

PROLOGUE

The actors sit in a semi-circle. During prologue actors speak in the third person when describing the character, they are playing. This is a play reading and a play within a play. Banika doodles on piano free flowing original tunes as actors enter. Rosa and John are sketching with drawing board, pads, pencil and pastels.

RICHARD as LEAR

**Does any here know me? This is not Lear:
Does Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discerning's
Are lethargied. Ha! Waking? It's not so.
Who is it that can tell me who I am?**

BANIKA

Welcome to “Hope an Action”, a play developed through improvisational theatre workshops with senior citizens of Peter’s Place, a drop-in center that was a program of The Partnership for the Homeless. Drop-in centers were designed to help special populations such as the fragile and mentally ill homeless and senior citizens get services to prevent homelessness, however no one came to the drop-in who was not homeless. The play takes place in 2005. The setting is a large church basement on 23rd Street. The drop-in has since been closed and all clients folded into the city shelters.

The plays were originally performed by clients and the art

therapist, me, of Peter's Place, at community centers to raise awareness; to provide the participants with an advocacy action to empower themselves, to add their voices to the war on homelessness.

RICHARD

Is it a war?

LUIS

War is good for the economy.

ROSA

Not yet.

ANNE

It is an economic crisis.

RICHARD

Spare us.

LUIS as LEAR

When we are born, we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools. this' a good block!

It were a delicate stratagem to shoe

A troop of horse with felt; I'll put it in proof,

**And when I have stol'n upon these sons-in-law,
then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!**

ANNE

But we hope so.

BANIKA

This part of the process is to share; to raise awareness as to the condition of homelessness and to enlist recruits in the war on homelessness. Our actors are playing the parts developed by the initial clients.

ANNE

We think this possible...

RICHARD

Richard is a 68-year-old male Texan, Korean war veteran, an alcoholic who has recently returned from the hospital after a double by-pass. He has been drinking....

BANIKA

When I worked as a discharge planner in the Brooklyn Hospital Center such discharges were illegal, but that was the early 90's, at the beginning of the managed care movement, now...

RICHARD

After major surgery, a senior citizen is routinely discharged to drop-in centers to sleep on plastic chairs...

Richard often buys flowers for the female staff and tells Banika to comb her hair. He grew up in orphanages and foster homes; was sexually abused as a child by his foster family; worked in construction, maintenance, ran a service station; was married; had

two children that he has lost touch with. His wife died 5 years ago. He hasn't stopped drinking since.

ANNE

Anne is 80. She is a freelance writer and journalist. She was the first female syndicated literary reviewer and book columnist in the U.S. A combination of illness and breached writing contracts led to her homelessness. The eviction was attended by the building manager, the superintendent, the lawyer for the landlord and the clerk. She was given 28 minutes to pack up immediately as they changed the lock. The packing was supervised by the lawyer for fear she might jump out the window as a tenant had done not long before. She had lived in her apartment 30 years. It was a famous building on 5th Avenue, one block up from Washington Square Park. She had paid her rent, accepted increases without complaint and was treated like an alien from Mars. Following eviction, she maxed out her credit card in a hotel, then lived sleeping on benches and in coffee shops in lower Manhattan for about a month, until the police brought her to Peter's Place.

JOE

Luis is also 70. Has a history of substance abuse. He was an actor, with a career in Columbia and Holland....

Has adult children who are in daily contact with him; has not had a drink for 5 years.

ROSA

Rosa 65, a long-term heroin addict...has seizures...very street...has been on methadone for 40 years.

JOHN

John 84, a WWII Veteran; has rediscovered his love for drawing; clearly has a passion for visual art, all portraits look like himself...

LOUISE

Louise has lived here the longest, five years...no identification, which makes it impossible for the staff to find her housing. She is very delusional. This is her house; she is the boss....

ALBERT

Albert... also a more senior member...85...
Never mind...later...

BANIKA

Now Presenting, **Hope An Action...**
ACTION

ANNE

When I was 17, if anyone had told me I'd be spending my golden years sitting in a broken-down plastic geriatric chair day and night -I'd have laughed my head off. but it looks like the joke's on me.
Right?

