

A Room Of One's Own

By Seth Berner

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama editor JANET COLSON writes...*

Inspired by Virginia Woolf's remarkable essay-slash-novel of the same name, Seth Berner's play, A Room of One's Own, speaks to women's rights as human rights, pitting expression against oppression. This is a terrific story about Victorian women denied any outlet for artistic creativity or personal freedom. It's about power dynamics. And it's about 'the man,' who in this case is epitomized by the indulged master of the house, Thomas, who hasn't yet exceeded his deceased father's legacy of abuse (although we give him points for trying). Then there's his betrodden mother, the lady of the house, a bully in her own right, who once wrote beautiful poetry in a fine "feminine hand," and is now relegated to staring at empty walls for entertainment. Yes, she's both a reflection of the man and a victim of the society that created him. At its essence this play is about empathy. While our hearts readily go out to the servants who have little chance for a better life, we have to feel for the plight of this cold and officious character of privilege, the "Mother" (she has no other name), a Victorian Karen, who reminds us that behind every meme there's a human with a backstory.

BEATRICE

Maybe she doesn't want to write any more.

ALINDA

I don't believe that. I think she was made to stop.

BEATRICE

Why do you think that?

ALINDA

Because no one who can write poetry would ever just stop to stare at walls.

(Spacing and font size are playwright's own) Eds.

A Room Of One's Own

A play in one act.

CAST

BEATRICE	A female servant, 20s. She knows she is being mistreated but is powerless to do anything about it.
ALINDA	A female servant, a bit older than Beatrice. She knows she is being mistreated but is powerless to do anything about it.
THOMAS	Lord Scarborough, Lord of the manor. In his 20s. Arrogant bully
MOTHER	Thomas' Mother. A free spirit when young, beaten into submission by her husband and son.

SCENE

The mansion of an English nobleman

TIME

Early to mid- 19th century.

SETTING: The Lord's bedchamber mid-morning.

AT RISE THOMAS is lying in bed, fully dressed; MOTHER is in a chair.

MOTHER

The party was quite pleasant.

THOMAS

Tell me.

MOTHER

The Duke and the Worcesters and the Willinghams were there with their daughter. The girl was out for the first time and behaved quite badly.

THOMAS

What did she do?

MOTHER

When Lord Bilton entered she stared at him, then turned back to Evelyn Chambers.

THOMAS

John will probably be rather pleased.

MOTHER

Pleased, Thomas? With that behavior?

THOMAS

He's wanted out of that marriage since it was announced. And rightly so.

MOTHER

The match has been made.

THOMAS

Then it will need to be unmade. When a horse is of bad stock you don't make the purchase and then hope to fit it to the saddle - you make damn sure it does not get into your stable in the first place.

MOTHER

Language, Thomas. If the Willinghams refuse?

THOMAS

Then the Thurstons could demand a trial by peers.

MOTHER

Do you think the Thurstons would want to go to trial? They, who have never been touched by a breath of scandal would be willing to air their dirty laundry in public?

THOMAS

A slight to Lord Bilton is a serious offense. The Thurstons would go through trial and more to show Lord Bilton and the rest of the world that they know what is proper. And after the trial they will be respected for upholding propriety.

MOTHER

But to have to stand in court . . .

THOMAS

Father allowed no improprieties and was not afraid to stand for what he believed in. You would not have had him avoid court when it was necessary, would you?

MOTHER

No.

THOMAS

And if he went to court over trifles like domestic difficulties you don't think he would have publicly decried outrage.

MOTHER

Your father was not afraid of court.

THOMAS

A family that will not stand in public when necessary and proclaim its spotlessness probably can not. Good citizens must proclaim crimes in public. Not knowing one's station in life is such a crime.

MOTHER

You know, they were saying things about the girl even before this. That she wrote poetry.

THOMAS

Don't make me laugh, Mother, my side is still sore. Wrote poetry. I never. Of what use has a girl writing poetry?

MOTHER

I do not know that for a fact, Thomas, it is just what was said.

THOMAS

But if true, Mother, it is preposterous. Girls are not artists. Creation is beyond them. It is enough for girls to support those who can create. Play the piano. A girl attempting poetry is no laughing matter. It means that she has forgotten her place in the world. Well. What else happened? No more adventures, I hope? Who else did you see?

MOTHER

It was well attended. You were missed.

