

TIC-TAC-TOE

One-Act Play in English

Palanca Entry 2016

TIC-TAC-TOE

Synopsis

A controversial “sexually charged” play has been written. Everybody reacts to it from a whole range of different angles.

The bold and daring playwright wants it staged as originally written. He believes in the sacredness of the text, and in the kind of theater that has actors doing actions more than just talking words.

The versatile actors are eager to try it. They are ready to play it straight, or on the rocks. They adapt very easily, and are adept at improvisations.

The compromising director wants it tweaked, to make it more “palatable.” He wants to stage the work, get sufficient funding for it, and have a good, long, profitable theater run.

The enterprising producer wants to open it up to a bigger audience, even suggesting drastic changes in the dynamics and themes of the script, which he considers as simply a blueprint to produce a box office hit.

The traditionally conservative test/preview audience, a self-appointed vanguard of morality and decency, wants it sanitized, and if possible, castrated to sterility.

Pressured by the director, the playwright revises the play. But the producer wants more changes. The play is put into a workshop. The test audience demands more clean up. The play undergoes a complete rewrite.

Will the overhauled play finally satisfy?

TIC-TAC-TOE

A one-act play

Characters

PLAYWRIGHT Noel Tacutin

JENNY, *actress playing a teacher*

STAN, *actor playing Jenny's husband*

MIGGY, *actor playing Jenny's kid brother*

DIRECTOR Alex Millado

PRODUCER Ronald Tan

PROF SARABIA, *consultant/test audience*

Setting

The time is the present. The action takes place in a theater in Bacolod.

TIC-TAC-TOE

A one-act play

Scene One

In a living room, TWO MEN are frantically making love on the couch. It is dark and raining outside. A WOMAN enters, and – finding the men – goes berserk. The two quickly disengage, and barely cover themselves with their crumpled clothes and the throw pillows.

JENNY

OH, MY GOD! What the fuck? WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS?

STAN

Jenny, it is not what you think.

JENNY

Tell that to Jesus, you, dirty pigs! You were both naked, intertwined with each other, sucking each other off, eating each other out, and it is not what I think it is? I am not

stupid, Stan. You were fucking my kid brother! YOU... WERE... FUCKING... MY KID BROTHER!

STAN

Shhhh... Jenny, please calm down. I was just trying to...

JENNY

Shut the fuck up, you, faggot! You make me want to puke. You are disgusting! I should have known that you, too, love dicks. You are disgusting, Stanley!

(eyeing both)

You, shitty bastards! I work my ass off to support both of you, and this is how you repay me? I turn my back, and you both screw me?

(to MIGGY)

And you, my dear little brother, how low can you go? I knew you were queer since you were little. But cocksucker of cocksuckers, how could you do this to me? To me, who virtually raised you?

MIGGY

Get a grip, *Ate* Jenny. I am not your kid brother anymore. I am 21! And I am tired of you lording over me. You always make me feel incompetent and inadequate. You try to humiliate me every chance you get.

JENNY

But you are incompetent and inadequate! And you are a screaming faggot. You cause me so much shame and dishonor everyday. You are a great dishonor to our family name. An abomination. Do you understand that? How can I be a success in this life? Every chance I get for a promotion is ruined because of you.

MIGGY

That's not true. What have I to do with your professional life?

JENNY

You wouldn't understand, you, son-of-a-bitch! I am a teacher. I am supposed to fix everything! Including you! But here's something you can understand: Mamang and Papang. Do you know that our parents died because of you?

MIGGY

No! That's a lie. You know the truth. They were killed in a car accident.

JENNY

Yes, there was an accident. But they died because of you. Because YOU... ARE... GAY! The whole family is being punished by God because you are gay. You are a disgrace!

MIGGY

No!

JENNY

You are an abomination. A curse. A despicable error in God's creation.

MIGGY

(covers his ears)

Stop. Stop it! Please stop it!

Lightning effects.

STAN

Jenny, stop torturing him! Please... MIGGY... IS... NOT... WELL!

MIGGY reaches for a gun on the floor.

JENNY

And so are you! Both of you are sick. Both of you are better off dead, cocksuckers. May God strike you dead!

A pistol shot.

Beat. Then, MIGGY slumps on the floor.

