

POOR PLAYERS

A supernatural evening's entertainment

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You're an actor — a struggling one. You see an ad seeking talent "for future consideration." You submit your résumé. You hear nothing. You forget about it. But then — sometime later — you get a call, summoning you to an out-of-the-way theatre, at a rather inconvenient time, for a rather peculiar audition.

Poor Players is a fantastical black comedy that revels in all that is eerie about *Macbeth*. Instead of witches, the equivocating fiends are numinous forces beguiling a pair of actors at an audition. The audition is for *Macbeth* and the actors, Oliver Ashe and Sean McBride, are here for the title role.

Oliver and Sean are initially unaware that fellow auditioning actors Peter, Charles, and Todd are not quite what they seem, but once they grasp the uncanny nature of their predicament they see no choice but to get into the spirit of an increasingly phantasmagoric evening.

All this sleight of hand is presided over with professional aplomb by the director, Alfie Hackett. At this particular audition Alfie decides the best way to find his Macbeth is to have his actors put aside any prepared soliloquies and improvise. He wants them to tell ghost stories....

Poor Players traffics in the tropes of supernatural horror to tell a very human cautionary tale on the hazards of persistence. An evening of illusion and delusion, magic and mystery, and just a drop of Grand Guignol, it's a mordant parlor game riff on Macbeth's lament for an actor that struts and frets his hour upon the stage. Our poor players get about an hour and forty-five minutes, with no intermission.

There are seven roles. Setting and characters are contemporary.

The piece plays in real time, in one setting, and in one act. It invites a spare and fluid production, sculpted by light and steeped in obscuring shadow.

A brief synopsis of the story with spoilers can be found at the end of the script.

A list of characters follows on the next page.

Characters

OLIVER ASHE, *Forties*

For an actor looking for a job, his manner is oddly reticent, even apologetic. Something's off.

SEAN McBRIDE, *Forties*

Self-regarding, seductive, and still working the room. All that bravado is rather touching.

CHARLES CORTLAND, *Forties*

British, or so we assume. A decent chap who regrets some unfortunate choices.

PETER GRAINGER, *Thirties*

Affable, attractive. A genuinely nice guy with little ambition save for a good time.

TODD FITCH, *Twenties*

Raucous, rude. This callow fellow appears to be at the wrong audition.

ALFIE HACKETT, *Fifties*

His smooth command of the proceedings just barely obscures his weariness with it all.

PORTER, *Twenties*

We can't tell if the stage manager is a boyish young woman or an effeminate young man.

The empty stage of a theatre

The dark night of the week

**“He’s as blind as he can be,
Just sees what he wants to see,
Nowhere man, can you see me at all?”**

— John Lennon

Poor Players

(Darkness.

We hear, floating in the air, a call being placed — a ringing signal awaiting connection.

A title appears:

He that's coming must be provided for.

The title fades away as a voice mail responds to the ringing signal.)

VOICE MAIL on phone

“You have reached the voice mail of —”

SEAN’S VOICE on phone

Sean McBride. [Beep.]

FEMALE VOICE on phone

Mr. McBride. Hi. This is Mickey, from the Hackett office? I really apologize for the late notice but we would so appreciate it if you could come in for an audition that we’re holding — well, that we’re holding tonight. I understand this is very lax on our part, calling so late, but we just came across your résumé and we’re very interested in seeing you for our new *Macbeth*.

(Far offstage: three knocks — measured, ominous.

A single ghost light fades up on a dark and empty stage.

Except — what we think is empty is not. As our eyes adjust to the dim glow of the ghost light, we realize that three men are gathered around it: PETER, TODD, and CHARLES.

The offstage knocking persists — this time naturalistically. Someone really wants in.
A voice shouts from the opposite wings.)

PORTRER’S VOICE

All right! All right! I’m coming.

(A flashlight beam shoots from the wings and a figure enters — barely visible but for the flashlight. This is PORTER, crossing upstage and heading for the opposite wings.)

TODD

Excuse me?! Lights?!

PORTRER

I’m on it!

(Shouts to the offstage knocker.)

OK! I hear you! ... I hear you.

(Porter has exited.)

TODD

On it. Bullshit, on it.

CHARLES

How long has it been?

PETER

About an hour.

TODD

This is so fucked.

CHARLES

Why do they always make us wait?

PETER

Just another way to torture actors.

TODD

Fucked!

CHARLES

Please. Don't start.

PETER

Really, man. It is what it is.

TODD

Yeah. Fucked.

PETER

Just sayin'.

(An offstage drum roll gets their attention.)

Shall we get on with it?

CHARLES

If we must.

TODD

Whatever.

(Drum roll stops. PORTER enters, guiding OLIVER on by flashlight.)

PORTER

Just hang here a while, Mr. Ashe, OK? We're having an issue with the lights.

TODD

Issue my ass.

PORTER

Mr. Fitch? I'm on it. The fuses in this place are from hell. I'll get us lights. Promise.

PETER

That'll be great. Thanks.

PORTER

(Exiting.) Everyone chill for just a tiny bit longer, please. Thank you so very much.

TODD

Just do it.

CHARLES

And perhaps some chairs?

