

In Search of ... Theme.

by

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

JANEY/BORNFREE, a woman in her early thirties. Dressed modestly as JANEY, then more punkish as BORNFREE. Nervous about her upcoming ordeal.

PHIL, a worn, beleaguered looking white man in his mid thirties. Dressed in a wrinkled shirt and tie.

TARIQ, a worn, beleaguered looking black man in his mid thirties. Dressed in a wrinkled shirt and tie.

JOHNNY, a tough looking guy in his thirties/forties. He wears a black leather jacket and jeans. He could even be wearing sunglasses upon entrance. While his appearance is tough, his demeanor is calm and professional. In most cases, he presents his lines in a professional monotone, similar to Jack Webb in *Dragnet*. In the second part of the play, he will be tired and disabled..

ROCCO, another tough guy in the first part of the play, who then switches into an intellectual.

WRITER 1. Could be any man or woman of any age.

WRITER 2. Could be any man or woman of any age.

(NOTE: WRITER 1 and WRITER 2 are not directors who the actors hear. They are having a discussion between themselves on how to improve the play, and the actors never acknowledge their voices as they change positions and lines in reaction to the writer's discussion. When WRITER 1 and WRITER 2 speak, the actors either freeze in position, or take actions described by the writers without acknowledging them.)

THE SCENE

A normal living room in a normal house. The entrance to the living room is upstage center. Centerstage is a couch facing the audience. A comfortable chair flanks the couch on stage right. Downstage is an imaginary television, which is facing the couch.

AT RISE

PHIL is flicking a remote control vacuously at the TV. JANEY paces nervously behind the couch. Doorbell rings and JANEY lets in two tough-looking guys, JOHNNY and ROCCO.

JANEY/BORNFREE

Oh, thank God you're here.

JOHNNY

How long's he been this way?

JANEY/BORNFREE

All day. He didn't go to work, he didn't eat, he didn't move. He just flicks.

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

Looks bad, Johnny.

JANEY/BORNFREE

You've got to do something!

(Pause as JOHNNY assesses the situation.)

JOHNNY

Janey, I'll need a People magazine.

JANEY

I've got one in the bathroom--

JOHNNY

Get it.

(JANEY runs offstage.)

JOHNNY (CONTINUED)

Rocco, you got the antidote?

ROCCO

(Indicating the inside of his coat.)

Right here.

(JANEY returns with the People magazine.)

JOHNNY

Let's go. Janey, you stand back, and don't -- DON'T --
- come close till I call you.

(She nods; ROCCO and JOHNNY return to their
original seats. Then, to ROCCO.)

Okay, now.

(ROCCO restrains PHIL, while JOHNNY grabs onto
his arm with the remote control. JOHNNY removes
the remote control and shuts the TV. PHILLY
screams in panic. JOHNNY then inserts the
People magazine. He slowly calms himself after
the magazine is in his hand. He tries to
change the channel with the People Magazine,
but is frustrated by the results.)

PHIL

What the--

ROCCO

No, it can't change channels for you. It's for
reading.

PHIL

Reading?

ROCCO

Yeah, little letters on a page that form words.

PHIL

(As he stares at the page, he gets an alarmed
look.)

Ohh. Ohhhh.

JANEY

What's the matter?

PHIL

Nothing's moving here!

JOHNNY

It's not like TV, Philly. The page stays the same, you move your eyes to follow the words.

PHIL

(As if learning an interesting fact.)

Huh.

(He reads slowly at first and with his finger. He then picks up speed in his reading. He shakes his head as if he is coming out of a trance.)

Hey, why isn't the TV on? Where's my remote control?

JOHNNY

Not so fast. Rocco, the antidote.

(ROCCO hands PHILLY a TV Guide.)

PHIL

A TV guide?

ROCCO

It can save your life.

PHIL

But I don't need that. I'll just flick--

JANEY

No! You won't flick! You can't flick! Don't you see? It's destroying you, it's destroying our marriage!

PHIL

I've got my flicking under control. I can stop anytime I want!

ROCCO

You're a flickaholic, Phil. And until you admit it, you'll be stuck in a never-ending channel surf from Hell.

PHIL

What am I supposed to do? I can't survive without TV.

JOHNNY

We're not asking you to give up TV. That's too much for any human. But you must never, never handle the remote control by yourself.