Roll of thunder, and more lightning effects.

STAN

(runs to MIGGY's dead body)

Miggggggy!

JENNY

(steps back away from STAN & MIGGY)

What happened? Oh, my God! Oh, my God! OH... MY... GOD! He blew his brains out!

STAN

I tried to warn you. Your brother was not well. He tried to shoot himself earlier, but I stopped him. He didn't need any of your cussing and gay-bashing tonight.

(to the dead body)

Miggy, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I loved you, too, and I tried to deny it, but I loved you, Miggy. More than I loved your sister!

JENNY

(crumpling to the floor)

Noooooo!

Enter PLAYWRIGHT and DIRECTOR.

PLAYWRIGHT

Thank you, people. Take five.

ACTORS exit.

So what do you think?

DIRECTOR

I don't know. It's... different. Very riveting. Very intense.

PLAYWRIGHT

Pretty intense, huh? That's the very intention.

DIRECTOR

There are parts of it that I really like. But some parts, well... you can rework them a little bit, can't you?

PLAYWRIGHT

Rework?

DIRECTOR

Just a tiny little bit.

PLAYWRIGHT

You want me to change it?

DIRECTOR

Just a slight tweak.

PLAYWRIGHT

Tweak... what? How? Why?

DIRECTOR

Well, Noel...

PLAYWRIGHT

Don't you like it? I mean, what don't you like? What do you want changed?

DIRECTOR

Honestly, Noel... There are just too many cuss words. Too much swearing.

PLAYWRIGHT

Too much?

DIRECTOR

Yes. As your Stanley character says, "He didn't need any of your cussing and gay-bashing tonight;" so I think, the audience doesn't need to be bombarded with your cussing and gay-bashing night after night.

PLAYWRIGHT

He was talking about the immediate cause of a character's suicide!

DIRECTOR

I know, I understand. But just the same, perhaps the coarse language can be.... changed?

PLAYWRIGHT

Coarse language? Changed to what?

DIRECTOR

You know... something less crude and rude. Something less vulgar, less obscene. You are the playwright, Noel. You have the gift of gab.

PLAYWRIGHT

What's wrong with how it is now?

DIRECTOR

Nothing. It's perfect. It's just that some of the words...

PLAYWRIGHT

Which words?

DIRECTOR

Well, the F-word, for example.

PLAYWRIGHT

Fuck? What's wrong with the word *fuck*?

DIRECTOR

Now, now, Noel. It's not really the nicest of words.

PLAYWRIGHT

The character is angry. She's at a loss for sophisticated words.

DIRECTOR

One can be angry without being verbally foul and filthy.

PLAYWRIGHT

Sure, but it is not in her character to be quiet and nice. She's a nag. She needs to scream obscenities. To be vicious and noxious.

DIRECTOR

Noel, just try it, okay? Just for me. I know what the producers want. And this play, as it is, won't make the cut. I want your play to work. I want you to succeed. I think that you have a vision. But this is Bacolod we are talking about. People here are very conservative. Tight-ass conservative. You have a message, and if you want this play to see the light of day, you just have to rework it.

PLAYWRIGHT

I don't see how changing the words will help.

DIRECTOR

Trust me, my friend. I'm on your side. But we have to take caution. It's not the best time for the theater in this part of the world. The last thing we want to do is to offend, to scandalize, and to drive the audience away.

PLAYWRIGHT

But words are all I have. I chose those words precisely for their maximum explosive powers, to make the scene work. I want to help create a theatre that speaks the vocabulary we use day to day. I want to draw a new audience into the theater and show them why it is exciting. Can you hear me, Alex? Words are all I have!

DIRECTOR

Yes. You have the gift of words. Use it. Now, listen to me. I know how important those labored and carefully cobbled words are for you. But to a director, and to producers, for that matter, scripts are only blueprints; they are not cut in stone.

PLAYWRIGHT

I'm a playwright, Alex. Every word I use is a conscious choice. Film, television, music, video, and the Internet have changed the way we think. We have no need to be told stories in the same constipated language our parents, or their parents, used. We need to reinvent theater to serve our own purposes. We need to do theater in a language that engages us. I use words for their most explosive effect. That's where my art lies, so why should I change it?

