

The Ultimate Woman

A one-act play

by

Mary Poindexter McLaughlin

1740 Emery Road
716.474.3734
mary@poindextermclaughlin.com

CHARACTERS

Joe: director, mid-thirties. Smart, driven. Opportunistic.

Paul: producer, mid-fifties. Vain, self-satisfied, used to getting his own way.

Athena: goddess of wisdom and the arts. She is strong, in her early thirties, tall and athletic. Serious yet quick-witted, she wears slacks and a collared blouse, Katharine Hepburn-style.

Demi: goddess of agriculture, fertility, and marriage. Bubbly, motherly, sympathetic. She is in her late thirties, zaftig, dressed in a colorful, full skirt, ruffled blouse, and open sandals.

Venus: goddess of love and beauty. Not book-smart, but worldly-wise. Highly sexual. She is "beauty pageant beautiful," (hair, nails, makeup, etc.), in her early thirties or younger; she is wearing a tight-fitting minidress and high heels.

NOTES:

When it says "Joe's Voice" or "Paul's Voice," their voices should be amplified and come from offstage.

There are 4 short lines spoken by "Female Voice" through a speakerphone.

Scene 1: Wide spot up on JOE and PAUL, seated relaxedly in two comfortable office chairs SL. They are talking to a phone on speaker.

PAUL
...so I really think--

JOE
I do too--

PAUL
--so does Joe, we both do, that women are--are--

JOE
What are they, they're women, for god's sake--

PAUL
Exactly.

JOE
They're the reason we're here, you know?

PAUL
Without them...
(he falters)

JOE
Sure. Absolutely. But it's even more than that--

PAUL
God yes.

JOE
Look. Can we be perfectly honest here? Can we? I mean, look. Let's face facts. Women have gotten the shaft from men for centuries. Centuries!

Paul nods to Joe, encouraging him to continue.

And no matter what we say, if we're honest, we gotta admit: it is still going on today.

FEMALE VOICE
Uh huh.

PAUL
Can I jump in here?

JOE
Please.

PAUL

There used to be a time, Joe knows this, when women really had a voice, you know? Status. They had a say.

JOE

They were worshipped! Men built temples, for god's sake!

PAUL

Exactly. But not even that long ago. Here in Hollywood, these women had a voice. They told their stories, ya know? And we listened. We had to! These women were strong, they were tough--

JOE

They were gritty--

PAUL

Absolutely. These were tough, gritty women. They didn't just roll over.

Paul winks at Joe, nods.

JOE

No way.

PAUL

So that's where we-- Joe and I-- are trying to go with this project. We are trying to give some of the strength, some of the--

JOE

The grit.

PAUL

The grit, and the dignity. Back to women.

FEMALE VOICE

So that's where the title comes from.

JOE

Grit and Dignity. You got it.

FEMALE VOICE

What's it about?

JOE

(reads from a sheet of paper)

"One woman's struggle to survive, to make a living, and yes, possibly even realize her dreams in this male-dominated, patriarchal society--"

PAUL

--working as a topless carwasher. Based on a true story.

Loosely.
JOE

FEMALE VOICE
Uh... okay, I'll send you what I got.

JOE
Hey, thanks.

PAUL
That's why I love you.

Joe hangs up. He and Paul high-five.

JOE
Yes!

PAUL
Oh, that was masterful, Joe. The temple shit,
"patriarchal"... Where'd ya get that?

JOE
Grad school.

PAUL
Love it. You're gonna climb this town like a billygoat.

JOE
You think?

PAUL
I know.

Wide spot out; Joe and Paul roll their chairs off SL.

Lights up on ATHENA, standing SR among 4 or 5 folding chairs. She speaks the following articulation exercise quickly:

ATHENA
"To sit in solemn silence in a dull dark dock
In a pestilential prison with a life long lock
Awaiting the sensation of a short sharp shock
From a cheap and chippy chopper on a big black block--"

DEMI enters.

ATHENA (CONT'D)
Oh no. Not again.

DEMI
Athena! I didn't think you'd be here.

ATHENA

Ditto.

VENUS enters.

VENUS

(as she sees Athena and Demi)

Seriously?

