embarked on creating a story that would encompass some of my experiences with miscommunication in romance in college, I came across the realization that I had had a unique experience in that I have been through a relationship of this type with both a man and woman. I began to reflect on whether I believed one experience varied from the other based upon gender alone and thought it would be an interesting exploration into the dynamics of a heterosexual pairing versus a homosexual pairing. Deciding that the

experience is universal with only minor changes, I began writing these characters in a completely gender-neutral manner. I did so by using the gender-neutral names ‘Sam’ and ‘Alex’ as well as ‘Cameron’ and ‘Taylor’. I made sure every pronoun was in the singular ‘they’. Furthermore, the playwright’s note makes it clear that these characters require no specific physical type.

As I was writing, it became apparent that there would be three scenes within the play. Thus, a great opportunity presented itself. I planned to cast one of the scenes as a heterosexual pair, as mentioned previously, and I could cast the other two scenes with homosexual pairings made of two men and two women. In doing so, I felt I could fully examine how the issues dealt with in my script applied universally to a variety of types of relationships. However, much of what influenced my experiences in relationships had to do with dynamics between gender-fluid people. I tried to capture some of this dynamic with the casting of a non-binary friend of mine, Chris Herrero.

By making these characters descriptions and pronouns gender-neutral, I recognize that it adds to the commerciality of the script in that any combination of actors can perform it.

However, my intent in creating a gender-neutral script, with no references to past partners of any specific binary gender or use of gendered

pronouns, was not so much to make it marketable as much as it was to make it universally relatable.

When someone can empathize with a story and someone else, very different from them, can empathize with too, it connects them and allows them to see their common humanity where they might not have before.

The First Draft

Upon completing the first draft and sending it to my advisors and some fellow playwrights, I could see that the play and the characters had potential, but there was plenty to be smoothed out. The writing of stage directions, particularly in the set-up of new scenes, gave too little about the place and the action. Thus, a lot of re-writing entailed including more detailed dynamics of character implied by the stage directions.

The second concern goes back to the issues mentioned previously with the inconsistencies within the character of 'Alex'. In attempting to remedy some of the issues with the character, I rewrote some of the conflict of the third scene in order to keep the spirit of Alex's action congruent with their action in scene one. Specifically, I gave them a more specific reason to expect something from Sam, a previously made promise to live together. This was important to me and my peer playwrights since Alex clearly expects very little romantically at the time of the first scene.

In terms of action, the conflict arose too quickly in scenes two and three of the first draft. The issue at hand was reached too easily and in order to change this I would have to find why one character or the other would avoid the issue at hand, and, in each scene, who possessed stronger motivation to avoid it.

In examining the work of my first draft with the help of my peers, I determined that my greatest struggles in writing proved to be speed of action, and continuous and consistent character motivation.

DRAMATURGY

While dramaturgy can be a singular practice unto itself, it can often accompany playwriting as well. In a general sense, dramaturgy is the process of refining, editing, and updating works of drama to be the most effective and ‘actable’ form for the world in which they are to be performed.

Last semester, I had the pleasure of being Dramaturg for Dr. Walsh’s new play, Tom Kellogg in B Flat. Dramaturgy is in a broad sense, adapting a story to actable form. Some dramatists combine writing and dramaturgy when creating a drama. Which is what I intended to do for myself, in order to apply both my experiences in playwriting and in dramaturgy.

A Critical Look at my Work

A more empirical type of editing included research over cities and colleges in different states, reading the script with friends and fellow playwright to finesse dialogue, taking feedback from my advisors and teachers, and a good deal of rewriting to fit character arcs. The responses and feedback from the staged reading will be another great tool to have for dramaturgy.

I knew I needed a smaller liberal arts college in the United States, and I preferably wanted the geographical location to be one where there is still a good deal of political dissent regarding the rights of LGBTQIA individuals.

I felt the need to ensure that this element was a part of the location I chose, Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, because it particularly affects the stakes of the relationship at hand.

I also became aware that the generic ‘studying’ that took place in scene two needed more specifics based in the real world. Therefore, I looked into a few sets of Oral communication curriculums to find a particular set of arbitrary terms

Feedback and Further Rewriting

As I move forward with editing beyond this project I will focus my attention on the longer plot arc of the play and attempt to flesh out inconsistencies and hiccups within trains of thought. Thus, I will dedicate a great deal of further dramaturgy to individual character study and tracking. To do this, I will use the method of reading the play as an actor, paying attention only to the character I’m embodying, although within my mind, in order to feel out where intention gets muddled by sidetracked dialogue.

DIRECTING

Before I became interested in Playwriting or Dramaturgy, I was interested in Directing. While at TCU, I've directed a ten-minute play as a part of TCU's directing class, entitled *Annabel Lee*, as well as TCU V-Day's *The Vagina Monologues*, and a staged reading of a new play, *Velas*, as a part of Theatre TCU's Kaleidoscope series.

