

# BIRDS ON THE EDGE

**By Marilyn Barner Anselmi**

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *If you don't think a half-bird/half-man and a suicidal teenager are material for a moving play this beautifully written example of absurdist theatre will blow it out the window. Anselmi addresses both the idea of 'inter-species' communication and the fact that two creatures of entirely different origin and behavior can participate in the exchange of emotion—especially tenderness and all its healing capacity. Opposing relations with air-space—flight and non-flight—became powerful symbols of their respective life situations. Dialogue is smart, savvy and dimensional. Quote: Birdyman--All right. All right. Suit yourself. I was trying to be, what do you bi-peds call it? Humane?/Chloe- Ha! Right. Any species is probably better at that than us. (Spacing is the playwright's own. We publish all submissions exactly as received.)*

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**BIRDS ON THE EDGE**

Marilynn Barner Anselmi

## **Characters**

CHLOE: Later teens female

BIRDYMAN: Fully grown bird/man

Setting: On roof of a five story building.

Time: Late night, present

(Enter BIRDYMAN in an erratic flight pattern carrying a couple of 2x4's. He should have some sort of bird regalia—wings, ridiculous beak, bird feet, something. Flight is up to you. He sings snippets of “Strangers in the Night”, has to la-la-la much of it, finally lands with a clunk on the roof-top. He regains his composure and curtsies to audience.)

BIRDYMAN

Sorry. Landings are clearly not my forte. My apologies. I so wanted to make a graceful entrance. Whole bird representing freedom and beauty thing. Hate to disappoint, but (drops the 2x4s) there it is.

(Sings another snippet of “Strangers in the Night”—badly.)

What? Everybody loves a song bird? Right? Right? Am I right?

(He looks at the sky.)

My kinda' evening: no stars, little bit a' fog, north wind stirring up a good strong wiff of our rancid river. (Inhales deeply.) And best of all, the piece de' résistance, so the speak, NO PESKY HUMANS. (Looks around at audience.) Well, present company excluded, of course. I would never, ever call humans like you pesky. Obviously well educated, into wildlife preservation, type that keeps those tasty bird feeders filled to capacity. Any critics in the house tonight, hum? Anyway. You get the picture. Just the kinda' night my fellow bird brothers are snugly ensconced in their sweet little nests.

(He picks up a hammer.)

Ever tried to get cozy in a pile of sticks, the occasional discarded (and used, I might add) *used* tissue and perhaps a stray piece of cotton from your discarded pill containers? (Shudders.) Hence, (Holds up the hammer.) This.

(He picks up a 2x4, hammers it into another, works a while, begins to whistle unsuccessfully then resumes singing. The sound of a door opening startles him. He jumps quickly out of the light. Enter CHLOE, jacket wrapped around her, she looks around, scared, upset, has nothing to wipe her nose, picks up some tissue from the pile of 2x4s, blows her nose, looks over the edge of the roof, shudders, withdraws from edge. She notices the 2x4s, kicks at the framing.)

BIRDYMAN (Still in dark.)

I'll kindly ask you to refrain from that teen, destructive angst.

CHLOE (Startled.)

What? Who's there? (She moves closer to the edge.) Not another step or—

BIRDYMAN

Or what? You'll jump?

CHLOE

I, I'll. I might.

BIRDYMAN (Steps into the light.)

Well, if you do, could you please do so over there? (Points in opposite direction.) Or farther out there. (Points in another direction). One of my most conscientious bird feeders resides directly under your current potential launch position.

CHLOE (Moves away from the edge, considers him.)

You're. Um. What are you?

(BIRDYMAN stands tall, smoothes his feathers (or whatever), preening, and sings a bar from "Strangers in the Night".)

CHLOE

So, you're a delusional, really bad Frank Sinatra bird impersonator?

BIRDYMAN

I beg your pardon?

CHLOE

Oh, no offense. Not like I care, or won't as soon as I—(She steps closer to the edge, BIRDYMAN steps in front of her.)

BIRDYMAN

For your information, I'm a highly endangered, giant specimen of the North American song bird.

CHLOE

A bird that can talk?

BIRDYMAN

And sing in several languages.

CHLOE

No way! Like what?

