

The Theatre Chair

A short one act play

By Val Stulman

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

LUKE WADDELL, 48, newly minted Chair of the Theatre Department at a respected Catholic liberal arts university. He's a costume designer by trade.

VICTORIA BARKWORTH'S GHOST, 45 ish, a classic theatre actress circa 1955, glamorous, authoritative, imperious. She used to run this college theatre department.

SETTING

LUKE'S NEW OFFICE -- very old and has been empty for awhile, with very old furniture, some broken and old photos. It used to be Victoria Barkworth's office.

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A LARGE COLLEGE OFFICE

Bits of SONGS from old and new musicals PLAY THROUGH SPEAKERS -- *Come From Away, Fiddler, 1776, Hamilton, Pippin, Wicked.*

PROFESSOR LUKE WADDELL, 48, enters a large professor's office, HUMMING and SINGING from the song *Popular*, from the musical, *Wicked*.

LUKE
(sings softly)

Popular! You're gonna be popular!
I'll teach you the proper poise

He stares at an old desk, small lamp swivel chair, a small worn couch, and a bunch of dust bunnies.

Boxes are stacked on the floor.

Luke's a big guy, smart as hell, but confused at the moment. He's dressed casually, with a bit of panache, wears a vintage scarf around his neck.

Papers, and what may be photos are scattered across the desk and couch. Luke picks up a large framed photo.

LUKE
(still singing)

When you talk to boys
Little ways to flirt and flounce
Ooh!

Music FADES AWAY.

LUKE

(looks around, exclaims)

This office is HUGE. Oh, and look --

He picks up a large framed PHOTO.

Maybe the audience can tell, maybe they can't -
that it is cracked and it is of **VICTORIA**
BARKWORTH, in a black cocktail dress,

LUKE

(to photo)

-- Victoria, Victoria -- Vic---toria. You were one glam lady back in the day. You know, we're expanding, building a new center, renovating the theatre. You'd be so proud. And, your office is gonna be more than storage again. Has to be. But, it's not gonna house some young silly T.A.s, It's mine. Proud to follow in your footsteps. Oh Vic, I promise I will live up to you as the new department chair -- accomplish incredible things with students with the department. We'll do you proud!

(looks around again)

I love this space. It's soooo damn big.

He sits in the swivel chair, but it tips over, clearly broken. He jumps up just in time.

LUKE

S'okay. I'll get a new one.

He looks through more PHOTOS in an album nearby or on an old broken coffee table.

LUKE

Holy... look at this and this and look at you in an evening gown. Oh Vick, I'll have to find a place for these, maybe a wall downstairs. I love 'em! Really love them! But --

(looks around)

-- I'm gonna have to update.

As soon as he **says the word UPDATE**, there's a **LOUD BANG**. He jumps, scans the room, but there's nothing that would make **THAT BANG**.

LUKESS

What the --

More LOUD BANGING. A HOWL. The eerie SOUND OF WIND. A ghostly WHINE. Luke crosses to a window, peers out, walks around the stage, looking up for a hole in the ceiling.

LUKE

Hello?! Hello!! What the?!

He EXITS OFF STAGE AS SOUNDS of wind, thunder, rain and howling EXPLODE EVEN LOUDER.

As soon as LUKE EXITS, COLORS FLASH ON STAGE, a STROBE goes off. Maybe there's even smoke... and GLITTER FALLS from the rafters.

LUKE O.S.

Hello?! Anyone there?!

VICTORIA BARKWORTH'S GHOST ENTERS, (If there's a budget, she descends from the rafters or rises on a platform from below.)

Victoria is majestic in a black 1960 cocktail dress from the cracked framed picture. She wears black heels, her hair is done in a 1960 coiffure and she wears a little tiara, Audrey Hepburn style.

Victoria sits on the couch, flicks a dust bunny away with disgust.

LUKE re-enters. When he SEES Victoria on the couch, LUKE SHRIEKS, JUMPS, falls backwards, maybe on his tush.