DIRECTOR

Try to rewrite it a little bit, Noel. Just try! For me? Think of it as an artistic exercise. Keep the intensity of the scene, but soften the language, refine it, so that the play can open up to a larger audience. Be more people-friendly.

PLAYWRIGHT

Soften the language? People-friendly?

DIRECTOR

Clean it up. Make it more... *palatable*. We really don't want to offend our audience's sensibilities with crass and disagreeable language. I know you want to draw the younger crowd, but those other generations behind us are still the bigger bulk of our audience. They still control our market. You have a reputation to protect, and I have mine. We need to work together.

PLAYWRIGHT

I don't know. I don't see how changing the language will help.

DIRECTOR

Just try! See you in a week?

PLAYWRIGHT

I guess so.

DIRECTOR

Try!

Blackout.

Scene Two

One week later. The play starts again. STAN and MIGGY are at it, JENNY enters.

JENNY

Oh, my God! What the fudge? WHAT THE FUDGE IS THIS?

STAN

Pumpkin pie, it is not what you think.

JENNY

Tell that to Jesus, swine! You were both plain and exposed, pretzelized with each other, nibbling... *body parts*, and it is not what I think it is? I am not the village idiot, Stan. You were... *fudging* my brother! YOU... WERE... FUDGING... MY KID BROTHER!

STAN

Shhhh... Jenny, please calm down. I was just trying to...

JENNY

Be quiet, you, pederast! You make me want to throw up. You are dislikeable! I should have known that you, too, love... *carrot sticks*! You gross me out, Stanley!

(eyeing both)

You, ungrateful traitors! I work so hard to support both of you; and this is how you repay me? I turn my back, and you both mess up with me?

(to MIGGY)

And you, my dear little brother, how low can you go? I knew you were... *colorful* since you were little. But fairies of fairies, how could you do this to me? To me who virtually raised you?

MIGGY

Get a grip, *Ate* Jenny. I am not your kid brother anymore. I am 21! And I am tired of you governing me. You always make me feel incompetent and inadequate. You try to humiliate me every chance you get.

JENNY

But you are incompetent and inadequate! And you are a... *flashing fuchsia cape-wearer!* You cause me so much shame and dishonor everyday. You are a great dishonor to our family name. Do you understand that? How can I be a success in this life? Every chance I get for a promotion is ruined because of you.

MIGGY

That's not true. What have I to do with your professional life?

JENNY

You wouldn't understand. I am a teacher. I am supposed to fix everything! Including you! But here's something you can understand: Mamang and Papang. Do you know that our parents died because of you?

MIGGY

No! That's a lie. You know better. They were killed in a car accident.

JENNY

Yes, there was an accident, but they died because YOU... ARE... GAY! The whole family is being punished by God because you are gay. You are a disgrace!

MIGGY

No!

JENNY

You are an abomination. A curse. A despicable error in God's creation.

MIGGY

(covers his ears)

Stop. Stop it! Please stop it!

Lightning effects.

STAN

Jenny, stop tormenting him! Please... MIGGY... IS... NOT... WELL!

MIGGY reaches for a gun on the floor.

JENNY

And so are you! Both of you are sick. Both of you are better off dead. May God strike you dead!

A pistol shot.

Beat. Then, MIGGY slumps on the floor.

Roll of thunder, and more lightning effects.

STAN

(runs to MIGGY's dead body)

Miggggggy!

JENNY

(steps back away from STAN & MIGGY)

What happened? Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Oh... my... God! He blew his brains out!

STAN

I tried to warn you. Your brother was not well. He tried to kill himself earlier, but I stopped him. He didn't need any of your cussing and bashing tonight.

(to the dead body)

Miggy, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I loved you, too, and I tried to deny it. But I loved you, Miggy. More than I loved your sister!

JENNY

(crumpling to the floor)

Noooooooo!

Enter PLAYWRIGHT and DIRECTOR.

PLAYWRIGHT

Well? I spent the whole week on revisions, I integrated your suggestions, and by exaggerating the language, I thought you would begin to see that...

DIRECTOR

It's perfect!

PLAYWRIGHT

You l-l-liked it?

DIRECTOR

Very much. It sounds very refreshing... very new.

