

THE CRITIC

a play

by

Alex Broun

email: abroun@bigpond.net.au

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The Critic

was first performed by

Hullabaloo Theatre

at

The Crypt Theatre – The Cat & Fiddle Hotel, Balmain, Sydney,

on the 3rd of May, 2006,

with the following cast:

ALAN FISHER: **Bren Foster**

KARL ANDERTON: **Richard Mason**

The production was directed by **Felicity Nicol**,
produced by **Louise Tychsen** with Dramaturgy by **Adam Gelin**, design by **Rebecca
Williams** and lighting design by **Larry Kelly**.

Characters

KARL ANDERTON - a theatre critic, 50s.

ALAN FISHER - a playwright, 30s.

Scene

The living room of a suite in a shabby hotel.

Two tatty chairs and in front of them, a coffee table.

Near one wall is a mini-fridge next to a chest of drawers. On the chest of drawers is a phone.

Upstage left a door leads into the hotel corridor. Another door leads into a bathroom/bedroom area. Faded prints adorn the walls.

Time

The present.

“Alas, good friend, what profit can you see
In hating such a hateless thing as me ?”

- “**Lines to a Reviewer**”,
P. B. Shelley

1. Afternoon

DARKNESS

WE HEAR A KNOCK AT THE DOOR. SILENCE. THE KNOCK IS REPEATED - LOUDER. SILENCE.

THE DOOR UP LEFT OPENS, ILLUMINATING THE STAGE WITH A CHINK OF LIGHT.

KARL: Hello. Hello Mr. Shanley. (PAUSE) Mr. Shanley.

THE DOOR OPENS FURTHER.

IN SILHOUETTE WE SEE **KARL**, BACKLIT BY LIGHT FROM THE HALL. HE STEPS TENTATIVELY INTO THE ROOM.

KARL: Mr. Shanley ?

SUDDENLY THE DOOR SLAMS SHUT, PLUNGING US BACK INTO DARKNESS.

IN RAPID SUCCESSION WE HEAR A SERIES OF POWERFUL BLOWS, ACCOMPANIED BY **KARL** CRYING OUT IN PAIN.

A FINAL LOUD ANGRY BLOW. WE HEAR **KARL** COLLAPSE ON TO THE CARPET. LONG PAUSE.

THE LIGHT IS TURNED ON.

AT THE LIGHT SWITCH, WE SEE **ALAN** - 30S, DRESSED SCRUFFILY IN JEANS, T-SHIRT AND OLD BOOTS.

ON THE FLOOR IN FRONT OF THE SOFA LIES **KARL**- 50S, SLIGHTLY OVERWEIGHT, DRESSED NEATLY IN SLACKS, A SHIRT AND COMFORTABLE SHOES.

BESIDE HIM ON THE FLOOR LIES A SOFT LEATHER BAG. A NOTE PAD AND A TAPE RECORDER SPILL OUT ON TO THE FLOOR. **KARL** IS STILL.

ALAN EXITS, RIGHT. HE RETURNS WITH A GLASS OF WATER. HE POURS IT OVER **KARL'S** HEAD.

KARL COMES TOO. HE STARTS TO GROAN. HE OPENS HIS EYES. SUDDENLY HE STARTS TO PANIC REALISING WHAT HAS JUST HAPPENED. HE SCANS THE ROOM QUICKLY

KARL: What is it ? What's going on ?

HIS EYES SETTLE ON **ALAN**.

KARL: Oh, it's you.

ALAN: Sir Karl.

KARL: Alan.

HE HOLDS HIS NOSE, WHICH IS OOZING BLOOD.

KARL: You broke my nose.

ALAN DOES NOT RESPOND.

KARL: I said - you broke my nose.

ALAN : If I broke your nose, you wouldn't be able to talk.

KARL WIPES HIS NOSE WITH HIS HANDKERCHIEF.

KARL: I should've known. John Patrick Shanley would never stay in a dump like this.

ALAN : Why'd you come then ?

KARL: Curiosity killed the cat. I did think it all seemed a bit odd. Hotel room, mid-afternoon. Knock before entering, but I was blinded by my love for Shanley. Now there's a good writer. An intellect to be reckoned with.

ALAN: Pretentious crap.

KARL: In your humble opinion.

ALAN: Naturally.

KARL: Where is he anyway ?

ALAN: New York probably. (AMERICAN ACCENT) "You should check your sources more closely."

KARL: Thanks for the tip. Nice touch. The accent. You should've been an actor.

ALAN : You'll pardon me if I don't value your opinion too highly.

KARL: Naturally. Can I go now ?

ALAN : Not just yet.

KARL LOOKS DOWN AT HIS BAG. HE LOOKS TOWARDS THE UP LEFT DOOR.

ALAN : You'd never make it.

KARL: This is a little extreme, even for you.

ALAN : Perhaps.

KARL: Could I have a towel or something ?

ALAN MOVES TO **KARL** AND PICKS HIM UP.

KARL: What are you doing ?

ALAN PUTS **KARL** IN TO A CHAIR.

ALAN GOES TO THE CHEST OF DRAWERS. HE TAKES OUT TWO PAIRS OF HAND CUFFS AND SOME ROPE.

HE GOES BACK TO **KARL** AND CUFFS HIS HANDS TO THE ARMS OF THE CHAIR.

KARL: I'm being taken hostage. How exciting.

ALAN KNEELS AND TIES **KARL'S** FEET TO THE CHAIR'S FRONT LEGS.

KARL: If you're looking for ransom, I wouldn't hold my breath. My ex-wife'll be glad to get rid of me and my parents gave up years ago.

THE TYING IS COMPLETE. **KARL** STRUGGLES. HE IS HELD FAST.

KARL: I could scream.

ALAN : You could also lose half your teeth.

KARL: Good point. You're not going to do anything, are you ? (PAUSE)
Right. Looks like we're in for an afternoon of high drama ? Schaeffer with a touch of Stoppard.

ALAN : More like O'Neill, with a touch of Chekov.

KARL: (LOOKING AT HANDCUFFS) Props too ?

KARL BEGINS TO STRUGGLE ONCE MORE. HE STOPS.

KARL: This couldn't just be about the review, surely ? It must be more than the review.

ALAN : You've got too much power. It's time to cut you down to size.

KARL: It could've been worse. You could've written a ten minute play. (WEAK LAUGH) Bad joke. Listen, how about I say sorry and you let me off with a slap on the wrists ?

ALAN : The curtain has just come up and we're in for a tense first act.

KARL: I was just doing my job.

ALAN : You did a little more than that.

KARL: I was harsh, yes, I admit it. But justifiably so. The structure was weak and clumsy.

ALAN : "Haphazard and confusing".

KARL: The characters shallow and one dimensional.

ALAN : "Laughable and facile".

KARL: And the whole thing was just so dull.

ALAN : "A tedious evening that is mercifully short."

KARL: The set was good.

ALAN : "At least there's still the furniture to admire."

KARL: What an impressive memory you have.

ALAN : Melbourne's cancelled.

KARL: You can hardly blame me for that.

ALAN : And Perth and Brisbane.

KARL: They'll be others. You can bounce back. You've done it before.

ALAN : My agent doesn't seem to think so.

KARL: She's ...

ALAN : "Parted company".

KARL: There's plenty of agents.

ALAN : But only one critic.

KARL: You can't just blame me. The other's ...

ALAN : Slammed me too ?

KARL: Were just as harsh. What about Peter - and Lloyd ?

ALAN : They all take their lead from "the Axe". They just copy out yours and put it under a different by- line. You know that.

KARL: You're exaggerating.

ALAN : You - know - that !

KARL: Flattering, isn't it ? I think I'd like to go home now.

ALAN : I've been working on the play for five years. Not one, not two, not three - five years.

KARL: "Ulysses" took twelve.

ALAN : This was meant to be my come back. My triumphant return. "Once more into the breach".

KARL: It's not my fault I didn't like it.

ALAN : A national tour and then perhaps London. Washington were interested.

KARL: I have to tell the truth.

ALAN : All gone in five hundred words. "Phoenix sinks without trace."

KARL: Don't blame me for the title. Talk to the subbies.

ALAN : They're playing to ten percent. Tony's going to give it a week and then cut his losses. Seven more actors back on the dole cue.

KARL: My responsibility is to my readers. I must report to them what I see, without fear or favour.

ALAN : I got a fucking standing ovation !

KARL: A very short one from half the audience.

ALAN : They stood and applauded my work.

KARL: It was opening night. The house was stacked.

ALAN : Most of the audience hated my guts !

KARL: The play didn't work.

ALAN : People were in tears.

KARL: I'm not surprised. (SLIGHT PAUSE) This is ridiculous. A critic can't close a show. Many a time on Broadway a show has been panned only to go on to become a huge success. Look at Cate Blanchett.

ALAN : We're not on Broadway.

KARL: It's a universal principle.

ALAN : On the day your review appeared we had ten thousand dollars worth of cancellations. The phones haven't rung for a week.

KARL: The word was out.

ALAN : No one had even seen it. Word of mouth takes at least a week.

KARL: You shouldn't've been depending on a good review. It's ludicrous business sense to depend on a favourable review.

ALAN : We were counting on a bad one.

KARL: Well you got it.

ALAN : What we weren't counting on was the "worse review in Australian theatre history." A grand slam from the Axe.

ALAN GOES TO THE DOOR. STUCK ON THE BACK WITH STICKY TAPE IS A CLIPPING FROM A NEWSPAPER.

