

Substitute Teacher from Hell

Jass Richards

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Cast:

teacher (a woman in her 20s, wearing jeans)

Set:The Classroom:

teacher's desk (centre stage)

teacher's chair (behind desk, facing audience)

a two-sided flip blackboard (flips along horizontal axis)

The Principal's Office:

teacher's desk turned sideways

teacher's chair to left of desk

principal's chair (from offstage) to right of desk (plusher than teacher's chair)

blackboard flipped with panelling and framed certificate and/or painting

Props:

chalk and brush (for classroom scenes)

phone (for principal's desk, can be kept in drawer during other scenes)

miscellaneous papers, files, etc.

paperback copy of *Romeo and Juliet*

copy of *The Education Act*

prop box (on stage for Scene 19: Theatre Arts class only) with small stool sitting on top

contents of prop box: suitcoat and tie, beard, large cucumber, small pickle

Sound effects:

class noise (30 minute cassette of, so volume can be controlled live according to scene's needs)

bell or buzzer (to indicate class changes)

Lighting:

slight dimming between scenes

Dialogue notes:

The actor will pretend the principals exist (seated in principal's chair) just as she will pretend the students exist (one half of audience) - though audience participation should be anticipated and even encouraged if the actor is comfortable with some improvisation; when teacher speaks to audience as audience, her focus should be to the other side of the audience.

() indicates that implied student or principal has said something.

Scene 1: (classroom)

[Class noise. Bell rings.]

[Teacher walks onto stage, carrying some files, papers, pens, texts, including *Romeo and Juliet*, all of which she puts onto the teacher's desk. She then stands upstage centre for a moment, in front of the teacher's desk, expecting the students to become quiet and give her their attention.

This does not happen.]

Good morning, my name is--could you please be quiet--people--we need quiet before-- [No change in class noise.]

()

Yes, I'll introduce myself as soon as--people--quiet please! [No change.]

Class, please be quiet and take your seats. I'd like to begin-- [No change.]

QUIET PLEASE! [No change.]

[imitating Sister Mary Elephant from Cheech and Chong] CLAAAASS! [No change.]

SHUT THE FUCK UP!!! [Class is silent.]

()

Well, when you understand another language, you just let me know. Asshole.

Okay, attendance, please say 'here' when I call your name. [Teacher begins to read names off a list.] John, Mary, Scott, Lori - [Class noise resumes softly, increasing until teacher asks for quiet; then it resumes again and increases until teacher asks for quiet; etc.]

[If no one from the audience says 'here'] This is McGraw's grade ten English, period two, right?

[resumes reading names] Natasha, Jeremy -

[If still no one answers 'here' - imitating Pink Floyd] 'Is there anybody out there?' [resumes reading names] Matt, Bob -

[If still no one answers, skip to *.]

[As soon as audience members start answering, persist a little until two people say 'here' to the same name] What, are we sharing the brain today? [Skip to *.]

[and/or until the same voice says 'here' twice - look out at audience searching for the person] You are both Matt and Bob? And you two are sharing a body, right? [Go to *.]

*Okay, look, we're going to have to do this the slow way. [Teacher starts circulating among the students (front row of audience) with a piece of paper and a pen.]

Could you please sign your name as I come around.

[First student doesn't have pen - speaks to him/her.] Let me guess: you don't have anything to write with. You've come to class without pen or pencil, without paper, no books--

[Teacher moves onto the next student--who also doesn't have a pen. With the third student, she offers her own pen.]

[Aside to the other half of the audience, the not-class side] A little known Murphy's Law states that half the students won't have anything to write their names with, and half [she looks at the

name the third student has just written] won't know how to spell their names--[aside to the third student] 'Donna' begins with a 'D' [or 'Joe' begins with a 'J']. Unfortunately, it's never the same half.

[If a student seems to hesitate before writing name] Do you KNOW your name? Yes? [all sweet and sympathetic] Just forgot it for a moment, did you? That's okay, you've got it now...

[Continues moving around with sheet while continuing aside.] So this is a royal waste of time. But of course I can't just ask the students to pass the sheet around, because everybody would be signing everybody else's names--I once ended up with thirty names for ten people. 'Course, that was in a gifted math class.

[Continues.] I solved the problem one day by taking a snapshot. Unfortunately, I ended up with a picture of thirty bare asses. Apparently none of which the regular teacher could identify.

[She has finished with attendance and has returned to centre stage.]

Quiet please. [no change] Class, we're ready to begin. [eventually class noise decreases]

So, as the sharp ones among you have noticed, your regular teacher is not here today. I'm your substitute for today, and my name is Jude Beecher [writes it on the board].

()

Well, I prefer to be called Jude--that is my name--but if you feel really uncomfortable calling me by my name, you can call me something else. As you no doubt will anyway.