LUKE

Holy sh... how the hell... what the... who in the holy sh--

VICTORIA

(casually)

It's okay, you can say shit. Profanity doesn't affect my spirit.

LUKE

Who THE HELL ARE YOU and HOW THE HELL DID -- did you get in here?! And why do you look like the picture of --

VICTORIA

-- Victoria?!

Victoria CLICKS HER FINGERS.

MUSIC PLAYS, SHE SINGS WITH IT. Maybe even a MICROPHONE DROPSs from the rafters.

The SONG IS from *Pippin's, Magic to Do*.

VICTORIA

(sings)

We got magic to do just for you.

We got miracle plays to play.

We got parts to perform, hearts to warm, kings and things to take by storm, As we go along our way...

LUKE

(calming a little)

Pippin, one of my all time faves, a classic, and you snuck in here, dressed in that... fabulous cocktail dress!

VICTORIA

Thank you.

LUKE

But, where did you get it.

VICTORIA

I was buried in it.

LUKE LAUGHS. His LAUGH gets louder and more hysterical until he crosses to her and touches her.

LUKE

I can touch you, so no ghost.

VICTORIA

Yes, ghost.

LUKE

Ghost?

VICTORIA

Ghost!

(Ghost SOUNDS)

LUKE

(not listening)

I repeat, who are you?! And, how the hell did you get in?! And, how did you manage to look like the spitting image of --

She YANKS his arm so hard, he's pulled up to her,
stands straight, stares down at her.

VICTORIA

(echo-ey)

-- Victoria Barksworth. I am what is known as an interactive personality ghost, and I have chosen to acknowledge you, a living being. It may seem like you're touching me, but really, it is my ghost... the ghost of Victoria Barksworth.

(authoritatively)

Now, let us move on! Think, Professor Waddell. Think. And, when you're done thinking, may I suggest that you clean in here.

LUKE

(thinks)

Am I dead?

VICTORIA

Now, why is that the first thing everyone asks? Everyone. No. Not dead. But, I am.

Luke jumps, steps back, her spell has broken.

LUKE

Okay, okay, this is a practical joke! John, the T.D. is playing a practical joke since I just agreed to move in here. He said it was haunted!

VICTORIA

He was right, but you didn't believe him. Too big for your britches, too full of yourself, so I will have to prove it.

Victoria's VOICE BOOMS THROUGH THE
THEATRE ON STAGE, ON SPEAKER, ON
MICROPHONE, EVERYWHERE.

VICTORIA

(an echoing, booming voice)

I AM VICTORIA BARKWORTH'S GHOST. HERE. NOW. YOU MUST ACCEPT
ME, OR YOU WILL NOT LAST!

LIGHTS FLICKER. COLORS FLASH. The
STROBE goes off.

VICTORIA

DO YOU BELIEVE ME?!

Luke takes it in, almost persuaded. He's now an
obedient student.

LUKE

Yes, Miss Barkworth.

VICTORIA

(echoing, booming)

LOOK AROUND LUKE. WHERE IS MY VOICE COMING FROM. WHERE ARE
THE COLORED LIGHTS AND STROBE COMING FROM?

LUKE

(yelps, gobsmacked)

I -- I --

The LIGHTS STOP FLASHING, THE STROBE
CUTS OFF and Victoria's VOICE returns to
normal.

VICTORIA

Exactly. From now on, you will always call me Professor Barkworth, never Victoria or
Vick. I will call you Professor Waddell. I like formality.

LUKE

Formality.

VICTORIA

Yes. Now, take a few deep breaths and tell me Professor Waddell, that music you were singing when you came in, what was it from?

He takes deep breaths, clearly hyperventilating.

LUKE

You don't -- of course you don't. When did you die?

VICTORIA

Nineteen ninety seven.

LUKE

And that's why this has been kept as storage -- because you --

VICTORIA

-- Got rid of anybody who wanted to move into my office if they weren't worthy and the two that tried weren't worthy.

(girlish giggle)

I even got one to almost jump out your window.