ALAN : (READS) "In a many chequered career Fisher has hit a new low. 'Phoenix' is the poorest new Australian play in recent, or ancient, memory."

KARL: I did like Barry Otto.

ALAN : (READS) "But the play. Awful. Awful. Awful."

KARL: It was unfavourable. I grant you that.

ALAN : "The worse review in Australian theatre history."

KARL: That was an exaggeration.

ALAN : She's your editor.

KARL: Your letter just inflamed things. If you'd let it die a natural death.

ALAN : Your reply didn't help.

KARL: I had to answer the allegations. And we did sell a lot of papers.

- ALAN : And that's what it's all about isn't it ? I was just cannon fodder so you could sell a few more of your precious papers.
- KARL: Not at all. We just happened to sell more papers that day than usual.
- ALAN : So even more people read about my "lackadaisical mish-mash." How nice.
- KARL: That's one way of looking at it. I suppose. The artist must be respected –
- ALAN: Respected ?
- KARL: Treated fairly, but in the end -
- ALAN: "Awful. Awful. Awful." Is that being respected ? Is that being treated fairly ?
- KARL: I am a critic. I offer an opinion. A lone voice. It is up to the reader what credence they choose to give it. If you're so passionate about the play, then work on it. Re-write. Tighten up the first act. Give it a new title. Put it on in Canberra. Who knows what could happen ?
- ALAN : No theatre in Australia would touch it.
- KARL: Then stage it yourself. Ever heard of "writer-producers."
- ALAN : And where pray tell am I suppose to get the money ? Sell my kids ?
- KARL: The corporate sector. Sponsorship is available.
- ALAN : For the "worse Australian play in recent memory" ?
- KARL: Write something new. Onwards and upwards.
- ALAN : You going to pay the bills in the meantime ?
- KARL: Get a job. Write at nights.
- ALAN : I already have two.
- KARL: You must have some money put aside.
- ALAN : I had fifty thousand of my own money in Phoenix !

PAUSE.

- KARL: Well there we have it. The "Ibsonian" secret. And only just into the first act. The crucial motivation that drives the action of the drama. A penniless man driven to a desperate act.
- ALAN : This isn't a game !
- KARL: Of course not. But if you don't mind me saying this just gives weight to my argument. The show couldn't have been much good if you had to put up the money for it in the first place.
- ALAN : You are either very, very brave. Or very, very stupid.
- KARL: Come, come. We are reasonable men. We are participating in a reasoned exchange of views.
- ALAN : I am far from reasonable at this moment.
- KARL: One would think now was the time when you needed to be most reasonable.
- ALAN : I had to put up the money. Who was going to touch me after "Strange Days" ?
- KARL: You can't blame me for that too.
- ALAN : You hammered it.
- KARL: Well I didn't like it either.
- ALAN : You axed me. Twice.
- KARL: Maybe you're in the wrong line of work. Now might be the time to face facts. Perhaps you're just not meant to be a dramatist.
- ALAN : All my life I've wanted to be a writer.
- KARL: I said dramatist, not writer. Many a fine wordsmith has not had the craft to construct a play.
- ALAN : I meant plays.
- KARL: Well, many are called - few are chosen.
- ALAN : Chosen by you.
- KARL: I am not God. I give an opinion.
- ALAN : You ripped me to shreds.

KARL: That's not my fault.

ALAN : You massacred me and you did it with a smile.

KARL: That's not my fault either.

ALAN : Whose is it then ?

KARL: It's not my fault you're a bad playwright.

SILENCE. **ALAN** GOES TO THE CHEST OF DRAWERS.

KARL: What are you doing ?

ALAN OPENS THE FRIDGE. HE PULLS OUT A BOTTLE OF WATER.

ALAN : Having a drink.

KARL: I didn't mean that. Your work shows great ... promise.

ALAN : Forget it. You want something ?

KARL: Yes please. Beer. Come to think of it - make it two. One for the nose and one for the throat.

ALAN : (AFTER A PAUSE) Maybe later.

ALAN CLOSES THE FRIDGE.

KARL: Well I don't know what else there is to say. I think we'll just have to agree to disagree on this one. And if you don't mind, I better get back to the office. A review for tomorrow.

ALAN : Not yet.

KARL: What else can this dialogue possibly achieve ?

ALAN : A bit of dramatic tension.

KARL: But we are never going to reach a resolution.

ALAN : This is my drama, not yours. And the reviews aren't in – just yet.

KARL: You're just making matters worse for yourself. Let me go now and I won't press charges.

ALAN : Thanks.

KARL: Listen, I have been a journalist for over thirty years.

- ALAN : I've been writing plays since I was eleven.
- KARL: What do you want Alan ? Or should I call you John ? The angry young man bites back.
- ALAN : I'm not that young anymore.
- KARL: Then you should be able to tell me. What do you want ?
- ALAN : I want to know why you wrote that review.
- KARL: Simple. It was a bad play. Can I go now ?
- ALAN : I think you can do better than that.
- KARL: How can I ? That's the truth. (PAUSE.) Look, what else do you want me to say ? Tell me and I'll say it.
- ALAN : When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.
- KARL: What does that mean ?
- ALAN : When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.
- KARL: Another one of your failings. Obscurity.
- ALAN: When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.
- KARL: Stop blaming me. You've got no one to blame but yourself.
- ALAN : For my failure to write "either dramatically or comically."
- KARL: For your damaged reputation. Perhaps if you were less volatile you'd get more plays on.
- ALAN: It's the way I am. I can't change that.
- KARL: You might have to learn. Maybe we should've spoken like this before. It's quite purgative.
- ALAN : Cathartic.
- KARL: That too. So what happens now ?

ALAN STANDS BEHIND KARL. HE TAKES A BLACK CLOTH FROM HIS POCKET AND HOLDS AN END IN EACH HAND.

- ALAN: Time for a blackout.

ALAN BRINGS THE CLOTH DOWN TOWARDS **KARL'S** HEAD. **KARL** LOOKS UP NERVOUSLY.

BLACKOUT.

2. Later.

IN DARKNESS WE HEAR:

ALAN: Lights up.

THE LIGHTS COME UP ON **ALAN** REMOVING THE CLOTH FROM **KARL'S** HEAD. **KARL** LOOKS AROUND.

KARL : Ah yes. The same. Some time later.

ALAN GOES TO THE FRIDGE. HE GETS OUT A BEER.

KARL : You are a gentlemen.

ALAN BRINGS THE BEER TO **KARL**.

KARL: What's that ? Lite. Don't you have anything stronger ? There must be a mini-bar.

ALAN: Shall I mix up you up a dry martini ?

KARL: Please.

ALAN: (HOLDING OUT BEER) Take it or leave it.

KARL OPENS HIS MOUTH. **ALAN** POURS SOME OF THE BEER INTO **KARL'S** MOUTH.

KARL : You're not joining me ?

ALAN: I don't drink.

KARL : Maybe you should.

ALAN: Trust me.

KARL : It might improve your writing.

ALAN: People like my writing.

KARL : But they might like it more. Give it some edge. Danger. A touch of madness. Look at Behan and Dylan Thomas. Great writers with edge.

ALAN: Just think what they could've written if they weren't pissed all the time.

KARL: Boring twaddle probably.

ALAN: So all great writers are alcoholics.

KARL : I'm not saying that. You're doing it again.

ALAN: Doing what ?

KARL : Over-simplifying. Just like in your play. Obscurity and simplification – such an odd mix. Alcohol gives some writers, note some, a touch of magic. Dark, brilliant, intense magic.

ALAN: It's called insanity.

KARL : All the really important work has it.

ALAN: Except for Shakespeare.

KARL : Even the great Bard.

ALAN: I'm insane enough without the booze.

KARL : As we can see.

ALAN: As we can see.

KARL : You should learn to let it out on the page rather than in your life.

ALAN: What do you think I did in Phoenix !

PAUSE.

KARL : You do have anger in you, that's for sure.

ALAN: Insanity is just repressed anger.

KARL: My point exactly. So vent it in your writing, not on some poor unsuspecting hack.

ALAN: I'll workshop it.

PAUSE.

KARL: You have a young family don't you ?

ALAN: Yes. I do.

KARL : Beautiful wife. Two young children.

ALAN: Unlike you. Divorced, twice. No children. How appropriate for a critic. A barren life for a barren man.

KARL : What are their names again ? The little darlings ?

ALAN: Jeremiah and Alicia.

KARL : Lovely names.

ALAN: Lovely kids.

KARL : How old are they now ?

ALAN: Jeremiah's three. Alicia - six.

KARL : That young. A vital time in their development.

ALAN: To what do I owe this vain attempt at intimacy ?

KARL : I'm just wondering how little Jeremiah and Alicia will feel when they go to visit their father in jail. Behind those cold bars.

ALAN: I won't be going to jail.

KARL : You certainly will if you keep up with this. I have some friends who'll make sure you get locked up for a very long time indeed.

ALAN: When this is all over you won't want anybody to know what happened here.

KARL : You are gravely mistaken. Revenge is a game two can play.

ALAN: But you won't want to play. You're only desire will be to put all this far behind you.

KARL : How so ?

ALAN: When the pupil is ready the teacher will appear.

KARL: So you keep saying.

ALAN: You know what I do ?

KARL : Attempt, with not much in the way of success, to write.

ALAN: That's the physical act but what am I actually doing ?

KARL : Spewing out your bile ?