PLAYWRIGHT

But the whole energy of the scene has been diffused. When furious Jenny screams, "What the fudge," I can't help but think of a piece of chocolate.

DIRECTOR

You think too much. Funny that you thought about chocolate fudge, because I thought about it, too. And admittedly, it is easier to swallow than the F-word. The language change really makes it better.

PLAYWRIGHT

You want it *palatable*. But *pumpkin pie*, *pretzelized*... and *carrot sticks*? Really, Alex! I was just kidding.

DIRECTOR

Serendipity!

PLAYWRIGHT

What?

DIRECTOR

Congratulations. I think the sanitized language and the food allusions worked. They actually make the play a lot better.

PLAYWRIGHT

Better for whom?

DIRECTOR

My dear boy, for the audience, of course.

PLAYWRIGHT

I really don't see how it could be better. The play is not supposed to be *swallowed* so easily. It is not meant to make the audience comfortable. It's supposed to make them think.

DIRECTOR

And it does.

PLAYWRIGHT

About chocolate delights and pumpkin pies!

(sighs)

Please, Alex, can we go back to the original now? You said this was just an artistic exercise. Well, I've done it, and I am not happy with the result. I want to go back to the original version.

DIRECTOR

You can't.

PLAYWRIGHT

Why not? This version sucks. It cannot go on like this.

DIRECTOR

You are right. It cannot go on like this. A few more changes are necessary.

PLAYWRIGHT

More changes? This feels like tic-tac-toe!

DIRECTOR

Tic-tac-toe?

(beat)

Oh, you mean “Noughts and Crosses”? The pencil-and-paper game with X’s and O’s?

PLAYWRIGHT

(nods)

Noughts and Crosses, Tit-tat-toe, Exy-Ozys, same-difference. Two players take turns marking the spaces in a 3x3 grid.

DIRECTOR

First player to succeed in placing three respective marks in a horizontal, vertical, or diagonal row wins the game. I love that game! Why do you think revisions to your play feel like tic-tac-toe?

PLAYWRIGHT

Because the only winning move is not to play.

DIRECTOR

You know that is not true, Noel. I really want to help you succeed; that’s why I’m guiding you to survive in this business. I want your play to be great, and to be a box office hit, too. Now, we need financial backing to stage your play, so you want to make some people happy. I know you want your voice to be heard. But first, you need a platform on which to stand.

PLAYWRIGHT

My play was great as it was.

DIRECTOR

No question. It was perfect. It just needed some adjustments.

PLAYWRIGHT

But why does anything need to be changed at all, in the first place?

DIRECTOR

To make the Producer happy.

PLAYWRIGHT

The Producer? Who is this goddamn producer? Can I have a word with him, or her?

Enter PRODUCER, from the audience.

PRODUCER

Here I am.

PLAYWRIGHT

Who are you?

PRODUCER

The producer.

PLAYWRIGHT

You're here?

PRODUCER

(shakes PLAYWRIGHT's hand)

I've been watching. Alex invited me. Of course, I was curious what kind of play I would be funding. It's nice to finally see you, Mr. Noel Tacutin. You are no Noel Coward, but you are a brilliant dramatist. You really are. I love the play.

PLAYWRIGHT

It was much better before.

PRODUCER

I love it that there are no profanities in this play. You are so creative with words. But there has to be a few more changes.

PLAYWRIGHT

More changes?

PRODUCER

Just minor changes. Listen, Noel... May I call you Noel?

PLAYWRIGHT nods.

I know that you have a vision and a message for the world, young man. And it is good and noble, and yada-yada-yada. But let us see if we can add a few more changes to improve the play for bigger audiences without sacrificing your message. Shall we try and workshop it?

PLAYWRIGHT

I don't know. But since you are producing the play...

(with resignation)

I guess, I should just say, "All right," and "Go ahead."

PRODUCER

Actors, take your places, would you please?

ACTORS go to their places to start the scene again.

(to the ACTORS)

Now, actors, we are going to workshop this piece. Let us try and see how we can make this even better. All I want you to do is to feel free to follow the flow. Let the moment take you where it leads you. Learn to improvise as we go along. Is that okay?

JENNY raises her hand.

(acknowledges JENNY)

Yes?

