



THE GROUNDLING

BY MARC PALMIERI



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For Kristen

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The verse in Bob's play ought to be played, even by the trained actress in the story, for the rhythm, hitting the beats. While it may make sense that Dodd would direct verse to sound as much like natural conversation as possible, delivering aloud the bad poetry as if scanning the verse is, simply put, funnier — and sustaining a comic momentum is a key to the success of the play's tonal shift in the final moments.

The name of the messenger, Marcade, should be pronounced like "Mark-ah-dee."

There are a few contemporary references in the play, like Anderson Cooper's cable "news" show and *The Phantom of the Opera* on Broadway. If I'm so lucky to have productions of *The Groundling* take place beyond the lives of these shows, feel free to replace Cooper with some other anchor — and adjust Pete's suggestion in Scene 3 to: "I'd buy us all tickets right now if the show was still running, and if I could leave Suffolk County." And if America takes Ally's advice and legalizes drugs, just cut that line, which is also in Scene 3. In Scene 4, Frank mentions the store "Lowe's." Same deal as Cooper. In general, feel free to make outdated references more current.

If the actress playing Karen happens to have blue eyes, the line in Scene 2, "Ah, I'm thirty-eight" should be changed to "I have blue eyes."

The melody for Pete's voicemail song can be up to whoever would like to compose it for your production. If his Casio is a working prop, that would be preferred to piped-in music, but you do what you can. The New York premiere's version of the song sounded like some kind of mixing of "Tonight" from *West Side Story* with just about any Barry Manilow ballad. Whatever it sounds like, the important thing is that Pete sings it fast.

My great thanks to you for your interest in the play. As long as I'm alive, I'm happy to answer any of your questions. Like most of us, I am easy to find on the internet.

THE GROUNDLING was workshopped at South Coast Repertory’s 2012 NewSCRipts Series, The Lark Play Development Center, and by the Penobscot Theatre Company at the Northern Writes Play Festival in 2010.

THE GROUNDLING was produced by Axis Company (Randy Sharp, Artistic Director) and Brian Barnhart in New York City, opening on February 11, 2015. It was directed by Marc Palmieri; the set design was by Chad Yarborough; the costume design was by Karl Ruckdeschel; the lighting design was by David Zeffren; the sound design was by Eric T. Lawson; the properties master was Lynn Mancinelli; the assistant director was Sean Patrick Monahan; and the production stage manager was David Beller. The cast was as follows:

BOB MALONE.....Robert Ierardi
KAREN MALONEEva Kaminsky
FRANK Jerry Matz
DODDBrian Barnhart
VICTORIA.....Kendall Rileigh
PETE Benjamin Russell
ALLY..... Emily Kratter

CHARACTERS

BOB MALONE, 40s

KAREN MALONE, late 30s

FRANK, 70s

DODD, 30s–50s

VICTORIA, around 30

PETE, mid-20s

ALLY, around 20

PLACE

Eastern Long Island.
The garage of a middle class house.

TIME

The present.

*To move wild laughter in the throat of death?
It cannot be; it is impossible;
Mirth cannot move a soul in agony.*

—W. Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*

THE GROUNDLING

Scene 1

The inside of a two-car garage on Long Island. Most of the cement floor is clear, with scattered folding chairs and a café table set that looks like it was taken off a backyard deck. There are two doors upstage and opposite one another: one to the house and one to the outside.

As the pre-show light fades to black, we hear music, and the gently rising sounds of what seems to be a Shakespeare play being performed in an outdoor park. The spoken verses are comic and lighthearted, involving love and romantic longing. They come fast, with a growing excitement. On a crest of laughter as if from an audience, music and sound go out, and lights to full. Frank stands upstage amidst some tools and materials, constructing a base and a short steel pole. Bob and Karen, husband and wife, enter in mid-argument through the door to the house. There is a raging exasperation between them.

BOB. You got that look! That goddamn look and you know it!

KAREN. What *look*?

BOB. That look you do. The lip, the eyes! I can't stand that and you know it —

KAREN. Lips and eyes?

BOB. You know what I'm talking about —

KAREN. I can't have an expression? I'm not allowed to have a facial expression when I'm thinking?

BOB. *Thinking*. You're not thinking. That's not what you're doin' —

KAREN. What am I doing?

BOB. TORTURING ME!

FRANK. (*Turning toward them.*) Hello?

BOB. Shit.

KAREN. Sorry, Dad.

FRANK. I left my hearing aid inside. But let me guess. You two fighting?

KAREN. No Dad.