ROSA

Some joke.
It's crazy. Senior citizens living on plastic chairs.
(Regarding drawing that she is working on) I'm working on my arms. My doctor says they are getting stronger. I lost all the strength but they're coming back. My pictures aren't pretty.

ALBERT

My wife had Alzheimer's. Cost me 800,00 dollars. The hospitals took everything. I had two homes. I worked my whole life. Don't tell me nothin' You can't tell me nothin. I hate everybody.

ROSA

When I left my apartment, in the village, gangs would terrorize me They hired punks to force me to move. It put me in the psych hospital. I'm still not over it.

JOE

You have certain legal rights as a family member even though you are not on the lease, pending how long you lived there.

BANIKA

Joe is our staff attorney. He helps clients with evictions as well as other legal matters.
Do you have hope?

LUIS

I don't see anyone leaving here. Look around you. Everyone is just sitting around.

ALBERT

I've been here three years now. They don't do nothin' here.

ROSA

I lost my apartment because the landlord wanted more money. They said I had to get out. I came to this center last summer. I hope it's not three years for me.

JOHN

I'm just waitin' to die.

LOUIS

Everything was my own fault. My father wanted to put me on the lease. I kept saying later. I didn't expect him to die. He was so strong.

JOE as LEAR

**Let the great gods,
That keep this dreadful pothor o'er our heads,
Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch,
That hast within thee undivulged crimes,
Unwhipp'd of justice; hide thee, thou bloody hand;
Thou perjur'd, and thou similar of virtue
That art incestuous; caitiff, to pieces shake,
That under covert and convenient seeming
Hast practis'd on man's life; close pent-up guilts
Rive your concealing continents, and cry
these dreadful summoners grace. I am a man
More sinn'd against than sinning.**

JOHN

I was in the war. I never knew if I was going to live or die. I started drinking to get through. I'm an alcoholic. I know it. Sometimes a drink helps me create. Then, I can relax.

My daughter is a crack addict. All my family wants is my money. They are waitin' for me to die.

ROSA

Sign our petition. We can write to the mayor or Mr. Cohen. Isn't he in charge? We can tell him we need more housing.

ALBERT

Write who?

BANIKA

Arnold Cohen is head of The Partnership for the Homeless. Peter's Place is a program of the Partnership.

ANNE

We got to fight. We have to let people know we are here. What about Mayor Bloomberg? He is the one to watch. I always said that. He says he will build affordable housing not more shelters.

BANIKA

Maybe this play expressing our concerns can get on NY1 or CNN. After all, this is a real news story.

LUIS

The plays the thing wherein we catch the conscience of the king.

ANNE

Hamlet, to be or not to be...ha ha ha.

ALBERT

That is the question

ANNE

Invite Bloomberg to come to a performance.

LUIS

Since 9/11 things seems so much worse.

ROSA

A lot of us have health problems. My knees hurt. My legs are swollen. My feet. It is hard to get around. You've got to understand how it is with us.

LUIS

I have medication for seizures, thanks to my drinking.

RICHARD

Drinking is not my problem. It is all I ever hear around here. Yeah, I drink, but I don't want to stop. It's my business.

JOHN as LEAR

When the rain came to wet me once and wind to make me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to they are not men " their works: they told me I was everything; 'tis a lie, I am not ague proof....

JOE

Is drinking why you're homeless?

ANNE

Not me. I never drank in my life. A stingy landlord is why I'm unhoused, not vodka.

LUIS

Will the play show that we are intelligent and reasonable people?

ANNE

It might surprise skeptics to know how many master's degrees we have here.

ALBERT

People are racist here. I've gone to the Human Rights Commission to complain. There are some clients who tell me they are in control and tell me when to eat and where to sit. The other day one guy called me a Jew bastard, and no one did nothin'. They're racist. I'm tellin' you, the whole lot of them.