ATHENA

And look what the catfish dragged in: the foamy one.

VENUS

Ha, ha.

(to Demi)

Hi Demeter.

DEMI

Demi. Hello honey. But look at you! You've gotten so thin!
Are you ill? Would you like a Fig Newton?

(rummages in her bag)

They're here somewhere...

VENUS

Demeter. Demi. I'm not hungry.

ATHENA

That's a... charming little outfit, Aphrodite.

VENUS

It's Gaultier. Who are you wearing?

ATHENA

(mock-serious)

The Virgin Collection.

VENUS

(believes it)

Figures.

SPOT up SL.

ATHENA

"To sit in solemn silence in a dull dark dock--

JOE'S VOICE

(amplified)

Athena? We're ready for you.

ATHENA

Excellent.

She exits purposefully, walks into the spot.

VENUS

She's so butch.

Lights dim.

ATHENA

My selection is from The Eumenides by Aeschylus.

(pauses, "preparing." Then, with passion and skill:)
 "None has dishonored you. Why should immortal rage
 Infect the fields of mortal men with pestilence?
 You call on Justice: I rely on Zeus. What need
 To reason further? I alone among the gods
 Know the sealed chamber's keys where Zeus's thunderbolt
 Is stored. But force is needless;--"

PAUL'S VOICE

(interrupting)

Thank you Athena.

ATHENA

"Let persuasion check--" what?

PAUL'S VOICE

Thank you. You can wait in the holding room.

ATHENA

Oh. I see. Thank you.

*SPOT out, Athena walks back as lights come up. Venus
 is applying make-up.*

DEMI

(holding out a Fig Newton)

Here you go, hon.

VENUS

I don't eat before auditions--

DEMI

(offering it now to Athena)

Athena? Figgy Wiggy?

ATHENA

Not interested, Demi.

Demi shrugs, takes a bite. SPOT up.

JOE'S VOICE

(stressing her name wrong)

De-METER? You're up.

DEMI

Oh! Goodness, and here I am, chewing... Ha! Well, here goes!

Demi exits, appears in spotlight. Lights dim on holding room.

DEMI (CONT'D)

Hello, how are you.

JOE'S VOICE

Fine, thanks--

DEMI

Have you been at this *all day*?

JOE'S VOICE

Yeah.

DEMI

Well, I hope you're done soon! You must be starving.

JOE'S VOICE

Your selection?

DEMI

Right. I'll be doing The Phoenician Woman, by Euripides. The character of Jocasta. Oh! Do you mind if I sit?

JOE'S VOICE

No, go ahead.

DEMI

Great.

(sits crosslegged on the floor, pauses, prepares.

With great emotion:)

"I heard your Phoenician cry, girls, and my poor old feet, trembling, have brought me out. My child, my child, at last I see you again. Embrace your mother's breast with your arms, stretch forth your face and your dark curly hair, to shadow my throat. Oh, oh, you have barely come, unhopd for, unexpected, to your mother's arms. What shall I say, how phrase the whole delight in words and actions--"

PAUL'S VOICE

(interrupts)

Thank you, De-METER.

DEMI

Oh! Of course, thank you. And please -- call me Demi.

(turns to leave, stops)

Um, excuse me, but-- when are callbacks?

PAUL'S VOICE

Right away. Please wait outside.

DEMI

Sure. Thank you. Have a nice... something. And get some dinner!

SPOT out, lights up.

VENUS

(still applying make-up)

This one is totally in the bag.

ATHENA

Right.

Demi enters.

ATHENA (CONT'D)

(to Demi)

How did it go?

DEMI

Oh, fine, fine.

ATHENA

Our little lycra friend here was just telling me that you and I have no chance at this one.

DEMI

Really. And how does she know this?

VENUS

(brushing her hair)

It's not hard. Lemme guess what you did for your auditions. Let's see... Athena? The old "I rely on Zeus" thing? Whew! What a crowd-pleaser. And Demi probably did the smoking hot "trembling feet" routine. You two are so lame. In two thousand years, you couldn't come up with anything better than that? You just don't get it, do you. They're like, not interested in "the classics" anymore.

DEMI

What are you doing?

VENUS

Shakespeare.

DEMI

(laughs)

Now there's a new voice in theatre.