()

No, not 'Miss'. Please don't call me 'Miss'.

()

Because I find it extremely insulting. [Class noise has resumed again.]

()

Well, apart from being incredibly impersonal, what does 'Miss' mean? I means 'Unmarried Female'. How would you feel if someone called out to you, 'Hey, Unmarried Female' or 'Unmarried Female, what's for homework?'

()

No, I'm not ashamed to be unmarried or female--I just don't think either aspect of my existence is important enough to be part of my name.

()

No, 'Ms.' and 'Mr.' are almost as bad--they still designate sex: 'Female Person Smith', 'Male Person Brown'.

()

Well, there are lots of sex-free titles: Chief, Captain. Your Highness.

Now, let's see what your regular teacher has left for you to work on. [reads assignment sheet]

Okay, I see you're playing with *Romeo and Juliet*--quiet please [she waits a moment for quiet]--you are to "rewrite one of two scenes--the balcony scene or the fight scene--into contemporary English." Okay. This can be lots of fun, let's take a look. [She opens her paperback copy of the play.] Open your books to the fight scene please, page [X].

Now imagine it: you have these guys raging at each other, and they've been doing it for years, they're gonna fight now, and they're gonna fight so bad a couple of 'em end up stabbed to death. Now instead of saying [reading from book], "Thou wretched boy that didst consort with him shalt with him hence," Tybalt would say it differently, today he'd say maybe "You fuckin' bastard! You're dead meat!" [Class noise resumes a bit.] Got the picture? Okay, go to it! [Class noise increases.]

Scene 2: (principal's office)

[Teacher enters principal's office.] You wanted to see me?

() [She sits down.]

“Why did I take it upon myself to introduce vulgarities into a lesson?” What are you talking about?

()

Oh, Ms. McGraw's class. I didn't 'introduce' anything, the assignment she left instructed the students to rewrite a Shakespearean scene into contemporary English.

()

No, I didn't say “you fuckin' bastard”--well, I mean yes, I said it, but I was quoting a character, Tybalt.

()

Well then you'd better take a good look in the library and get rid of about half the books in there; I guess Mr. Johnson's film study course will have to go as well. Both are full of characters who swear.

()

Well I understand last year's major play had a homicide in it, but I don't think the community thought you therefore condoned murder.

()

They said that? They said I said it was okay to swear? And you believed them? Well aren't you a damned fool.

()

No, I won't promise never to swear in the classroom again. I didn't swear in the classroom in the first place. The most I could do is promise never again to quote a character who swears. But--

()

Offensive? Give me a break. When the basketball coach reams out the losing boys' team in the locker room by saying "Look, ladies, you've got to start playing with your eyes open," that's offensive. To every lady on the planet. But when someone mutters "Damn it!" upon hammering their finger, that's just frustration. And it's a lot better than flinging the hammer across the room.

()

I think it's appropriate if the character and/or the scene warrants it. Not to include swear words in the verbal exchange between two hot-headed male adolescents involved in a gang fight so impassioned that one kills the other would be, to my mind, unrealistic and would certainly reveal an incomplete understanding of character. Furthermore, Shakespeare himself used vulgarities all the time. Three times in the preceding scene, one of the characters screams "A plague upon your houses!" That's a curse! And there's much 'biting of the thumb' at each other.

()

Oh, it's an Elizabethan gesture. Perhaps the contemporary equivalent is [she gives him the 'finger'].

Scene 3: (classroom)

[Bell rings and teacher enters. Class noise.]

Could you please be quiet. [No change. She waits patiently. No change.] People--please be seated. [Noise slowly stops.]

Good morning, your regular teacher isn't here today; my name is Jude Beecher and I'm teaching his [checks timetable] history classes today. So--history. Of what?

()

I mean, what are you studying the history of?

()

Well--is it the history of scientific discoveries? The history of funny walks?

()

What do you mean you don't know. How can you study history for four months and not know what you're studying--no--I take that back--I don't want to hear the answer to that one. Okay, what was yesterday's lesson about?

()

War--okay--so this is a course on military history?

()

Not just wars, you say--okay, what else?

()

"Presidents and stuff." This is Canadian history, right? Okay, presidents--so it's also a history of people in positions of responsibility?

()

You don't think the presidency is a position of responsibility, it's a position of power. Okay, very good point. So this is a history course in military conflicts and power--

()

"And countries"--okay, a history of territorial claims, military conflicts, and power. Hm--is that what the course description says?

()

Can you leave? What do you mean--of course you can leave. [Her head follows as all thirty students walk out; she looks back at the empty classroom, flabbergasted, looks at the door, looks at the empty classroom, picks up her books, and leaves too.]

Scene 4: (principal's office)

[Teacher is in principal's office.]