BANIKA

Racism, bigotry is everywhere unfortunately. The Partnership policy is anti-bias. If that is happening, you need to talk to staff....

ALBERT

They don't do nothin'....

RICHARD

I've got to say something. I'm sick of all these immigrants. I'm an American and proud to be an American, but these immigrants come here and have more rights than I do.

LUIS

Just a minute, everyone is proud of their country. I am an American too, but I'm also Panamanian.

ANNE

That's not the point. The founding fathers were immigrants.

RICHARD

White guys who worked their whole lives can't get nothin' unless their rich! I couldn't get medical insurance, but these immigrants come here, and they get the best of everything.

ALBERT

You tell him. There's no affirmative action for us. We got to work hard.

BANIKA as LEAR

**No, no, no no! come, let's away to prison;
We two alone will sing like bird i'the cage: When thou dost
Ask me bless, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness: so, we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, packs and sets of great ones
That ebe and flow by the moon.**

JOHN

I fought in World War II. The VA sent me here. I'm sick. I can't walk without these crutches. Shouldn't they have something for me?

BANIKA

On Veterans day we mobilized the vets here to join the parade. We made a sign "Homeless Vets Support Veterans Rights" Most of the vets could barely walk and were from WWII - Tom Brokaw's 'Greatest Generation' - they stood with canes and crutches and great pride behind our banner. My 23yr old social work intern cried. She told me later that was the saddest day for her.

RICHARD

All I hear around here is I got to go to a program in order to get an apartment because I drink. People drink in apartments too.

JOE

Yeah, but when we talk about abuse of alcohol and drugs; we are talking about hurting yourself or others. If you can't go to a housing interview because your high, then case managers will recommend substance abuse programs.

RICHARD

It's not fair. I'm not a child. If I want to drink, I should be able to. Try living like this. You would drink too.

BANIKA

The truth is there are not enough housing options for homeless people, especially seniors. They have cut section 8 which many of

our clients were waiting for. Most SRO's only take people until they have been sober 3 months. If a person drinks and admits it, he or she is not eligible. So, clients who drink are discriminated. Maybe someone who has a problem is in denial. Many people in apartments also drink. They are not necessarily alcoholics. Certainly no one demands they go into programs to keep their apartments. And yes, living in a drop-in can exacerbate a problem.

ANNE

We are people who have raised families, led entire lives and now are here. If I drank, I would drink more.

LOUIS

Get up, you're sitting in my chair.

JOE

We are having a group.

LOUISE

You're in my chair.

BANIKA

We will move the chairs back soon. Why don't you join the group?

LUIS

There are people here who want to run the show. They gossip about everyone, but they don't bother me. My work used to keep me going.

LOUISE

Get out of here.

ALBERT

Oh, shut up.

LOUISE

I'm not joining anything, and this is my chair. You shut up. You hear me, shut up!

BANIKA

Let it go.

JOHN

I can't take it anymore

ROSA

No one should have to endure what I went through.

ALBERT

The staff are nice, young and very sweet kids.

LUIS

They take their work very seriously. I give them a lot of credit.

JOE

I would like to answer the question asked earlier about hope. I guess I find hope in meeting people who are committed to social justice.

JOHN

Look around you.

ROSA

I worked for a visiting nurse service. We used to go into homes and help others get services. I never thought I would be needing this help.

ANNE

I always wanted to be veterinarian's assistant. That was my ideal job, but I became a journalist. I got sick while I was working on a book I was writing. My opus magnus is a comedy...prose and poetry. It's the story of a dog, M.Que. M. speaks in verse. I was obsessed with finishing it, so I paid the doctor before the landlord. A fatal mistake!

ROSA as LEAR

**I'd use them so that heaven's vaults should crack.
She's gone forever.
Shes dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why then she lives...**

ANNE

Then, I got stiffed by a writer who agreed to pay me \$10,000 for four installments for ghosting the background to his book. He paid only the first quarter. After that the check was always "in the mail".

LOUISE

It's time for Judge Judy. Put on the T.V.