ATHENA

Didn't Willie get the Tony this year?

VENUS

Shut up. At least he's not ancient history.

ATHENA

Which nouvelle Shakespeare are you doing?

VENUS

What's it to you?

DEMI

Come on. We won't steal it, we promise.

VENUS

Ha! As if. I'm doing Venus and Adonis. Actually, Athena could probably play Adonis.

ATHENA

Um, I hate to break it to you, toots, but Venus and Adonis isn't a play. It's a poem.

VENUS

So what? It speaks to me.

DEMI

I'll bet it does. Not much of an acting reach, hon.

VENUS

Oh, excuse me. What about Athena playing Athene in "The Humanities"?

ATHENA

Eumenides. With an "E", as in "edification" or "enlightenment."

VENUS

Or "egghead."

ATHENA

Thank you.

VENUS

Whatever. You're just bugged because you know they're not gonna cast you.

ATHENA

Mmm. I had no idea such a wealth of insight dwelled within that little malnourished body.

VENUS

Hello, thin is in.

DEMI

Oh, no. Again?

VENUS

Yep.

DEMI

But what about the roundness of motherhood?
 (displaying herself)
 Ample breasts, curving hips?

VENUS

Eeuw.

DEMI

Look hon, it's what sustains life. How could that be eeuw?

VENUS

It just is.

Venus flops over from the waist and begins exhaling loudly and shaking her arms and upper body to loosen herself and relax.

DEMI

But you were so beautiful in Milo's statue! And Botticelli's portrait. Voluptuous, gorgeous... Of course, I'm not a big fan of the Renaissance, but still! You looked female, at least.

ATHENA

She looked too soft. Weak.

VENUS

Times have changed, Demi.

DEMI

I guess. But isn't plus-size acceptance a thing now?

ATHENA

Please. It's an advertising ploy.

DEMI

Really? That's sad.

VENUS

Whatever. I just mirror the trends, Demi, I don't make 'em.

DEMI

Well, we used to make the trends. My, my.

Demi takes knitting out of her bag and begins to knit.

SPOT up.

JOE'S VOICE

Venus?

VENUS

(to him)

That's me.

(to them)

Later, bitches.

Venus exits, walks toward and into SPOT.

ATHENA

"Venus"? Since when? What happened to "Aphrodite"?

DEMI

She thought Venus sounded more updated, more...

ATHENA

(sarcastic)

Commercial?

DEMI

Exactly.

ATHENA

Bimbo.

Lights down.

VENUS

Hello. I'm Venus. And I'd like to do a monologue for you today from Venus and Adonis. (pause) Um, it's not from a play? But it really speaks to me. I hope that's alright.

JOE'S VOICE

That's fine.

VENUS

Great. Here goes.

(pauses, remembers something)

Oh! The character of Venus.

Giggles, then prepares, making a circle with her arms in front of her as though she were holding someone. Seductively, yet badly acted:

"Fondling, since I have hemmed thee here
 Within the circuit of this ivory pale,
 I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer:
 Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale;
 Graze on my lips; and if those hills be dry,
 Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.
 Within this limit is relief enough,
 Sweet bottom-grass, and high delightful plain,

Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,
 To shelter thee from tempest and from rain.
 Then be my deer since I am such a park;
 No dog shall rouse thee though a thousand bark."
 That's it.

PAUL'S VOICE

Thank you.

VENUS

My pleasure. Well, I hope I hear from you.

PAUL'S VOICE

Actually, would you mind waiting outside?

VENUS

No, not at all. Um, could I ask you something?

PAUL'S VOICE

Yes.

VENUS

I heard you're looking for "the ultimate woman." Is that right?

JOE AND PAUL'S VOICES

Yes.

VENUS

(smiles)

Good.

She turns and sashays SR toward the chairs, sits.

Joe and Paul, seated in their office chairs, roll back onstage into SPOT. They each have a stack of picture/resumes. Paul is looking at Venus's picture.

PAUL

Yowza.

JOE

Tell me about it.

PAUL

How come the beautiful ones can't act worth a good goddamn?

JOE

It's criminal.

PAUL

What are we asking for here? The goddamn moon?

JOE

I know...