Oh no, I disagree. They are responsible. We all are, of any age. Simple free will and cause and effect make us so. Whether or not we accept such responsibility, that's another question. And one, as long as a person is denied free will, as long as a child is not given choice, not allowed to make decisions, but is coerced, forced into doing things, and two, as long as person is denied the experience of cause and effect, as long as consequences are intercepted or as long as someone else takes the consequences for them, that person will not act responsibly, they will not accept the responsibility that is, whether they acknowledge it or not, theirs. When I said 'You can leave', I was stating the obvious. They just thought I was giving permission. Then again, no, they really didn't think that, they just thought they could get away with telling you that's what they thought.

()

No, I was merely stating the obvious: everyone is free to come and go.

()

Well, I didn't say the action would be without consequence. In my sphere of action, the consequence is they didn't get the benefit of my teaching. And in your sphere, in view of the law that requires them to attend, well I suppose you'd report them for truancy.

()

Right. I forgot. They told you I told them they could leave. You are such an idiot.

Scene 5: (classroom)

[Teacher enters classroom enthusiastically as the bell rings. Class noise decreases on its own

rather quickly this time.]

Good morning grade eleven music! What are you doing today?

()

Music from the 50s? Yeah? Cool! That stuff was fantastic to dance to, but there were a lot of perverted lyrics--

()

Well, consider Dion. "Run Around Sue"-- [breaking into song and dance]

Here's my story, it's sad but true

'Bout a girl that I once knew

She took my love then ran around

With very single guy in town..

Run Around Sue was a slut. But "The Wanderer"?

I'm the type of guy who likes to roam around

Where the pretty girls are, well you know that I'm around...

They call him the wanderer. What else would they call him?

()

Yeah, a stud. Do you see the double standard?

()

Good point. He'd also be called HIV positive. So would Run Around Sue.

Here's another one:

Ooooo weee ooo ooo ooo ooo ooo ooo

Anyone? For 200 points?

()

Yes! "Walk like a Man!" I've always wondered exactly how is that, how does one walk like a man? [She lopes ape-like across the stage on all fours, then walks like a football player with an

attitude, then marches like robo-soldier and salutes.]

And such ridiculous expectations! [again singing]

Chantilly lace and a pretty face

And a pony tail hanging down

A wiggle in her walk and a giggle in her talk, Lord!

That's what men want? And the women? What do they want?

My boyfriend's back and you're gonna be in trouble

Why, does she have a gun? No,

'Cuz he's kinda big and he's awful strong.

It's sad actually, you end up with these pathetic people:

Only you can make this world seem right

Frightening, isn't it? Such dependency! Such illusions!

[seeing raised hand] Yes?

()

This is boring? [pauses a moment to catch up to this complete non-sequitur] Yeah, so what's your point?

()

Well I don't find it boring. You find it boring. That would make it your problem.

()

Oh I'm supposed to make it interesting for you. Okay, suppose--just suppose--for a moment--for a brief moment--that I accept responsibility for your happiness. What would make it interesting for you, what do you want to learn about?

()

You don't know. Of course not.

Scene 6:

[Teacher says this to audience as audience.]

Allow me to introduce Willy the Wasteland, the class rep. First and foremost, Willy the Wasteland is bored. He is especially and chronically bored at school because he can't change channels. He has to watch the same program for a whole hour. The program has only one main actor with no costume changes. It has only one set. The camera uses only one angle. (Unless you get up out of your seat and move around.) (Which Willy does.) (A lot.) There is no soundtrack. And it happens in real time: in one hour, only one hour passes by.

This state of affairs is a problem for Willy because he can't concentrate under those conditions. (It is my belief that he may not be able to concentrate under any conditions.) Because, you see, in a thirty-second commercial, the image changes ten to fifteen times. That's once every two seconds. Music videos are just as fragmented: you never see a whole dance step; often you don't even see a whole body. Willy the Wasteland probably finds strobe lights soothing. On the radio, as on MTV, there's a different song every three minutes, and in between, a different voice every thirty seconds advertising a different product; and the deejay changes pitch more often in one sentence than most of us do in a whole day. Even a newspaper (should Willy be able to read) presents material in bits and pieces seldom longer than two or three hundred words with individual sentences no longer than seven or eight words. So poor Willy doesn't get to--doesn't have to--can't--maintain a focus for very long. It is my belief that Willy is turning into a frog--he only 'sees' things that move.