THOMAS

I would have been there if I could.

MOTHER

That rib has barely mended. Everyone knows of the accident and forgave your absence. There were some jokes. James Worthy asked if that horse had finished riding you yet, if it had you jumping fences.

THOMAS

I've been riding for years and get thrown on my own course by a horse I know likes to buck. I should have been more careful. Soon as I am well I am getting back on that nag and turning her into a lap dog.

MOTHER

A lap horse?

THOMAS

Now there's a sight. I wonder if I would hurt any more with that horse on me than with me on that horse. Ow, don't make me laugh.

MOTHER

I am being cruel, and to an invalid.

THOMAS

Not for long. I am not staying in this bed a minute longer than necessary.

MOTHER

I am sure you won't.

THOMAS

So what of Miss Chambers?

MOTHER

I am so happy for you, Thomas.

THOMAS

Happier than for John Thurston?

MOTHER

Miss Chambers is a model of decorum. She behaved herself perfectly in every way. She will make you a fine wife.

THOMAS

I am glad to hear it. Is she attractive?

MOTHER

She has poise. She holds her head up and her back straight and dances elegantly.

THOMAS

But not much to look at?

MOTHER

She is not slim like Sylvan Willingham. She is, well, she has attributes that do not show in a portrait.

THOMAS

Then I will be pleased to add her portrait to our hallway. And if she is no great beauty I will not have to worry about her while I am away.

MOTHER

Thomas!

THOMAS

Good looking girls are not to be trusted. I do not mean you, of course, Mother, but girls today are not raised as you were.

MOTHER

No, it is not like it was, that is true.

THOMAS

So I will not need to keep an eye on the gardener. There are just a few simple rules I demand of people, and right at the top is that a wife be faithful to her husband. But back to the party. Are you recovered from the excitement now?

MOTHER

Goodness, I am still a little tired. I am not as young as I used to be. I may take a short nap.

THOMAS

Why Mother, why not sleep all day if you want to? You know that I can run this place even in bed.

MOTHER

Yes, yes, but who would run the house? Who would see that the dusting is done and meals prepared?
You could do that?

THOMAS

No Mother, the women's work I leave to you.

MOTHER

And so a short nap will be all I can afford.

THOMAS

Do you have so much to do?

MOTHER

Just like your father. He was a gentleman among gentlemen but no idea in his head about what went into what he did not do himself. Nor should he.

THOMAS

Like father, like son.

MOTHER

Like father, like son. What I would do without you I do not know.

THOMAS

Leave the sweat to me.

MOTHER

And the poetry?

THOMAS

I am working in something now, Mother, a poem comparing life to clouds. It will be an elevated piece when finished.

MOTHER

Clouds are elevated, Thomas.

THOMAS

No joking, Mother, this is serious. You could not understand. You must believe me that my writing is important. Every man can ride and dance but I will be the one who is known for his culture as well as his manners.

MOTHER

I wish I could appreciate it the way you do. As a girl I learned to recite scripture and read works for my moral improvement but I could never see the beauty in what was before me.

THOMAS

Women don't. You are not meant to.

MOTHER

No, I am not.

THOMAS

I will try it out on others I trust to know good work when they hear it.

MOTHER

I will share in your glory.

THOMAS

And I will keep you here no longer.

MOTHER

Do you need anything? Are you hungry?

THOMAS

We have servants to ask those questions, Mother. Please send Beatrice in to do her job, leaving you free to do yours.

MOTHER

I will check in with you at dinner.

MOTHER exits.

[from offstage] Beatrice, the Master needs you.

BEATRICE enters.

BEATRICE

Yes Sir?

THOMAS

Bring me some cold meat and a glass of stout.

BEATRICE

Yes Sir.

THOMAS

I have not dismissed you yet. I want you to hear something. Fetch that folder on the mantle.

BEATRICE

Yes Sir.

THOMAS

Now listen. "Oh clouds. So high you float. So white. Bringing together what you need to give you substance. So alone and yet so bold. Bolder than the birds that must change course to avoid you." Are you listening?

BEATRICE

Yes, Sir.

THOMAS

What do you think? You have not heard enough. Here is more. "Must change course to avoid you. For

you are master of the sky, you are master of your fate, none can make you . . ." [*interrupted*]

MOTHER

[*from offstage*] Thomas?

THOMAS

What is it Mother? I'm busy.