PAUL

A pretty face, a rack, and--and-- just a hint of acting ability. Why is that so impossible?

JOE

Dunno. So Venus. What do we do with her?

PAUL

I got a few ideas.

JOE

Yeah. But seriously.

PAUL

You're the director. You're the one who'd have to deal with her every day.

JOE

Maybe with an acting coach on the set...

PAUL

Yeah.

Pause.

JOE

What the hell. Let's bring her back in and see how... coachable she is. What are you smiling about?

PAUL

Me? Nothing, not a damn thing.

JOE

Yeah, right.

(pause)

Who else've we got?

PAUL

(looking at another photo)

Ugh. Wouldja look at this? What am I supposed to do with this?

(to the picture)

Honey. One word. Rhinoplasty.

JOE

(shows him Athena's picture)

Hey, what about her?

PAUL

Too serious.

JOE
Hell of an actress, though.

PAUL
Yeah.

(pause)
Could we fem her up?

JOE
Maybe. Worth a shot.

PAUL
Okay.

JOE
(looks at another photo)
Jesus. She looks just like my ex-wife. Next.

PAUL
(indicates Demi's picture)
What about her?

JOE
I liked her. Warm, bubbly.

PAUL
Too fat?

JOE
Definitely. But we've got six weeks of pre-production. A
shake for breakfast, a shake for lunch--

PAUL
Bingo. Alright, keep her. You want 'em to read sides?

JOE
Nah. It's not about the words, am I right?

They laugh.

PAUL
Yes you are.

*SPOT out, as they exit with their chairs. Lights up.
Demi is knitting, Athena is reading. Venus is talking
on her phone.*

VENUS
Uh huh... Oh, yeah...this one is mine. *Totally.* K. Bye.

*She hangs up. Athena and Demi look at each other, then
resume their actions.*

VENUS (CONT'D)

Go ahead, pretend you weren't listening. I could care less.

ATHENA

Couldn't care less.

VENUS

Whatever. You're just jealous.

ATHENA

Jealous!

VENUS

That's right. Ever since Paris chose me over you and Hera, you've been on my case non-stop.

ATHENA

You promised him Helen! And look what that did! Thanks a lot, Venus, for starting the *Trojan War*.

VENUS

I did not!

ATHENA

Did too!

VENUS

Not not not!

DEMI

Girls. Girls!

ATHENA

And maybe you're the jealous one!

DEMI

Please!

VENUS

Me! Of what? Your dumb-ass olive tree?

ATHENA

I was always Dad's favorite and you couldn't stand it! And then he made you marry that greasemonkey Hephaestus -- you've been bitter and vindictive ever since!

VENUS

I don't care. I'm going to book this job and show both of you. I'm the only one of us that has any hope of power in this society now.

ATHENA

Really.

VENUS

Yep. I'm thin, I'm young, and I'm beautiful. And that's all that matters today.

ATHENA

No it's not. What about wisdom?

VENUS

(holds up her phone)

With this? All that higher learning crap you used to talk about... no one cares.

ATHENA

That cannot be true.

DEMI

She may be right.

VENUS

I know I am.

DEMI

At least fertility still matters.

ATHENA

No, it doesn't.

DEMI

That's ridiculous. How do you think the human race can continue? Of course fertility matters!

ATHENA

In vitro fertilization is real, Demi.

DEMI

Well... what about the harvest? The fertility of the earth?

VENUS

No one cares about that, either.

DEMI

That can't be. The earth HAS to matter. To someone.

VENUS

Well, it doesn't. Not to the "powers that be."

DEMI

Remember when we were the powers that be?

ATHENA

Now we're the powers that were.

DEMI

Clearly.

ATHENA
(wistful)

It's like it was yesterday. The smell of fresh sacrifice:
charred smoke, reeking of warm blood and fur. And the
silence. Hundreds, thousands, all bowing down with solemn
devotion, to pay their most humble respects...to me.

DEMI

And me.

VENUS

And me.

Pause, as they sigh collectively.

ATHENA

The good old days.

VENUS

Word.

Athena rolls her eyes.

DEMI

Temples, shrines, Eleusinian Mysteries. Why did it all have
to end?