However, I have never directed my own work, and I was interested to see how hearing it aloud and staging it would change my perception of it. While it is a staged reading, I added blocking in some areas, especially in scene one, because some of the characters' blocking is so emotionally intrinsic to the dynamic of the pair and their respective emotional journeys.

Working with Actors

Hearing your work read aloud by fellow actors certainly highlights where your comedic bits translate, where they do not, and where they necessitate more details in stage directions in order to assure their success onstage. The majority of changes I made from working with actors had to do with specificity of movement and tone in certain one-word lines.

Since directing was a practice of theatre I was more familiar with and new how to really dig into, I discovered where I had questions, as a director, about plot or backstory that I could not see merely from writing and

rewriting. Furthermore, my actors often pointed things out to me that I didn't notice. In some cases, their mistakes in reading the text aloud presented a cleaner way of conveying the same ideas; thus, making a permanent change in the script.

The Reading and Responses

The privilege of seeing people respond to my work in a staged reading heartened me a great deal. The genuine responses of laughter and sympathy at the fitting times encouraged me to keep at this script and that it does in fact have potential.

The response sheets I passed out at my reading to gather feedback about the characters' journey as well as the convention of gender-neutrality proved to be very useful in assessing the effectiveness of the script. Most everyone who responded affirmed the universality of the characters through gender-neutrality and that it didn't interfere with their ability to follow the story to see three different people play each character. Much of the criticism carried over from my first draft, including that the action of scenes two and three still moved a little too quickly into conflict. However, I can say now that I have a stronger and definitive idea of what the play needs in order to become whole.

BEYOND THE HONORS PROJECT

The Future for Playing Chicken

Upon completion of this project, I intend to let the script I've created sit for a moment to allow me to return to it with a fresh eye after graduation. After this time, I will re-read my work once again, now with an eye more removed from the experiences that inspired the work. At this time, I will flesh-out the script, as mentioned before. In doing so, my intention will be to create an easier and more natural flow of action and dialogue. Most of all, I want to improve upon the resolution and denouement of the play to be more dramatically satisfying and complete.

As I feel comfortable with the script I've created, I will upload it to the National New Play Network's New Play Exchange as well as submit the work to different theatres, festivals, and competitions to workshop it and get it some exposure.

As I move forward in my artistic career, I will definitely take with me the knowledge of how incredibly important staged readings are to the development of new work. In writing new plays, I will apply the practices of critical and personal dramaturgy, as well as reading and working on scripts through the lenses of director and actor.

Playing Chicken

By Carroll Herring

Characters

SAM – Emotional, whimsical, playful.

ALEX – Rational, easily frustrated, determined.

Setting

A dorm room, an apartment, a park bench.

Time

Modern day. Late Spring. Early Fall. Winter.

Playwright's Note:

These are two people of no specific gender or look. They need not necessarily be played by a specific sex; the actors need only play the character. Casting different variations of men and women and ages and races is encouraged. The only stipulation is that your 'Alex' and 'Sam' have a believable connection. They are very close friends who could easily love each other.

Scene 1

(Lights up.)

(The set is a living and entertainment area. Video game consoles, a chess set, and perhaps a bong may be seen. ALEX and SAM sit in two chairs in front of the entertainment set up so that when they are watching TV they are facing full front, with a coffee table between them and the TV. ALEX is more stationary while SAM haphazardly flies about the room.)

(ALEX has a constant neurosis bubbling under their surface. SAM is high-energy and loves to play games with people, so much so that it pushes ALEX out of their façade of calm at times. SAM enjoys that, although doesn't respond particularly well them self. Both are intelligent, but they don't actively show it to each other, until it's time to argue.)

ALEX

Do you feel it?

SAM

Yeah, I think so.

ALEX

You think so?

SAM

Yeaahhhh, like...
 Things are...
 Starting to get away from me so I think...
 I think...
 I think I feel like I am float - ie - r...

It's neat.

ALEX

Yeah, I think so too. I don't think it's something I'm gonna do a lot, but, ya know, every few years or so why not.

(This is not a stammer, but restarting a phrase after getting stuck over and over again)

SAM

I'm glad I only did a half to start. I think...I think...That... that...that...that was a good idea.

ALEX

(Laughing at SAM's deteriorating awareness) Yeah, I had a rough time with it my first go 'round.

SAM

What happened?

ALEX

Nothing bad that I remember. But I was told I sat and faced a blank wall for about an hour without saying anything.

SAM

What were you doing?

ALEX

Don't know, but every now and then my buddy Casey heard me say some stuff from Mrs. Doubtfire under my breath.