JENNY

Well, considering that we are workshopping the play, do you think we can *ad lib* some of the lines, or at least change some of the words?

PLAYWRIGHT

(vehemently)

Of course not!

PRODUCER

Now, now, Noel. Why not let them? As any self-respecting director will tell you, the script is just a blueprint, it is not written in stone. Isn't that right, Alex?

DIRECTOR just nods ambiguously.

PLAYWRIGHT

Alex, will you say something, please? My play is being butchered here.

DIRECTOR

What can I say, Noel? As a director, I've always been one for improvisations. To what feels right for actors. I look at their choices, supervise them, coach them, and moderate, if and when necessary. I think you should let them. Who knows what these actors can bring to your play.

PRODUCER

Now you see, Noel?

PLAYWRIGHT shakes his head, but relents.

(to the ACTORS)

Okay, folks. We will do improvisations. Give the play your best shot, and don't be so tied to the original. Don't be afraid to stray a little bit. A new idea goes a long, long way. Just let the play lead you where it wants to take you. Start when you are ready. All right... *(snaps his fingers)*

JENNY

OH, MY GOD! What the...

PRODUCER

Stop! Stop it right there. Do we really need to be sacrilegious? It's the first line of dialogue, and we are already using God's name in vain. Can we say something else instead? *Goodness*, perhaps? Yes, goodness! Let's try that. Jenny, take it from the top.

JENNY

OH, MY GOODNESS! What the fudge? WHAT THE FUDGE IS THIS?

PRODUCER

Wait. Try *Mama mia!*

PLAYWRIGHT

Mama mia?

PRODUCER

Mama mia instead of *my goodness!*

PLAYWRIGHT

Great! Now, people will think of *Mama Mia* spaghetti and chocolate fudge dessert while watching this play! How can people really enjoy the play if we have psychologically made them hungry? Now, all they will hear is their stomach grumbling throughout the play.

DIRECTOR

Oh, Noel. Don't be so hard on yourself.

PRODUCER

Okay, folks. Let's try it again.

JENNY

MAMA MIA! What the fudge? WHAT THE FUDGE IS THIS?

STAN

Pumpkin pie, it is not what you think.

JENNY

Tell that to Jesus, swine!

PRODUCER

Stop! Here we go again. Really now, can we please refrain from using the Lord's name in vain? Why not try *tell that to the marines*.

PLAYWRIGHT

Because it is a cliché?

PRODUCER

Okay, what about *tell that to the mountains*?

PLAYWRIGHT

That's far out, but go ahead. It's just a workshop, right?

PRODUCER

Okay. Try it again. Actors, please...

JENNY

(enjoys her ad lib)

Tell that to the mountains, *lechon* wannabes! You were both plain and exposed, *Jack 'n Jill* pretzels with each other, nibbling body parts, and it is not what I think it is? I am not the village idiot, Stan. You were fudging my brother! YOU... WERE... FUDGING... MY KID BROTHER!

PRODUCER

So sorry to interrupt, but why don't we change the brother's character into someone more distant like a driver, or a houseboy. Yes, a houseboy!

PLAYWRIGHT

No!

PRODUCER

Why not?

PLAYWRIGHT

Because that's really retarded. That will change the whole dynamics of the play.

PRODUCER

But it's all for the better, eh? I mean, why should Stan be fudging his brother-in-law?

PLAYWRIGHT

Because that is the crux of the play. Two weak men forced to live together under the wings and claws of a very crazy woman, who is close to their heart.

PRODUCER

Come on, Noel. Let's just try it on for size, okay? We are just workshopping your play. Nothing is permanent. Besides, isn't a houseboy just as important in the household as a brother-in-law? Let's have Miggy as their houseboy, all right? Actors, begin!

JENNY

I am not the village idiot, Stan. You were fudging the houseboy! YOU... WERE...
FUDGING... OUR HOUSEBOY!

STAN

Shhhh... Jenny, please talk quieter. I was just trying to...

JENNY

Silencio, you, pederast! You make me want to puke. You are... eew... yuck... ugh! I should have known that you, too, love... *torotot*. You gross me out, Stanley!

(eyeing both)

You, ingrates! I work so hard to support you, and this is how you repay me? I turn my back, and you play with me?