PHIL

But ... how will I turn it on?

JOHNNY

There's actually a power button right on the TV.

PHIL

Wow ... But how do you reach it?

JOHNNY

You must get off the couch and actually touch the television.

PHIL

Ohh, I don't know if I can--

ROCCO

It'll be a struggle until you build up the muscles in your legs again, but you'll get there, like we all have.

PHIL

And to change the channel?

JOHNNY

(He approaches the TV.)

You walk over and touch this button.

PHIL

(Amazed.)

Wow, a remote control built right into the TV! What will they think of next?

ROCCO

Philly, from now on, only Janey is allowed to possess the remote control.

(He hands the remote control to JANEY.)

PHIL

But what if it does the same thing to her that it did to me?

JOHNNY

Not likely, my friend. This dreaded disease rarely affects women.

(To JANEY.)

We'll check on him next week. If there are any relapses, call us immediately.

PHIL

How can I --

(He takes JANEY'S hand.)

how can we -- ever thank you?

JOHNNY

By helping some other poor slob in the grips of this dreaded disease.

(He looks off into the distance, which is actually the audience. House lights could be put up and JOHNNY could stare at the men in the audience. While he is giving his speech, ROCCO puts his hand on his heart and hums "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah)

There are plenty of them out there. Wherever a man is left alone with a remote control, he's a flick away from hell.

(Lights go back down.)

Come on Rocco, our work is done here.

(They utter their goodbyes and exit the stage. JANEY sits next to PHIL, remote in her hand. PHIL is intently reading his People magazine. They cuddle and sigh. Lights dim on them and come up on WRITERS.)

WRITER 1
That's good.

WRITER 2
It's funny.

WRITER 1
It makes me laugh.

WRITER 2
It's just funny.

(Beat. Then in a resigned tone.)

WRITER 1
It's meaningless.

WRITER 2
Has no value.

WRITER 1
Will never get picked up.

WRITER 2
Nobody does meaningless anymore.

WRITER 1
Gotta have a theme. A ... A --

WRITER 2
A cause.

WRITER 1
Socially redeeming value.

WRITER 2

Break out of the box.

(Beat.)

WRITER 1

So ...

WRITER 2

So let's fix it.

WRITER 1

Make it "meaningful?"

WRITER 2

Give it ... "significance."

WRITER 1

Ahhh.

(Lights up on the exact opening scene: PHIL flicking a remote control vacuously at TV. JANEY pacing nervously behind the couch.)

WRITER 1

Wait wait wait, you see what's wrong here?

WRITER 2

Uhhh--

WRITER 1

They're both white.

WRITER 2

Yeah?

WRITER 1

Where's the meaning in a white couple?

WRITER 2
So ... you want a black couple?

WRITER 1
Even better: interracial.

WRITER 2
That'll play.

(A black actor comes on-stage and replaces the white actor playing PHIL.)

WRITER 1
So Phil is--

WRITER 2
Not Phil, Tariq.

WRITER 1
Okay, Tariq is flicking the remote--

WRITER 2
Hold it. Remote's gotta go.

WRITER 1
Yeah, not meaningful enough. Gotta have something more--

(As the following items are mentioned, TARIQ pulls them from under the couch.)

WRITER 2
A computer?

WRITER 1
Too analytical.

WRITER 2
A book.

WRITER 1

Too boring.

WRITER 2

A doll?

WRITER 1

Too weird.

WRITER 2

A gun.

WRITER 1

That'll play. That always plays.

(PHIL puts the doll down and comes out with a gun. He then plays with it, checks the chamber, etc., maintaining a vacuous mode.)

WRITER 1

So he's going toooo ... murder his wife?

WRITER 2

Nah, too much like a "Cops" episode. Suicide. He's contemplating suicide.

WRITER 1

Black *and* depressed. One person covering *two* theme biggies!

WRITER 2

He's depressed because ... the marriage is in trouble.

WRITER 1

Why?

WRITER 2

Because play marriages are always in trouble.

WRITER 1

Of course, but what's the reason?

WRITER 2

Because ... their racial and cultural differences are tearing them apart?

WRITER 1

Nah, that's played. Six Degrees of Separation and a million others.

WRITER 2

Because she's ... she finally realizes ... she only married him because of societal pressures towards heterosexuality and ... and she wants to leave him--

WRITER 1

Tooooo

WRITER 2

To ... fully explore ... her repressed homosexuality ... with ...