SAM

(Laughing) What?

ALEX

Yeah, they think I was reciting the whole thing.

SAM

Whoa.

ALEX

What else would I do while tripping balls, right?

SAM

What do I do if my mouth's not there?

ALEX

What?

SAM

Like, it's missing.

ALEX

What the fuck, no it's not.

SAM

(Runs hand over mouth) I feel like my lips are not there.

ALEX

Sam. Hey, you're fine.

(ALEX grabs SAM's hands and pulls them away from their face. Then touches SAM's lips.)

Your lips are right here, I'm touching them, see?

(There is a moment. It seems like it might be a moment of connection, assurance, and sensuousness. Then SAM breaks it.)

SAM

Why are you doing that?

ALEX

(Hesitating and pulling away.) Because I you said you couldn't feel your lips.

SAM

Pssh, you're high.

(They both laugh. ALEX gets a text, pulls phone out of pocket and checks it, doesn't answer, puts it back in their pocket.)

SAM

Who is it?

ALEX

Cameron.

SAM

What happened?

ALEX

Nothing. Just asking if I'm busy.

SAM

Well, you're free!

ALEX

No, I'm trip-sitting, I'm not just gonna leave you alone.

SAM

But if you want to-

ALEX

I don't.

(Slight pause.)

SAM
Did coffee go badly?

ALEX
It went fine. What about you and Taylor?

SAM
Huh?

ALEX
Seemed like that was happening last time I saw you two together.

SAM
Oh, no. Not that Taylor isn't attractive but I'm not... I don't wanna... start stuff, right now.

ALEX
You okay?

SAM
Like BOOKS. I never finish books.

ALEX
(Laughs) Okay. Are you gonna-

SAM
It wouldn't be nice to just put people down halfway through, you know?

ALEX
Ah, I think I see what you mean-

SAM
Taylor's got a really nice butt, though. I do want that butt.

ALEX
(Giggling) What? I thought you didn't want to go out with Taylor.

SAM
I doooooon't. I want that butt.

(SAM by this point is feeling it. ALEX is thoroughly enjoying it.)

ALEX
Wait so you just want to hit that?

SAM
I want that butt on my boooooooyyyyyyy

ALEX
OH, you want to have a butt like that?

SAM
YESSSS

ALEX
(Laughing) I think you have a great butt.

SAM
Oh, jeez I'm tripping

ALEX
Do you need food? Or water?

SAM
No, I'm just... I'm just... Just gonna lie down...

(SAM starts to flatten rather comically on to the floor in a manner similar to an ice cube slowly liquidating.)

ALEX
Hey

SAM
Hello

ALEX
Do you want to listen t-

SAM
Hehe you like my butt.

ALEX
What?

SAM
Butt. What?

ALEX
What butt?

SAM
My butt.

Your butt what? ALEX

You said you like my butt!! SAM

Whoa, hey calm down- ALEX

Ugh I hate when people tell me that- SAM

Right, I know, sorry, you don't have to be anything. ALEX

Bitch I know! SAM

Hey! ALEX

(Laughing) Sorry. (Coy) I like yours too. SAM

What? ALEX

Your butt. SAM

Hah, okay. ALEX

And your eyes. SAM

Oh yeah? ALEX

Yeah, they're like all chocolatey... Stirred... SAM

What'd you say? ALEX

They're like pots of liquid chocolate... Like brown and pretty and spinning... SAM

ALEX

My eyes are spinning?

SAM

Yeah... Oh my god chocolate

(Pause. Then Sam abruptly jumps up and frenziedly starts gathering things, putting their shoes on, etc.)

ALEX

Whoa, whoa what're you doing?

SAM

(In their best Bilbo Baggins) I'm going on an adventure!

(SAM is not paying attention to ALEX during this next section and runs over ALEX's lines.)

ALEX

No, no I don't think that's a good idea-

SAM

An adventure for chocolate, a chocolate adventure

ALEX

Sam, you're literally in the middle of tripping balls-

SAM

I'm gonna trip balls all the way to Walgreens

ALEX

Look, I have some peanut butter and jelly?

(Making up a tune, SAM serenades and dances around ALEX trying to get them to join.)

SAM

Chocolaaaaate, Chocolate adventure time, going to have that Hershey shit, come on chocolate eyes (ad lib)

(ALEX is rather enjoying this strange dance that SAM is creating. SAM forgetting them self, gives ALEX a kiss. ALEX is not very surprised but doesn't really engage into it since SAM is tripping but doesn't stop it either. They come apart and SAM slowly comes to realize they crossed a line and starts backing up.)

SAM

Oh no. Oh. Oh nooooooo, I'm so sorry...

ALEX

I mean, I think you know it's okay.