MOTHER

[*still offstage*] Oh forgive me, it can wait.

THOMAS

How can anyone work with interruptions? Did Plato?

BEATRICE

Who is Plato, Sir? A landowner?

THOMAS

No he was not a landowner! He was a Greek philosopher. One of the greatest philosophers of history.

BEATRICE

I'm sorry, Sir.

THOMAS

Do you think he had to put up with interruptions? He never could have written The Republic if he had been interrupted all the time. No one can work without peace and quiet.

BEATRICE

No, Sir.

THOMAS

Of course not. Well what did you think?

BEATRICE

I have no ear, Sir.

THOMAS

What did I expect asking a female? A servant no less. How could you understand true poetry? But you do understand a servant's place, don't you. Come here. Lie down here. Goddamnit, I told you yesterday to be careful of that rib. I think you've broken it again. You can't do anything right, can you. Can't even handle yourself in bed. I should just fire you. But I'm going to need you, I think. I hear my future wife looks like a dog and there are some things a dog can't do, at least to me. Goddamn you. Help me downstairs. I will have to say that I injured myself trying to ride. And if you value your life you will not say anything.

BEATRICE

No Sir.

THOMAS

And stop that bawling. Someone with as little sense of beauty as you could not possibly have anything to cry about. Now let's go.

THOMAS and BEATRICE exit. ALINDA enters and begins straightening the room. BEATRICE enters.

BEATRICE

I can't take much more Alinda.

ALINDA

I don't see how you've stood it this long.

BEATRICE

What else can I do? If I complain of him who will believe me? I can't leave, he would not give me a reference, so I could not get a job. What else is there for me?

ALINDA

I don't know. I only know that if he touched me I would kill him.

BEATRICE

You don't know how lucky you are.

ALINDA

He knows how plain I am. Funny to think of one's self as being lucky for being unattractive.

BEATRICE

You're not unattractive, Alinda!

ALINDA

I'm death warmed over next to you. And that's what he sees. If I'm a dog to him, much the better for me.

BEATRICE

But doesn't it bother you to be always reminded of it?

ALINDA

Of course it does. But what can I do? At least I'm not pawed. I could have a master who doesn't mind dogs. Our master's father was not so picky.

BEATRICE

Were you here when the older Scarborough was still alive?

ALINDA

No, but I heard plenty. The man was a tyrant. He was often before the magistrate for beating the staff. It is said that once he even killed a girl who refused him something. But what did he care if he got fined? He bragged of paying for his rights.

BEATRICE

His rights?

ALINDA

What he did in his household was his right. And he stopped others from doing what he did not want.

BEATRICE

What do you mean?

ALINDA

The young Miss Fitzwater was reportedly a free spirit before she married him. Saucy ways that offended nobility, discourtesies at balls that nearly cost her the marriage. But her family was one of the wealthiest and the Scarboroughs calculated that they could take some disgrace as long as it came with so large a dowry. After that the man made sure that she did nothing to embarrass him. Ruled with an iron fist. Really crushed her spirit.

BEATRICE

Our mistress?

ALINDA

Yes.

BEATRICE

She seems all right to me. She certainly is not afraid to work me. Or you.

ALINDA

She knows how to command. But she doesn't know how to live.

BEATRICE

What are you saying?

ALINDA

She doesn't know what to do with herself.

BEATRICE

What should she do? She has no work.

ALINDA

She just sits in her room all day.

BEATRICE

And why not? So would I if I could.

ALINDA

She stares at the walls. I've often gone in to clean and found her sitting in the dark, looking at nothing. If she hasn't heard me come in I can watch for minutes and she doesn't move. So I clear my throat to let her know I'm there and she jerks awake and watches me carefully for a bit and then nods off again.

BEATRICE

So?

ALINDA
She used to put her time to good use.

BEATRICE
How?

ALINDA
Wait here, I'll be right back.

ALINDA exits and BEATRICE resumes cleaning the room. ALINDA enters carrying an old notebook.

ALINDA
Look at this.

BEATRICE
It's an old copy book.

ALINDA
Yes.

BEATRICE
Whose?

ALINDA
Hers.

BEATRICE
Our mistress's?

ALINDA
Yes. Well, it was hers. At least I think it was.

BEATRICE
How do you know?

ALINDA
It's a feminine hand. Whose else could it be in this house?

BEATRICE
It's from this house?