WRITER 1

A lap dancer!

(Lap dancer enters and does a seductive dance around JANEY.)

WRITER 2

A lap dancer. Finally, a play husbands will miss football for.

WRITER 1

But where's the meaning?

WRITER 2

Okay, okay ... Their love isn't about sex. It's about the fact that they're both into ... saving whales.

(They both get whale dolls thrown to them from offstage. They both caress the whale dolls.)

WRITER 1

Which depresses Tariq because ... he'd rather save dolphins.

WRITER 2

Compelling conflict *and* animal rights theme. Go with it.

(The lap dancer takes the two whales, waves to JANEY and exits the stage. JANEY sadly waves back, then glares at TARIQ. From under the couch, TARIQ pulls out a can of tuna and starts crying.)

WRITER 1

Now Janey.

WRITER 2

Not Janey ...Bornfree!

(JANEY sheds any modest clothing, loosens her hair and looks more natural, or possibly punkish.)

WRITER 1

Oookay ... Bornfree. She still nervous?

WRITER 2

About this loser? Forget it.

(BORNFREE stops pacing.)

WRITER 2

This ... this is a strong, liberated woman. A tough, cynical woman who would never kowtow to an oppressive, domineering male pig.

(JANEY's demeanor goes from worry to defiance in conjunction with the SPEAKER.)

WRITER 1

Very significant.

WRITER 2

Okay, now we've got socially compelling characters. I think we're ready.

TARIQ

How many dolphins died to catch this?

JANEY/BORNFREE

(With animosity.)

Compared to the whales, it's a party for your Flipper-faced fools.

(Doorbell rings and JANEY lets in the two tough-looking guys, JOHNNY and ROCCO.)

WRITER 1

Wait wait, they can't be dressed like that. Johnny's too ... hero-ish. Make him more ... current.

(Wheel chair is pushed on-stage, JOHNNY sits down.)

WRITER 2

Plenty of meaning in that.

WRITER 1

Suffers from PCFS. Psychosematic chronic fatigue syndrome.

(JOHNNY slumps his head and snores lightly.)

WRITER 2

What about Rocco?

WRITER 1

Gotta break out of that stereotypical bouncer mold.

WRITER 2

Let's make him troubled, complex, philosophical.

WRITER 1

An intellectual--

(ROCCO sheds the leather jacket and any other tough-looking garb and replaces them with a professorial looking cardigan or sports coat with elbow patches and smokes a pipe.)

WRITER 2

Suffering in a plebeian world.

(He strikes an intellectual pose, holding his chin in one hand as he gazes off into the distance.)

WRITER 1

That's better.

(ROCCO wheels Johnny into the room.)

JANEY/BORNFREE

Thank God you're here.

WRITER 2

Wait, wait, wait. A woman named Bornfree wouldn't say that.

JANEY/BORNFREE

(With disdain.)

Oh God, you're here.

WRITER 2

That's more like it.

(JOHNNY is about to say something, then falls asleep and snores. BORNFREE shakes him.)

JOHNNY

Huh? What?

JANEY/BORNFREE

Who's this loser?

JOHNNY

This is Rocco--

WRITER 2

Name change!

JOHNNY

This is Rocheforte.

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

How long has he been this way?

JOHNNY

His whole life.

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

I mean, with the gun.

JANEY/BORNFREE

I don't know, sometime this morning. No breakfast, no work, just this. Wish he'd just do it already and put us all out of our misery.

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

(Said fast, like an auctioneer.)

Sadly, I often find myself agreeing with that viewpoint, particularly when one ponders the inanities of said environment. The lack of perspicaciousness in an epoch where alacrity and erudite reasoning are demanded -- nay -- required of all inhabitants.

(Beat.)

JANEY/BORNFREE

Hey Tariq, can I borrow that gun?

JOHNNY

All right, let's get down to business.

(To BORNFREE.)

Do you have a Flipper video?

JANEY/BORNFREE

I know he's got them stashed somewhere.

JOHNNY

Could you...?

(JANEY/BORNFREE hesitates, sighs loudly, then insolently trudges offstage.)

JOHNNY

You have the antidote?

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

If you are alluding to an item of need being surreptitiously replaced with an equally alluring item in the hopes in a sanguine outcome, then I respond affirmatively to said request.