ALBERT

I worked my whole life. I was never a lay-about. So, what good did it do?

BANIKA

Why don't you stay with your kids?

ALBERT

My kids are in California. I can't travel.

LOUISE as LEAR

**Howl, howl, howl, howl! O! you are men of stones:
had I your tongues and eyes**

ANNE

Do they know where you are?

ALBERT

They have their own lives. I don't want them to know.

ROSA

We got to do something. Write some letters, get a petition going.

ANNE

The only thing we have going for us is our numbers.

LOUISE

You can't come in here and change everything.

BANIKA

Through the play I hope to get media attention.

LOUIS

Not everyone wants people to know they live in a drop-in center.

JOE

We can make sure only people who want to go public will participate. Maybe we will take the play outside Peter's Place. Most importantly, clients will have to believe change is possible.

LOUIS

I wouldn't be participating if I didn't think things could change. See in my work I always analyze the situation and the circumstances for us, well it needs to change. I think we can do something.

ALBERT as LEAR

My wits begin to turn.

Come on, my boy. How doest, my boy? Art cold?

I am cold myself. Where is this straw, my fellow?

The art of our necessities is strange,

That can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel.

Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart

That's sorry yet for thee.

BANIKA

Clients need to be heard and taken seriously in this battle against

homelessness and for affordable housing.

RICHARD

You think you can come in here and tell us anything we don't know? Getting people to sign your lists so you can have a job? I need housing. That is all I'm interested in.

ROSA

This is about finding affordable housing. It's about telling people we are here. If I have to, I'll shout it in the streets.

ANNE

Did you see that lady in the town meeting with Obama? She said she and her son were homeless and needed help now...Huit?
Henrietta

ROSA

Hughs... Henrietta Hughes

ANNE

The face of the economic crisis. He kissed her and someone offered her a home to stay. She shouted. You never know who is out there.

ROSA

I'll talk to Obama. Let's invite him to our town meeting.

LOUIS

What are the problems? Let me see elder abuse, systemic failure, family abandonment, mental illness, dementia, sickness and just

plain old-fashioned stubbornness and meanness.

RICHARD

Forget it. I'm leaving. Play your play. I won't sign a thing.

ROSA

Forget him. I know I'll get an apartment.

JOE

The fight for justice. That is what gives me hope.

JOHN

Doesn't it feel good when you go home and turn that key in the lock?

BANIKA

Yes.

JOHN

That's the hope.

BANIKA

So, let's work on the acting scene about an illegal eviction. When we are ready, we can take our play to seniors who haven't lost their apartments at community centers. A community service project that may help someone and raise awareness of homeless senior citizens. Our own Homeless Prevention Project.

Richard, you are the Judge. John, you be the landlord. Anne can play the tenant.

What is the situation?

ROSA

Anne got kicked out of her apartment because she was sick and couldn't pay the rent.

RICHARD

Does she have a lawyer?

ANNE

No, I represent myself

BANIKA

Ok. Places please. Think who you are, where you are and what you want. 'What you want' is the motivation. Acting skills are life skills. Our wants and needs change depending on where we are and who we are. In this case we are in housing court.

ACTION

RICHARD

Isn't the bailiff going to call for order.

LOUIS

I'll be the bailiff...

Hear ye, hear ye, the court of Judge Richard is now in session. All rise.

(Judge enters - all rise, Judge calls the court in session)

JUDGE

Court is now in session. Is the owner of the building present?

OWNER (JOHN)

Yes, I am sir.

JUDGE (RICHARD)

Is the tenant here?

TENANT (ANNE)

Yes, judge, I am.

JUDGE (RICHARD)

Are your lawyers present?

TENANT (ANNE)

I don't have a lawyer. I will represent myself.

OWNER (JOHN)

Yes. This is my lawyer, Mr. Johnson.

JUDGE (RICHARD)

Ms. Cooper, you need a lawyer.

ALBERT as LEAR

They flatter'd me like a dog, and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say 'ay' and 'no' to everything I said! 'Ay' and 'no' to was no good divinity.