(Porter has exited.)

TODD

Asshole.

PETER

He's doing the best he can.

TODD

Which sucks.

CHARLES

I wonder. Might it be possible to limit the profanity to every other utterance?

(Todd is about to respond, but —)

OLIVER

Is this —?

(He hesitates — even though he now has the others' complete attention.)

Are you guys ... Are you here for *Macbeth*?

PETER

Yes. Yes we are.

OLIVER

How long have you been waiting?

PETER

A bit.

CHARLES

No excuse, you know. Making us wait? Not at all professional.

TODD

That's the fucking least of it.

(Sound of a light board switch. A flash of light on stage.

We hear PORTER from the light booth.)

PORTER'S VOICE

Anything?

PETER, CHARLES, and TODD

No!

PORTER'S VOICE

Bear with me. This light board's a trip.

TODD

Fuck this. I'm calling my agent.

PETER

No —

CHARLES

I don't think that's —

TODD

Whatever. (*On his phone.*) Hello? ... Hello? ... Shit! Why do these fucking things never work?!

CHARLES

The question is why do you keep asking.

TODD

Oh. You are so very witty.

(*The sound of a light board switch, a brief flash of light. To Oliver:*)

What about yours?

OLIVER

My —?

TODD

Your *phone*?

OLIVER

I don't have a phone.

TODD

You don't?

OLIVER

No.

TODD

Really?

OLIVER

Yes.

TODD

That's just weird.

(*Sound of a light board. The stage is illuminated.*)

PETER, CHARLES, and TODD

Yes!

(*Lights go out.*)

No!

PORTER'S VOICE

Sorry.

(*Oliver has remained where Porter deposited him, a distance from the others. He regards the three men gathered round the ghost light. They regard him.*)

(*A brief flash of light on stage.*)

PORTER'S VOICE

Damnit!

CHARLES

I'm afraid he may not know what he's doing.

TODD

No shit.

(*Pause.*)

OLIVER

I think he's a she.

CHARLES

Beg pardon?

OLIVER

The stage manager. You keep saying "he." She's a woman.

TODD

What?

CHARLES

No.

PETER

Hey. Give the man a break. It's not like you can see very clearly in here.

(Peter draws closer to the ghost light:)

PETER

Lucky we have this old thing ... lending a little substance to the shadows.

CHARLES

For a while, at least ...

(Draws closer to the ghost light.)

But what seems corporeal will soon melt like breath into the wind.

TODD

Yeah. Whatever.

(Todd joins Peter and Charles closer to the ghost light.

The three stare into the light and inhale deeply — as if taking in a kind of oxygen.

As they do this, the light bulb appears to glow just a bit brighter. Oliver silently observes.)

PORTRER'S VOICE

OK. OK. I think I have it. Just one more second...

(Oliver extracts a copy of *Macbeth* from his backpack and starts reading it — in the dark.)

CHARLES

For your edification, Todd, that was a bit from the play. Paraphrased, of course.

TODD

What was?

CHARLES

“Like breath into the wind.” This fellow Shakespeare wrote it. Perhaps you’ve heard of him?

TODD

Yeah. And I also heard that you’re an —

PETER

(To Oliver.) You can’t possibly see what you’re reading.

OLIVER

What?

CHARLES

No need to go blind.

OLIVER

Oh ... no. It’s fine.

TODD

Dude. Room for one more.

OLIVER

Well. Thanks.

(Oliver joins the others around the ghost light. They stand silent for an awkward moment.)

PETER

This is pretty ridiculous, isn't it?

CHARLES

Indeed.

TODD

Please.

OLIVER

And here I was worried I was late.

CHARLES

Yes.

PETER

No.

OLIVER

I gave myself plenty of time, but — Did anyone else have trouble finding this place?

PETER

Oh, yeah.

CHARLES

Not really.

TODD

Don't ask.

OLIVER

I really thought I was late. But — they haven't even started. Have they?

CHARLES

Insulting, isn't it?

(A loud pop from the light board.)

PORTER'S VOICE

Whoa! ... OK. I have it. I definitely have it...

PETER

Well. I say we make the most of an awkward situation.

CHARLES

What do you suggest?

PETER

We have time to kill. Let's kill it constructively.

CHARLES

Constructive killing. Rather oxymoronic, that.

PETER

You know what I mean. (*To Oliver.*) What are you offering?

OLIVER

Offering?

PETER

You doing a monologue, soliloquy?

OLIVER

Oh. Yes. I am.

PETER

Right. (*To Charles and Todd.*) And, of course ...

CHARLES

| Yes.

TODD

| Whatever.

PETER

So, let's run lines. Rehearse.

CHARLES

To "kill time."

PETER

Why not? It'll be a bonding experience. (*To Oliver.*) You doing something from the play?

OLIVER

I guess.

CHARLES

You guess.

OLIVER

No. I am. Yes. I am.

PETER

OK. What?

OLIVER

Well, I thought I would wait and see. I know everything by heart, so ... I thought I'd wait and see.

CHARLES

Ah. You've done the role.

OLIVER

Oh. No.

CHARLES

Just an eager beaver, then. An apt pupil.