Secondly, Willy doesn't know what to do about his boredom. He can't amuse himself, he can't imagine. His internal landscape is, well, not. (Is it because he's never had practice? He's used to

having input provided for him, and it's always so explicit, there's no need to manufacture his own content.) (And my god, if he can't imagine, if he can't rehearse his options, he'll be forced to do it, to act out all of it--)

So Willy tells his teachers that it's their fault, it's their responsibility, they're supposed to entertain him. Most principals, being only one step ahead of Willy, on any evolutionary scale, agree: teachers should make the class interesting. Forget encouraging delayed gratification (that rite of passage out of infancy). Forget questioning the premise that everything should be interesting. (He learned how to use a toilet, and I'm sure that was no subject of great fascination.) (Then again--)

Willy can't concentrate. Willy can't think. (Could Willy be 'the missing link'?) Is there a relationship here? Maybe 'intelligence' is directly related to the ability to concentrate, the ability to focus, and to hold a focus mentally, inside.

But then again, maybe that's not the problem at all. Maybe the problem is that the prerequisite for interest is care and Willy doesn't care--about anything. Because to care is to presume power: to care about X when you can have no effect on X is to set yourself up for great mental and emotional anguish. Willy is simply exhibiting the healthy response, the logical response. If his belief in his powerlessness is valid. And maybe it is. Maybe I'm the one out to lunch.

Scene 7: (principal's office)

[Teacher enters principal's office.]

And what can I do for you today?

()

What do you mean by “unprofessional attire”?

()

Okay, what do you mean by “professional”?

()

No, I don't know what it means. Sometimes it means you're very good at it. Sometimes it means you're getting paid for it. Usually the two are mistakenly thought to be related. But what does it mean when it describes my attire?

()

Okay, what's “inappropriate” about it?

()

Did you used to work for a dictionary company? What “certain standard” might that be?

()

An “expectation”--whose?

()

But why? Why are jeans “simply not acceptable”? Is there some intrinsic problem with the colour blue? Is it the fabric? Something I don't know about, some power of denim that makes me forget everything I know about teaching?

()

Well, if you have nothing against jeans and you wear them when you're relaxing on the weekend, then aren't you being a bit of a hypocrite?

()

Why is school different? Is it that we're not supposed to relax here? I suspect people work better when they're relaxed--

()

Oh, is this argument related to 'no pain, no gain'? Maybe the school uniform should be a hairshirt.

()

What? You'd have no objection if I wore a denim skirt? You mean it's okay as long as my legs are showing?

()

Yeah right. If my students really saw me as a role model, they wouldn't be throwing their books around, they wouldn't be coming to class unprepared, they wouldn't be absent more often than not. And they wouldn't be listening to country music.

()

You want to know what I think? I think the appropriate attire for teachers here is the straitjacket.

Scene 8:

[Teacher speaks to audience as audience.]

I just had a class out in the portable. And the students were coming in and out and in and out, talking, shouting, laughing, and there I am trying to take attendance, and they're in and out and then I try to explain what they were to work on, and they're still in and out and in and out and I said "Look--make up your mind: if you want to come to class, then come, and stay in; and if you don't, then please stay out!"

But they ignored me and kept on going in and out--one goes out and gets a can of pop then comes back in, then one goes out for a smoke, comes back in and asks a friend, calling from the door to the other side of the room, "Do you have a light?" and then two others call across the room to each other and decide to go out to see something--

They were completely oblivious to the fact that I was a teacher, they were students, this was a classroom, and a class was in progress. Unbelievable. So. When everyone was out but two-- there were two students who were co-operating and working on the assignment--I locked the door.

Well. You should've heard them! "Fuckin' bitch locked us out!" "She can't do that!" "How're we supposed to learn if we can't get into class?!" "You can't do this, we have a right to an education!" And then eventually someone threw a crushed can at the window. "We're going to the principal to complain!"

Scene 9: (principal's office)

[Teacher pokes her head from offstage, into principal's office.]

You wanted to see me--again?

()

[As she enters and sits down.] Yes, that's correct.

()

But surely at some point that right can be denied, forfeited.

()

Okay, then how would you have controlled the situation--you've got students talking and going in and out with total disregard--

()

[grinning in disbelief at his naivete] "Ask them to please be quiet and be seated." Well, suppose--I

mean--I know this is a long shot and probably would never happen, but just suppose--they didn't.

Suppose they didn't do what you asked them to do. Then what?

()

Okay. [still playing along, in disbelief] But suppose they wouldn't tell you why they were acting as they were, suppose they refused to discuss the problem with you. Suppose--suppose they just laughed at your question. Suppose they didn't hear your question.

()

Okay, and suppose while you were busy ignoring their bad behaviour in order to extinguish it, it just got worse.

()

Okay, suppose I sent 'the troublemakers' to you. Suppose they didn't go.

()

But I don't know their names--they wouldn't tell me.

()

Okay, suppose I called you to come escort them to your office--all twenty of them. Suppose they don't all follow you back to your office.

()

Okay, suppose you recall all twenty faces and recognize them in the student card file, then what?

()

You'd suspend them? And deny them their right to an education?! [She gets up and leaves.]

Asshole.

Scene 10:

[Teacher speaks to audience as audience.]