TENANT (ANNE)

I couldn't afford to pay the rent. How could I get a lawyer? I was sick and when I came out the hospital all my belongings were gone and I'm on the street. I stayed in hotels for awhile. Then I found a place to camp out in the buildings by the Winter Garden. It was ok when it was warm, but it started to get cold and the Police brought me here. How am I supposed to have a lawyer?

JUDGE (RICHARD)

How long did Ms. Cooper go without paying rent?

OWNER (JOHN)

3 months.

JUDGE (RICHARD)

Did you let her know that she was facing eviction?

TENANT (ANNE)

He never did. I was in the hospital for hip replacement surgery.

OWNER (JOHN)

We sent her notices, but she never responded. We had to get her out.

JUDGE (RICHARD)

Did you ever receive notification that you needed to pay the rent or face with eviction?

TENANT (ANNE)

No, Never.

LAWYER (ALBERT)

My client is the owner. The tenant didn't pay the rent. He has a legal right to rent the apartment.

BANIKA

Freeze.

Okay, who do you think is going to win here?

LOUIS

She should stay in the apartment. It wasn't her fault

ALBERT

The owner has the rights.

Rent wasn't paid.

RICHARD

Why can't you have a drunk homeowner?

ANNE

Better than a drunk judge? Or a lawyer or one who falls asleep.

LOUISE as LEAR

Do not abuse me. You must bear with me. Pray you now, forget and forgive: I am old and foolish.

RICHARD

The landlord sold my building. The new owner said the stuff I collected was a fire hazard. They cheated me and locked up the apartment. They kicked me down the steps and I left. I had lived

there for twenty years but I didn't have a lease. I was scared off by the mafia.

ROSA

The same thing happened to me. I lived on MacDougal Street. After my father died, they said I didn't have a lease and had to leave. It was the mafia. I couldn't fight them. Do you know how much rent they are getting for my apartment? I paid \$350. Now it's over \$2000.

They drove me crazy. I went to the hospital. I'm still not over it.

BANIKA

In my building. They can't wait for me to move or get thrown out, or die, for that matter. They take a studio and change it to three rooms and charge 5 times the rent.

ANNE

My friend lives in a co-op apartment. She wanted to help me after her husband died and take me in. The coop board wouldn't let her. Now they are threatening to throw her out, because they want to make money on her apartment. They harass her all the time. Not letting her have visitors or guests. My friend is a little eccentric, but they are driving her crazy.

JOE

Harassment is a very serious problem and against the law. Tell your friend she needs to document what has happened. She needs legal help. You can have her call me or I will give you a list where she can get legal advice.

The other problem is due process. If somebody doesn't pay rent,

they can be evicted but proper notification is necessary. The tenant must be given a chance to correct a situation before eviction. Harassment is of course a crime. Charges need to be filed by the tenant. Even in the case of "hoarding" the tenant must be given a chance to correct the situation.

ALBERT

I never had leases. Didn't like them. If someone didn't pay the rent, they were out.

BANIKA

You were an owner, right?

ALBERT

I lost everything because the hospitals took everything. They killed me and my wife. I'm just waiting to die now.

RICHARD

And you gambled the rest...

ALBERT

You don't know what you are talking about.

RICHARD

As soon as your check comes you head for the track. Everyone knows it.

ALBERT

It's my money. I do what I want. My wife is dead. I like to gamble.

RICHARD

You could get an apartment.

ALBERT

Don't want an apartment, to die in my sleep with no one around?
Forget it!

JOE

I guess illegal evictions aren't the only reason people are at Peters Place.

BANIKA

What if the eviction was legal? Why did it happen and what can be done?

JUDGE (RICHARD)

I haven't made my ruling yet.

LUIS

Yeah, here come the judge.

BANIKA

ACTION (group returns to action of play)

BAILIFF (LUIS)

Here ye, here ye, the court is now in session again.

JUDGE (RICHARD)

My ruling is that you have 3 months to work on a payment plan with the landlord. If you continue to not pay the rent, you will be evicted.