BIRDYMAN (Puffing himself up.)

"Alonse de fant de la patria, la shur de goury teravay"—

CHLOE (Laughs.)

And you think a mangled bit of La Marseillaise makes you a song bird?

BIRDYMAN

Can you do better? (Singing, really badly and loudly.) “Contrevous de la terinyah, letandar se la te la veey!”

CHLOE (Begins singing louder and louder.)

“Entendez-vous dans les campagnes, Mugir ces feroces soldats? Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras, Egorgger vos fils, vos compagnes! (Looks at BIRDYMAN triumphantly.) HAH!

BIRDYMAN (Turns away.)

I detest a diva.

(He returns to his work, hammers. CHLOE watches a moment, nudges a board with her foot.)

CHLOE

So you're a really bad singing carpenter bird.

BIRDYMAN

No to the former, yes to the latter. Will you hand me that square?

CHLOE

The what?

BIRDYMAN

The shiny thing. There. Behind you. Looks like a capital L.

CHLOE

Oh. Sure. Here. (Hands him the square.) What's it do?

BIRDYMAN

What do you think? (He holds it up then places it next to his boards.)

CHLOE

I don't know. And I'm sick to death of these damn pop quizzes. NO MORE QUESTIONS!

BIRDYMAN

All right. All right. Suit yourself. I was trying to be, what do you bi-peds call it? Humane?

CHLOE

Ha! Right. Any species is probably better at that than us.

BIRDYMAN

Really? What part exactly? Plucking each other's tender, juicy young out of their nests or skewering the neighborhood worm population?

CHLOE

Exactly why I am—was—going to be a vegetarian if I didn't...

BIRDYMAN

Didn't what?

(CHLOE points over the edge.)

BIRDYMAN

Oh, didn't become road-kill. (A train horn is heard.) Why not that method? Fast, efficient, quick...

CHLOE (Shudders again, pulls back.)

No. I wanted. Want. I want it peaceful. Not all that, you know, noise. And, and wind. When you get up real, real close to a train, the wind, the gust is so bad. So cold. It's not. I don't know. Free.

BIRDYMAN

Of all the roof tops, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks onto mine.

CHLOE

Only street entrance open.

BIRDYMAN

I'll have to take this up with building security.

CHLOE

And. I saw you. Circling up here. For a while now.

BIRDYMAN

Wait a minute. You've been watching me?

(CHLOE nods. BIRDYMAN puffs up, proud.)

BIRDYMAN (Cont.)

My very first stalker!

CHLOE

When you take off, I watched, you just jump and then glide—it's so, I don't know, thoughtless, so natural, so easy—

BIRDYMAN

Easy? Want to know the number of wing sprains I've gotten? Ever seen one of us hit one of your windows? Not pretty...

CHLOE

But you don't—any of you, have to learn this, right? You just do it. You just live to live. Instinct. It's got to be so easy. So beautiful. So peaceful. Right? Isn't it? Isn't it?

BIRDYMAN

Well, I don't—

CHLOE

All this screwed-up world they push us into, the useless shit they cram in our heads. Learn this, memorize that, are you ready for Friday's test? Regionals are next week, gotta' squeeze a couple more points on your SAT! A couple more seconds off your time! Then I see you—or one of yours, soaring, dipping, gliding. And I watch. For like forever, you weren't after anything, not even hunting that I could tell. Just soaring for the fun of it. The sheer fun of it. Because you could. And it hit me. Right then. I couldn't remember what I ever do for fun. Ever.

BIRDYMAN

Oh.

CHLOE

I'm not even 17 and I don't have the first clue what fun is.

BIRDYMAN

Oh.

CHLOE

Yeah. That's why I'm here. On your roof top.

(She steps closer to the edge, BIRDYMAN grabs her arm.)

BIRDYMAN

I find construction lots of, what was that term you used? Fun? See—I'm having so much fun I think I'll whistle while I work. See? (He attempts to whistle, can't.)

CHLOE

A bird that can't whistle?

BIRDYMAN

I'm a talking, building song bird, gimme a break.

(CHLOE laughs.)