SAM

No-o, no it's not, oh shit, shit fuck balls! I'm such a dick!

ALEX

It's really okay, I promise. I didn't mind it.

SAM

But I don't like it when people play with me! It's rude and that was rude and I swore I wouldn't do that.

(SAM curls up on the floor, high and ashamed and starts to become increasingly paranoid.)

ALEX

Sam, I'm not that fragile and you're literally on drugs. Just chill out.

SAM

This is why I suck.

ALEX

You do not.

(ALEX gives a comforting hug.)

When did you swear you would never...kiss me again?

SAM

When I was a douchebag to you the first time.

ALEX

Oh, come on, I was a young and naïve freshman. I just thought I wanted something serious.

SAM

And I knew that I didn't then, but I still strung you along-

ALEX

You didn't, really.

SAM

See, see, you say that, but you still cried when-

ALEX
Ok, we really don't have to go through the details.

SAM
I'm sorry, I'm a people user. I put them down halfway through.

ALEX
What?

SAM
(Near hysteria) Like books.

ALEX
Sam, let's get you watching something positive before the trip goes bad okay, how about something classic – Princess Bride?

SAM
No, not now.

ALEX
(Pause.) You said didn't?

SAM
What?

ALEX
You didn't want anything serious. Then.

SAM
Yeah, I didn't. I'm sorry.

ALEX
No, don't be, I just... do you st-

SAM
No.

ALEX
No?

SAM
I don't still feel that way.

ALEX
Oh. Okay.

SAM
(Quiet calm pause, then explosion) Okay??

ALEX
What??

SAM
You're not gonna do anything?

ALEX
You seriously need me to make the first move?

SAM
YES.

ALEX
Now you are being unfair!

SAM
Don't yell at me! I'm tripping on acid dammit!

(SAM grabs their head and starts getting scared by perceived shifting in the walls and the floor and tries to steady them self. The trip is starting to go bad.)

ALEX
Oh, shit calm down, come here.

SAM
No!

ALEX
I'm just gonna comfort you, everything is fine, okay?

(SAM is in something of a turtle like position on the floor. ALEX slowly goes to SAM and places a hand on their back. SAM curls into ALEX.)

SAM
I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

ALEX
Shhh. Shh. None of that.

(ALEX continues physically comforting SAM.)

Let's watch some Princess Bride. Okay?

SAM

Okay.

(Lights fade.)

Scene 2

(Lights up on a similar set up, the snacks from the last scene are gone. A few months have passed. The coffee table holds two coffee cups, two textbooks and two notebooks. SAM has their notebook open, reviewing carelessly while ALEX uses their open notebook to write flashcards.)

SAM

I hate this.

ALEX

Ya know, you can keep saying that but there's still gonna be a test so-

SAM

So what?

ALEX

So, there's no point in being negative.

SAM

Alright, life coach.

(ALEX is about to retort but let's it go. Reaches for another notecard to continue.)

ALEX

(While writing from their notebook) Okay, what are the types of outlines?

SAM

Speaking and the written kind.

ALEX

What's the name for the written kind?

SAM

It's the fully written out speech.

ALEX

What's it called?

SAM

Well, I obviously don't fucking know.

(Again, ALEX refrains from commenting on SAM's bad attitude.)

ALEX

A preparation outline.

Fucking semantics.

SAM

Fucking semantics that determine your grade.

ALEX

It's still superfluous.

SAM

Oh yes, you're so above basic college requirements.

ALEX

Hey, don't be rude, I'm just saying I can already give a speech fine and therefore I should be able to test out.

SAM

Really?

ALEX

I mean, what's the point of learning how to combat (disdainfully) 'communication apprehension' if I don't have that problem.

SAM

To learn to organize your thoughts in a professional manner.

ALEX

Abortion should be legal. There. Organized.

SAM

You haven't given any reasons why.

ALEX

And I wouldn't change anybody's mind even if I did. There's also no point to speech because no one listens to anyone.

SAM

Okay, are you gonna be like this all night?

ALEX

Like what?

SAM

What's up your ass?

ALEX

SAM
Nothing, what's up yours?!

ALEX
NO, no, I am not letting you turn this on me, you've been treating me like shit recently and you're especially being fucking mean now. The fuck is up?

SAM
Okay I think this isn't about speech-

ALEX
Yeah, no shit.

SAM
You said you weren't upset about Taylor.

ALEX
(Taken aback.) What?

SAM
You're being petty about my thing with Taylor.

ALEX
No, I am being reasonably angry about your piss poor attitude and I told you to do whatever you wanted-

SAM
As if you meant it-

ALEX
Which you would do no matter what I said.

SAM
You were fucking daring me!

ALEX
What!

SAM
You practically talked me into it.

