

Crisis of Character

by

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## Crisis of Character

### Synopsis:

A student, desperate for a higher grade, meets with her professor. While he thinks he's in control, the tables are completely turned on him.

### Cast:

LAURENCE – Male, 38, professor, philanderer,

DIANA 1 – Female, 30, graduate student, defiant, righteous

DIANA 2 – Female, 30, graduate student, sexy, confident

SAM – Male, 58, playwright

### Setting:

Laurence's office, an afternoon in May. Laurence's desk should be directly facing the audience. The two halves of the stage should be near mirror images of each other. For the first part of the play, the lights will shift so that the half in which the action is taking place is brighter than the other half.

### Playwright Biography:

Scott Lummer is an award-winning playwright and mediocre actor. Seven of his plays have been featured in 16 professional productions nationwide: Starbucks on Broadway, Cherry, The Saint, Love Her Madly, Auction Day, A Service Tail, and Miss Understanding. His play, "2045," was selected to be presented at the 2017 Inge Festival, and will premier this November. He has written nine other short plays and two full length plays.

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Play opens with Laurence sitting at his desk. Knock on the door. Laurence rubs his hand through his hair to make sure it's in place. Left half of stage is dim.

LAURENCE

Come in.

DIANA 1

Enters, stage right. Her demeanor is very professional  
Professor Ellis, is this still a good time?

LAURENCE

1:30 right on the dot. And I've told you to call me Laurence.

DIANA 1

I need to talk to you about the grade on my project.

LAURENCE

As I recall, you got a ... 78 ... no ... 76, right?

DIANA 1

I worked harder on this project than anything in all of my classes.

LAURENCE

Diana, effort only gets you so far in an elite graduate program. You didn't integrate any of the three major themes of the class into your paper.

DIANA 1

But you don't understand. I got a C last semester – a second C causes me to lose my scholarship, and I'd have to drop out of the program.

LAURENCE

I'm sorry about that, but the grade's a fair assessment. My notes on your paper explained my reasoning.

DIANA 1

(Reaches into bag, searching for paper).

I couldn't understand exactly what you meant. Where's the paper? I was just looking at it. I must have left it in the waiting area. I'll be right back.

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Diana 1 exits stage right. Lawrence checks his hair. Lights stage right dim as lights stage left brighten. Diana 2 enters stage left holding the paper in her hand. She's dressed identically to Diana 1, except wearing her clothes sexier (such as one extra button on her blouse open). She says her lines more sultry and flirty. She leans over the desk.

DIANA 2

It was right where I left it. I'm sorry Laurence, but I can't read your writing.

Opens paper to middle. Brushes against Lawrence's arm.

LAURENCE

Picks up paper

It says "relate this paragraph to one of four main principals of interaction." Diana – we've talked in class many times of the importance of full thought development. Never leave anything to the reader's imagination.

DIANA 2

I try to be as direct as possible. I really thought I was clear.

LAURENCE

I'm sorry – you weren't.

Hands paper to Diana.

DIANA 2

I can't afford a C. Is there any extra credit I can do to increase my grade?

LAURENCE

I'm not sure that would be fair to the other students.

DIANA 2

Not sure? So there's a possibility?

LAURENCE

Well -

DIANA 2

Excessively sultry

Now who's not being precisely clear? I need to try to raise my grade.

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Lights shift – stage left dims and stage right brightens. Diana 2 turns away from audience. Diana 1 enters.

DIANA 1

Argumentative

Now who's not being precisely clear? I need to try to raise my grade.

LAURENCE

I guess we can try think generatively.

DIANA 1

Such as?

LAURENCE

Let's both think on it a bit. How about we discuss this later, say ... tonight.

DIANA 1

And where would this discussion be?

LAURENCE

How about Julio's – let's say 7:00?

DIANA 1

Won't your wife miss you for dinner?

LAURENCE

She's on a sales trip – won't be back till Thursday.

Lights brighten on stage left to equal stage right. Diana 2 turns in. Simultaneously

DIANA 1 (sarcastically)

Oh really?

DIANA 2 (seductively)

Oh really?

Lights dim on stage right. Diana 1 turns out.

LAURENCE

So are we on for a spirited discussion?

DIANA 2

I guess I have no choice in the matter.

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LAURENCE

We always have choices. You're the one asking for extra consideration.

DIANA 2

True ... I am. So is there anything I should bring?

LAURENCE

Like what?

Lights up on both sides. Diana 1 turns in. Simultaneously

DIANA 1 (sarcastically)

You're the one who's generative.

DIANA 2 (seductively)

You're the one who's generative.

The Dianas look at each other crossly.

LAURENCE

Don't bring anything except an open mind.

DIANA 1

I can do that.

Crosses towards right exit

LAURENCE

7:00 then?

DIANA 2

7:00

Crosses towards left exit. Looks at Lawrence, and mimics a kiss.

DIANA 1

That's it!

Crosses in front of Lawrence and throws the paper at Diana 2.

DIANA 2

What the hell's your problem?

DIANA 1

I don't have a problem. YOUR problem is a libido on steroids.

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DIANA 2

I'm playing the part the way it's written.

DIANA 1

If the venue was Cinemax After Dark, yeah.

DIANA 2

There's nothing wrong with a woman being sexy. (mocks holding a cell phone against her ear). It's the 1950s calling – they want their attitude back.

DIANA 1

If you'd read the rest of the script – you do know how to read, don't you – you'd know it ends by Diana trapping Laurence. She isn't a sexual victim. She reveals him for the fool he is.