BIRDYMAN

See? Right there! That ha-ha? That's good, right? That's a clear indication of, of human fun, right? Ha-ha! Right?

CHLOE

Wish I could tell you. (She takes another step to the edge.)

BIRDYMAN

No, no, see, if you really did like watching me, or us, or our kind, if you really admire our freedom, wasn't that what you called it? Then, you really should think about helping me. Here. I could use another—or to be more precise, one hand.

CHLOE

I'm sorry, I don't—

BIRDYMAN

Hammers clearly weren't designed for wings. Could you?

CHLOE

I've never tried this.

BIRDYMAN

Never tried flying either, I suspect, yet you seem determined to give that a go.

CHLOE

Good point. Okay. What do I do?

BIRDYMAN

Hold this. Or, hammer that while I hold this.

CHLOE

Why are you doing this? I thought birds lived in—

BIRDYMAN

Twigs. I know. I know. (Pause.) Think of this as avian evolution.

CHLOE

Wow. I'm contributing to science. Can you let my mom know after I—you know—at least she'll have something to brag about. Soften the (she hammers hard) blow. HA!

BIRDYMAN

So, are you having fun?

CHLOE

Yeah. Maybe I am.

BIRDYMAN

Excellent, so you won't—

CHLOE

My mind is made up. I'm doing it right after we finish.

(He un-hammers the boards she has joined.)

BIRDYMAN

Your call.

CHLOE

Yep. (Pause.) And thanks.

BIRDYMAN

You're most welcome. For what?

CHLOE

Not trying to talk—or whistle me out of it.

BIRDYMAN

Oh.

CHLOE

Can't tell you how good it feels to, to finally let go. It's a huge relief.

BIRDYMAN

I can only imagine.

(She joins some boards, he takes them apart.)

CHLOE

Do any of your kind ever, you know, do it? (She motions to the edge.)

BIRDYMAN

Except for those silly Lemmings, I don't think so. (Beat) Survival's a pretty big deal for us.

CHLOE

Yeah. Sounds nice. Simple. Clear purpose.

BIRDYMAN

In the middle of winter when food is scarce to non-existent, nice or simple are the last things I'd call it.

CHLOE

Yeah, but this, whatever this thing we're making will help, right?

BIRDYMAN

It should. I'm hoping.

CHLOE

Good, I'm glad I helped somebody or something. Finally.

(She continues to hammer boards together, he continues to disassemble them. She looks around, sees that nothing has changed and pretends to hammer while he takes boards apart. She stands. He looks up.)

CHLOE (Pissed.)

I can't believe this shit.

BIRDYMAN (Stands.)

Oh. So you—

CHLOE

Yeah. Figured you out. I'm actually pretty smart, believe it or not.

BIRDYMAN

Look, I'm. Sorry, I thought if you had some—

CHLOE

Purpose? Fun? Hell, you're just like them. Making me do something for you that will ultimately make you look more important, more *needed*. (She kicks at some of the wood.) You are no damn different!

(She takes a step closer to the edge, BIRDYMAN takes her arm and shoves her to the edge.)

BIRDYMAN

This what you want? You sure? Okay, than take that step, jump on out there, make that decision that only you can make. But know this, my girl, you aren't going to soar like us. You aren't going to have that free-flight peace—oh, maybe for the 2.5 seconds it will take you to smack rock bottom, but it won't be lovely, you certainly won't soar, and you won't be free until you splat right there, on that street, right down there. (Holds her to the edge.) Still ready to fly? Then do it. Right now. But hear this: the instinct to survive is every bit as beautiful as the instinct to soar.

(He pushes her again and, at the last minute, grabs and hugs her to him. She begins crying.)

The End.

**THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:***I was watching a particularly athletic hawk soaring above my house and wondered what he thought of us (if anything). This led to the whole flight thing and the strangeness, the convoluted bravery of those who chose that way out. Not sure of my stylistic influence. I like a good story well told. 'Birds on the Edge' is a new script and has had a staged reading at The Imperial Center for the Arts, Rocky Mount.*

**BIO:***I'm a lesbian playwright living and writing in rural North Carolina. Despite or because of this, my work has been performed around the country and a teeny bit in Germany--but I did win an award there, so I'm claiming it.*