ALEX
That's why you're mad? You wanted me to tell you not to?

SAM
(upset and dumbfounded) I... Yes?

ALEX

(Struggling for words, frustrated) You- want- what the fuck?

SAM

I don't know.

(Uncertain pause.)

You made it seem like that's what you wanted me to do.

ALEX

Well, I think you owe me an apology because I said do whatever you want.

(SAM eyes ALEX and then concedes.)

SAM

Sorry.

ALEX

Thank you.

(Pause.)

What's up?

SAM

Taylor never stops talking.

ALEX

Gee, I can't imagine having to deal with someone like that.

SAM

I said I was sorry. Can we just get back to studying?

ALEX

Are you actually going to study?

SAM

Yes, let's go.

ALEX

Okay. (ALEX picks up the notebook.) What *are* the methods for dealing with communication apprehension?

Ugh. Skills training? SAM

Yep. ALEX
Another?

Cognitive Reshaping? SAM

Close. Cognitive- ALEX

Cognitive Re—sh-st-ruct-uring-Cognitive Restructuring? SAM

Yep. ALEX

Oh, nice. SAM

See, you know more than you think. ALEX

Haha, thanks. SAM

ALEX
K, anoth-

SAM
Sorry 'bout earlier.

What? ALEX

I... I just said sorry. Again. SAM

Ah. Well, thank you. And you're forgiven. ALEX

(SAM's phone buzzes. SAM pulls it out and checks it and upon seeing the messenger bursts out...)

UHH, shut up. SAM

(They then put the phone on the floor, put the pillow they were sitting on over the phone and sit on it.)

So. ALEX

So what? SAM

Okay... Yeah, I'm gonna regret this. Why are you doing this? ALEX

This? SAM

Taylor. ALEX

That's a rude way to refer to a human- SAM

I'm calling bullshit on you, Sam. ALEX

Didn't I just apologize? SAM

Yes, so why ruin this clean slate we now have with lies. ALEX

What are you talking about? SAM

You really like Taylor? Even a little bit? ALEX

(Pause.) No. SAM

(Surprised and outraged.) Does Taylor know that? ALEX

Why are you beating this point- SAM

You're not enjoying yourself and you're stringing them along. ALEX

SAM
Don't be an unpaid shrink-

ALEX
Don't be a liar.

SAM
Jesus, this isn't even your business okay?

ALEX
Not my business?

(ALEX sighs and doubles over. For a beat it is unclear whether ALEX is upset or sick, but then they spring back up in uproarious, if somewhat less than genuine, laughter.)

SAM
What?

ALEX
(Through a frenzied laughter) I'm so sick of dealing with your petty childish shit!

SAM
What the fuck, dude??

ALEX
Are you that surprised? You're so surprised, you, who said *I* should have told you not to go out with Taylor, and you, who could just as easily turn around and ask 'do you want to go out with me' any time you drink more than two glasses of Pinot grig? And the next day of horseshit is always the same: 'Sorry I didn't mean it, I was just having a self-image crisis' or 'I was drunk' or 'I kissed you because I was on acid and thought your lips were food.' And then you convince me to be supportive of your 'new determination' which is always to 'try to commit' to this other meaningless pawn in your life even though you can't stand them. And then, a month or so later, we'll be attempting to study for some class, which I usually do need to study for by the way, and you find it's just the perfect time to complain to me about your failing plan that you didn't really believe in to start with. That petty childish bullshit.

SAM
(Speechless.) Well, I'm never apologizing for anything, ever again.

ALEX
Then I guess I won't have to be surprised ever again.

(SAM is dumbfounded.)

SAM
So now you have emotions?

ALEX
What? When did I ever say-

SAM
You are one of the coldest fucking people-

ALEX
That's not true!

SAM
Yes, it is!

ALEX
How can you say that to me? I comfort you all the damn time, that was the whole point of that rant-

SAM
You do not comfort me, you tell me what you think I want to hear and then you stay stone-faced. There's no connection, no real feeling.

ALEX
Just because I stay composed and don't lose my shit regularly like you?

SAM
You don't stay composed, you stay closed off from the world.

ALEX
So, I'm cold?

SAM
Maybe not on purpose. You just seem unaffected. It's frustrating. You also never open up.

ALEX
Yeah, you don't have that problem.

(SAM eyes ALEX.)

SAM
Do you think I'm fake?

ALEX

No, that's not what I meant. I just meant you could think through...your life choices a little more before you make them.
Even if you really like someone's butt.

SAM

Wow, that sounds really shady.

ALEX

I know, I can't really think of a way to make it not sound shady.

(A beat.)

SAM

I'm not trying to lie to anyone.

ALEX

I know.

SAM

I just want the best situation.

ALEX

I know what you mean.