- ALAN: I'm dissecting someone's soul. Trying to get right to the heart of them, their very essence. To find out what makes them tick.
- KARL : Noble. If slightly undramatic.
- ALAN: And that essentially is what I'm doing here today, unlocking your soul. Seeking the dark heart at its core.
- KARL : Correction. Essentially you have committed assault and now are holding me against my will.
- ALAN: I know what makes you tick. I can see the fire that's burning right at the very core. Your whole reason for being.
- KARL : What extraordinary powers of insight you must have.
- ALAN: And I know that when you are forced to confront what is lurking deep beneath your skin, you won't want anybody – anybody at all – to know what happens here today. In fact, you'll be begging me not to tell.
- KARL : I'm afraid you're character is losing plausibility in this ill-conceived drama. The audience will soon agree with me and Gertrude : “Alas. He is mad !”
- ALAN: We shall see Sir Karl . We shall see.

PAUSE.

- KARL: Well, isn't this fun. What next ? Do we play a game, sing songs, make a bonfire ? You're the scoutmaster. Instruct me.
- ALAN: As Cassio says: “Reputation. My reputation.”
- KARL: And as I said. “Obscurity. Obscurity.”
- ALAN: I want you to do something.
- KARL : Say sorry. Easy. I'm sorry. I one hundred percent apologise. Can I go now?
- ALAN: I want you to write a review.
- KARL : Good. I can do that. That's my job.
- ALAN: A good one.
- KARL : Ah, a retraction. Highly unlikely it'll get published.
- ALAN: Not of “Phoenix.”

KARL : What then ?

ALAN: You went to a show last night.

KARL : “Echoes of Tomorrow.”

ALAN: That's the one.

KARL: Hideous. Total crap.

ALAN: For once we agree.

KARL : You want me to write a good review of “Echoes of Tomorrow” ?

ALAN: A rave.

KARL : But it was irredeemable.

ALAN: You can do it. You're a critic. Critique.

KARL : But it's Ryan. You hate Ryan.

ALAN: Not as much as I hate you.

KARL : It's preposterous. You can't make me write a good review.

ALAN: Yes I can.

KARL : But it's shit. Everyone will think I've gone mad.

ALAN: Yes.

KARL : They'll think I'm going soft. Or worse still - I'm playing favourites.

ALAN: Yes.

KARL : If I write a good review of that no one will ever take me seriously again. I'll lose my credibility. My ... (HE STOPS HIMSELF)

ALAN: “Reputation. My reputation.” Still too obscure ? Or am I over-simplifying?

KARL : A critic is nothing without his reputation.

ALAN: Just like a playwright.

KARL : I'll be a running joke.

ALAN: Welcome to the club.

PAUSE.

KARL : You're bluffing.

ALAN: I'm not.

KARL : This is insane.

ALAN: Guess I have got that edge after all.

KARL : But it's after two already. You'll never get it in before deadline.

ALAN: Six o'clock right ? Plenty of time.

KARL : You have done your research.

ALAN: Just like a good little playwright.

KARL : I'll have to go to the office and type it up.

ALAN: Call in sick. You can dictate, over the phone.

KARL : Even if I did ring it through it still may not appear. You seem to forget I have an Arts Editor.

ALAN: We can get around Helen.

KARL : She'll never buy it. She was there. She knows what I thought of the play. She'll twig something's up.

ALAN: Helen went on holiday today.

KARL : No she didn't.

ALAN: The South American adventure.

KARL : How do you know all this ?

ALAN: I have my sources.

KARL : Your plotting is most complex.

ALAN: Enough to sustain a couple of hours.

KARL : Well maybe seventy minutes. That's another of your problems. Over writing.

ALAN: You can't help yourself can you ?

KARL: Always stretching it out. Saying in two lines what could be said in one. Brevity is the soul of wit.

ALAN: Define stupidity.

KARL : Pardon.

ALAN: I think you have a problem understanding who has the status in this scene. Define stupidity.

KARL: Inform me.

ALAN: A man insulting his own firing squad.

KARL : Well, if he's going to be shot anyway.

PAUSE.

ALAN: So shall we get started.

KARL : No.

ALAN: You're in no position to say no.

KARL : How can this petty act possibly appease what you feel ?

ALAN: Maybe it can't but it'll certainly distract me up for awhile.

ALAN GOES TO THE DRAWS. HE PULLS OUT A PEN AND PAPER.

ALAN: The writer will write, the critic will critique.

KARL : Alan - this is silly.

ALAN: The writer will write, the critic will critique.

KARL : It'll never work.

ALAN: It might.

KARL : Think of the ramifications.

ALAN: I am.

KARL : Your box office may decline even more.

ALAN: My box office is already dead. You killed it remember ?

KARL : Please.

ALAN: Having trouble getting started ? How about: "Brilliant. Brilliant. Brilliant." Or "Echoes of triumph."

KARL : I will not go through with this.

ALAN: I think you will.

KARL : But why ? What could you possibly hope to achieve by this misguided act?

ALAN: I told you. Someone needs to cut you down to size.

KARL : That's the text, but what's the sub-text. And why now ? Obviously some of my other reviews have enraged you in the past. Why wait till now to wreak havoc ? The review appeared over a week ago. You seem like a spur of the moment sort of chap, hot blooded, passionate, full of innate drama. Surely if it was just that you would have sought me out as soon as the review appeared.

ALAN GOES TO THE CHEST OF DRAWERS. HE PICKS UP A PRESS CUTTING AND PLACES IT IN FRONT OF **KARL** .

KARL : Ah - ha I was right. What's this ?

KARL READS.

KARL : Ah yes.

ALAN: I could've maybe, just maybe, forgot about the review, channelled my rage, slipped into damage control but then – just a few days after your review appeared. The Hewett Prize for Critical Writing. Your big fat head, beaming away like some clown at The Easter Show, champagne in hand, pictured with the Premier moments after your grand acceptance speech. And right there in the corner, tucked in your pocket, an envelope containing a cheque for fifteen thousand dollars. I couldn't believe that they would give an award and fifteen thousand dollars to a man who makes his living by ripping other people to shreds. Jesus, the top playwriting award in the country's only twenty. When I first saw it, in that split second, I thought for a moment that the world had gone mad. Suddenly Iago was the great hero and Othello his treacherous assistant. Nobody could see who were the heroes and who were the villains. The picture was coming apart. It became obvious that something needed to be done. "The time was out of joint –

KARL : And you were born to set it right ?

ALAN: Nothing as grand as that.

KARL : A third failure in your work. You create a falsity rather than look at the truth, which is right in front of you. There is another motive, hinted at perhaps subconsciously in your Othello reference.

ALAN: What ?

KARL : Jealousy.

ALAN LAUGHS.

KARL : Professional jealousy. Correct me if I'm wrong but you have never won any major awards. This could be construed as the jealous act of an unrewarded writer taking revenge on a rewarded one.
"Beware the green eyed monster for –

ALAN: You're theory might have some substance if it wasn't for one thing - you're not a writer.

KARL : The committee of The Hewett Prize may beg to differ.

ALAN: Fuck the committee. You and I know the truth.

KARL : And what is the truth ?

ALAN: When the pupil is ready the teacher will appear.

KARL : And when all is lost he once more resorts to his common failing – obscurity. I shall have to start calling you "Alan, the Obscure." So, that's it ? The review and my reception of the Hewett Prize combined to propel you into this rather illogical, and let's be frank – somewhat pathetic scheme for vengeance. Any artistic motives to throw in ? A little character research maybe. Perhaps devoid of ideas you're road testing your next drama.

ALAN: I wouldn't waste my time on a character like you.

KARL: But you already are. And what's our protagonist's objective? What could he possibly hope to achieve from this dark pantomime ? Money, entertainment or is it just barbaric revenge ?

ALAN: My aspirations are somewhat loftier than you might think. I could call it a quest for Justice.

KARL : Justice. How noble ? Next you'll be talking of honour.

ALAN: Perhaps. A desire for honour borne of anger.

KARL : Anger. Now that sounds more like it.

ALAN: It's a powerful emotion. Almost overwhelming.

- KARL : As we can see.
- ALAN: It comes in waves, rolling over me, almost knocking me off my feet. Surging up slowly within me, like molten rock in an ancient volcano.
- KARL : Is that a direct quote or are you ad-libbing ?
- ALAN: Usually I fight it. Push it down and cover it up with forced smiles and polite handshakes. Repressed anger - that leads to madness. Or I let it out in more acceptable ways like deep breathing or punching a leather bag. But this time when the wave came - sustained, relentless, awesome in its power - I surrendered and let it take me wherever it so desired.
- KARL : And it took you here, to this one star hotel.
- ALAN: After a fashion.
- KARL : You call insanity repressed anger, I call anger - mis-directed passion. Imagine if you could channel this passion into your work. What a fury, what a magnificent torrent might emerge.
- ALAN: I do channel it.
- KARL : Not as effectively as this. You should channel it into your art not childish revenge.
- ALAN: Someone had to do it. Because it's not just me. Someone had to stand up for all the wronged writers, directors, actors, designers, singers, composers.
- KARL : "Alas. He is mad."
- ALAN: Someone had to stand up and say: "no". No more. Enough is enough.
- KARL : And if that needed to be done – which it does not – who, pray tell, elected you ?
- ALAN: I did. I'm sick and tired of you people.
- KARL : Which people ?
- ALAN: You. Critics. Reviewers. Commentators. You sit on the sideline and throw shit on us.
- KARL : We offer constructive criticism.
- ALAN: Who asked you to ?