LUKE

Yeah, heard about that. It was the theatre history prof who quit right after she got tenure.

VICTORIA

Correct. Now tell me about this musical.

LUKE

(deep breath)

It's from *Wicked*, the story of Elphaba, the future Wicked Witch of the West from the Wizard of Oz, who has gotten a bum rap, I mean a bad reputation. The story presents Elphaba in a sympathetic and empathetic manner. It's a re-invention of the original.

VICTORIA

Very interesting. Sing it again, please?

LUKE

(nervous)

I don't know all of it. It's called *Popular*. The good witch is friends with Elphaba and wants to help her --

VICTORIA

-- I love it! Sing, please.

LUKE

(sings hesitantly)

Popular! You're gonna be popular!

I'll teach you the proper poise

When you talk to boys

Little ways to flirt and flounce

(Flounces with more confidence)

Ooh!

I'll show you what shoes to wear!

How to fix your hair!

Everything that really counts to be

....Popular!

VICTORIA

Keep going.

LUKE

I'm sorry, I don't know the rest. Please don't throw me out the window, I can play it for you when I get my computer in here. And also, they've made a movie of it.

VICTORIA

Ah computers, I know about those. Will yours take up half the room?

LUKE

Oh, no. They're much smaller now. In fact my phone is even a computer, but the music won't sound that great on it.

He pulls out his phone, she crosses looks at it.

VICTORIA

No wire.

LUKE

Nope.

He shows her a few apps and pictures on the phone.

VICTORIA

It is magic! Oh, is that me?

LUKE

Yes there is a terrific picture of you downstairs.

VICTORIA

I have a good feeling about you, Professor Waddell.

(Sings *Aquarius* from *Hair*)

When the Moon is in the Seventh House. And Jupiter aligns with Mars, Then peace will guide the planets And love will steer the stars...

LUKE joins in. They SING together.

LUKE

(sings with her)

This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius... age of Aquarius. Aquariuuuuus.

(speaks)

Hair, another classic which I love.

VICTORIA

Ahhh...

(sings from *Momma Hey Momma* from
1776.)

Momma, hey momma, come looking for me. I'm here in the meadow by the read maple tree.

Luke INTERRUPTS WITH *Molasses to Rum* from
1776.

LUKE

(sings)

Molasses to rum to slaves, oh what a beautiful war --

VICTORIA

(cuts him off)

--You know *1776*?

LUKE

Yes. I bet you haven't heard this.

(sings)

I'm not throwing away my shot. I'm not throwing away my shot. I'm just like my country. I'm young scrappy and hungry and I'm not throwing away my shot...

VICTORIA

What is it?

LUKE

A musical about Alexander Hamilton... called *Hamilton*.

VICTORIA

Alexander Hamilton? But, he was a minor player.

LUKE

Not anymore. The show was the biggest hit in years. It's a modern classic. They made a TV video of it. I'll show it to you too.

VICTORIA

On your computer.

LUKE

I'm getting a big screen.

VICTORIA

(ecstatic)

Oooh.

Victoria CLAPS her hands, STAMPS her feet, starts to move in a circle around Luke. MUSIC ERUPTS FROM SPEAKERS. It's the opening to *Fiddler on the Roof, Tradition*.

VICTORIA

(sings)

Tradition.

LUKE

(sings back)

Tradition.

They SING together. Circling each other or they're with each other, part dancing, part challenging.

VICTORIA AND LUKE

(SING together)

TRADITION!

(SING in harmony together)

Tradition... Tradition... Tradition...

Luke stops.

LUKE

I'm not gonna sing the girls part, but yes Professor Barkworth, that's a classic too.

VICTORIA

Alright. Good. I must tell you, the second person who tried to move in here, a disgusting man came in to this office, yelling and moving furniture out as quickly as he could, discarding my very best photos, testing putrid paint colors on the wall -- mustard yellow, dung brown, faded salmon. I literally threw the chair over while he was in it.