SAM

Am I a shit person?

ALEX

No, you just-

SAM

But do I do shit person type things?

ALEX

For the most part, no, but-

SAM

What?

ALEX

A person isn't just a nice butt.

SAM

Oh, jeez.

(SAM puts their head down on the pillow they were using to sit. The cell under the pillow buzzes/beeps again. SAM pulls it out and looks at it.)

ALEX

You can always work on it.

SAM

(Typing a message out on the phone.) We're meeting to talk later tonight.

ALEX

Good. I think that's a good thing.

SAM

Yeah, I think so too. Now you don't have to listen to my petty childish shit about it.

ALEX

Sam, I was bein-

SAM

No, it's okay, I heard what you said. You were right, this is an opportunity to start clean.

ALEX

Really?

SAM

Yeah, and I want to tell you something that's been bothering me.

ALEX

...okay.

SAM

You mentioned how I always blame my romantic tendencies on being under some kind of influence. I'm not trying to argue with that, but, to be fair, you only ever broach the subject us romantically when I am under the influence.

ALEX

(Incredulous) Oh, I do?

SAM

YES, you do and it's actually a little fucked up.

ALEX

What?

SAM

You wait 'till I am intoxicated in some way to talk about anything romantically inclined. Not only do you not let your guard down ever, you attack me at my most vulnerable.

ALEX

That is not what I'm ever trying to do.

SAM

Maybe not but you're definitely some kind of coward.

ALEX

Oh, how's that?

SAM

Because you can't even admit you like me unless I'm too inebriated to remember it.

ALEX

You have so many words for fucked up.

SAM

Including this one: Alex.

ALEX

Oooo, good one.

SAM

You can't even genuinely talk about something I'm bringing directly to your attention.

ALEX

Is this suddenly the who's-more-repressed game?

SAM

If you wanna win, sure.

ALEX

I'm an open book! You've always had the option to talk to me too! Why is this on me more than you? That's bullshit.

SAM

Always had the option?? No, you don't always make it an option and you are not an open book. You never talk about your own feelings and you certainly don't tell me how you feel about me. You are not an open book. You are a locked book that says yeah open me whenever but won't give anyone the fucking key!

ALEX

I'm starting to think you just want to wax poetic and you certainly don't need me to listen to you talk, you enjoy listening to yourself far more than I could.

(ALEX starts gathering their things into a backpack. Pausing as they react.)

SAM

There was the time when I was on acid that you decided to ask if I was up for dating seriously.

ALEX

That came up in conversation-

SAM

At the Halloween party last year, when I was trashed, you tried to make out with me-

ALEX

I'm sorry but in my defense, I was also drunk.

SAM

Not like I was. And you first told me you were interested in me when I was showing you weed for the first time, and I was stoned but *you* didn't take a single hit.

ALEX

Because I was nervous!

SAM

You can dish out criticisms of how I treat people, but you can't take it.

ALEX

Shut up!

SAM

Wow. And you were complaining that I talk too much about my feelings. So, which one is it? Do I talk about it too much or not at all?

ALEX

You talk too much about bullshit and you don't talk about what matters.

SAM

And just melodramatically packing your stuff is so much more honest? Is that more *genuine*?

ALEX

At least I'm not dating people, just trying them out until someone else tells me it's not what I want.

SAM

Not everything is that black and white.

ALEX

Seems pretty black and white. Just don't date people you don't like.

SAM

And who should I date, you?

ALEX

(Taken aback) Do you think that's what I'm always trying to get at?

SAM

Is it not?

(That hits like an insult.)

ALEX

You really don't pay attention.

SAM

What? I thought you wanted me to quit with the bullshit, is this not what you wanted? To ask this question?

ALEX

I've been seeing someone.

SAM

...what?

ALEX

You haven't asked about my life once in the past two weeks because you only wanted to talk about you and Taylor. You never asked about what was going on in my life.

SAM

Cameron?

ALEX

Yeah.

SAM

I thought you wanted...

ALEX

You thought I was going to wait.

No, I-

SAM

Yeah. You did.

ALEX

(ALEX puts backpack on shoulder and leaves. SAM is left alone, confused, and in a new dilemma of self-assessment. Lights Fade.)

Scene 3

(Several months have passed. Lights up on a mostly blank stage except for a park bench, and perhaps a lamp post. A few days until the new year. SAM enters and goes to sit on the bench, coffee cup in hand. SAM sips the coffee, which burns their tongue causing SAM to jolt causing some more coffee to spill on their hand.)

SAM

Fuck!

(SAM starts licking the coffee off of their hand. ALEX enters also with a coffee cup. For a moment, Sam is still licking up coffee off of their self and their sleeve while ALEX watches. SAM finally looks up and notices ALEX.)