ALINDA
The attic. A dusty pile of books and papers in the back. Not looked at in years, I'd say. I found it one day when hunting for a chair. And being nosy I picked one of the books up.

BEATRICE
What does it say?

ALINDA

Read it.

BEATRICE

I do not read well. What is it?

ALINDA

Our mistress's own poetry I think.

BEATRICE

Why do you say that?

ALINDA

Look at it. She wasn't practicing her hand, the writing is accomplished right from the start. No servant writes so well. And she wasn't copying out of a book or why would there be all these cross-outs and different versions of the same thing?

BEATRICE

She might have been writing for someone else.

ALINDA

Who? It couldn't have been from before her marriage - Scarborough would never have allowed this into his house. If after, who could it have been? Scarborough was no artist. She saw no one who could have given her this. Except herself.

BEATRICE

All right, so it's hers. So?

ALINDA

She used to write. Now she sits in her room staring.

BEATRICE

Maybe she doesn't want to write any more.

ALINDA

I don't believe that. I think she was made to stop.

BEATRICE

Why do you think that?

ALINDA

Because no one who can write poetry would ever just stop to stare at walls.

BEATRICE

OK. So do you think her husband stopped her?

ALINDA

You've heard our master's views on women and poetry.

BEATRICE

And he compares himself with his father.

ALINDA

Though as I think on it I'm not so sure. Her husband might not have known.

BEATRICE

No?

ALINDA

These books are still here. If he had known he would have destroyed them.

BEATRICE

She stopped because she couldn't risk his finding out. She wrote poetry as Miss Fitzwater and continued as Lady Scarborough. Until she'd heard his ravings enough and realized that it would be more than her life was worth if he caught her. She stopped on her own to save herself.

ALINDA

Yes.

BEATRICE

You say there are more of these? This isn't the only one?

ALINDA

There are nine.

BEATRICE

She hid them in the attic because if he had found them he would have killed her or thrown her out.

ALINDA

I think she's forgotten about them. She hasn't gone to the attic in years and shows no signs of having something up there that she values.

BEATRICE

Maybe she doesn't value them.

ALINDA

She saved them. Knowing that she could have been plagued if they were found.

BEATRICE

Have you asked her about them?

ALINDA

Never!

BEATRICE

Why not?

ALINDA

I'm not supposed to know, I came across them without permission. Would you tell her?

BEATRICE

Not if I wanted my job.

ALINDA

Exactly. So when I'm sent up there or think I can get away for a few minutes I read on the sly. It's taken years but I've read most of the books and they are all like this. They should be seen.

BEATRICE

Our master likes poetry.

ALINDA

But not from women.

BEATRICE

No. If he learned that his own mother wrote poetry while married to his father he would feel that his name had been besmirched.

ALINDA

He would torment her to the grave. She'd get the torture she feared from her husband. Which I don't care so much about, though things could only get worse around here with her gone. She does keep Lord Thomas somewhat civilized. What I'm scared of is that he would destroy the books.

BEATRICE

But you need not tell him who wrote them, he need not know it was his mother.

ALINDA

He would figure it out just as I did. Who else could have written them?

BEATRICE

So he would know. But he professes a love of beauty. He could claim the writing as his own. That would cheat our mistress but save the books

ALINDA

He has less artistic nature than a dog, he wouldn't want to claim these.

BEATRICE

So what will you do?

ALINDA

Continue sneaking trips to the attic. Dreaming of getting them out, if I could hide them.

BEATRICE

You seem angry.

ALINDA

Yes, at what has happened to the writer.

BEATRICE

Why feel sorry for Lady Scarborough? You said yourself you wouldn't mind seeing her in her grave.

ALINDA

Not her personally. What she went through.

BEATRICE

What has she gone through? No one beats her or threatens her job as she does us.

ALINDA

But she has been beaten. First by old Scarborough and now by her son.

BEATRICE

She has never been beaten in her life. I see no reason to feel sorry for her in the least.

ALINDA

But can't you imagine what it would be like to lose your voice?

BEATRICE

There's nothing wrong with her voice.

ALINDA

Poetry was her voice. And it was scared out of her, so that all she can do is sit staring at the walls.

BEATRICE

But she still runs the house. I don't feel sorry for someone who orders me about.

ALINDA

Then you're not a artist.

BEATRICE

And you are?

ALINDA

I think so. If I could be.