(Pause, then we hear JOHNNY's light snoring.)

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

(Exasperated.)

Yes, I have it!

JOHNNY

Hmm? What? Uh, okay, good.

(BORNFREE returns with the Flipper video.)

JANEY/BORNFREE

Anything's better than his endless moaning.

JOHNNY

Rocheforte, let's do it. Bornfree, you stay back.

JANEY/BORNFREE

Don't you ever use that arrogant, order-giving male tone on me.

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

May I then suggest you refrain from obtaining an adjacent proximity to upcoming activities in the event of unforeseen and possibly deleterious actions that may or may not occur?

JANEY/BORNFREE

Huh?

JOHNNY

He was also asking if you could stay back a little.

JANEY/BORNFREE

(To ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE.)

Well, since you put it that way.

(JANEY takes a few steps back. ROCHEFORT move close to TARIQ to prepare for an assault.)

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

I suggest we commence ... forthwith.

(ROCHEFORT restrains TARIQ, while JOHNNY grabs onto his arm with the gun. JOHNNY removes the gun as well as the can of tuna fish. TARIQ screams in panic. JOHNNY turns on the TV and inserts the Flipper video. From offstage, we hear the Flipper theme song. TARIQ slowly calms himself as he watches the video.)

TARIQ

What the--

JOHNNY

It's Flipper. The fun little slippery fellow

TARIQ

Who cares--

JOHNNY

He needs you now more than ever.

TARIQ

There is no Flipper. There never was.

JOHNNY

What are you -- I grew up watching Flipper, we all did--

TARIQ

All a fake, man. A tawdry attempt by Hollywood sleazoids to hoodwink the uncaring mass of middle America with the illusion that the majestic dolphin was a fun-loving clown of the sea.

JOHNNY

But that can't be--

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

Sadly, Tariq is correct. There were actually multiple dolphi swimerandi, or dolphins, who were used interchangeably. Their work schedule was so arduous that many of said creatures suffered from exhaustion.

JOHNNY

Okay, then consider this video your call to action to protect these friendly, fun-loving frolickers.

TARIQ

Don't you ever use that prejudicial language in this house.

JOHNNY

What'd I say? "Frolicking, fun-loving"--

TARIQ

Code words for "lazy slackers who have no responsibilities and waste their days doing tricks for fish snacks."

JOHNNY

I never -- why would you think--

TARIQ

Because that's the way your type is.

JOHNNY

My type? What type is--

TARIQ

The human type. Looking down on the noble, majestic, hard-working dolphin -- relegating him to a circus performer.

JANEY/BORNFREE

Him?

TARIQ

Huh?

JANEY/BORNFREE

You just called the dolphin "him."

TARIQ

I was using the broad sense of the --

JANEY/BORNFREE

"Broad?" Did you just say "broad?"

TARIQ

I was describing the term used --

JANEY/BORNFREE

You were summing up the reason I have to get out of this relationship. Your dominating, oppressive maleness and this strange affinity for dolphins, which, compared to the mighty whale, is so lame.

JOHNNY

"Lame?"

JANEY/BORNFREE

What?

JOHNNY

You said "lame."

JANEY/BORNFREE

Yeah, as in, that's what his ideas are.

JOHNNY

I'm "lame."

JANEY/BORNFREE

You know I didn't mean anything about physical defects.--

JOHNNY

As if insulting the mentally challenged is any different?

JANEY/BORNFREE

I never did that. I--

JOHNNY

I guess you want to exterminate the "lame" so the brainiacs can take over.

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

"Brainiacs?"

JOHNNY

Yeah.

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

By that term, are you referring to the mentally gifted?

JOHNNY

No, I just meant--

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

As one of the intellectually unchallenged, I must take umbrage to your harsh rejoinder.

JOHNNY

I was just saying that she shouldn't--

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

And I'm just saying that we will no longer accept stereotypes that depict us as ruthless corporate leaders or erudite airheads who eschew everyday issues.

JOHNNY

Look, I never meant to--

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

Ah yes, the infamous "never meant to." It is now obvious that when it comes to recognizing an intellectual hater, I have no choice but to call a spade a spade.

JOHNNY

No, I'm not--

TARIQ

You said "Spade."

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

What?

TARIQ

You said "Spade."