Just got off the phone with Mrs. Whatever [mimes her end of the conversation]

“Well, I can't do my job when I spend most of my time doing your job.”

“Oh he's good, all right, he's a good example of arrested development: your son acts like a two-year-old.”

“Yes I know how old he is, that's my point.”

“No, I understand now, thank you. You're a fucking bitch too.”

Scene 11: (classroom)

[Teacher is already in classroom. A little class noise which quickly stops.]

Hi, Mr. Arnold isn't here today, I'll be taking this class for him. Now [looking at assignment sheet], I understand you're to work on a project concerning landforms? [There is no response from the class.] Is that a project you've already begun or should there be assignment sheets somewhere to hand out? [There is no response from the class.] This is Arnold's grade ten geography, yes? Thump once for 'yes', twice for 'no'. [There is no response from the class.] Room 106, period 2? [There is no response from the class. Teacher hits imaginary communicator just below left shoulder.] 'Sensors indicate no intelligent life forms. One to beam up. Please?'

Scene 12: (principal's office)

[Teacher is in principal's office, already seated.]

Yes, that's correct. The failure rate in my classes is 45%.

()

It's not supposed to be any higher than 20%? Well, I guess the students don't know that. They should work harder then.

()

Well I could blame you, but that wouldn't make sense. Would it?

()

Certainly I can justify my figures. 29 of the 36 students who failed did not hand in at least half of the required assignments. Another one did hand in everything, but with only his name on it. As well, all failing students were absent at least fifteen days during the term, that's three weeks of missed school. I offered to send work home with a friend--sometimes they knew in advance if they'd be sick, you see--but they laughed. I offered a make-up test where applicable and they laughed harder: they insisted that if they weren't there for a test, they couldn't possibly fail it. And, in a recent class survey, 65% of the students said they'd never done any of the homework in this course and 70% said they weren't trying very hard. Then I took the liberty of looking into their files: another five got 50% in grade nine English, grade ten English, and grade eleven English. Now what do you think the odds are of getting a fifty?

()

One in a hundred. Did you get a 50 in math?

()

Oh. It's a school policy. No student gets a mark lower than 35, and all marks in the forties are 50. And Pickering is a safe nuclear power plant. Got it.

()

Yes, raising all of the marks by 15% would bring the failure rate down. It would also give six students a mark of 105% or better.

()

Oh. The computer can handle only two digits.

()

“Nothing succeeds like success”? How can success succeed? I bet your English mark was also 50.

Scene 13: (classroom)

[Teacher enters classroom. Class noise persists after bell rings.]

Could you please be quiet--

People, we need quiet before--

When you're quiet, well begin--

[noisy class quietens] Thank you. Now, could you--[she is interrupted by a latecomer; noise increases]--just sit in the nearest empty desk--class, could you please be quiet--

Look what's gonna happen here is the more you don't listen to me, the more I'm going to believe I'm not worth listening to, and then the less I'm going to be concerned about what I say, the less I'll be worth listening to. I spent two hours preparing for this class. If this is how you're going to behave, I sure as hell won't spend two hours on tomorrow's class. And if you think I'm not worth paying attention to today, wait till you hear the sloppy shit that comes out of my mouth tomorrow.

[A student presumably raises a hand; she responds with some enthusiasm] Yes, a comment?

()

[disbelief; deflation] No, you just had a ten minute break between classes.

()

Then piss on the floor!

Scene 14:

[Teacher says this to audience as audience.]

You see, the trouble is I watched "To Sir with Love" too many times in my formative years.

And I keep forgetting about the boxing match. That was the turning point for Poitier.

Students think nothing of coming to class ten minutes late, as if my lessons are soap operas and you can miss chunks of them and still know what's going on; Terry echoes everything I say in a tone that drips with derision; Sean sits at the back, silent, smirking at anything I do that doesn't work, like a question that no one answers or a story that no one has read; Matt got up and turned off the video as I was introducing the lesson; I failed to pick out all the relevant assignments from Adam's very messy file and thus neglected to give credit for one page of writing--he yelled at me "If you're gonna do it, at least do it right!" and slammed the file drawer shut; after I told the class for the 98th time that if they talk and miss the lesson, it's their fault, a student hurled at me "You're supposed to control the class, that's your job, not ours!"

That's it. They want me to control them. They refuse to accept the responsibility of controlling themselves. Why? Because self-control implies free will. People are afraid of freedom. That's why they get angry when no rules are suggested. Freedom entails responsibility--responsibility to make one's own rules--and well people generally don't like responsibility.

Scene 15: (principal's office)

[Teacher is in principal's office.]