LAURENCE

Hey, wait a minute --

DIANA 2

But it doesn't say what actually happens before she springs her trap. She might have sex with him – he IS kind of cute. And there's nothing wrong with being playful in this situation.

DIANA 1

That's a weak interpretation. I was in the performance last year at the Oakland Playhouse. The critics loved my character – they called me a true heroine.

DIANA 2

The actress performing me won an award for MY character.

DIANA 1

Oh? Where was that?

DIANA 2

Pasadena.

DIANA 1

Southern California. Figures.

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LAURENCE

Puts a dab of cologne on his neck  
Can we just move to the scene at my house? I want to –

DIANA 1

Be quiet, Laurence!

DIANA 2

I know we could have some great fun together sweetie, but we have to resolve this character issue.

LAURENCE

Looking at Diana 2  
Personally, I really like your version.

DIANA 1

Typical man. And no doubt you had a male director as well.

DIANA 2

Yeah. He's good friends with the playwright.

DIANA 1

Of course!

DIANA 2

What?

DIANA 1

Let's ask the playwright. You! Get over here.  
Crosses to audience to Sam and pulls him on to the stage.  
He's holding a script.

SAM

We've seemed to have deviated from the script. I'm all for a little improvisation in the rehearsal process, but we're in front of an audience –

DIANA 1

Rips script from Sam's hand  
Before we go on with the play, we need to get your character definition.

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SAM

Ummmm, all you need to know should be in the lines.

DIANA 2

But did you intend her to be played like she's eternally constipated, or as a passionate, attractive, mature woman?

DIANA 1

You mean a shallow, oversexed –

SAM

Crosses to Lawrence

My main thought was she's cleverer than we initially suspect. See, this really is Lawrence's story – the fight against his baser inner demons. How men battle between current social mores and millennia of genetic programming.

DIANA 1

It's always about the man. We need more women playwrights.

LAWRENCE

I think I better get to that faculty meeting.

Start's to exit stage right, then stage left, then runs out through a different exit (perhaps through the audience)

DIANA 2

You had to have more specifics in mind for Diana. Something about her led Lawrence to invite her to dinner.

DIANA 1

It's not about her – it's about power. The idea of making a woman do something she wouldn't normally do because of his position.

SAM

You're both right. But she is very attractive.

DIANA 2

Crosses to Sam, touches his arm.

Thank you. (pause) I know there's a big age difference, but you're pretty hot yourself.

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SAM

Put's his arm around Diana 2

You think so? I think there's a part of you I'd like to explore. Maybe we can –

DIANA 1

Gross! You created her. It's incestual. (beat) Isn't the ending more believable if Diana isn't coming on to him?

SAM

Theater is organic. It's a symbiotic relationship between writer, director, and actor. For the process to flow optimally, each participant should not stray too far from the periphery of their frontier.

DIANA 2

Huh? Just tell us who's right.

SAM

Neither. And both. Look at Kate's final speech in the Taming of the Shrew. There are at least two interpretations that give completely different meanings to the end. Either way, it's a great play.

DIANA 1

Shakespeare? We're a bit grand with our comparisons, aren't we?

SAM

I'm just saying –

DIANA 2

Why can't Diana have more internal conflict of which direction she wants to go?

DIANA 1

Don't think too much – you might get a headache. (beat) Although, if there was an early scene in which she talks to a friend about her situation –

DIANA 2

Maybe her sister.

DIANA 1

That's not bad – a family member would create more of a bond. I always wished I had a sister.

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DIANA 2

Me too. Someone to share my deepest insecurities with. (beat) I was also thinking we could add a scene when she first sees her grade on line – she takes her computer and throws it --

SAM

Whoa! Character interpretation is a good point for discussion, but the words are MY words. You can't change them – let alone add an entire scene.

DIANA 2

During the audience talk back in Pasadena, didn't you say the most important part of a play is character?

SAM

Yeah.

DIANA 1

Well we're the character, and we're in charge. So shut the fuck up!

SAM

Plot's important too.

DIANA 2

Plot? Teacher seducing student? Hardly original.

DIANA 1

Good thing you're so obscure. If Mamet caught wind of this play, he'd sue your ass.

Diana 2 crosses to Diana 1 and high fives her

SAM

I'm exploring the inner conflict of a man confronted by –

DIANA 1

That's crap! You wrote this because you're trying to get a meeting with HBO about a series.

DIANA 2

You're just using us. If you don't stop interfering, we're going to contact all your female characters, and they'll never cooperate with you again.

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DIANA 1

From now on, you'll be stuck writing dramas about father-son relationships.

SAM

What am I supposed to do?

DIANA 2

Starts writing on script in her hand

Let me give you some direction. Sam ... exits ... with ... look ... of ... dejection

Sam begins to cross back to his seat

DIANA 1

You're not just going to sit and watch us, although that is kinda hot. Get out of here! We'll let you know when we're done.

Sam uses same exit as Lawrence

DIANA 2

Let's create a backstory for Diana. Humble beginnings. Unlucky breaks.

DIANA 1

Great. How about before going to college she supported herself as a strip – (Diana 2 looks disappointed at her). O.K. An administrative assistant.

DIANA 2

And her boss gives her a grant – she gets a scholarship as long as she maintains her grades –

DIANA 1

Much better.

They look at each other, cross to each other, and shake hands.

END OF PLAY