(to MIGGY)

And you, dear little *echos-echos* houseboy, how low can you go? I knew you were a green-blooded *jokla* since the day I hired you. But *chufatid* of the *federacion* Pride nation, how could you do this to me? To me who hired you? Who virtually adopted you?

MIGGY

Get a grip, *Acheng* Jenny. I am not your houseboy anymore. I resign! I am tired of you acting like a *perya* queen over me. You always make me feel incompetent and *wiz-know-ang*. You try to humiliate me every chance you get.

JENNY

But you are incompetent and *boobita chaka!* You are nothing but a flashing fuchsia cape-wearing, second-hand, trying hard *gender-bender* copycat. You cause me so much shame everyday. You are a great dishonor to our... *familia Zaragoza*. Do you understand that? How can I be a success in this life? Every chance I get for a promotion is ruined because of you.

MIGGY

(exaggeratedly)

It's a lie! It's a lie! It's a super lie! What's my Internet connection with your professional life?

JENNY

Oh, you wouldn't understand, you, *Chuvva-tienes-chararat*. I am a teacher. I am supposed to fix everything! Including you! But here's something you can understand: your *mudra* and *fadir*. Do you know that your parents died because of you?

MIGGY

No! That's not *true-lala*. You know the truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God!

They were killed in a car accident.

JENNY

Yes, there was an accident, but they died because YOU... ARE... SHOKOY! Your whole family was punished by...

(slightly confused)

...by... by *Mama mia*?

(continues as before)

... because you are a *shokoy* with the tail in your groin. You are a... *disgraciada!*

MIGGY

No!

JENNY

Yes!

MIGGY

No!

JENNY

Yes!

STAN

Oh, please. Go ahead, and spin-a-win!

JENNY

(ignores STAN)

Oh, yes! You are a jinx, Miggy engot.

(in a sing-song)

Beh! Boo! You are a loser! La-la. La. La-la.

MIGGY

(covers his ears)

Stop! In the name of love. Before you break my heart. Stop it! Please stop it!

Lightning effects.

STAN

Jenny, stop tormenting him! Please... MIGGY... IS... NOT... WELL!

MIGGY reaches for a gun on the floor.

JENNY

So are you! Both of you are sick. Both of you are better off dead. May *Mama Mia* strike you dead!

A pistol shot.

Beat. Then, JENNY slumps on the floor.

Roll of thunder, and more lightning effects.

STAN

(runs to embrace MIGGY)

Miggggggy!

MIGGY

What happened? Oh, *Mama Mia* spaghetti! Oh, *Mama Mia* spaghetti sauce! OH... *MAMA MIA!* I blew her *gulai otak* out!

STAN

I tried to warn her. I wanted to tell her you had a gun. That you tried to *tigbak-chugi* yourself earlier, only I stopped you. Miggy, you didn't need any of her cussing and *chuk-chak-takatak* tonight.

(goes to the dying JENNY)

Jenny, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I loved you, too. But I loved Miggy... MORE. More than I loved you!

JENNY

(dying)

Noooooo!

PRODUCER

Bravo! Bravo!

DIRECTOR

Oh, my! I like it! It's perfect!

PLAYWRIGHT

(pulling his hair)

Noooooo! How can you be so deaf and blind? They've bastardized my play.

DIRECTOR

But, Noel, I really like it. That was so much better. Three, four, maybe ten times a lot better.

PLAYWRIGHT

But that wasn't the play I intended. That wasn't the play I wrote! What's with Jenny dying in the end instead of Miggy? Instead of creating remorse for Jenny, it just created a happy ending for Stanley and Miggy. That's not the intention of the play.

PRODUCER

But this is brilliant. You are a brilliant writer, and the actors are simply great at improvisation.

DIRECTOR

It's wonderful. I love it!

PLAYWRIGHT

Okay, now that we have workshopped my play, can we please go back to the original now?

PRODUCER

But we are on to something brilliant here!

PLAYWRIGHT

(threateningly)

No! You are butchering my play. Now, listen here, Mr. Producer...

PRODUCER

Calm down, Noel. There's no need to be upset. After all, we still have to preview it. Then, we will see how the audiences react. If your artistic intuition is right, we can always put the play back to the way you want it.