SAM

Oh, fuck me.

ALEX

Ya know, I was wondering if that's why you texted.

SAM

Oh my god, fuck you.

ALEX

(Laughing) Can't we make a joke about it? Your timing was oh so opportune.

SAM

I really didn't know until after I texted you. Sorry about it.

ALEX

It's fine. It's good to see you.

SAM

I just want to talk. I've missed you.

ALEX

I've missed you too.

(They slowly concede to hug one another. They sit in it a little longer than normal, like addicts who haven't had a fix in a while.)

SAM

Hmm. You smell different.

ALEX

I do?

Yeah, you switched soaps.

SAM

That's creepy.

ALEX

Am I wrong?

SAM

Nope, but you're weird.

ALEX

(Laughs) How are you? I miss class with you.

SAM

Well there's always Spring semester.

ALEX

Have you already made your schedule?

SAM

Partly. I've been watching a lot of movies and getting fat.

ALEX

Stop, you look fine. Are you doing okay?

SAM

Yeah, jeez, nobody died. (They sit.)
I've been hanging out with the rugby team a lot. But I guess that's over.

ALEX

Why- Oh-

SAM

They're Cameron's friends.

ALEX

Sorry.

SAM

It's fine, I graduate soon enough.

ALEX

Yeah, it's crazy.

SAM

ALEX
Are you going to graduate on time?

SAM
God willing. I have to pass speech.

ALEX
What?! You failed?

SAM
Yeah.

ALEX
How?

SAM
I didn't study.

ALEX
I-I-...I don't know why I'm surprised.

SAM
I lost my study buddy.

ALEX
(Eyes SAM.) You *can* study alone you know.

SAM
Can? Maybe. Will? Nah.

ALEX
Well, that's on you.

SAM
I know that. I've done all right this semester.

ALEX
Did you find a new study buddy?

SAM
A few.

ALEX
A few?

SAM

Well yeah, I just made a friend in each class-

ALEX

Ohhh, you actually-

SAM

Oh you meant-

BOTH

Yeah – (They laugh.)

ALEX

So, have you – had a special study buddy?

SAM

Hah, uh not particularly. Taylor and I hooked up a few times but that was definitely a mistake.

ALEX

Ah, are you okay?

SAM

I'm fine. I've been spending some more time with my roommates so that's been cool.

ALEX

Yeah, they're a cool bunch.

SAM

They're okay, don't exaggerate.

ALEX

I like them, Jeff's funny, and I always have a good time around Amy.

SAM

Yeah, but neither one knows how to put a dish away.

ALEX

Oh, and you're the ideal roommate.

SAM

No, but at least I know what dish soap is.

(Pause.)

I don't think I want to live... (ALEX starts to react) with roommates anymore.

ALEX
Jesus Christ!

SAM
What?

ALEX
You can't phrase shit with pauses like that! (Laughs.) So, since you know you don't want to renew your lease-

SAM
Uh, geez-

ALEX
What?

SAM
I don't think I'm even staying here after school.

ALEX
Oh, really?

SAM
Did you think I was going to stay in Huntingdon?

ALEX
Well no, but maybe Pennsylvania.

SAM
I don't know. Maybe Philly. Are you?

ALEX
I, uh, actually wanted to tell you this a while ago when I found out, but it was right after I started hanging out with Cameron and... Ya know... We weren't really talking at the ti-

SAM
Yes, I remember. What's the news?

ALEX
I got a job offer.

SAM
Wait, that's great. What's the job?

ALEX
Working in admissions, actually.

SAM

Oh, so like *here* here.

ALEX

Yeah, I mean I wanted to work in education administration-

SAM

I thought you wanted to work in an underprivileged public-school district?

ALEX

I did, and I do but this is a real offer and real money and it would be great to put on my resume before I move somewhere new.

SAM

Yeah, no, I get that.

ALEX

You don't sound excited.

SAM

To be fair, you don't really either.

(Pause.)

ALEX

I do want the job.

SAM

Then you should take it.

ALEX

What're you going to do?

SAM

I'm moving.

ALEX

Where?

SAM

I'm not sure yet.

ALEX

Then why move just to move?

SAM

Because I don't want to be somewhere just because I happened to have been there yesterday.

ALEX

Poetic.

SAM

I've thought about it.

ALEX

Well, I'll be here.

SAM

I won't be.

(Pause.)

ALEX

We did have a plan to live together.

SAM

When?

ALEX

Last year. You said if you didn't have any plans after graduation, we'd room together.

SAM

Well, things change.

ALEX

Yeah, I guess.

SAM

Besides, we don't want the same things. I wanna get out of here.

ALEX

Well, so do I.

SAM

Well, regardless, you're staying.

ALEX

I don't know why I'm surprised that you're bailing.