BEATRICE

Why do you think that?

ALINDA

I hear a voice.

BEATRICE

So do I. Two of them. Master and Mistress Scarborough ordering me about.

ALINDA

No, I mean inside of me. A voice telling me to let loose. To come alive.

BEATRICE

Come alive?

ALINDA

Sometimes I think that the night grows still so that I can take my turn. That the carts stop their rumbling and the smithies their pounding and the laborers their shouting as an invitation to me. It's like they are offering me silence and solitude until morning so that I can do what I like. No distractions, no interruptions. And then I have my choice. I could take up a pen and write. Or perhaps let forth a song. Or not words but a dance that I throw my whole body into. Something I make that is mine, that comes from me, that is me. And I take off my apron and I let down my hair and I raise my eyes from the ground where I have obediently kept them all day long and I breathe and I wait to begin.

BEATRICE

Oh, Alinda!

ALINDA

But I no sooner begin to stretch my toes than I hear a creak on the stairs or a hand on the doorknob and a voice commands me this or that and I know that I shall never be alive until I can stop that knob from turning, that command from coming. I shall never have my soul until I have a room of my own.

BEATRICE

You are a poet!

ALINDA

No, I'm a servant. But I would like to be a poet. I would like the chance to try.

BEATRICE

Will you ever, do you think?

ALINDA

I have to tell myself so or I'll turn into Mistress Scarborough with no servants to boss around.

BEATRICE

Could you appeal to Mistress Scarborough? If it really is as you say maybe she would help you.

ALINDA

I've thought of that but I don't know. I'm afraid she's been down so long that she no longer remembers what it is like. And if her son found out, which he surely would, hell would break out.

BEATRICE

You would be heard if you danced or sang in your room, but you could write.

ALINDA

How, when I'm called every fifteen minutes, even at night? And it would be the end of me if my writings were found.

BEATRICE

You could keep them in the attic.

ALINDA

Yes I could, couldn't I. I could get paper from the study and hide it in the attic. I could.

BEATRICE

You will, won't you? Say you will?

ALINDA

We'll see. If I can make sure it's safe. Maybe someday if Mistress Scarborough's books survive mine will too.

BEATRICE

Oh, that would be too exciting. Can you disguise your hand so that it does not look like a woman's?

ALINDA

My hand is bad enough that it looks only like a child's. Maybe I'll be seen as a child prodigy.

BEATRICE

No, you should put a note in saying who you are and what you've done. Let the world know about you. Maybe in some future day it will be all right for women to write.

ALINDA

And servants?

BEATRICE

Why not? Are you not human? Have you not a soul?

ALINDA

Depends on who you ask. Scarborough says not so much as a dog.

BEATRICE

But Scarborough will be dead then.

ALINDA

And so will I. Who knows who will be here instead?

MOTHER

[calling from offstage] Alinda, Beatrice, where are you?

BEATRICE

Here, Madam.

MOTHER enters.

MOTHER

There has been an accident. Your master was found on the ground by the stables. I have had him put in the study downstairs, he is in too much pain to be brought up here. Are you finished in this room?

BEATRICE

Almost Madam.

MOTHER

Good. I shall need one of you to see that he has hot compresses. How much longer will you be?

BEATRICE

I can finish alone, Madam.

MOTHER

[inspecting room, sees the book on the bed] What is that?

ALINDA

What, Madam?

MOTHER

That book.

BEATRICE

Something of Master Scarborough's, Madam.

THOMAS

[offstage] Mother!!

ALINDA

Madam, the Master is calling.

MOTHER

He can wait for once. *[looking at both]* I think I know how he got hurt this time and he can wait. Don't you agree?

BEATRICE

If you say so, Madam.

MOTHER

[looking just at Beatrice] You know what I mean, don't you.

BEATRICE

I'm not sure Madam.

MOTHER

Thomas is to be married in a month. He is marrying a proper girl from a fine family who expects their daughter will be marrying a proper gentleman.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER

A proper gentleman. That means that there are things that he can not do. He should not do them at all but he can not do them before the wedding. You know what I am talking about, don't you.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

THOMAS

[*offstage*] Mother, I'm dying down here.

MOTHER

[*to Alinda*] You go downstairs and help the Master.

ALINDA exits

I will not have his wedding taking place with him on a stretcher and I will not allow you to *assist* him in his games. The next violation and you will leave this roof!