()

Well, let me see, I tried the authoritative approach you suggested, putting the students in rows, but they simply shouted across the room to have conversations with their friends. We also tried putting the desks in a circle. Everyone made faces at each other. For a whole week. We tried a student-run democracy then--but they broke their own rules. When I tried teacher-centred learning, they complained that the course was boring, and when I tried student-centred learning, they said they couldn't come up with anything they wanted to learn about. We tried group work, but that was just party time. I tried simply ignoring the negative behaviour, but it always got worse.

()

Be consistent? What happened to be flexible?

()

If I expect them to behave, they will. Right. Well, I started off expecting them to behave. But sane people adjust their expectations to fit reality.

()

The students who are having trouble settling down to work? You mean the ones who call me a bitch or start beating up other students? Well, I've already winnowed out as many of the ones with learning disabilities, hyperactivity, and attention span deficits as the resource and withdrawal room will take.

()

Oh, I did that. I've talked to them in class, in the hall, and privately at lunch.

()

I did that too. Apparently they don't keep their appointments with the counsellors.

()

I did that. They don't bother showing up.

()

Did that too. One kid has 316 detentions he hasn't shown up for.

()

Oh, I did that too. One came back, after seeing you, told me to go to hell, and threw his books on the floor. Every five minutes. For seventy-five minutes. Another is ten minutes late every day now, instead of five. Another--

()

I know our job is to teach these kids, and I know we can't do that if they're not here. But we can't do it if they are here, but irregularly so, chronically unprepared, and obstinately unwilling. *The Education Act* also specifies it is the duty of pupils to "be diligent in attempting to master their studies, to exercise self-discipline, and to be courteous to fellow pupils and obedient and courteous to teachers". Well, if they don't fulfil their part of the contract, I figure I'm released from mine.

()

Yes, I thought you'd agree.

Scene 16:

[Teacher speaks to audience as audience.]

Actually, I was finally able to 'manage the class' and 'achieve control'--hypnosis worked.

I suspect I was also able to successfully teach the intricate steps of “The Bird Dance”. We'll find out next time someone says the words “Dance you motherfuckers dance.”

Scene 17: (principal's office)

[Teacher enters principal's office.]

Well, hello there, long time no see. [sits enthusiastically in chair]

()

No, I don't stand for the national anthem.

()

Well, first of all, it's a bit arbitrary, isn't it? I mean, why not play the school anthem instead, or the provincial anthem, or the planetary anthem? Why glorify that particular group membership?

Second, why foster groupiness at all? I prefer to encourage individuality. It's much less dangerous.

()

Well, I guess I'm against anything that divides us into little groups--especially territorial groups. And I'm definitely against encouraging this kind of gang feeling--I think tribalism is the current buzzword for it. If you have a sense of self, you don't need to find your identity in a group.

()

No, I believe, like Einstein, that “nationalism is an infantile disease.”

()

No I didn't stand for the prayer either, but that was different.

()

Well, partly because I'm not a Christian.

()

I'm atheist. "Religion is the opiate of the masses."

()

No, that was Marx. Karl.

()

No, I don't think I'm a communist. I agree with a lot of what he said in his *Manifesto*, but surely you know that applied communism is much different than--

()

If standing for the prayer was simply a show of respect for others' right to religious expression, then you'd broadcast a variety of religious prayers--but you give only the Christians the opportunity to pray aloud in class. Which makes me wonder, why do they need to do it in public?

()

I hardly think I'm a revolutionary. Surely you know people who think as I do.

()

Well, step into the staffroom some time during opening exercises.

()

Well, no one stands for the anthem in there. Or the prayer.

()

Oh, you don't require teachers to stand for opening exercises in the staff room? So what, you just want us to put on a little show in the classroom?

()

And what example are you wanting me to set for the students--

()

But I don't agree with it: "The true north strong and free"--please; "I'll stand on guard for thee"--but I won't; "With glowing hearts--"

()

I know you aren't asking me to sing it, but when I stand for something, well, I stand for something.

()

Well, if it doesn't really mean anything, why are you upset?

Scene 18: (classroom set - blackboard showing)

[Teacher says this to audience to audience; she has a copy of *The Education Act* with her.]

You know, he's right. It's in *The Education Act*, Section 229.1(c): "It is the duty of a teacher to inculcate by precept and example [she writes each one on the board, making a list]

- "respect for religion and the principles of Judaeo-Christian morality"--this one violates the Charter, doesn't it? Freedom of religion?

- "the highest regard for truth"--but see we have a contradiction here already [she draws a line connecting truth and religion]

- "justice, loyalty, love of country"--here's his case [points to loyalty and love of country]--but it's because I love my country that I don't want to see its young people caught up in nationalistic fervour, joining the killing corps

- "humanity"--the highest regard for humanity necessarily excludes love of country [draws line connecting love of country and humanity]

- "benevolence, sobriety, industry, frugality"--yeah right, do you know how much paper this school wastes?

- "purity"--what the hell is purity?

- "temperance"--temperance?