- KARL : Your publicist for one.
- ALAN: But who gave you the right to criticise us ? How do you know what's good or bad, right or wrong, better than any of the rest of us ? Who ordained you the high priests of a sacred art ?
- KARL : Ooh Chekov now. Our literary references are impressive.
- ALAN: What gives you the right to criticise Osborne, Coward, Pinter, Fugard. Some of the greatest writer's of any century.
- KARL : Even the greatest master sometimes comes up with a dud.
- ALAN: And you know which one is good and which is bad.
- KARL : I have a fair idea.
- ALAN: What gives you the right to slam Sarah Kane ?
- KARL : Suppose you blame me for her suicide as well. Someone has to make sure the standard is kept high.
- ALAN: You wouldn't know a good play if it flew up your arse.
- KARL : I must congratulate you on your vivid use of imagery. I must also remind you that I - like you - am entitled to my opinion.
- ALAN: Yes, but I don't get to put it on page thirteen of the Daily News. The whole notion of criticism is completely absurd. How can you criticise art ? It's not a mathematical problem. There is no right and wrong answer. X plus Y does not equal Z. It's art - subjective, intangible, mysterious, magical. The outpourings of the soul. How can you say whether that is good or bad ? There is no chemical formula for greatness. You can not measure genius on a scale. Art by its pure definition defies judgement. And yet here you are, every Monday and Wednesday giving us the good oil, informing us that Howard Barker's poetry is slipping, or Michael Gows' characters have lost their charm, deciding who's succeeded and who's failed like some judge at a diving contest holding up scores on a chalk board.
- KARL : A diver I'm sure would regard his particular discipline as an art. Following your argument, he should not be judged either.
- ALAN: Art is not a contest. It's creation. Ibsen was not competing against Strindberg in a three Test series. A good speech is not worth four points. Art is entirely subjective. There is no score board. No winner or loser.
- KARL : There is a certain art to criticism.

- ALAN: Criticism is not creation. It is analysis. Analysis by definition must be objective. But how can you be objective about something that is subjective ? A matter of personal taste, emotional response, feeling ? It's impossible.
- KARL: Tis the way of the world.
- ALAN: I shouldn't just blame you. I shouldn't just have you here handcuffed to a chair. I should have all of them. Lined up in neat little rows. Petty little men with tiny little pens and tiny little pads, scribbling away in the dark.
- KARL : We're not all men. And you've already had your right of reply. You wrote a letter to the editor, which was run, remember ?
- ALAN: Which no one read. Or made my case even worse.
- KARL : A few well chosen words -
- ALAN: How did my letter come across to the public, most of who had not seen and now will not see my play ?
- KARL : Another opinion.
- ALAN: Sour grapes. His play got slammed and now he's having a whinge. True or false ?
- KARL : Well ...
- ALAN: True or false ?
- KARL : To a point - true.
- ALAN: No one took my letter seriously. It just made me look worse.
- KARL : It might've helped if it was a better letter.
- ALAN: It's hard to be poetic when you want to rip some one's heart out.
- KARL: Most writers would say that is when poetry comes easiest. I think you underestimate your power. Many people did read that letter and took your comments on board.
- ALAN: Not as many as read your review.
- KARL : Possibly. Still - you know what they say, today's news – tomorrow's fish and chips wrapping.
- ALAN: You don't believe that for a second.
- KARL : You were given right of reply.

ALAN: In a way. If I was really given right of reply it would've been printed on the Arts pages. Just as large as your review.

KARL : No one wants to read an article like that..

ALAN: Yes they do. But that's not why you don't run it. You don't run it because it might tarnish the almighty critic's pristine image. Knock him off his pedestal. Jesus, you're more revered now than Shakespeare.

KARL : You do live in something of a fantasy world.

ALAN: Obviously. You know I really thought this time you'd lay off. You'd report what you saw - fairly, accurately.

KARL : I was both fair and accurate.

ALAN BEGINS TO LAUGH.

KARL : I reported what I saw.

ALAN LAUGHS LOUDER.

KARL : I did my job - with maximum care and complete authority.

ALAN: Half the audience gave a standing ovation.

KARL: Slightly less than half.

ALAN: Half the audience. A standing ovation. The actors took four curtain calls. I don't remember reading that.

KARL : Listen, I may have the low status in the scene but I am beginning to tire of your macabre innuendoes and ridiculous accusations. A critic is his or her own master and nobody's slave.

ALAN: How noble.

KARL : It is a noble profession.

MORE LAUGHTER.

KARL: I listened to you. Now you listen to me. A critic's role is a crucial link between the audience and the artist. It must not be abused. For some it is the pinnacle of their careers as reporters of the truth.

ALAN: You are so full of shit.

KARL : May I continue ? Please. (PAUSE) I started as a Cadet when I was 17. I worked my way up to Subbing. A thankless task but a job none the less. Next I was given the odd story - human interest, robberies, real estate. And then one day - my big break. The theatre reviewer was ill and some one of my letters was needed. I knew a little of the theatre, not a lot, but I grabbed the new challenge with both hands. A theatre was attended, notes were taken and a review written. Nervously, tentatively, but written. The results were published and received not too unfavourably. Two days later - I got another go. Soon it became apparent the old reviewer would not be returning. Discussions were held behind closed doors. And I was it. The new theatre critic. I launched myself into my new career with all the vigour I could muster. Books were bought, plays studied, lessons learnt. I read everything I could get my hands on. Every particular aspect of theatre crafts - writing, directing, designing, acting. Even a short book on Wig Etiquette. Soon I was an expert in my chosen field. That was over twelve years ago. Today I feel I have earned my place in the theatre. Some write, some direct, some act - I report. I report on the theatre. I offer an opinion, just an opinion, and I do it cheerfully, entertainingly with a certain sparkle. And I do it from a position of knowledge. And I maintain my knowledge. I see and read everything. I know about new movements, new trends and new voices, sometimes even before they happen. There is nothing important happening on a stage anywhere around the world that I do not know of. I am a critic but I am also a writer. Just like George Bernard Shaw. I just happen to write criticisms. I am fair, honest and tough. I am well respected and over the years I have developed many loyal readers. Often at the theatre they approach me and enquire: "Karl, Karl – what did you think ?" And my answer is always the same: "For that dear Madame – or Sir - you will have to buy tomorrow's Daily News." Consequently I have attained some degree of influence but it is influence I use knowingly, judiciously and with utmost care. I am their eyes and ears and I must always put them first. I never ever abuse my readers trust and the power they have placed in my hands. I do it for them.

PAUSE. **ALAN** BEGINS TO APPLAUD, FIRST SLOWLY THEN BUILDING.

KARL : My very own standing ovation ? How generous.

ALAN: On your scale that must mean you were crap. (PAUSE) You are not George Bernard Shaw. You are nothing - and one day we will snap you in two like the petty, pathetic nuisance you are.

KARL: Awful lot of trouble to go to over nothing. (SLIGHT PAUSE) Have you considered the possibility, although I know very remote, that in fact your play wasn't any good. It was a piece of shit and it got what it deserved. Have you considered the fact that maybe you're just not a very good writer ?

ALAN: Every day of my life.

KARL: And ?

ALAN: The play works.

KARL : In your opinion.

ALAN: And the cast. And the director's.

KARL : Oh yeah, like they're going to turn down the work.

ALAN: And most importantly, the audience.

KARL : On the opening night.

ALAN: On every fucking night. Every single person who has seen "Phoenix" liked it. Every single one. Some a little, some a lot but you are the first person who didn't like it. You are in a minority of one. A very powerful minority of one.

KARL : I find that hard to believe.

ALAN: Believe it. Even after your review came out people still enjoyed it. But they don't show it. They come up to the actors afterwards and say "Thank you", "It was great". Terrified of being over heard disagreeing with the Daily News theatre critic. Jesus, you've got this city in the grip of fear. You're more powerful than Genghis Khan.

KARL : Absurd, bizarre, ridiculous, inane. My vocabulary has been defeated in trying to describe your ever more maniacal outbursts. Your comparison of me to Genghis Khan is only slightly less insane than your comparison of yourself to Shakespeare.

ALAN: Now Sir, I never once compared myself to Shakespeare.

KARL: Close enough. And why do you keep calling me Sir ?

ALAN: Because one day you will be knighted for services to the arts.

KARL : (LAUGHING) Hardly.