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER

Now let me see that book. What is it?.

BEATRICE

I don't know, Madam. I think it is Master Scarborough's.

MOTHER

You know very well it is not. Does that look like his writing? It must have been the other one, you never go to the attic.

BEATRICE

No, Madam.

MOTHER

What is it doing down here?

BEATRICE

She was showing me something she found, Madam.

MOTHER

Do you know what it is?

BEATRICE

Is it yours, Madam?

MOTHER

Would I have done this?

BEATRICE

I don't know, Madam.

MOTHER

Have you ever known me to engage in nonsense?

BEATRICE

No, Madam.

MOTHER

Then why did you say it was?

BEATRICE

Alinda said so, Madam.

MOTHER

A servant brings you a book and says it is mine. How does she know?

BEATRICE

Whose else could it be, Madam?

MOTHER

It could be that other one's, couldn't it? It's she who brought this to you. Thinks herself a poetess, does she?

BEATRICE

Not exactly, Madam.

MOTHER

I see her mooning about all the time. Now she has filled a book up with her drivel. And says it is mine so she will not be blamed if your master finds it. Only I found it first. And I know if it is mine or not.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER

She is an uppity servant who does not know her place. Or her sex. Writing poetry. She thinks very little of her job.

BEATRICE

I think she does, Madam.

MOTHER

She does not act like it. She would not do this if she valued her employment here.

BEATRICE

Madam . . .

MOTHER

Or you either.

BEATRICE

Madam, I value my job very highly.

MOTHER

That is better. So, if you want to keep your job what do you suggest I do about the other one.

BEATRICE

Madam, . . . I don't think it's hers Madam.

MOTHER

No?

BEATRICE

Her penmanship is not so fine, Madam.

MOTHER

This is fine, is it?

BEATRICE

Much nicer than could be writ by a servant, Madam.

MOTHER

Let me see it. No, it could not have been writ by a servant. It should not have been brought down.

BEATRICE

I'm sorry, Madam, I'm terribly sorry.

MOTHER

Can you imagine what your Master would say if he had found this? If he had been put in his room just now? I would have had to say it was Alinda's. And he would have said what you said.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER

You see why these must be kept hidden.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER

If he should ever find them.

BEATRICE

Madam?

MOTHER

What is it?

BEATRICE

It's beautiful, Madam.

MOTHER

You read it?

BEATRICE

Alinda has. She says you were a lovely writer, Madam.

MOTHER

She does?

BEATRICE

She's read most of what's up there. Do you still write?

MOTHER

No.

BEATRICE

Why not, Madam?

MOTHER

My husband would not have it.

BEATRICE

Your husband is gone.

MOTHER

I can't. I look at paper and see nothing. Just menus and correspondence. There is nothing inside me.

BEATRICE

Alinda says she hears voices.

MOTHER

They were not voices . . . I used to look at a blank page and see the words already there. I just had to write them down. Sometimes I'd write too fast and have to change something. Or sometimes I would write it and then see it again a little differently. But it was all there in front of me.

BEATRICE

Perhaps if you tried again?

MOTHER

I tried once or twice. I have nothing of my own. The land is my son's. And so is my life. I can not do anything that might stain our reputation.

BEATRICE

I'm sorry, Madam.

MOTHER

No staring at Lords, though some deserve it. Just staring at my walls. My room is all I have. I spend my life in my room trying not to think of the past.

BEATRICE

I'm very sorry, Madam.

MOTHER

No need to be sorry unless my son finds out. He must never find out under any circumstances. I would have you killed first. I would kill you myself!

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER

Now get this back in the attic and finish the room.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam. Madam?

MOTHER

What?

BEATRICE

About Alinda, Madam?

MOTHER

What about her?

BEATRICE

She would like to write, Madam.

MOTHER

Well she can't.

BEATRICE

No, Madam?

MOTHER

Not in this house.

BEATRICE

How can you deny her, Madam, after what you have been through?

MOTHER

What have I been through?

BEATRICE

Losing your voice.

MOTHER

As you can hear there is nothing wrong with my voice.

BEATRICE

Your spirit, then.

MOTHER

My spirit still inhabits my body, else I would be buried next to my husband.

BEATRICE

You were a poet once, Madam.

MOTHER

And learned the folly of it. Alinda can do as well.

BEATRICE

It isn't folly, Madam.