- and here's my case: "and all other virtues" [underlines this one]

When the principal insists we all stand for an anthem or a prayer, he's "inculcating by precept", but when I teach about political purchasing, I'm accused of "pushing my values on my students." It's not just that I'm being compelled to display love of country--it must be a very specific, particular kind of display. But standing for the anthem is not the only, nor even the best, way to inculcate love of country--surely my concern for the environment displays my love of country. So it's pretty clear the issue is not nationalism at all. It's obedience.

So what am I going to do? Concede? Isn't it a small price to pay for--for what? Three months and I'll have a down payment on a cabin on a lake in a forest. Then I can quit--and oh yes I will--I can get out of here and live happily ever after. I'll probably never have the chance to make this much money this quickly again. Hell I'll probably never have the chance to make this much money again period.

So. Is that the name of the game--The Price is Right? [launches into game show/revival preacher mode] Step right up folks, for \$10,000 our next contestant will retract any value--that's right--any value at all, you name it, she'll put her tail between her legs and say 'Yes!' Do you believe in God? Yes! Do you believe God is a man? Yes! Do you believe he lives in heaven and has a long white beard? Yes, oh yes! And do you love your country? Yes! Will you stand on guard for it? Oh yes! And will you wear a dress in the classroom? Yes, polyester even! In beige!

Scene 19: (classroom)

[Class noise. Teacher enters carrying the usual stuff and takes centre stage...]

Good morning, my name is--could you please be quiet--[she waits patiently for a whole minute, going around to sit at desk halfway through--to no avail]

[Standing again in front of her desk] People--we need quiet before--this is grade eleven Theatre Arts? Look, could you please--[she turns the lights off and back on--it has no effect on class noise level]

[There is a knock on the door; she opens the door; class noise immediately cuts in half; we hear a deep male voice say "A little noisy, aren't we?" and the class is immediately silent; she closes the door; class noise resumes.]

[She looks back at the door and then at the class. She stands on a nearby footstool, gaining six inches, and class noise reduces a bit. She opens a nearby prop box, pulls out suitcoat and tie and puts them on; class noise reduces a bit more. She pulls out a beard and sticks it on; noise reduces even further. She then pulls out a large cucumber, considers, then pulls out instead a small pickle, and sticks it in her jeans; class is silent.]

Scene 20: (principal's office)

[Teacher is in principal's office, already seated.]

()

Yes, they said they were coming here when they walked out. Did you have a nice chat?

()

Sort of.

()

Well yes I was sitting at the back of the room and yes I refused to participate in that class. It was a simulation exercise. We started a unit on business meetings today and I decided that a simulation would be an excellent pre-test and also a motivator: I put an agenda on the board and told them to have a class meeting. I said that I was not part of it, they'd have to work through their problems on their own at this point as if it were a real meeting. I anticipated failure. Not gunshot, but failure. That would establish motivation. I had planned to debrief tomorrow. And I was going to repeat the simulation at the end of the unit.

()

Oh yes it did--it did work. We'll discuss why half of them left the meeting, why they were unable to complete their task.

()

To have explained it all would've ruined it.

()

No [proudly] this isn't the first time students have walked out of my class.

()

Don't you see what's happening here? It's the problem with grey. Black and white is easier to deal with; it's hard to navigate through grey I present them with. I admit to not knowing something, so suddenly I must not know anything. I ask for feedback, I open myself to a little criticism, and suddenly everything I do is under attack; they're new at being critical, they've never been encouraged before--so they're thoughtless, cruel, and unjustified in their criticism. I give them a choice, the option of saying no, and now they're refusing everything; they're making bad choices--until they get good at it.

()

Of course they resist. It's harder to think for yourself than to simply do as you're told. If they're used to being told what to do, when to do it, and how to do it, then of course my class is

frustrating. But it's not my class that's the problem.

()

What do you mean?

()

And you believe them, don't you. Damn it, why do you think my students know more about pedagogy than I do? If I teach one novel one way and another novel another way, that doesn't mean I don't know what I'm doing! Each novel is different, of course I use different teaching methods. And it keeps the course more interesting. And it's fairer to the different learning styles of the students.

()

They're in grade twelve. So yes I expect them to be able to take notes--on their own--as we talk.

Yes I expect them to be able to listen and write. At the same time.

()

My expectations are too high?

()

Are you serious? I should tell them what paragraph on what page of the text they're to copy into their notes? But--one learns by being challenged--

()

Oh, that's priceless. "The students don't want to be challenged--they just want to get their credit and get out of here." Are you sure you're talking about the students?

Scene 21: (classroom set, with blackboard showing)

[Teacher is writing on the classroom blackboard, speaking to audience as audience.]