ALAN: Stop laughing. You're praying to god it'll happen. (PAUSE) So what's it like to be on the receiving end of a Sir Karl Anderton axing ? We'll let me tell you, because you wouldn't know. Of course it doesn't start on opening night. The finished play starts years before. You couldn't know how hard I worked. Or how much I worried whether this play would be any good. Jesus, don't you think at the first sign of trouble I would've known. But all people kept

ALAN: (CONT) doing was patting me on the back and congratulating me. It was surprising in a way. I've been out of the scene for a long time but things went well right from the start. I was coming up with fresh ideas and new lines and the director responded well to almost everything. I knew my material and it showed. I was slightly anxious about the director at first, he's a young kid, career first and all that - but he really seemed to be in touch with what I was on about. Poor bloke, he'll probably never work again after this. The cast were great too. A perfect mix of experience and enthusiasm. You know, Doug, the director, and I drew up a list of our perfect cast and we got all of them, except one and even he wanted to do it. Everything seemed to fall into place, simply, naturally, like it was meant to be. The production seemed bless. The previews went well and when opening night arrived what a night. Never in my wildest dreams had I hoped for such an opening. I never let myself get too optimistic, it hurts when you come crashing down, but the response was phenomenal. Even the bullshitters and cynical style merchants seemed to like it. They stood and clapped, really clapped, for five fucking minutes. And in the foyer afterwards I had to fight my way to the dressing rooms, so many handshakes and pats on the back. Could it be ? At last. A hit. I really thought that maybe, this time, after all I'd been through, all those years of pain and struggle, at last - I'd made it. Jesus, you could feel it all around you. It was like a gale knocking you over - admiration, joy, success. I had a play. Then it happened. The day the review came out I went down to the theatre. They had a matinee. You could feel it straight away. The smell of death all around. Like walking into the morgue to identify a body and then you find the stiff on the slab is actually you. As incredible as it may sound I'd forgotten about your review in all the excitement, hadn't even noticed you slip out seconds after the curtain went down. Never turn your back on your enemy - I should know that, by now. I walked into the dressing room and straight away I knew what had happened. I'd seen it all before. All the smiles had disappeared. Seven glum faces. Not one glad to see me. They looked at me with harsh, accusing eyes. Suddenly I was the enemy. They were in a turkey and it was all my fault. That night we were three-quarters full. Next night half. Soon they were playing to thirty people. Thirty puzzled faces in the dark, enjoying the show but desperately trying not to show it. (PAUSE) What gives a man that kind of power ? The power to kill. To destroy so much work, so much heart, so much passion with the simple slash of his pen. How could one man have created such a position ? A dominion over culture where the whole city waits breathlessly on his every syllable, dying to know what they can and can't see. And artists trembling before his feet fearing the edge of his ever sharpening axe ? Serial killers are given trials but not us. We are summarily executed on page thirteen every day of our lives and there's not a single thing we can do about it. No one has the right to murder another human's soul and make no mistake when you rip into us with almost tangible glee that is what you are doing. You have to be

ALAN: (CONT) stopped. Something has to be done. You must begin to understand what its like to stand on the other side of the fence and receive unwarranted, unjustified, merciless punishment.

PAUSE.

KARL : I'm sorry but I just don't want to watch five drug addicts in a detox for two and a half hours.

ALAN: They were alcoholics not drug addicts.

KARL : Whatever they were I don't want to see it and neither do my readers.

ALAN: In your opinion.

KARL : It's not my fault so many people value my opinion.

ALAN: Not us. Every single one of us despises you.

KARL : The play didn't work.

ALAN: Shut up. Just shut the fuck up !

ALAN GOES TO CHEST OF DRAWERS AND PULLS OUT A GUN. HE COMES BACK AND HOLDS IT TO KARL'S HEAD.

KARL: Just sit there very quietly, don't say another word and pray to god that I don't do what every fibre of my being is screaming out for me to do.

LIGHTS FADE.

END ACT 1.

3. Late Afternoon.

KARL SITS IN HIS CHAIR. **ALAN** SITS IN THE OTHER CHAIR, WRITING ON THE TABLE. AN EMPTY BEER CAN IS NEAR **KARL**.

KARL: It's too long. They won't run it.

ALAN: Just one more line. Big finish.

KARL: Is me urinating on the floor part of your character development ?

ALAN: If needs be.

KARL: Alright. I can not recommend it highly enough. Fullstop. See it. Fullstop. Do. Fullstop. Enough ?

ALAN: (WRITING) Perfect. There we are. Job well done. Gives you a certain satisfaction doesn't it ?

KARL : May I be unlocked ?

ALAN UNLOCKS THE HANDCUFFS. HE PICKS UP THE GUN.

KARL: Is that necessary ?

ALAN: Just in case.

KARL STANDS AND MOVES INTO THE BATHROOM. HE GOES TO CLOSE THE DOOR. **ALAN** STOPS HIM.

ALAN: Best not.

KARL : You're lucky my task is not more substantial. You're modesty might be offended.

KARL DISAPPEARS. WE HEAR THE SOUND OF HIM URINATING.

KARL: At last.

ALAN: You asked for the beer.

KARL: (SIGHS) Heaven.

A TOILET FLUSHING. **KARL** REAPPEARS.

ALAN: A playwright is dying of AIDS. You go to review his play, which could very well be his last.

KARL : This is hypothetical ?

ALAN: Completely. Remember the man is dying. What do you do ?

KARL : I write a review.

ALAN: And if you don't like it ?

KARL : You mean if in my opinion the play does not work ?

ALAN: If you don't like it.

KARL : I report accordingly. Without fear or favour.

ALAN: You slam him.

KARL : I treat him as I would treat any other playwright.

ALAN: You tell people not to bother.

KARL : If it was a bad play.

ALAN: In your opinion.

KARL : I'm paid to give my opinion.

ALAN: It could be his last play.

KARL : People are paying good money. They deserve the truth.

ALAN: The man is dying. Doesn't that mean anything to you ?

KARL : A night off. (PAUSE) I don't wish to be provocative but this ground is already well trod. If you have no new fruit for the drama I suggest you bring the curtain down.

ALAN: There's a few more twists in the second half.

ALAN MOTIONS HIM BACK TO THE CHAIR.

KARL : Couldn't we dispense with the chains ?

ALAN: Best not.

KARL SITS DOWN. ALAN HANDCUFFS HIM.

KARL : I'm beginning to feel a little dizzy. I really must eat something soon. I'm diabetic, you know.

ALAN: When the job is done I'll order you a three course meal.

KARL: How generous.

ALAN MOVES TOWARDS THE PHONE.

ALAN: But first I'm going to do to you what you've been doing to us for the last twelve years.

KARL: What's that ?

ALAN: Totally screw you. Time to dial.

KARL: This will never work. Your life is a farce and it's getting more and more ridiculous by the second.

ALAN: "Good poets write the poetry they can't live. Bad poets live the poetry they can't write."

ALAN PICKS UP THE PHONE.

KARL: Who are you calling ?

ALAN: Flynn Wilkie.

KARL: Flynn ? Thinking of auctioning off the film rights ?

ALAN: I must admit I did consider taking my revenge in a more artistic manner. Writing a play about it. Channelling my anger. But then I thought - I need to do something slightly more immediate.

KARL: You should've written the play. At least that would've been something productive.

ALAN: This is very productive. Putting an end to the most destructive critic in theatre today.

KARL: Ah, that good old morbid sense of humour.

ALAN: Some people call it black comedy.

KARL: Maybe you should try a change of style. A lot of your stuff is childlike, naive - in my opinion of course. There's no big earth shattering stuff. No grand thoughts, theories, ideas.

ALAN: I write about life. Not intellectual head trips.

KARL: Who needs life in the theatre ? We've got it out on the streets ? Give me "head trips" please. Delicious word play, fiery conflict, life and death struggles on battlefields of the imagination.

ALAN: Lord of the Rings ?

KARL: Henry the fifth.

ALAN: If this was a play I would say that by engaging me in this conversation you are actually trying to do something entirely different.

KARL : A hidden agenda ?

ALAN: On the surface your character is trying to start up a discussion about the nature of theatre but underneath his real action is trying to delay my character from his ringing through the review, until the deadline has passed in (LOOKING UP AT CLOCK) thirty two minutes.

KARL : You are too generous in your assessment of my powers.

ALAN: But this isn't a play.

ALAN DIALS.

KARL: Yes Alan, it's not a play. It's real life. And in real life when faced with a problem you come up with a solution.

ALAN: I am.

KARL: No you are not. You've spent all this time railing against the critics, myself being the chief target. Yet you haven't once come up with a viable alternative. If we are not to write the reviews then who is. Are we meant to grab some Joe off the street ?

ALAN: I never said that.

KARL : Then who writes the reviews ?

ALAN: (PUTTING DOWN THE PHONE) No reviews.

KARL : No reviews ?

ALAN: None.

KARL : I'd be out of a job.

ALAN: Exactly.

KARL : How would people know what they should like ?

ALAN: So you do tell people what they should like ?

KARL : Pick up the entertainment pages. How else are the general public to navigate the morass of offerings if it were not for their trusted critic ?

- ALAN: We don't need critics. Fullstop.
- KARL : The theatre going public needs an informed opinion. People invest a lot of time and money in theatre and film tickets. Who will tell them if there investment is worthwhile ?
- ALAN: They will tell themselves.
- KARL : You are full of surprises. Next you'll be saying we don't need directors.
- ALAN: In film - yes. Theatre - maybe.
- KARL : You're entertaining. I must say that. Unbalanced but entertaining. We do a job like everybody else and it is an important and necessary one.
- ALAN: It's not a job.
- KARL: Of course it is. I get paid to do it. That's what a job is.
- ALAN: Even if it were you would be totally unqualified for it.
- KARL : Do you know how many plays I've seen ?
- ALAN: But how many have you written ?
- KARL : How many has the man in the street ? He is my concern.
- ALAN: Ah yes, your role. To advise the "man in the street".
- KARL : Part of my role. I believe I also play another developmental role in regard to the artists themselves.
- ALAN: But for both tasks you are completely unqualified.
- KARL : So you keep saying.
- ALAN: Well we've already agreed that criticism of art itself is impossible.
- KARL : I never agreed.
- ALAN: And even if it were someone who has never created art himself is certainly not in a position to do it.
- KARL : You put the theory. I never agreed.
- ALAN: Secondly you are also totally wrong to give your opinion to the man in the street because your viewpoint and his is going to be completely different.