MOTHER

And I tell you it is. A woman does not write poetry. A woman has no need to write. Nor has she the capacity. It is enough for us to encourage men to write, for they create what is beautiful and lasting. Do you know of any women artists from the Greeks? From the Orientals? From here in England? Nothing that we hold in high esteem today has come from our sex. And that is because our sex can not do it.

BEATRICE

But this book, Madam

MOTHER

This book does not exist.

BEATRICE

But . . .

MOTHER

No more, I tell you. That was the error of youth and I am pleased to say that that error has been mended. I have learned my place in the world. You and Alinda will do the same if you wish to remain in my employ.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER exits. ALINDA enters

ALINDA

He wants you. [*sees the book*] What did she say?

BEATRICE

That it is not hers.

ALINDA

Really?

BEATRICE

That it was hers but that it is hers no longer.

ALINDA

How can that be?

BEATRICE

She has learned that women do not write.

ALINDA

She can't mean that.

BEATRICE

She does. And she won't allow you.

ALINDA

You didn't mention me!

BEATRICE

She worked out that you had brought the book down. I thought she might be sympathetic, she's too scared. She won't let you go now for fear you will tell her son, but she won't let you write in this house. And I think will be careful to see that you do not.

ALINDA

So I am lost. No, not more lost than I was. Before I *thought* that I must keep it secret, now I know I must, so nothing really has changed. Except that now I know why she stares at nothing.

BEATRICE

Yes.

ALINDA

She will give up her life for peace with her son.

BEATRICE

Will you?

ALINDA

That remains to be seen. Yes, I probably will. I can live without creating, I can not live without eating.

BEATRICE

No.

THOMAS

[offstage] Beatrice!!!

BEATRICE

Nothing has changed. She wants this book gone

ALINDA

I'll put it back.

THOMAS

[offstage] Come when I call, damn you!

BEATRICE

Yes, Sir.

ALINDA and BEATRICE exit

END

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *If I, Seth Berner, had to describe myself in one word it would be “political.” I am consumed by wanting everyone to have equal rights and opportunities to decide who they are and become it. Most of my writing comes from that belief.*

Much of the time I use absurdity to strike blows against the expected normal. My settings, situations, and approach to staging challenge what plays are supposed to do. In one ten minute play I have a character laugh for six minutes – because I want an audience to start feeling uncomfortable and asking itself why it feels that way. In another I have three blind narrators standing in a child's wading pool for an entire play because, well, it still seems like a good idea and no one else is doing it.

*I also directly confront conditions in our society blocking the path to personhood. Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* makes explicit the necessity of freedom for individuality. She was not the first, and many since her have made the observation. But I was struck by her phrase “a room of one's own” and wanted to build around that. Who would literally and figuratively not have a room of their own? And how could that idea develop without it being obvious all along where I was going? There are as many answers as there are writers, mine became servants who would not only not have the physical privacy, but would not be allowed the personal privacy to become themselves. This setting also allowed the observation that privilege is both real and relative – the servants are not the only ones being crushed by their circumstances.*

*When I wrote *A Room of One's Own* I expected that it would be the first act of a work drawing attention to the privation in our modern “enlightened” America. I still have not found a conclusion I'm happy with, so this remains a one-act. What is missing is a contrast; the message is clear without it, I hope.*

Stylistically I was influenced by 19th century novelists. I tried to capture speech from that time. I worked hard to eliminate the structural quirks that are my default. Keep It Simple, Stupid, I said to myself, let the story, not the style, be the story.

The play was read as part of a fund-raiser for a struggling local theater. More recently it was presented to a couple of informal workshops, where I got helpful feedback. It has never had a staged performance.

I live in Portland, Maine where I practice poverty law, am heavily involved in

progressive politics, act, and know more about punk rock than anyone you know.

AUTHOR'S BIO: I have a profession that requires very non-creative serious writing, so the other side of my brain starts howling when I take my jacket and tie off. I have had plays accepted by the Samuel French Off Off Broadway Short Play Festival, the King of Crows Festival and the Eleven and One Festival. I have had prose published in the University of Southern Maine literary journal and an on-line fiction journal I no longer remember the name of. My writing typically explores the absurd and unconventional, though I will work in more conventional styles to keep people from thinking they have me figured out. I also act - preferably for pay, but for fun when that's what's on offer. I live in Portland, Maine.