FRANK. Ya come out here to fight? I can tell even if I can't hear a goddamn word.

KAREN. We're fine, Dad. WE'RE GREAT.

FRANK. (*Returning to work.*) Uh-huh.

KAREN. (*To Bob.*) Now leave me the fuck alone.

BOB. I was leaving you alone! I'm happy to!

KAREN. Good! Then do it! Go back to your stupid —

BOB. My *stupid*? My stupid what?

KAREN. Aw for Christ's —

BOB. MY STUPID WHAT? I knew this was comin' at some point! I was having too good a time. Right? Is that what you thought? I looked like I'm enjoying myself in there?

KAREN. Get outta here —

BOB. Well don't worry. It won't last. I promise. That make you feel better?

KAREN. No! (*Dodd reluctantly enters from the same door to the house. He lingers upstage, unsure whether to cross or go back inside.*)

BOB. God, isn't this amazing? How awful we are? Look at us. We can't even, we can't go two days! I mean, nothing really happened and we're out here, screamin' at each other. Aren't you sick of that Karen? Tell me you're sick of it.

KAREN. Who wouldn't be?

BOB. Hey! We agree on something! We're sick of it!

KAREN. Fuck you. Okay? (*Karen notices Dodd.*) Oh Jesus.

DODD. Good morning Mrs. Malone.

BOB. You can call her Karen. I told you that.

KAREN. Yeah good morning.

BOB. Or Mrs. Face. Mrs. *Freakin' Face!*

DODD. I'm disturbing you.

KAREN. Not at all. Everything good with your breakfast my husband ordered in from the expensive diner?

DODD. It was delectable, thank you.

KAREN. Coffee alright?

DODD. Luscious. Had three cups.

KAREN. What's your name again? Dom?
DODD. Dodd. D, O, double-D!
KAREN. That's a weird name.
DODD. Thank you.
KAREN. (*Smiling hugely.*) You see my face, Dodd? This is my good morning face! My good morning *look*. This okay with you?
DODD. I like it.
KAREN. (*Holding her face on.*) You feel better Bob? Am I good to go now, asshole?
BOB. You know what? Trash is what you are.
KAREN. No, trash is what *you* are.
DODD. So! Good news! I just heard from Victoria and she's almost here! Two turns away. I'm gonna go flag her down. We'll go over the rest of my notes later, Bob?
BOB. Yes, thank you.
DODD. (*Turns upstage to Frank, who won't hear him.*) MORNING, FRANK!
BOB. Hey Dodd! Can you walk her through here? When she comes? I'd like to show her my wife.
KAREN. Show her your ass.
BOB. I'LL SHOW YOU MY ASS!
DODD. Ah, I wondered — Victoria will be staying in that room upstairs? I noticed you were in there last night.
BOB. Yes. She'll stay there. That's where she'll be.
DODD. Terrific.
FRANK. (*Re: the pole.*) I think this'll do it! Just needs a bulb. And an extension cord.
DODD. THAT OUR LIGHT POLE, FRANK?
KAREN. Can I go now?
BOB. I don't care what you do!
KAREN. Oh yeah? Then why am I walking through my kitchen and you —
DODD. Hey guys, guys. Look. You hide it well. But I detect some tension. I just want to assure you that whatever you're feeling is part of the process. Just remember that somehow, some way, everything comes together in the end. There are moments when it will seem impossible, that everything is *lost*. All your work, all the love. But then, it all works out. It all comes together.
KAREN. What does?

DODD. Your play! And Karen, you are in for a treat. Your husband's got a real talent.

KAREN. Oh yeah?

DODD. He's a natural playwright. A great ear for dialogue.

KAREN. Really.

DODD. And he's romantic.

KAREN. Fuck off.

DODD. I am very proud to be involved in this project. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm gonna get out there before your lead actress drives by in her Zipcar. (*Passes Frank.*) FRANK! THIS LOOKS GREAT!

FRANK. I'm gonna make two!

DODD. GOOD! AND MAYBE TALLER? We might want some light above the actors' shins. Ha!

FRANK. Fine.

DODD. Be right back everyone! (*Exits to outside.*)

BOB. He's proud to be involved. You hear that? The man is a professional director from the city and he said that.

KAREN. You're paying him money. Why shouldn't he? And now you're paying for her too, whoever she is —

BOB. So that's why the face? I spent some money? We got plenty of money, Karen. What else we gonna spend it on?

KAREN. Have I intruded at all? Complained? Jesus I step into my kitchen for a minute and you're all up my ass.