- KARL : I pride myself on my affinity with my readers.
- ALAN: They see one play a year. You see five a week. Your approach is purely technical. Ticking things off on your score card. Is the lighting dark enough ? Are there enough red costumes ? Have they used the word "forage" six times ? You're sitting there keeping count while the real audience is right in there, going with the characters, laughing at the jokes, taking the punches. They're in the game, while your standing on the sideline, keeping statistics.
- KARL : I admit I may be fussier, a touch harder to impress than the average theatre goer, and by the nature of the task I need to be a little remote. I give my expert opinion, uninfluenced by passion.
- ALAN: And that just shows how little you know. Art is passion. You can not respond dis-passionately to art.
- KARL : Noel Coward. The way critics function is simple. I thought even you might've worked it out. Of course you're not going to agree with every critic. Everybody finds a critic they "connect" with. Someone with like tastes, and then you take their viewpoint into your deliberations.
- ALAN: Is that so ?
- KARL : Yes. And even if you think one critic is a total fool and everything he writes is ... less than accurate, it's still useful. If the critic doesn't like something then it follows you will. E.g. ; "Flynn Wilkie doesn't like it. I don't usually agree with Wilkie, so I'll probably love it." And "Flynn loved it. It must be terrible. I'll stay at home." All a critic really needs to do is be consistent with his likes and dislikes. The rest is left up to the reader.
- ALAN: Well you're consistent at least. You hate everything.
- KARL : Utter nonsense. I enjoyed "The History Boys".
- ALAN: And so you would. It was total crap.
- KARL : He's says objectively. Look, to be brutally honest, and I hate to admit this, but in the end it doesn't matter diddly-squat what I write or don't write. If someone wants to really see something they will go. It doesn't matter what Flynn, me or anybody else writes. If you want to see garbage, you'll see garbage.
- ALAN: So then it doesn't matter what critics write ?
- KARL : In over half the cases - no. To the serious theatre goer we mean nothing.

- ALAN: Then why have critics ?
- KARL : Because we serve a function.
- ALAN: You're contradicting yourself. A skill you seem to have turned into an art form.
- KARL : We serve a function, to the undecided.
- ALAN: You do like validating yourself don't you.
- KARL: Listen, I just do what I'm told. My editor tells me to go to a play. I go to a play. I do my job.
- ALAN: A job ? Correction. Writers do a job. You waste space.
- KARL : I do a job. Which is: to report the truth.
- ALAN: You don't report the truth. You report fabrication, lies, idiotic waffling filled with bias.
- KARL : I report the truth – as I see it.
- ALAN: So it's all about perception ?
- KARL : Opinion. Yes.
- ALAN: But what gives you the right to voice that opinion in black and white to one hundred thousand people?
- KARL: My paper gives me the right. My readers give me the right.
- ALAN: I am a writer. I write a play and then some critic comes along and reviews it. I am open to criticism just like all artists. But who criticises the critics ? Who says "No. He's wrong." Or "this review is badly written, or badly structured. Or "he's used the wrong word there." Our every movement is publicly scrutinised. But you - you write what you like with no fear of recrimination. You can write the most scathing, nonsensical piece of crap and get off scot free.
- KARL : Look, I think you've made your point. We're not getting anywhere.
- ALAN: Not yet.
- KARL : You can not continue with this pathetic charade.
- ALAN: You want to make a bet. (MOVING TO PHONE) Three forty two. Eighteen minutes to spare. Plenty of time.
- KARL : You're really going to make me go through with this travesty ?

ALAN: Travesty ? Don't you mean work of genius ?

KARL : Your career has plummeted to new depths. As a playwright - you're a flop. As a person ... well I'd rather not say.

ALAN: I don't agree with the reviews so I'll take that as compliment.

KARL : It will never appear. I promise you that.

ALAN: I promise you it will. Now, if you'll excuse me, Flynn is waiting for my call.

KARL : But why Flynn ?

ALAN: He can put us through to a copy taker, to type up your glowing review. And just in case you get any ideas.

ALAN GRABS KARL'S OTHER EAR AND TWISTS IT VIOLENTLY. KARL CRIES OUT IN PAIN.

ALAN: You play it by the script or you may end up disfigured.

KARL : He probably won't even be there.

ALAN DIALS.

ALAN: (TO PHONE) Flynn Wilkie please. (TO **KARL**) It's ringing.

ALAN STANDS BEHIND KARL. HE HOLDS THE PHONE UP TO HIS MOUTH.

KARL : (TO PHONE) Hello Flynn. Yes it's Karl . How am I ? Well actually (STARTING TO YELL) Help me. I'm being -

ALAN SLAMS DOWN THE PHONE.

ALAN: Very, very stupid. Just remember - you made me do this.

KARL : Do what ?

ALAN PUNCHES KARL IN THE FACE HARD. HE HOLDS UP KARL'S HEAD. HE PUNCHES HIM AGAIN. HE HOLDS HIS FACE UP ONCE MORE.

ALAN: Now, let's try it again. And believe me Karl - if you want to leave this room alive, you will do whatever you can to get this review run. Or I swear – I can not be responsible for what I may do ! And this time just make sure we don't have any further disruptions. Or I might have to consider Plan B.

ALAN AIMS THE GUN AT KARL.

ALAN: That's an avenue I suggest you don't stroll down.

**ALAN HOLDS THE GUN TO THE OTHER SIDE OF KARL'S HEAD.
HE COCKS IT.**

KARL: Not even you ...

ALAN: To tell you the truth, I don't really know anymore.

KARL : (TO PHONE) Flynn. Yes it's me again. Sorry about that. The cat's going berserk. Listen, um, need a favour. I'm not feeling too well and I need to get something in for tomorrow. Just a bit of flu. Don't want to infect everybody. She's on holidays, remember ? "Echoes of Tomorrow". Oh ... (HE GLANCES TO **ALAN**) Good. Surprisingly good.

ALAN COVERS THE MOUTH PIECE.

ALAN: Get him to put you through to a copy taker.

KARL : Alright. I am. (TO PHONE) Listen, could you just find someone to type it in for me ? One of the temps will do. Or how about Marjorie ?

ALAN: (COVERING MOUTH PIECE) Who's Marjorie ?

KARL : The receptionist on our floor. She often types things up for me. (TO PHONE) Thanks Flynn. Yes, I'm sure I'll be better soon. Bye. (TO **ALAN**) He's putting me through.

ALAN: Just read the review, word for word.

ALAN GIVES KARL THE PHONE.

KARL : Yes Sir. (TO PHONE) Hello Marjorie. Yes it's Karl Anderton . Look, I'm not feeling too well and I have to get something in to tomorrow's paper. You don't have time to type it in for me do you ? Oh you do. Great. It's quite long ? No problem. Fabulous. You ready ? Here goes. (READING) William Ryan R-Y-A-N has had a colourful and chequered career both as an actor and writer but in italics Echoes of Tomorrow comma his new play he adds a new dimension to his already more than impressive gamut of works full stop. Gamut. G-a-m-u-t. Paragraph. This new play is excellent full stop It is theatre of the highest order and perhaps his best work to date full stop. Yes Marjorie. I really did enjoy it. Hold on for a second ?

KARL COVERS THE MOUTHPIECE.

KARL : It's too good. No one will believe it. I haven't written a review like this since - ever.

ALAN: Just read it.

KARL : (TO PHONE) His brilliantly constructed story and delightfully complex characterisations reflect back to earlier highlights such as italics Dollars and Dreamers and italics The Factory but in italics Echoes Ryan finds new ways to enthrall his already considerable following full stop. Paragraph. Hold on again Marjorie ?

KARL COVERS THE MOUTHPIECE.

KARL : I can't read your writing. What's the next word ?

ALAN: Rush.

KARL : Ah, yes. (TO PHONE) Rush to the theatre and secure your seats to what is sure to be one of the biggest hits in recent memory full stop. Paragraph. This is truly terrible.

ALAN RAISES THE GUN.