OLIVER

I'm *not* a pupil.

CHARLES

Beg pardon. No offense meant.

OLIVER

No. Sorry. No. None taken.

CHARLES

I meant to say you're quite the Shakespearean.

PETER

You really know the role by heart?

OLIVER

Well... yes. It's —

PETER

Then you have to go first. Give me your script.

OLIVER

Oh. I don't think —

PETER

Come on. Give it to me.

CHARLES

Don't put the poor fellow on the spot.

PETER

What spot? It'll help us focus. Come on.

OLIVER

I don't know...

TODD

For fuck's sake. *Go on.* There's nothing else to do.

OLIVER

Well...

(Oliver hands Peter his script.)

PETER

Great. Now — *(Flips through the pages of Oliver's script.)* Pick one.

OLIVER

Pick one?

PETER

Yeah. Let's hear what you've got. (*Flips through pages.*) Say when.

OLIVER

All right. When. Stop.

(*Peter stops flipping the pages and looks where he stopped in the script.*)

PETER

Aha.

OLIVER

"Aha" what? Which one?

PETER

Act Three, Scene Two ...?

OLIVER

Ah. "Come seeling night."

CHARLES

Well done. The man knows his stuff.

PETER

He does indeed. Well done, sir.

OLIVER

Thanks. I —

PETER

Well then: Proceed.

OLIVER

Really?

PETER

Yeah.

CHARLES

Please.

TODD

Do it.

OLIVER

Well... If you think it will help.

(*Beat.*)

Come seeling night.

(*He recites the lines, without much affect — at first.*)

OLIVER

Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale.

(*Three knocks, far offstage. Todd calls out to Porter.*)

TODD

Door!

CHARLES

Shh!

PETER

Go on.

(*Oliver continues — with a bit more intensity.*)

OLIVER

Light thickens, and the crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood.
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.

(*Knocks, off. Peter, Todd, and Charles enthusiastically join in — with their own recitation.*)

PETER

Now, o'er the one-half world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtained sleep.

TODD

Witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's of rings ...

CHARLES

And withered murder
Alarmed by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch ...

PETER

Thus with his stealthy pace...

PETER and TODD

With Tarquin's ravishing strides ...

PETER, TODD, and CHARLES

Towards his design ...

(They pause — waiting for Oliver to join in. He does.)

PETER, TODD, CHARLES, and OLIVER

Moves like a ghost.

(The work lights bump on and stay on — brightening the stage considerably.
Peter, Charles, and Todd are visibly relieved.)

PORTER'S VOICE

Now?

PETER, TODD, CHARLES, and OLIVER

Yes!

PORTER'S VOICE

OK. I'll get you some chairs.

(Offstage knocks continue — random, insistent. Peter, Charles, and Todd gravitate to the brighter areas of the stage, which is empty save for the ghost light and the four men.

They're an attractive, sturdy lot; all viable Macbeth material [well, perhaps not Todd]. What sets Oliver apart from the others — besides his discomfort — is that he's dressed in a rather ill-fitting suit, complete with tie, as if interviewing at a bank.

This murky place has an air of antiquity and decay. The stage itself bears the evidence of countless performances — many an actor has trod these scuffed and scarred boards. The observant may also notice the floor bears the faintest evidence of other markings, akin to the residue on a recently erased chalkboard. Markings of a more peculiar nature.

Peter hands Oliver his "Macbeth" script.)

PETER

No need to be nervous. It's just an audition.

CHARLES

Means nothing.

TODD

Nothing.

PETER

You'll be fine. Just loosen up a bit. First step: Lose the tie.

OLIVER

You... you think?

TODD

| Oh, yeah.

CHARLES

| Absolutely.

PETER

Sure. The guy's a soldier. Not an accountant.

OLIVER

Yes. Of course. You're right.

(Oliver removes his tie and pockets it.)

PETER

Much better.

OLIVER

Right. Thanks. Uh ... ?

PETER

Peter.

TODD

Todd.

CHARLES

Charles.

OLIVER

Oliver.

(Knocks, off. PORTER enters with a few chairs. We really can't tell if Porter is male or female.)

PORTER

Sorry. That board is totally medieval.

CHARLES

I'll take one of those.

PETER

Somebody wants in rather badly.

CHARLES

Perhaps our late director?

PORTER

Or our missing actor. Amuse yourselves for just a little longer, gents. *(Knocks, off.)* Coming!

(Porter has exited.)

TODD

Not a girl, dude.

CHARLES

Oh, let him believe what he wants to believe.

(Peter has crossed to a chair and picked up a notepad Porter left there.)

PETER

Maybe this will provide a clue.

OLIVER

What is it?

PETER

He/she left it on the chair. Shall we pry? (*Reads from the notepad.*) “Scene One. The witches discuss their—” Oh. Just a synopsis for a program or something.

CHARLES

As if they don’t know the story by now.

TODD

Some people don’t.

CHARLES

Well, we needn’t coddle them.

PETER

Sometimes a little coddling is just what’s called for. Right, Ollie?

OLIVER

What?

PETER

You just asked for a hand. You’ve got it.