They all exchange knowing glances.

DEMI, VENUS, ATHENA

Jesus.

VENUS

Things just haven't been the same since.

ATHENA

What a mealy-mouth he was. I still can't believe that goody-
two-shoes knocked us out of the sky.

DEMI

He never would have cut it on Mount Olympus.

VENUS

Never.

ATHENA

Marketing. It was all marketing!

VENUS

I wish my publicist would work that hard for me.

DEMI

I mean, I liked him, but I never really understood his huge
appeal. I still don't.

VENUS

Really. Look at the guy! His baptism was probably the first and last bath he ever had! Where's the glamour?

ATHENA

Or power? What kind of loser lays down his life for a bunch of human ingrates?

VENUS

For nothing in return?

ATHENA

What a patsy.

DEMI

Now his mother... She's the one who deserved her own religion. Anyone who can give birth and stay a virgin...

Pause, as they all nod in agreement.

Of course, he was sweet with the children, though, wasn't he? And I liked the healing of the sick. That was nice. Oh, and raising the dead, that was pretty flashy. How about that?

ATHENA

Parlor tricks. Strictly amateur.

DEMI

I guess...

ATHENA

Look. Jesus was no dummy. He was a master manipulator! You've got to admire him. He knew exactly how to create an image, and then how to sell it.

DEMI

You really think?

ATHENA

Absolutely. He was ahead of his time. He just used a little child psychology before Freud came up with it. He knew that human beings would do exactly what he told them not to. "Don't worship me," he said. "Love your God with all your heart." So what do they do? Spend the next two thousand years creating an entire religion devoted to him. It's brilliant.

DEMI

But Athena, he seemed so earnest, so... humble. And his life was so-- so--

VENUS

Depressing.

DEMI

Yes, and painful! And short--

ATHENA

All part of the plan. Dying young was the masterstroke!
What better way to ensure his status as the ultimate martyr?
Please. Look at him now. Who's laughing now?

DEMI

Not us.

A gloomy pause.

VENUS

Ugh. Come on, you two. Oh, boo hoo, no one loves us
anymore. So we're not all-powerful anymore, so what? It's
only temporary.

ATHENA

You call two thousand years temporary?

VENUS

Yes, I do. There are other gods and goddesses who are being
worshipped *right now*.

ATHENA

Did Ares make a comeback? That arrogant bastard.

VENUS

Hello, I'm talking about *stars*. The road to power is straight
through Hollywood. A spot on a reality tv show, a choice
movie role like this one, and bingo! We're back on top!

DEMI

One of us, anyway.

Pause, as they look at each other warily.

JOE'S VOICE

Ladies? Would you please join us?

VENUS

All of us?

ATHENA

Together?

JOE'S VOICE

Yes.

DEMI

Well, sure!

ATHENA
Of course.

VENUS
My pleasure.

As they move SL:

ATHENA
Well, won't this be fun.

Lights down SR. Wide SPOT up SL on the three women as they face the audience.

PAUL'S VOICE
Okay, ladies, listen up. I'm Paul, the producer of this film.

JOE'S VOICE
And I'm Joe, the director. Great job, all of you. That's why you're still here.

PAUL'S VOICE
Yeah, for sure. Any one of you could carry this film, we know that. We just wanna get to know you a little better, watch how you move--

JOE'S VOICE
See how you think on your feet. Alright?

They nod.
Beautiful.

JOE'S VOICE (CONT'D)
Thanks, Paul. Now, ladies. Why doncha take a minute and introduce yourselves to each other.

DEMI
Actually, we go waaay back--

VENUS
Not *that* far--

ATHENA
We know each other.

JOE'S VOICE
Great! Let's do a quick improv warm-up, how 'bout word-ball. Demi, start us off. Throw a word, and Venus, you catch it, and send another off to Athena. Got it?

They all nod.
Okay. Let it flow. Demi, you're on.