PLAYWRIGHT

You promise to put it back?

PRODUCER

Of course! *If* the audience does not like it. But if they *do* like it... You see, it's a win-win situation, Noel. If the audiences like it, you're a brilliant writer; if they don't like it, you're still a brilliant writer.

PLAYWRIGHT

Hmmp.

PRODUCER

Now, I would like to introduce you to our test audience...

Enter PROF SARABIA.

...Prof. Edna Sarabia.

PLAYWRIGHT

Test audience? We have a test audience here?

PRODUCER

Of course.

(introduces the others)

Noel, Alex, this is Prof. Sarabia. She's a guidance counselor at the University of Negros Occidental - Recoletos.

PROF SARABIA

(after shaking their hands)

Is this going to take long? Because I have an appointment with my dentist in about an hour.

PRODUCER

No, no! Not at all. Actors, places, please. And begin...

ACTORS go to their places. They start the scene again.

JENNY

What the fudge?

PROF SARABIA

Wait! Are they having sex? Are those two men having sex?

PLAYWRIGHT

Yes. Can you please not interrupt?

PROF SARABIA

Why not? I was invited to preview this play. This is not good. I don't like to see two men having sex. It's gross.

PLAYWRIGHT

What's wrong with it?

PROF SARABIA

What's right about it? They're homosexuals! They're sick. That's wrong!

PLAYWRIGHT

This is a play.

PROF SARABIA

It's obscene. You don't have to promote homosexuality.

PLAYWRIGHT

Hello? As if homosexuality needs promoting from me! No, I am not promoting homosexuality. I am just artistically recreating a slice of reality to drive home a point.

PROF SARABIA

A slice of reality?

(beat)

Were you sexually abused as a child?

PLAYWRIGHT

What? No! I am a playwright! I don't have to personally experience everything that I write. As I said, I'm just capturing vignettes of real life.

PROF SARABIA

On the Negrense stage? Homosexuality on the Negrense stage, and you call that real life? Are you high, or something? You're a pervert.

PLAYWRIGHT

Prof. Sarabia, I'm surprised at your homophobia and amnesia. I thought you'd be smarter and more open-minded than the average stevedore. I don't know if you've

noticed but the world is changing. Bacolod has not been spared of the gay consciousness.

PROF SARABIA

So you admit that your play is about gay consciousness?

PLAYWRIGHT

No, the play is not about homosexuality or gay consciousness. It is about people who discover special relationships under most trying circumstances, or against a common enemy. Think of it as Filipinos coming together for a revolution against a dictatorship.

PROF SARABIA

You mean, like the People Power EDSA Revolution?

PLAYWRIGHT

Bingo! Your memory is coming back.

PROF SARABIA

I don't like political plays. And besides, while most people in EDSA were homosexuals and gay artists, many were not! And they did not make love on the streets!

PLAYWRIGHT

You are impossible.

PROF SARABIA

You are pretentious. You call yourself a playwright. I don't think you have a play. I think what you have is an occasion for gratuitous sex on stage. Why do your characters need to have sex on stage?

PLAYWRIGHT

Because it is an action vital to the play! Why are you so afraid of action in a play? You're so afraid of physical action. Sexual action. Violent action. Dramatic action. Why must action and narrative be sacrificed for character, metaphor, and debate?

PROF SARABIA

What is theater, then, without great characters and issues? If I must say so, I think the theater has gone down after Shakespeare.

PLAYWRIGHT

I'm not saying that I am not interested in exploring multifaceted issues, or complex characters in my play. On the contrary, that's exactly what I want to do. But I want to do it through what the characters *do*, not just what they say or think.

PROF SARABIA

Young man, I grew up watching naturalistic theater with one set and four characters, all of whom talk about things that happened in the past until they are led to some sort of internal character revelation. That was all so fine for me. And I didn't turn out so bad.

PLAYWRIGHT

If you were happy with those, fine! There's still plenty of it to be found. I'm just saying the world has changed. Movies, television, Facebook, and the Internet have changed the way people think, the way we see, the way we absorb information. I write for my generation, and my generation has no need to be told the same stories you were told. In the same rigid and frigid way you were told. In the same antiseptic language you were told. As a playwright, I want to be a voice of my generation.