(girlish giggle)

He went straight to the floor, yelling, but I chased him out with the chair which, of course, seemed to move by itself. And as he crawled out with what I believe was a sprained ankle, I howled, screeched and called out his name while colored lights flashed.

LUKE

(deadpan)

Thus, the storage closet that barely stores anything.

VICTORIA

Exactly, Professor Waddell, and while I understand that technology has advanced, you've certainly been clear to explain that, but --

(booming voice through speakers)

THE THEATUH IS STILL THE THEATUH!

(normal)

Yes, there are new plays, but the classics must be TAUGHT, PRESERVED, RESPECTED. And, furthermore, students must be taught all forms of acting styles not just Marlon's, disgusting, intense - feel, feel, feel. All he had to do was pull on a tight girdle and that would've made him FEEL all he needed to FEEL.

LUKE

Marlon? As in Brando?

VICTORIA

What do you think?

Luke takes a walk around the office, taking more deep breaths, then --

LUKE

Did you like him in Streetcar?

VICTORIA

Some of it, when he wasn't screaming or moaning.

LUKE

But students need to learn the Magic If, Given Circumstances, and Objectives

VICTORIA

Of course, but a little Konstantin S. goes a long way. Most important are the classics! That's what you must teach Antigone, Commedia D'elle Arte and Emperor Jones, even Street Scene!

The following back and forth gets progressively faster and louder.

LUKE

What?

VICTORIA

(sarcastic)

Street Scenes by Elmer Rice. You've heard of it, haven't you?

LUKE

Yes, right along with Lysistrata --

VICTORIA

-- Not my favorite.

LUKE

-- The Three Sisters, King Lear --

VICTORIA

-- Twelfth Night, Doctor Faustus, The Country Wife...

LUKE

Our Town --

VICTORIA

Meh!

LUKE

And new plays... Come From Away, August Osage County, Noises Off, The Laramie Project... Proof!

VICTORIA

(YELLS, ECHOES!)

Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Crucible, Death of a Salesman, Picnic, Look Back in Anger, Zoo Story!!!!

LUKE

I actually agree that the classics must be taught, but there are important newer plays. Maybe we could compromise...

VICTORIA

Compromise?

LUKE

Like adults. Dead or alive... Adults.

We'll go with some of yours, and I'll bring you some of mine to read or we can even watch the videos together. I actually agree that the classics must be taught. Just not all the time.

Victoria ponders this.

VICTORIA

A compromise?

LUKE

Why not? We academics do need to work together.

VICTORIA

Well... yes...

LUKE

Okay, then.

VICTORIA

Yes... maybe... Okay.

They study each other like two lions who may or may not go on the attack...

LUKE

Is it safe to sit on the couch, now?

VICTORIA

If you must, but it needs to be cleaned and re-covered with a nice tapestry, I think.

He sits, still uncomfortable, but no longer afraid.

LUKE

Agreed. What colors do you like?

VICTORIA

Rich theatrical colors of course.

LUKE
Royal purple.

VICTORIA
Emerald green.

LUKE
Exactly.

Luke goes through more pictures.

LUKE
What else?

Victoria sweeps all the detritus off the desk with
her ghostly pale arms, leans or sits.

VICTORIA
I need to know who you are. Really! Not your day-by-day, year-by-year resume, but
the inside stuff and why you care. Tell me why you should stay here and do this most
important job.

(gets in his face)

Why is this your VOCATION?!

He looks at her passionately and without hesitation
launches into it.

LUKE
I love theatre. And, when I say love, I mean LOVE. Theatre saved my life when I was a
young gay boy out in the boonies.

VICTORIA

Boonies?

LUKE

A two-bit, redneck, swamp-laden town filled with people who would rather someone like me didn't exist, and someone tried, but they didn't succeed. I knew they never would, because when I was in my fifth grade play, my teacher made me believe that it was possible for someone like me to have a life. And then in high school I found my tribe and I was in all the plays. I was your quintessential theatre kid... not a great singer, actor, but danced okay. And, I LOVED costumes, dress up. Then, when I got to college, I studied English as a cover -- for my parents, like a good son, but I spent every spare minute in the theatre department, double majored... Professor Barkworth, all theatre kids are sensitive and different as you well know. I could tell you stories about any number of students, but I'll spare you because, you had plenty. For the record, I fell in love with humanity in dark theatres...