Um, Cat. DEMI

Cat, purrrrr. VENUS

Purr, sphinx. ATHENA

Sphinx, sphincter! Oh-- DEMI

Dem! ATHENA AND VENUS

I'm so sorry, I- DEMI

That's okay, no judgement, you just gotta go with it. Whose turn is it. Venus? JOE'S VOICE

Yeah. Okay, sphincter, um, um, squeeze? Eeuw. VENUS

Squeeze, python. ATHENA

Python, grass. DEMI

Grass, green. VENUS

(getting progressively more heated between Athena and Venus)

Green, envy. ATHENA

Envy, apple. DEMI

Apple, jealous. VENUS

Jealous, father. ATHENA

Father, mother. DEMI
(sing-song, trying to soothe)

VENUS
 Mother, ocean.

ATHENA
 Ocean, bottom-feeder.

DEMI
 Bottom-feeder, eat.

VENUS
 (angry)
 Eat sh-- sh... sugar.

JOE'S VOICE
 (quickly, to defuse)
 Okay, great warm-up, lotta good stuff there.

DEMI
 (to Joe)
 Excuse me, Joe, could I have a word with these women?

JOE'S VOICE
 Go ahead.

They whisper fiercely with one another.

ATHENA
 What are you doing?

VENUS
 Yeah!

DEMI
 Listen, you two. We may not like each other. We may actually despise each other. But I'm telling you, if we don't work together, none of us will get this part. Am I right? Athena?

ATHENA
 I suppose.

DEMI
 Venus?

VENUS
 Yeah.

DEMI
 Good. Now, we need to impress them, and we need to do it fast. Any ideas?

VENUS
 We can turn ourselves into goats.

ATHENA
 (restraining herself)
 Impressive, but also a tad spooky, don't you think?

DEMI
 I've got it.

ATHENA
 What.

DEMI
 Just work with me.
 (to Joe and Paul)
 Hello there, so sorry about that! We're ready now.

JOE'S VOICE
 Okay.

Demi launches into an improvised scene:

DEMI
 Girls, I'm so glad you changed your minds!

ATHENA
 Thanks, we are too...

She elbows Venus, who is frozen.

VENUS
 Yeah!

DEMI
 Here's the music...
 (she mimes passing out sheet
 music)
 I signed us up for the last time slot. I figured the YMCA
 talent show should go out with a bang, right?

ATHENA & VENUS
 Right...

DEMI
 Okay, so I'll sing the first verse, then you, Ath--Angela
 (indicates Athena)
 can sing the second, and you, Veronica,
 (indicates Venus)
 will sing the third. Then we all sing together. Got it?

*Athena and Venus stare incredulously at Demi, who
 starts singing the first verse of the Three Way Canon
 Blues.*

*There's a pause, then, miraculously, Athena sings the
 second verse. Demi is overjoyed.*

There is another pause, then Venus sings the last verse, selling it. Athena and Demi are delighted.

They all sing the three verses in the canon together, in perfect harmony. They nail it. They hug.

JOE'S VOICE

Loved the song, ladies. Loved. It.

PAUL'S VOICE

Can I jump in here?

JOE'S VOICE

Please.

PAUL'S VOICE

I just wanna say that, and Joe'll back me up on this, that I really admire you three. You're out there, you're doin' it, you're giving it your all. And I respect that. Joe, don't I?

JOE'S VOICE

Hell, yeah.

PAUL'S VOICE

You are some top-notch actresses, truly. Totally professional. So, keeping that in mind, I've gotta ask you three to take it to another level, you know? Reach deep inside you, connect with that woman-thing you got goin' on--

JOE'S VOICE

Go that extra mile-

PAUL'S VOICE

--and take off your tops.

There is stunned silence. Then:

ATHENA

I'm sorry, did we hear you correctly? Did you just ask us to take off our tops?

PAUL'S VOICE

Yep.

Long pause. The three women look at each other. Finally, Venus smiles at the other two, and they smile in return.

VENUS

Why, sure.

They each unbutton their tops and then, pull them open simultaneously. At the same time, there is a loud CRACK like a thunderclap and a blinding flash, and they close their tops.

VENUS (CONT'D)

They asked for it.

ATHENA

Indeed.

Pause.

DEMI

Joe? Paul?

There is the SOUND OF GOATS BLEATING loudly. The three women laugh.

DEMI (CONT'D)

Sisters. Shall we?

Athena and Venus nod. They reprise the canon as they exit, linked arm-in-arm.

END OF PLAY