PROF SARABIA

You want to be a voice of your generation? Listen to your opening line, "What the fudge?" You try to disguise the F-word but I can see through it. This is not a play. This is unadulterated trash, pure garbage.

(sees the gun)

And is that a gun on the floor? Is there going to be some scenes of violence in this performance? Because that is all we need in these most difficult times. Lots of gratuitous nudity, immoral sex, and violence on stage, in the movies, in magazines, over the Internet, and everywhere. These have got to stop.

PLAYWRIGHT

From which planet did you come, Prof. Sarabia?

PROF SARABIA

You can't insult me. I'm leaving. I'd rather suffer in a dentist's chair than watch this smut.

PROF SARABIA exits in a huff.

PLAYWRIGHT

(furiously)

Then, go! Because the theater does not need toxins like you. You, constipated bitch!

PRODUCER

Now, now, Noel. That wasn't very nice.

PLAYWRIGHT

Yeah. It wasn't, huh?

(angrily)

Just what is it that you want from me?

PRODUCER

All we want is a hit show. I think it's a fairly reasonable demand. I put out my money, you deliver a hit play.

PLAYWRIGHT

You don't really care what my play means at all, do you? You don't care about my message. You don't care about my voice. You just want something that will create a profit.

PRODUCER

Hello? Isn't that what the show business is all about? You can talk theater, emancipation, developmental communication, and liberation for all you want, but show business is still a *business*.

DIRECTOR

Noel, you must understand. If people don't come to the play, we don't make money. We close the theater, no more plays. You're out of job, I'm out of job. Nobody wins.

PLAYWRIGHT

But what about...

PRODUCER

I'm sorry, Noel. But it's just the way it is. Now, make me happy. Rewrite it bearing in mind the improvements we have made today. I think we have a hit play in our hands.

DIRECTOR nods in agreement.

PLAYWRIGHT

Fine. Give me a week, and I'll show you the new play.

Blackout.

Scene Three

One week later. The ACTORS, DIRECTOR, PRODUCER, PROF SARABIA wait for the arrival of the PLAYWRIGHT.

PROF SARABIA

Well, is he coming? Because I don't like waiting. Besides, I have an appointment with my optometrist later today. My vision has been blurred lately.

DIRECTOR

He said he'd be here by...

Enter PLAYWRIGHT.

PLAYWRIGHT

All right, here I am. I've rewritten the whole play, and I'm sure *you* will be happy.

PLAYWRIGHT gives the rewritten play to the ACTORS.

PROF SARABIA

Hopefully, this will be better than the crap you had me watch last week.

PLAYWRIGHT

I know I am not the best writer in the world, but I had something to say in my play. I'm sorry if my play offends you, but if that is the only way to exchange ideas, why do you fear it so much? Ideas aren't so dangerous if you begin to understand them. I only wanted to say something meaningful in my original play. I composed the scene so that people will be hooked as early as the first line, then just build up from there. I really tried.

PROF SARABIA

Well, I think you...

PLAYWRIGHT

I've rewritten the play bearing in mind all your objections to the last version.

(sarcastically)

I am sure you will be *happy* with it now.

PLAYWRIGHT exits.

PROF SARABIA

He is one unhappy camper. A real sour-puss.

PRODUCER

Most young writers are. They are so full of angst. And so full of strange ideas for the world. Always pushing boundaries.

DIRECTOR

I liked pushing boundaries, too.

PRODUCER

But you have grown wiser in the business, Alex. You know what the audiences want, and you understand what the producers need. That's why you are a success.

(to the ACTORS)

All right, actors, as they say, "on with the show..."

Blackout.

Scene Four

Lights come up again. The THREE ACTORS are lined up shoulder to shoulder, standing erect and motionless.

JENNY

Tic.

STAN

Tac.

JENNY

Tic. Tac.

STAN

Toe.

JENNY

Tic. Tac.

MIGGY

Toe.

JENNY

Tic.

MIGGY

Tac. Toe.

JENNY

Tic. Tac. Toe.

MIGGY

Tic. Tac. Toe.

JENNY-MIGGY-STAN

(repeating continuously as lights slowly dim)

Tic. Tac. Toe.

Curtain.

End of "TIC-TAC-TOE."