

♣ The Possibilities

.....HOWARD BARKER

CHARACTERS: THE OFFICIAL (30's), THE WOMAN (20's)

SETTING: *An office, the present.*

This is a collection of short and witty plays about power, morality and sex. Sometimes all three. This one is called, "She Sees the Argument But".

(A WOMAN OFFICIAL, seated behind a desk. A WOMAN enters, stands before her)

THE OFFICIAL: We are so glad you could come.

WOMAN: It was — *(She makes a gesture of casualness)*

THE OFFICIAL: So glad. *(Pause)* I can see your ankle. *(Pause)* Do you realize that? *(Pause)* You do realize, of course. *(Pause)* And your eyes are outlined in —

WOMAN: Mascara.

OFFICIAL: Mascara, yes. *(Pause)* Very glad you came because we want to understand and I think you do, too. Terribly want to understand! *(Pause)* You see, all this is, we believe, a positive encouragement to criminality. Speak if you want to. *(Pause)* We feel you aid the social enemy. You put yourself at risk, but also, others. The ankle is — your ankle in particular is — immensely stimulating, as I think you know.

WOMAN: I have good ankles.

OFFICIAL: Good? I don't know about good, do you? In what way good? In a sense they are very bad because they stimulate this feeling I am referring to.

WOMAN: I don't like boiler suits.

OFFICIAL: People call them boiler suits! The word boiler suit is meant to — isn't it — prejudice? I don't think we should have called them boiler suits in the first place. In any case we did not succeed with them. For one thing, girls tightened the seats, or undid buttons far below the needs of ventilation. So, indeed, I share your irritation with the boiler suit. But the ankle. What are you trying to do? *(Pause)* You can speak to me, you know. We only want to understand.

WOMAN *(Pause)*: I wish to — this is a difficult question —

OFFICIAL: Is it? You have drawn attention to your ankle, so presumably you must know why.

(Pause)

WOMAN: Not really, no.

OFFICIAL: You don't know why! How bewildering! You go and buy a length of rather fine wool — many weeks of wages for a typist, I suggest — cut, alter and hem it at this specific point, showing the ankle — without knowing why. Is that honestly the case?

(Pause) I am so glad you came in.

WOMAN (Pause): I wanted men to suffer for me.

OFFICIAL: (Pause): Suffer?

WOMAN: Torment, yes.

OFFICIAL (Pause): I think, don't you, society is so riddled with crisis now, so much healing needs to be done? Crisis after crisis? The food crisis, the health crisis, the newspaper crisis, the suicide epidemic, the lunacy epidemic? So much despair and so much healing to be done? And you say, to all this misery I would add a little more despair, a despair of my own making because it is despair, isn't it? The effect of your ankle on the morning tram, despair?

WOMAN: Yes. Longing and despair.

OFFICIAL: Though of course, among the despairing lurks the criminal. And he, tormented as you wish, will not walk home in silence to his wife, and take his children in his arms with a slightly distant look . . . No, the criminal will own. No city banker has more passion to own. Which is why we stipulated, for a while, the boiler suit. For a long time this damped the criminal statistics. Then they crept up again, thanks to the tightening of the seat and the unnecessary open buttons. You advertise your sexuality.

WOMAN: Yes.

OFFICIAL: I am so glad you came in! (Pause) Why don't you marry and show this ankle to your husband?

WOMAN: I am married.

OFFICIAL: You are married! Then why aren't you satisfied to show this ankle in the privacy of your own home?

WOMAN: I don't know.

OFFICIAL: Perhaps you have a secret longing to betray him?

WOMAN: I'm certain of it.

OFFICIAL: You no longer love him?

WOMAN: I love him.

OFFICIAL: You love your husband but you show your ankles to any stranger in the hope of tormenting him, is that correct?

WOMAN: I think so, yes.

OFFICIAL: And where is your responsibility towards the male who cannot contain the lust you stimulate in him?

WOMAN: He should bear his suffering.

OFFICIAL: But you impose it on him!

WOMAN: Yes, and he must bear it. Perhaps I may be seduced. A correct glance or gesture, even a sign of modesty, may do the trick.