VICTORIA

(wipes a ghostly tear away)

Good...

LUKE

(on a roll)

Yes, kids need to learn classics and the moderns -- dramas, comedies, musicals. You'll read-- watch them, you'll SEE, you'll UNDERSTAND! We need theatre to feed our souls, particularly while we're alive! Since the last time you were alive in this office, the world has gotten sooo much darker. Very, very dark! Theatre gives us hope.

VICTORIA

A little schmaltzy, but yes, you'll do .

LUKE

I'll do?

VICTORIA

Indeed.

A beat. She reaches out to touch his hand. He shivers.

VICTORIA

I like the scarf too.

LUKE

It's vintage --

VICTORIA

-- Yes, Burberry. Alright, it's fine if you make a wall of pictures down in the lobby, I'd also like you to get my old end table, and put a couple of photos of me and you on it. Together. When there are big decisions to be made, especially when you're struggling, sit next to the table with our pictures and think -- talk to me -- maybe have a cup of tea or a shot of scotch.

LUKE

I like scotch.

VICTORIA

Of course you do... I'll pop in as necessary.

LUKE

Where's the table?

VICTORIA

In the hall closet. Out there.

Luke STANDS, EXITS OFF STAGE.

LUKE O.S.

(shouts)

I don't see anything but props!

VICTORIA

At the very back, under the old moving blanket.

(NOISES, BANGING)

That's right, you've got it got it.

Luke RE-ENTERS, carrying an antique side table.

LUKE

It's gorgeous.

VICTORIA

Yes, I know. Use it while you have the office. Maybe even decorate around it.

LUKE

Uh-huh!

Luke carries the table to the couch, sets it down, looks at it, pulls the couch closer as Victoria rises and SWEEPS OFF STAGE.

When Luke turns back around, she is gone.

LUKE

Professor Barkworth?!

No ANSWER. Luke crosses, peers OFF STAGE. He comes back to the couch, sinks down, picks up the framed, cracked PHOTO of Victoria in her cocktail dress, sets it down on the side table.

Leaning back, he closes his eyes, then SNEEZES.

LUKE

Definitely need to be cleaned.

VICTORIA BARWORTH'S VOICE BOOMS.

VICTORIA V.O.

My Dear Professor Waddell, don't sleep there, it's too dirty. Go home, get a good night's rest. Start the cleansing and redecoration tomorrow. There's much to be done, and I feel certain you're up to the task!

LUKE

(sleepily laughs, then mumbles)

Maybe, we'll do Seventeen Seventy Six.

VICTORIA V.O.

NO! There are more important things to dream about. The school main stage will need to be updated with all of today's technological marvels! Money needs to be raised!

Luke continues to doze on the couch.

LUKE

(like a student)

Yes, Miss Barkworth.

VICTORIA V.O.

Professor Waddell! Luke Waddell!

He SNORES. VICTORIA BARKWORTH
SPEAKS, her VOICE ECHOING THROUGH
OUT THROUGH THE THEATRE SPEAKERS.

VICTORIA O.S.

(elegantly as Hamlet's father's ghost)

My hour is almost come
When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames
Must render up myself.

LUKE

(mumbles as Hamlet)

Alas, poor ghost...

VICTORIA O.S.

Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing
To what I shall unfold... I am thy father's spirit
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night
And for the day confined to fast in fires
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away.

Luke JUMPS AWAKE.

LUKE

Holy shit.

VICTORIA O.S.

No, your line is, “Oh, Heaven!”

He picks up VICTORIA’s PICTURE, LAUGHS hysterically. MUSIC PLAYS from *Pippin*, *Wicked*, *Hair*, *Fiddler, 1776* and *Hamilton*.

LIGHTS FADE OUT.