And landlord, you must arrange a payment plan and follow due process with proper notification of court hearings and eviction notices. They must be signed by the tenant as proof that legal matters were correct. That is my ruling.

And Ms. Cooper, I would suggest you contact the Department of Aging or your local senior center or church for counsel in this area, so you follow the proper procedures. Pay the rent and not ignore these eviction notices, should they come.

JOE

That is very good. It often happens like that. The judge will give a time period for corrections to be made.

RICHARD

I don't think the play idea is going to work. We are all too old, a bunch of burned-out hippies. In the sixties we did drugs now were all on prescription methadone, and other medications.

ANNE

Speak for yourself. I never did drugs. There are a lot of us who have never taken anything stronger than an aspirin.

BANIKA

Both are part of the portrait we are painting. Do you have hope?

ANNE

Maybe. I am grateful to be here, rather than in the street. I'm happy to be heard. I like this microphone. At first, I didn't but it does make it easier to hear each other.

BANIKA

I am very grateful we have this sound system. The center is too big... It's hard to shout and some people have quiet voices. Everyone can still hear what's going on and maybe it will encourage participation in the groups, in this community. In order to motivate to action, you must be able to hear and be heard. Certainly, if we take the play public...

RICHARD

Homelessness is a big business. We need housing, not plays. I've been here three years. You come in here and have us read plays. What does King Lear have to do with my housing?

LUIS

King Lear is about a great man abandoned by his family, who lost his wealth and lost his mind.

ALBERT

People are making lots of money off us.

ROSA

Thankfully, we're like a family. I'm happy to be here.

JOHN

Me too. I was living in the park after I had to leave my apartment. They sold the building. I paid my rent all the time, but they told me I had to go. I was depressed. I was just drinking in the park before the police brought me here.

Since I started drawing again. I don't drink as much. I have a feeling about your program. I used to draw in the service, but I hadn't done it for 50 years.

ROSA

We are more a family than my own family here. I couldn't wait to get back here after seeing my sister. She doesn't care how I'm doing. She figures I'm homeless and that's that. I come back here, and my friend Anne is glad to see me. She always asks how I'm doing. It's nice.

ANNE

Thank you.

LUIS

We must accept responsibility. I don't blame anyone but myself. If I wanted to leave, I could.

ROSA

Some people don't like to be alone and don't want to leave here.

LUIS

I would give my daughter my whole check if she needed it. I don't need money. I don't have to be here. I was the one who drank. It's my fault.

BANIKI

Accepting responsibility is good but blaming yourself can keep you stuck. I believe senior citizens should not be living in plastic chairs. You deserve better but if you blame yourself too much you might not have the hope to get out; to see the other possibilities.

ANNE

I keep saying, all we have are our numbers. The Commissioner for the Department of Homeless Services says they now have a 5-year plan to end homelessness. We need to make a bigger noise about who we are and where we are...just like your acting lesson...that is our motivation...We are living in a drop-in center. All of the homeless, particularly the senior citizens of Peter's Place, need to be heard. We are symptomatic of our throwaway society. Senior citizens are ignored in the culture. We are not only the only ones who are waiting for us to die. Family, landlords, Department of Homeless Services, the medical community, nursing homes...everyone is waiting for us to die. I'm not waiting to die. I am living.

ALBERT as LEAR

I am old now

And these same crosses spoil me. Who are you?

Mine eyes are not o' the best: I'll tell you straight.

LOUISE

Hey!

BANIKA

What?

LOUISE

You're fired!

JOHN as LEAR

And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no Life!

**Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life?
And thou no breath at all? Thou't come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!
Pay you, undo this button: Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, Look there look
there!**

LUIS

What can you do? I am old. My life is over. Staff is nice though.
This is a nice place. There are some great people here, brilliant
people, well educated and I mean "the clients". I learn a lot from
them. But what more can one do? I am old. My life is nearly over.
The staff and my friends keep me alive.

JOHN

I guess that's what it's all about. If you can appreciate some place
like this. There's the hope.

THE END