OFFICIAL: You are a married woman and you say you may be seduced —

WOMAN: Yes, I am trying to be honest —

OFFICIAL: Bewildering honesty!

WOMAN: Well, do you want me to be honest or not? *(Pause)* I have not yet met this man. But somewhere I have no doubt he does exist.

OFFICIAL: And you are seeking him?

WOMAN *(Pause)*: I think so, yes.

OFFICIAL *(Pause)*: The world goes on, crises occur, we struggle towards the perfection of democracy, and you, a married woman, dangles her ankle on the bus.

WOMAN *(Pause)*: Yes.

OFFICIAL: *You deserve every unwelcome attention that you get.*

WOMAN: Ah . . .

OFFICIAL: And I must say, were some monster brought before me on a charge of violation I should say half-guilty, only half! *(Pause)* My feelings. My real feelings have — soaked through . . .

WOMAN: Good.

OFFICIAL: Don't please, carry your enthusiasm for honesty to such inordinate and —

[(A MAN has entered and sits at the back)]

WOMAN: Who's he . . . ?

OFFICIAL: The question is, are you mad?

WOMAN: Who's he?

OFFICIAL: I am married, and I have children also, I am capable of love, and have a sexual life, but I do not display myself in public, do I? Perhaps you are mad, have you considered —

WOMAN: Who is he?

OFFICIAL: You see, you cannot see a man without —

WOMAN: I just wanted to —

OFFICIAL: The very locality of a man sets off in you some —

WOMAN: How can I continue to be honest when there is a —

OFFICIAL: *He is a human being just like us. (Pause)* Such is the scale of your obsession you refuse to believe he can observe you simply

as a person. You think, my ankle will prevent him being a *person* and force him to be a *man*. You continually subvert his right to be a simple person, you *oppress him*. (*Pause*) But he refuses you. He is free. How peaceful he is. He observes you with a wonderful and objective comradeship. Your ankle is simply an exposed and consequently, somewhat absurd, piece of human flesh. Does he show you his? He also has an ankle.

WOMAN (*Pause*): You are trying to wreck our sanity.

OFFICIAL: Oh, listen, if rational argument is going to be construed as an attempt on your sanity, then your sanity has to be doubted. Is it wrecking your sanity if a man does not suffer your sex?

WOMAN: Perhaps.

OFFICIAL: You define yourself by sexuality?

WOMAN: Yes —

OFFICIAL: You admit your slavery to some arbitrary gendering?

WOMAN: Yes —

OFFICIAL: Bewildering!

WOMAN: I think — this man — this person — frightens me more than a violator would —

OFFICIAL: Oh!

WOMAN: *I am trying to be honest.*

OFFICIAL: *Well, that's not enough!* (*Pause*) That's merely an indulgence. You want us to admire you. But we think you are possibly mad.

WOMAN (*Pause*): I have to go.

OFFICIAL: The question is, have we the resources to provide a police force whose time and energy are consumed in searching for the violator of women like you? After all, there is a crisis.

(*Pause*)

[(THE WOMAN goes to THE MAN)]

WOMAN: You must try to save yourself.

OFFICIAL: Ha!

WOMAN: Yes, you have to try —

OFFICIAL: You look an idiot in those heels —

WOMAN: Look — look at me —

OFFICIAL: He is not moved — he merely suffers the embarrassment any man feels in the presence of a woman who is mad —

WOMAN: Look at me — [(*She slaps him around the face*)]

THE MAN: She hit me!

(*Pause*. THE WOMAN goes to the table, leans on it)

WOMAN: You want me to be mad, when it is you who is mad.

OFFICIAL: Am I wearing funny heels? Is my clothing so tight I can-

not move naturally? Find a mirror, look in it, and ask yourself who's mad. Look in your eyes, which are ringed with soot, and ask yourself who's mad?

WOMAN (*Pause. THE WOMAN is still*): You make me ashamed . . . of things I should not be ashamed of . . .

OFFICIAL: We only want to understand . . .

(*Pause. THE WOMAN leaves the table, goes out. The sound of her heels descending stone stairs*)

Source: Riverrun Press Inc.