BOB. You know what you're doing.

KAREN. What am I doing? You're the one all crazy as usual.

BOB. Me? That's funny. No. Actually? I'm actually kinda upbeat right now!

KAREN. So leave me alone Mr. Upbeat!

BOB. I'd love to! But there you are, lurkin' in the corner of my eye as I'm sitting at the table, trying to hear Dodd's feedback.

KAREN. Listen to you. *Feedback.*

BOB. The lip is out, the eyes wide. "Here I am, husband! Just in case you forgot me and your misery for a second! Here I am over here in your sightlines with my suffering face."

KAREN. What is that? *Sightlines. Feedback.* You sound like a jerk-off.

BOB. *Sightlines* is terminology for plays! So is *feedback*. When people give you *back* their ideas.

KAREN. I know what "feedback" means.

FRANK. (*Angrily sets down his tools, heads for the house door.*) I'm gonna pick this back up later.

BOB. Okay. Thank you.

FRANK. What?

KAREN. He said THANKS DAD!

FRANK. Fine. (*Stops at the door.*) And please ... you two. Try ta ...

KAREN. What, Dad?

FRANK. Try somethin'! It can't keep goin' like this. (*Exits.*)

BOB. *You* started up last night. You just got up and went downstairs and never came back. I didn't have time to take the bait because I had creative writing to do. And I can't do it all pissed off.

KAREN. I was tired. I slept in the TV room. What's new about that? Plus you had the light on!

BOB. I needed the light! I was writing!

KAREN. I was tired!

BOB. And now this morning you're draggin' around like —

KAREN. So excuse me. Okay? Maybe I'm just a little emotional.

BOB. Uh-huh —

KAREN. I'm emotional so I have an *expression*. Lord forgive me. Forgive my natural human being face. I confess. I had an expression. I had emotions for fuck's —

BOB. What, you think I don't have emotions —

KAREN. I'd just set up that room for a goddamn stranger —

BOB. She's a guest —

KAREN. And it's emotional —

BOB. An actress. For my play I'm writing. For you and our whole family to see.

KAREN. Great. Wonderful. I'm tired. I don't want to fight. I just woke up. Jesus Christ.

BOB. I don't want to either.

KAREN. Last night was terrible and you didn't even notice.

BOB. Didn't notice? It was an axe through my chest. I *always* notice. Everything. Don't worry about that. But like I said, I gotta ... put all that off for now. And concentrate.

KAREN. (*Heading for house door.*) Well I'll leave you alone Shakespeare. Enjoy yourself.

BOB. I will! Okay? I WILL! (*Karen exits. Bob follows but is delayed as Dodd and Victoria enter from outside.*)

DODD. And this here is the playwright. Mr. Robert Malone! Author, author!

THE GROUNDLING

by Marc Palmieri

4M, 3W

After stumbling upon an outdoor production of a Shakespeare play in Manhattan, Long Island landscaper Bob Malone returns home inspired to write a play about his troubled marriage. He hires two reluctant New York theatre professionals to spend a week at his home and stage the play in his garage, with a cast of colorful locals. *THE GROUNDLING* is a comedy exploring the meaning of the final moments of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, and how the power of theatre can affect the most unsuspecting, and perhaps most deserving, of us all.

"THE GROUNDLING is half comedy and half tragedy, half verse and half prose. Though it begins as a formulaic showbiz farce, it takes an unexpected swerve toward heartbreak ... Borrowing a neat trick from Shakespeare, Palmieri tops off this saccharine comedy with a nicely bittersweet finish. Plenty of audience members were dabbing eyes with sleeves and tissues as the lights came up."

—The New York Times

*"A thoroughly modern, breathlessly comical, arrestingly poignant story of a man trying desperately to make sense of love and loss ... exuberant comedy with seven well-defined characters ... strong writing keeps the play consistently comical when it wants to be and moving when it needs to be. At a crackling 90 minutes, the ending sneaks up on you like a pickpocket and takes the play in an unexpected direction, just as does *Love's Labour's Lost*. With gut-busting laughs and a moving story, *THE GROUNDLING* is one of the surprise downtown gems of the season."*

—TheaterMania.com

*"The play has a lot to say about the power of theater to touch hearts and minds, and to give voice to feelings that cannot be expressed in any other way. *THE GROUNDLING* has all the markings of a solidly written romantic comedy, with plenty of heart and lots of laughs to go around. Yet, the work veers in unexpected and emotionally moving directions."*

—TalkinBroadway.com

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CARL THE SECOND
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