KARL: No Marjorie, not you, it's fine. Just can't read my scrawl. Going on. Perhaps Ryan apostrophe s greatest achievement is that through a simple plot and recognisable characters he manages to tackle important themes with universal applications. (TO **ALAN**) I think I'm going to throw up. No, Marjorie. I'm fine. Just feeling a little queasy. Paragraph. Set on a small farm on the tablelands of Northern New South Wales the play tells of the desperate and despairing struggle of a close knit family to survive the worse drought in this nation apostrophe s history full stop. Paragraph. The central conflict is between the father Jim open bracket played with considerable charm by Ron Allenson (COVERING PHONE TO **ALAN**) cringe (BACK TO PHONE) close bracket and his son Riley open bracket a fine performance by newcomer Wayne O'Mara (COVERING PHONE TO **ALAN**) vomit (BACK TO PHONE) close bracket full stop. Jim clings desperately to the ways of his father comma which seem strangely inadequate (COVERING PHONE TO **ALAN**) try desperately inadequate (BACK TO PHONE) in these harsh times while Riley urges the family to break with tradition and strike out on a new course full stop paragraph. In lesser hands this drama could have been maudlin and dull (COVERING PHONE TO **ALAN**) It is (BACK TO PHONE) but under Ryan apostrophe's masterly hand the play buzzes to life comma full of rich insights and bucket loads of truth full stop paragraph. The dialogue races along comma complete with just the right mix of outback poetry and laconic charm comma as the drama builds to a climax that is both surprising and moving (COVERING PHONE TO **ALAN**) me from the theatre as fast as I could run (BACK TO PHONE) Fullstop. In the afterglow

KARL: (CONT) comma as the final searing image fades from your mind comma you are left to truly wonder at a dramatic construction that borders on perfection fullstop paragraph (COVERING PHONE TO **ALAN**) Borders on pukedom, more like it. (BACK TO PHONE) The evening is touched with further sparkle by the heart rendering performance of newcomer Jacqui McMahon as the sister comma Kate comma and Linda Calman as the long suffering mother comma Barbara (COVERING PHONE TO **ALAN**) She is appalling. (BACK TO PHONE) fullstop paragraph. Add to this inspired direction by Rodney Halbish (COVERING PHONE TO **ALAN**) The silly old queen. (BACK TO PHONE) comma evocative lighting by Nigel Craven comma and a rustic set by Emma Sands comma and you have a truly first rate night of theatre fullstop. Nearly done. (TO **ALAN**) Thank god. (TO PHONE) Perhaps Ryan apostrophe s greatest achievement is that not only has he captured a moment in Australian life in full idiomatic (COVERING PHONE TO **ALAN**) Try idiotic. (BACK TO PHONE) glory comma but he has shown how this moment and its ramifications impact on all our lives fullstop. It is a far cry from Alan Fisher apostrophe s italics Phoenix which is merely a pale pastiche P-A-S-T-I-C-H-E of imagined Australian life masquerading as truth fullstop. Last one. Yes Marjorie, this is definitely the last one. I can not recommend it strongly enough fullstop. See it fullstop. Do fullstop. Got all that ? Great. Thank you Marjorie. Yes it really is great. You must try and catch it. Yes, I'm sure your husband would like it. I know I did.

ALAN COVERS PHONE.

ALAN: Photo.

KARL : (TO PHONE) Oh and Marjorie could you make sure they put the photo with it. It should be on Helen's desk.

ALAN: (COVERING PHONE) And by-line.

KARL : Oh and Marjorie. Don't forget my by-line. Oh, you almost forgot. Lucky I reminded you. Thank you Marjorie. You are an angel. Yes, see you soon. I hope. (HE HANGS UP.) There it's done. Now can I go?

ALAN: Not yet.

KARL : I dictated the review. What more do you want ?

ALAN: I'll be satisfied when I see it in print.

KARL : And my credibility in tatters. Can you imagine how many people will do their dough on that piece of crap because of you ?

ALAN: Just as many who missed out on good shows because of you.

KARL: There'll be a lot of very angry theatregoers out there.

ALAN: And all angry at you. Delectable isn't it ?

KARL: Words can not fully express the depth of my feeling.

ALAN: My sentiments precisely.

KARL: So what do we do now ?

ALAN: Wait.

KARL : What for ?

ALAN: Till the review appears.

KARL: You mean I have to stay here –all night – with you?

ALAN: The first edition comes out just after midnight. I'll pick one up at Taylor Square.

KARL : And what if it doesn't appear ?

ALAN: You better hope for your sake that Marjorie is good at her job or you could be in for an indefinite stay.

KARL : I'm thrilled at the prospect. Of course your joy of vengeance, will be short lived.

ALAN: Really ?

KARL : When you release me, and you will eventually have to release me, I'll simply inform the world of your macabre plot, the review will be discarded and my fine reputation will once more be in tact. I'll simply put the unfortunate incident behind me. Who knows ? I may even write a feature for the Magazine section on Saturday. "My night with a madman." Or "Lunatic at large."

ALAN: Title needs work.

KARL: You'd know. Granted, my task will be made slightly more difficult by you forcing me to re-iterate my comments on your play. A nice touch. "Yes Mr Policeman, that's right he tied me up and forced me to slag off his play. Again."

ALAN: When I'm done with you, you won't be telling anybody anything.

KARL : So you keep saying. So there's another reason ? Don't tell me. In this fallacious review you are seeking to discredit me and hence discredit everything I write. By re-stating my negative views of

KARL: (CONT) "Phoenix" you are reminding the readers of my strong feelings for the play so they associate them firmly with me. Then when I am dis-credited they realise my views on the play were in fact untrue all along and that Phoenix is not a boring piece of twaddle as the dis-credited critic said but in fact a work of major import. Correct ?

ALAN: Bravo.

KARL : My skills of analysis have been honed through years of practice.

KARL SMILES.

ALAN: You know what I really hate about you.

KARL : Please. Tell me.

ALAN: You're so smug. You think you're a bloody genius.

KARL : No I don't.

ALAN: Yes you do. Right up there with Stanislavsky, Brook and Artaud.

KARL: Artaud was over-rated, but I would not put myself in the same class as Brook and Stanislavsky. I am merely a humble critic.

ALAN: That's not what your reviews suggest. An avid reader of your dribble could be excused for thinking you were Aristotle himself. You know how every play should be performed in every style. Realistic, naturalistic, avant garde, symbolic, poetic, classic, commedia dell'arte. You're the master of them all. In fact, you're better than Peter Brook. He was just a director. You're brilliant in every single area of theatre. You know how every production should be lit, designed, costumed, directed, choreographed, dramaturged. You're a genius right up there with Einstein. You know every fault in every play ever written. You know how every scene could be tightened, every dramatic moment climaxed, every conflict resolved. You know when Tennessee Williams over-wrote, when Harold Pinter was too obscure, when Samuel Beckett forgot the audience, even when William Shakespeare lost the plot. You're Mamet, Marlowe and Miller all rolled into one. You know absolutely everything there is to know about one of the most difficult, demanding and complex art forms there is. Pardon me while I get down on my knees. (HE KNEELS) You're not a critic. You're a fucking miracle.

KARL : Thank you for your appreciation. And I'm glad to confirm what I think is your chief talent - exaggeration.

ALAN: My pleasure.

- KARL : Yes, I do have some idea of what theatre is but no, I am not a theatrical genius. To your other observations, yes, Williams was at times verbose, and Beckett, fearlessly undramatic, but Shakespeare I can assure you, never, ever lost the plot.
- ALAN: Always the critic.
- KARL : I do my best.
- ALAN: You know what else I hate about you ?
- KARL : My choice of socks ?
- ALAN: You're lack of courage. You're spineless. No guts.
- KARL : May I ask why you think that ?
- ALAN: Because you gave in to the voice.
- KARL : What voice ?
- ALAN: The voice inside you. The negative, destructive one. Some call it "the darkness", "the Big Grey", "the fear."
- KARL : How metaphysical ?
- ALAN: But I call it "The voice of the critic". Most of us don't give into it. We fight it. We choose to create rather than destroy.
- KARL : How delightfully juvenile ?
- ALAN: Yes it is juvenile. The spirit of a child. And it's what we fight to hold on to. Innocent. Pure. Honest. Passionate. Not tainted by years of decay and compromise. Unlike your voice. Cynical, nasty, bitter, angry. Ours is the voice of the living. Yours is the voice of the dead.
- KARL : I do believe you're disintegrating right before my very eyes. It's spectacular in a way. Spectacular but alarming. I, as you have so rightfully pointed out, am a critic. I am paid to criticise, to analyse, to be cynical - to a point. And that is what I do. Efficiently, effectively, without bias or remorse, fear or favour. And if I might say so myself, quite well. And that opinion is something that my colleagues and most of this city wholeheartedly concur with. Fullstop. New paragraph.
- ALAN: No artist concurs with a single thing you say.
- KARL : May I remind you that first of all I am a journalist - a writer - and therefore by your own definition an artist.

ALAN: You're not an artist. You surrendered long ago. Artists keep fighting, keep struggling right to the end. I could've been like you. I could've given up and become a critic. Jesus, the money's reason enough.

KARL : I get paid what is reasonable for a senior journalist.

ALAN: But it's not enough is it. The money, the car, the holiday - it can't plug up the gaping wound in your soul.

KARL : I am perfectly happy.

ALAN: You're bitter, snide, angry. What reason does a critic have to be angry ? We know the reason though don't we Sir Karl.

KARL LAUGHS.

KARL : If I do get angry sometimes it is because of some of the crap I have to sit through. Much of it thanks to you.

ALAN: No that's not why you're angry.

ALAN THROWS A FOLDER ON THE TABLE.

KARL: What's this ?

ALAN: The teacher has arrived.

KARL : Where did you get this ?

ALAN: I was poking around the theatre one day. I had to pick up an old script of mine. An original of "Strange Days". I burnt all of mine after your review came out.

KARL : Over-reacting, as usual.

ALAN: And there in the cupboard, amongst the rejects that never got collected I saw this little red cover poking out. "Emblems of the Aftermath" by Karl Anderton. At first I couldn't believe it. So I rang the old administrator and he said you submitted another one as well. Also a reject, but I couldn't find that one. Still this is the only proof I need. You couldn't make it as a writer so now you pull down everyone else who tries. Shall we have a bit or a read through ? (OPENING FOLDER) "Act 1. Summer. The office of Town Planning, Adelaide. The busy hive of an inner city office. The workers mill around like bees at a honey pot." That's a nice similie isn't it ?

KARL : You've spoken a lot of garbage today but now you're really excelling yourself.

ALAN: Admit it Karl .

