

Pfft!

By

Robin Cantwell

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JOHN SULLIVAN writes...* We've probably all know someone who was sacked for being too competent, too focused on the mission, too self-sacrificing, for making the rest of the crew look like a gaggle of slouches in comparison. Maybe we've even been in that same unpleasant position. The dramatic set-up in 'Pfft!' is quite literally an actual set-up. Or, at least, so it seems on the surface. This protagonist's doom may be sealed from the onset but how it gets to that point is diabolical and rapid. And her unsavory nemesis seems lifted straight from a 'Bizarro' world where everything acceptable is reversed. 'Pfft!' is concise and supremely economical. Very crisp, very witty and, at times, barbed dialogue.

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Cast —

Helen — a woman in her 40s

Jo — a woman in her 30s

Madeline — a woman in her 30s

An office.

*Sitting on a chair is **Jo**. She twiddles her thumbs idly. She waits.*

*Enter **Helen**, talking loudly on the phone.*

Helen (on phone) Honestly, words fail me. The man is literally falling apart. Talk about a midlife crisis: he joins a gym, lifts *one* dumbbell, then tells me he's done his prostate in! I mean, how do you pull your prostate?!

She takes a seat opposite Jo, as if behind a desk.

Helen (on phone) All I know is when he climaxed that night, it came out looking like cottage cheese. Smelt like it too. Hmm? Oh, I just told him to stop crying and fetch a towel.

She clocks Jo.

Helen (on phone) Gotta dash. We're letting someone go. Yeah. Mmhmm. Right now.

Jo reacts.

Helen (on phone) OK. Speak soon. Bye!

Helen hangs up.

Helen Josephine. Sorry to keep you.

Jo Did I, um...did I hear you right? You're "letting someone go"?

Helen That was meant to be a *private* conversation?

Jo waits for Helen to explain.

Helen A complaint has been made.

Jo Against who? Me?!

Helen Afraid so.

Jo That's impossible.

Helen Well, a member of your team would beg to differ.

Jo And which *loyal* team-member would that be?

Helen You know these things are kept confidential.

Jo Can I at least know which infernal sin against humanity I'm supposed to have committed?

Helen scrolls on her phone, looking for the corresponding email.

Helen **(reading from her phone)** "Lack of discretion in the workplace".

Jo What?! But I'm so careful! I mean, I know the workplace guidelines by heart! Christ, I basically wrote the whole damn handbook! No, it can't have been me. This has Mistaken Identity written all over it.

Helen It's out of my hands. We run a tight ship here. One strike and you're out.

Jo Oh give me a break. I've been top of my sales group three years in a row. First in. Last out. Work late on weekends. Head down. Never complain. "Tight ship" — I'm the one holding your bloody ship together! Please Helen. You know how seriously I take this job. At least tell me who reported it.

Helen considers it.

Helen Fine. (**Pressing buzzer on a telephone**) Send her in.

Enter Madeline. Her shoes keep sticking to the floor as she walks.

Madeline Fuck my ass: whose big idea was it to make the toilets unisex here? Someone needs to buy Derek from Accounts a new pair of glasses. I walk in and he's splashing *everywhere*. I say 'how about you actually get some of that piss *in* the urinal, pal?' Old bastard can't hear me, of course. Man alive, I sound like I'm Donald Friggin' Duck.

She makes Donald Duck noise every time she takes a step. She notices Jo.

Madeline (**to Helen**) Oh. Have you not done it yet?

She pretends to take a gun to her own head and pull the trigger.

Jo (**to Helen**) *Madeline?! Big Mouth Madeline made a complaint about my lack of discretion in the workplace?!*

Helen Let's not resort to name calling.

Madeline takes a seat beside Jo.

Jo Oh, I see. **(Starts laughing)** This is a joke!! I get it. Like, let's take the Mick out of how Madeline can't keep her mouth shut about absolutely *anything* so we'll just play a prank on old gullible Jo, ha ha, yes, very funny. Bloody hilarious. You nearly had me.

Helen Well, I'm glad you find your impending redundancy amusing, Josephine —

Jo Please stop calling me that. You're not my mother.

Madeline See? She's passive aggressive as *fuck*.

Jo So come on then. What was I supposed to have said?

Helen **(to Madeline, compassionately)** Go ahead, dear.

Madeline takes a piece of paper out her pocket, steadies herself, clears her throat, then reads:

Madeline Tuesday the 19th. Morning.

Jo: So, you'll get the report to me by Friday, right?

Madeline: You know you can count on me, Jo!

(she pauses, for added effect)

Jo: Pfft!

Jo *That's* what this is all about? I'm being fired for making a sound?!

Helen Clear case of undermining worker's morale.

Madeline I literally felt like I did not exist.

Jo Still don't have that report, by the way.

Madeline I'm telling you, Helen. The hate for her fellow species is just waiting to spew out of her. Like a volcano of uncontrollable, sulphuric rage.

Jo Fine. I'd like to submit a formal complaint against Madeline. For calling me a volcano.

Madeline Who doesn't like volcanoes?!

Jo Then I want to make a complaint against you Helen for unfair dismissal.

Helen OK let me just make a note of that. **(Pretending to write it down)** "Jo is making a complaint about me to myself."

Jo D'you know what? Stuff all of you! I don't need to be here in this toxic hellhole any longer — God forbid someone registers an actual *opinion* round here. Three years spent treading eggshells around you wannabe snowflakes with trigger warnings and sensitivity workshops and woke-y koke-y language manifestos being handed around the office by the bloody pronoun police. So do you know what? You can take your smug, Guardian re-tweeting halos of self-righteous hypocrisy and shove it where the sun don't shine. I'm outta here!

She storms out.

Helen Jeez...touchy, isn't she.

Madeline Pfft. Can't say a single thing to that one.

The End.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *Pfft!* was recently performed in front of a lively audience at Calder Bookshop & Theatre, London. It's a fun little satire on self-righteous sanctimony in the workplace, and the flagrant hypocrisies that inevitably result.

The line about the 'cottage cheese' incident comes with my sincerest apologies. I'm delighted to inform you all that this particular vignette is not based on a true story.

AUTHOR BIO: Robin is a London-based playwright, poet and fiction writer. With themes ranging from toxic masculinity to the technological singularity, his plays have been performed at venues including Southwark Playhouse, Pleasance Theatre, Calder Bookshop & Theatre and Anthroplay Theatre. He was a winner of the 2021 Green Curtain 'Across The Water' Competition, for which his monologue on the Irish Free State was filmed.

He's a member of the Playwrights Hive, Bread & Roses Playwrights Circle, and currently undertaking his Master of Studies at Cambridge University.