I'm just writing out an announcement for tomorrow morning. [writes] "Do you believe abortion is okay? Should gay people be allowed to marry? Should we genetically engineer our food? If you think about controversial issues, come to Room 232 at 4:00 today for the first meeting of T.C.I.'s discussion club, 'The Forum'." What do you think?

Actually, at the last school I was at, this was censored a bit--they didn't want the word 'abortion' mentioned--afraid of parents calling. So maybe I'll just save some time and take it out now [erases that sentence].

And [sighs] if I leave this in [erasing the line about gay people], they'll think I'm gay for sure.

()

You're right [erasing the line about genetic engineering]--who knows what their cafeteria contracts are.

Oh and we can't have anything controversial in school--that's been made clear [erases "about controversial issues"].

Thinking is taboo [erases "If you think"] and so is discussion [erases "for the...Forum"]. So. What have we got? [reading what's left] "Come to Room 232 at 4:00 today." Good. Exactly the kind of thing they'll approve.

Scene 22: (principal's office)

[Teacher is in principal's office.]

I don't have any attendance records.

()

No, I don't keep track of attendance anymore.

()

Well one, it's irrelevant--education can happen without attendance and it can not happen with attendance. And I'm here to educate. And two--

()

Yes, I know it's compulsory in this province for a person to attend school until they're sixteen.

That's an administrative rule, not a pedagogical rule. To taking and ensuring attendance is your job, not mine.

()

If a student gets a borderline mark, attendance records are used to determine pass or fail? Well that's rather stupid. If you're not sure whether the student has mastered the material, re-test--how many times they were sitting in class won't tell you anything.

()

You mean the school gets so much money per student enrolled--and that if a student is absent so many times they're considered not enrolled? So this is all about money? You need attendance records to get money? Unbelievable.

[She leaves, delivering the rest from offstage.]

And three, I believe that making attendance mandatory is the main reason we're failing to educate.

It's not that the teachers aren't dedicated or competent. And it's not that what we teach is irrelevant. And it's not the kids. 'Cuz when I see the same kids, not just the bluebirds, but the sparrows too, when I see them outside of school, most of them don't spit on me.

What is it about school that brings out the worst in so many kids? They have to come. In other cultures, going to school is a privilege, here it's a punishment. Because they're forced to be here.

But no, no, you throw up your hands. If we don't make attendance compulsory, we'll have an entire generation of uneducated people. Hello. What do you think we're getting? Attendance is mandatory, not education. You can't make education mandatory. Have you so little faith in the value of education that unless forced, people won't want it? Nor one forced us to learn how to speak and we did it--well, except for [recalling a student]--and [and another]--well, most of us--and we did it voluntarily, without the bribe of marks and without the threat of punishment. And learning to speak is the most difficult task we accomplish in our entire lives. Well, besides getting up in the morning.

Scene 23: (classroom)

[Teacher enters noisy class.]

Good afternoon--so, we're into our last week, how does it feel? What I'd like you to do today is write an evaluation, to wrap up the course. One page of what you liked and what you didn't like, what you learned, what you'd change if you could, what you'd keep the same, that sort of thing, okay?

()

Yes, one page.

()

Yes, you can print big. But don't forget, even with crayons, you have to use periods and capital letters.

()

Ten of each.

()

What? No. It doesn't matter where you put them, put them anywhere. Put the periods over the 'i's, they look good there. Or put a couple over an 'a' and make an umlaut.

()

It's a Danish coffeecake.

Scene 24:

[Teacher speaks to audience as audience.]

Well, the end of the semester is just around the corner, and next semester Ms. Gregory will be back--I understand her psychiatrist says she's much better now.

I went to the principal--in spite of everything--because of everything--and offered to establish an annual prize, an Award for Independent Thinking, to be given to a graduating student each year. You know that look of incomprehension, the look Sultan probably had on his face before he understood he could pile the crates on top of each other to reach the banana?

Well, anyway, the offer was not accepted—"It would not be practical to administer." But it's practical to administer all those sports awards, they give a prize, for pete's sake, to whoever jumps the highest. Yes, they do that, don't they...

Scene 25: (principal's office)

[Teacher enters principal's office.]

That sign on the gate to the school's parking lot--has that always been there?

()

The one that says it's "illegal for a person to enter with intent contrary to *The Education Act*."

()

Well, then over half my students are here illegally. Aren't you going to have them arrested? No, I've got a better idea. [She uses the phone on his desk, dialling 911.] Yes, this is Jude Beecher, I'm over at the local collegiate, and I'd like your assistance with a citizen's arrest--the school's principal.

Scene 26: (classroom)

[Teacher enters classroom just as bell rings. Class noise decreases relatively quickly.]

Good morning. So, what have we got today, Science? Math? French?

()

Ah [looking at assignment sheet and laughing]--this is priceless: Society, Challenge, and Change.

[blackout]

Not fuckin' likely.