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

Yes. It's a phrase that means--

TARIQ

Oh, I know what it means: spade, coon, jungle bunny, I know what they all mean.

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

Wait a minute, are you implying that I--

TARIQ

It always comes back to that, doesn't it? Deep down, even the "intellectually gifted," white man is no different than a lame southern white cracker.

(The next three lines are said simultaneously.)

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

I take umbrage.

JANEY/BORNFREE

You know I'm from the south!

JOHNNY

Did you say lame?

(The four start arguing, then struggling to get the gun. JOHNNY walks out of his wheelchair to join the fray. The four are huddled in a struggle, with the gun concealed among them. Four shots are fired. The four stop in shocked silence. There is a pause.)

WRITER 1

Wait, wait, wait. The hell are we doing here?

WRITER 2

Adding meaning--

WRITER 1

Now there's too much meaning! I mean, Jesus, we had a story about a guy with a remote control problem, then we have a gay whale lover versus a depressed dolphin lover, now we got a racially charged mass murder.

WRITER 2

What's wrong with that?

WRITER 1

Well, we want meaning, but can't we have happy meaning?

WRITER 2

O'Neal and Miller never had happy meaning.

WRITER 1

So when we get as famous as them, we'll be depressing. But until then --

WRITER 2

All right, keep the meaning, kill the death.

WRITER 1

Let's pick it up right before the struggle.

(Actors resume their positions before the fight, pause, then continue arguing indecipherably.)

JOHNNY

Wait a minute! Enough already! Rocheforte, we better give them the antidote before we all kill each other.

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

Here, sir, is your all-expense paid membership to Greenpeace.

TARIQ

What? I didn't ask for--

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

They offer free membership to suicidal individuals who have an affinity for anything fishy, furry or green.

TARIQ

But why--

JOHNNY

Because people like you are great volunteers for their maniacal raft-against-the-oil-tanker battles.

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

Their motto is, "If you're going to go, go for a cause."

JANEY/BORNFREE

But what about my whales?

JOHNNY

Those Greenpeace boys also save whales -- and snails and shales and dandelions and daisies and anything else that'll piss off somebody.

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

So you two could work together -- and die together.

JANEY/BORNFREE

Hey, wait a minute. He's the one who wants to die, not me.

JOHNNY

Even better. Tariq gets himself killed, and you get press coverage as the grieving widow. Greenpeace will love it.

(Beat.)

JANEY/BORNFREE

Well ... I guess it could work.

ROCCO/ROCHEFORTE

You have the opportunity to replace the ignoble fate of a precipitated yet inconsequential suicide with a precipitated yet slightly less inconsequential suicide for a cause.

(TARIQ and BORNFREE look at each other meaningfully.)

JANEY/BORNFREE

How can I --

TARIQ

How can we --

JANEY/BORNFREE

Ever thank you.

JOHNNY

By helping some other poor slobs in the grips of a meaningless existence. By living so dysfunctionally that you'll be a profound example of the pitiful existence of our lives. By constantly being at odds with anything accepted or conventional, and thereby always being wonderful play material.

WRITER 2

You don't think we're being too obvious, do you?

WRITER 1

Nah.

JOHNNY

Come on Rocheforte, our work is done here.

(They exit.)

JANEY/BORNFREE

Well, what do you want to do now?

TARIQ

Hmmm ... they left that Flipper video, maybe I'll watch--

JANEY/BORNFREE

If we're going to watch anything, it'll be Free Willie.

TARIQ

Oh no, not more whale crap.

JANEY/BORNFREE

Better than that dumb dolphin squawking!

(They argue. Lights dim.)

WRITER 1

All right, that's enough.

WRITER 2

I liked it better when they shot each other.

WRITER 1

No really, what do you think.

WRITER 2

It's pretentious, sanctimonious and contrived.

WRITER 1

Now it's sure to get picked up!

WRITER 2

Meaning up the wazoo.

WRITER 1

Speaking of meaning, I've been thinking of our next "significant" work. It's the story about a couple that find the courage to stand up for their right to explore bestiality. It's called, "Damn it, Mr. Ed, you've got great legs."

WRITER 2

Wow, that is so filled with meaningful potential!

WRITER 1

Okay, so it opens with:

(Sung to the theme of Talking Mr. Ed.)

"A horse is a sex object of course of course ...

(From offstage, we hear a horse neigh.)

Lights down.

End.