- KARL : Admit what ? What have I got to admit ?
- ALAN: It destroyed you that you couldn't make it and now you're exacting your revenge on everyone who comes within reach. Jesus, you were so desperate to be a playwright, you even married one.
- KARL : I don't see what my ex-wife has to do with this.
- ALAN: Hoping some talent might rub off.
- KARL : It might surprise you to know but a book of my criticisms is being published next year. It is true that play, written when I was a young and very foolish man I might say, did not meet with success but to many people I am already an accomplished writer.
- ALAN: You couldn't make it so you stopped creating and started destroying. That is the difference between you and me.
- KARL : You are being simplistic.
- ALAN: Most important things are simple.
- KARL : You're beginning to sound as far fetched and ridiculous as one of your characters. The decision I made not to further my career as a dramatist was based not on anger or bitterness. But maturity. I recognised I had an alternative gift and I chose to nurture it.
- ALAN: A gift to destroy ?
- KARL : The gift of analysis. And it is a gift. To be able to see the whole spectrum, the big picture, with clarity and insight. To point out someone's failings and help them to grow. For god's sake Alan how are you meant to improve as writers if no one points out where you're falling down ?
- ALAN: How are you helping us to improve if all you're telling us is "It's fucked" ?
- KARL : We push you on to greater heights. Challenge you. Provoke you, inspire you. We demand you don't settle for good enough and continue to strive for perfection.
- ALAN: You couldn't do it so now you're out to get anybody who can.
- KARL : I recognised that I had a gift. A gift not for creating but for seeing. I realised I could play a part in the creation of theatre. I too could contribute to the making of great things. Didn't you listen ? I didn't even choose to be a critic. It was thrust upon me. This is the role I was meant to play Alan, whether you like it or not. A bit part but a

KARL: (CONT) part all the same and I'm playing it with all my heart. Ring up Marjorie. Cancel the review. Deep down, you know I'm right.

ALAN: No. I know in my heart you are wrong. You crush careers and destroy people like you were sweeping the back porch. You don't care about them or the audience or even the theatre. Deep in your heart you hate it because you couldn't conquer it. You wreak your terrible revenge with a smile on your face and a knife in your hand.

KARL : Are you telling me I've never written a good review ?

ALAN: Of actors and directors and designers - but plays, especially by local writers - never. The only good review you ever gave a local play was Bowen and that was only because you wanted to sleep with the publicist.

KARL : If these accusations had any ring of truth at all, don't you think someone would have said something by now.

ALAN: No, because we know if we speak out next time we do something you'll rip us to pieces. You and all your colleagues.

KARL : This is pure fantasy.

ALAN: The fantasy reign of "the Axe" is about to end. In about four and a half hours.

KARL: But this is insane.

ALAN: So you keep saying.

ALAN GOES TO THE PHONE.

KARL: Please tell me you've come to your senses. You're calling Marjorie to cancel the review.

ALAN: Just ordering us dinner. You deserve it. I'm up for a nice juicy T-bone. What about you ?

BLACKOUT.

4. Around midnight.

DIM LIGHT FROM A SMALL LAMP.

KARL SITS IN HIS CHAIR A HALF EATEN PLATE OF FOOD SITS ON THE TABLE IN FRONT OF HIM.

ALAN IS NOT IN THE ROOM. **KARL** HAS ONE HAND FREE, THE OTHER IS STILL HANDCUFFED TO THE CHAIR.

KARL IS TRYING TO WORK HIS OTHER HAND LOOSE. HE WORKS ON THE ARMCHAIR SUPPORT, TRYING TO LOOSEN IT. HE BANGS AT THE SUPPORT, TRYING TO GET THE HAND CUFFS FREE.

SUDDENLY THERE IS THE SOUND OF THE FRONT DOOR OPENING. **KARL** FREEZES.

ALAN ENTERS WITH A PAPER. HE FLICKS ON THE LIGHT. **KARL** IS STILL.

ALAN: Ah. You're awake. Perfect. Here we are, in magnificent black and white. "Echoes a Triumph." Choke on that.

HE PLACES THE REVIEW DOWN IN FRONT OF **KARL**. **KARL** READS.

ALAN: That's right. Read it. Feel what's it like to know that all over this city right now people are picking up that paper and reading that review and there is absolutely nothing you can do about it. That soon one hundred thousand people will think that Karl Anderton is a complete raving idiot. The powerlessness, frustration, anger, rage. The feeling that you are completely fucked. Everyone in the industry will think you're on the take. When Helen won't be able to save you. You'll be sacked, a laughing stock. Finally people will know you for the fraud you always were. Am I happy ? You bet I am.

KARL : How could they print it ? How ?

ALAN: A fitting climax to our little drama wouldn't you say. So how does it feel to be totally fucked ?

KARL: The truth will come out. Everyone will know.

ALAN: That I did it. But you slammed my play again. How could I have possibly forced you at gun point to write that ?

ALAN BEGINS TO LAUGH. **KARL** IS STILL.

SUDDENLY WITH ONE GREAT SURGE **KARL** BREAKS FREE FROM THE CHAIR, BREAKING THE ARMCHAIR SUPPORT IN HALF. HE LUNGES AT **ALAN** WITH THE KNIFE.

ALAN KNOCKS THE KNIFE AWAY AND **KARL** CLUTCHES HIM AROUND THE NECK, STRANGLING HIM. THEY CRASH TO THE FLOOR, KNOCKING THE SOFA OVER IN THE PROCESS.

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES FOR SOMETIME BEFORE **ALAN** GETS HIS HANDS FREE AND PUNCHES **KARL** IN THE FACE - TWICE.

KARL ROLLS OFF HIM ON TO THE GROUND. **ALAN** GOES FOR THE GUN BUT **KARL** GRABS HIS LEGS AND GETS THERE FIRST. HE PICKS UP THE GUN AND POINTS IT AT **ALAN**.

ALAN: That's it, Karl . Give in to the surge filling up every part of your body. Burning in your blood like fire. Hatred. You've taken your revenge in print but now you can quench your insatiable desire for revenge. Get those bastards back who didn't put on your tired, cliched, melodrama. And all those other bastards who think they can write. You're the only one who can write, aren't you Karl ? Well come on. Here's your chance. Pull the trigger. Strike one up for the critic. Time to show yourself for the great writer you really are.

KARL : Why shouldn't I be angry ? Why shouldn't I want revenge ? I'm the writer not you. I've got four times as much talent as you, Ryan, Bowen - any of you. Only they couldn't see it. Those idiotic directors and assessors. They couldn't open their eyes. See what was right in front of their nose. Of course the plays weren't finished. They needed work. What play doesn't. They were rough diamonds waiting to be cut into shape. A reading, a workshop, some one on one feedback. That's all I wanted. A little encouragement. But no. "The play didn't work." I should go and see more theatre." I'd been going to the theatre since I was seven years old. I'd read every play ever written. I knew every writer, every style. Of course I wasn't Chekov. But I wasn't a fool. Couldn't they see that. I was only twenty three years old. I just wanted someone to listen. And then I thought, well stuff them, if they think they can reject me, I'll show them. I'll teach them who can and who can't write. I bided my time subbing, writing features, getting chummy with the arts' editor, until at last my chance came. And then I was the critic and oh, how they changed. All these people who wouldn't return my letters, wouldn't take my calls, were suddenly all over me - asking if I wanted a drink, if my seat was alright, if they could come home with me after the show. Anything for a good review. It took time of course. I had to build up some credibility first. Some influence. But once I had it, I brought those idiots to their knees and made them curse the day they ever ignored me. I even closed down one theatre company. Slammed them so hard they never recovered. And then you came along. You were the worst of all. Their golden boy. The young craftsmen who everyone was raving about. An important new voice. I saw your first play. It was alright, it wasn't that good. Mine was easily better. It should've been me getting the accolades, the support, the productions but it was you, with your long hair and fresh faced good looks. You were the one getting all the attention, all the praise. I saved up something special for you. When your next big production came along, I let you have it. Both barrels. I thought that was it. Blown you out of the water like they had done to me. I didn't hear anymore about you. And then I heard the whispers. New play, come back, a fighter. Well, we would see who the toughest was. Who could take the blows. I went along. The play was good.

KARL: (CONT) Of course it was good. A bit unfocused in parts but it was easily one of the best new plays in years, here, anywhere. But I damned you just the same. I slammed you harder than I usually would. I made sure you'd never be coming back again.

ALAN: But why ?

KARL Because you wouldn't let me forget. How dare you keep writing when I couldn't ? How dare you think you could be a playwright when it was me who should've been ? How dare you still believe in your self when those bastards had knocked the belief out of me ?

SILENCE. **KARL** SUDDENLY TENSES AND PUTS THE GUN IN TO HIS MOUTH. HIS HANDS TREMBLE AS HE STRUGGLES TO PULL THE TRIGGER.

ALAN GOES SLOWLY TO **KARL**. HE TAKES THE GUN OUT OF **KARL**'S HANDS. **ALAN** PLACES IT ON THE TABLE.

ALAN: It's strange. I don't feel the way I thought I would.

KARL : Exulted, triumphant, vindicated ?

ALAN: No. Just sad. You only ever made one mistake.

KARL : Only one ?

ALAN: You listened to them. You let the bastards drag you down.

KARL : Where are you going ?

ALAN: Home. To my family.

ALAN STARTS TO LEAVE.

KARL : Don't go. Please. How can I ... ? After this.

ALAN: That's up to you.

ALAN LEAVES. **KARL** ALONE.

THE LIGHTS FADE.

END PLAY.