SAM

Whoa, are you upset about it?

ALEX

Well, I had that in my head as a plan –

SAM

Oh, I'm sorry, did I disturb your schedule? Yes, I guess I did. So that's why you finally called me. To get your new job and your new living situation all figured out and tied together in a neat little bow.

ALEX

What?

SAM

I'm sorry that that plan of yours isn't coming to plan. I can't believe you would still want to live together after everything – we're obviously not good together.

ALEX

It was our plan.

SAM

It kind of makes it better that I'm moving-

ALEX

It was *our* plan. Yes, I was dreaming about it, but you dreamt it with me. You planned with me.

SAM

I know. (Pause) But we aren't... and things aren't like I thought they would be right now. I'd rather leave here and find something new.

ALEX

That's a great summary of what's been going on here for three years.

SAM

You always held a grudge against me for wanting to explore after school. It's like you feel the need to get tied down and you hated that I didn't feel the same way.

ALEX

That's not true. I begrudged you for leading people on and being a tease. And at least, I'm choosing to stay here for a real reason.

SAM

I'm leaving for a better one.

ALEX
That's horseshit.

SAM
Moving in order to live somewhere intentionally is better reasoning than 'well I got this job, guess I'll just hang around this shithole.'

ALEX
Hey, it's a real job.

SAM
Yeah, well, so is working at Starbucks and I have a good chance of finding that anywhere I go.

ALEX
I didn't get a college degree to work at Starbucks.

SAM
Then you can take your fancy job.

ALEX
I am.

SAM
Great.

ALEX
Why wouldn't you just live here for a year working and saving money before moving somewhere completely new and more expensive?

SAM
Because I don't want to.

ALEX
I thought you would care.

SAM
Saying let's live together after school isn't a blood oath so what can I do?

ALEX
You could tell me if you wa-

SAM
If I try to stop you from taking a job to potentially be somewhere else-I don't know where- just because there might be a better chance of us living together, then I'm selfish for not

caring about this opportunity for you. If I say nothing, you'll think I don't care so, no matter what, you will either resent me for keeping you from the job or for not. So, I have to take my feelings out of my advice.

ALEX

You didn't actually tell me how you feel.

SAM

I feel like I'm gonna miss you a lot. Not enough for me to want to change my plans. So, I make no demands of you now.

ALEX

I'm gonna miss you. And I'm pissed because I was counting on you being nearby.

SAM

That was dumb.

ALEX

I know.

SAM

I'm not the bad guy. Just the messenger.

ALEX

Am I the bad guy?

SAM

No, I'm the bad guy, too.

SAM (Cont'd)

(They laugh.)

No.

(Pause, rethinking.)

Actually, maybe you too.

ALEX

Really? Then I guess I don't care if I-

(ALEX points a finger gun at SAM, shoots and starts laughing. SAM laughs lightly, unsure.)

Get it?

(SAM doesn't.)

I shot the messenger.

(They laugh. ALEX continues to 'shoot' SAM a few more times, poking them as they go, making 'pew pew' noises, both laughing. SAM stops ALEX's shooting/poking with their hand until they have a hold on ALEX's hand.)

ALEX

So, when are you going to know where you're living?

SAM

I'm not totally sure. Sometime next semester.

ALEX

Specific.

SAM

And then I want to be out asap after that.

ALEX

Well, I guess I'll start asking around for anyone staying in town who will need a roommate.

SAM

I am sorry for the trouble.

ALEX

Are you sorry for anything else?

SAM

Yes. And no.

ALEX

I feel the same way.

(They both know they messed this up equally. Let's hope life brings them back together in time. And if it doesn't, oh well.)

(They sit in silence a moment enjoying each other's touch and visage. When they finally got a good enough look, they take a breath or two, relax, and stand, ready to leave. They start but bump into each other.)

SAM

Oh, did you park in the main lot?

ALEX
Yeah, are you-

SAM
I'm by the restaurant.

ALEX
Ah. Well... Do you want me to walk you to your car?

SAM
Ah- you know, I'm okay.

ALEX
Okay.

SAM
Kay, well, I'll-

BOTH
See you.

(A pause for a minute, a bittersweet smile. They turn away to walk offstage. SAM whips around, speaks a little too loud and urgently, and then calms.)

SAM
I might have a party for the last syllabus week... if you'd want to come.

ALEX
You're having a party?

SAM
I could be.

ALEX
Ha, yeah, sure. Send me an invite.

SAM
I will. And maybe afterward we could just find a time to hang out alone. Just for fun.

ALEX
Yeah. Actually, I'd really enjoy that.

SAM
Okay cool, well... See you in the new year.

ALEX

I'll see you then.

(They smile at each other and leave. Blackout. End of play.)