

# THE TRUE

BY  
SHARR WHITE



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THE TRUE  
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THE TRUE was originally produced in New York City by the New Group (Scott Elliott, Artistic Director; Adam Bernstein, Executive Director) at the the Pershing Square Signature Center on September 20, 2018. It was directed by Scott Elliott, the scenic design was by Derek McLane, the costume design was by Clint Ramos, the lighting design was by Jeff Croiter, the sound design and music composition were by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen, and the production stage manager was Valerie A. Peterson. The cast was as follows:

DOROTHEA NOONAN ..... Edie Falco  
PETER NOONAN ..... Peter Scolari  
ERASTUS CORNING II ..... Michael McKean  
HOWARD C. NOLAN ..... Glenn Fitzgerald  
CHARLIE RYAN ..... John Pankow  
BILL McCORMICK ..... Austin Cauldwell  
BETTY CORNING ..... Tracy Shayne

## CHARACTERS

### DOROTHEA “POLLY” NOONAN

The ultimate loyalist, Polly is charming, vociferous, cajoling, foul-mouthed, and pugnacious. Sexy in her youth, and always a force to be reckoned with, she is single-minded in her drive to support Erastus and his endeavors above almost anything else.

### PETER NOONAN

Married to Polly. Measured where Polly is passionate, reserved where Polly is bellicose, Peter is as much Polly’s foil as he is her anchor and support system. More often than not, Peter finds himself playing bemused witness to the passionate friendship between Polly and Peter’s dear friend, Erastus.

### ERASTUS CORNING II

Mayor of Albany, New York. Married to Betty Corning. Mannered, erudite, charming, and deeply reserved, emotionally, Erastus has a profound affinity for Polly, his polar opposite. Ailing physically and besieged politically, Erastus is the alpha wolf who senses his pack beginning to turn on him.

### HOWARD C. “HOWIE” NOLAN

A popular state senator, Howie has for years been bristling at the corruption of the Albany Democratic machine, and Erastus’s edicts meant to contain the promising young politician’s rise. Handsome, young, wealthy, and possessing a well of integrity, Howie’s threat to Erastus’s power has suddenly become all too real for the aging mayor.

### CHARLIE RYAN

Brusque, tough, intelligent, and resentful of Erastus’s stranglehold on Albany machine politics, Charlie has long sought an opening to challenge Erastus, and now has it with the death of Dan O’Connell, Erastus’s patron and the chairman of the Democratic Party in Albany.

BILL McCORMICK

Twenty-seven years old. A young colleague of Polly's.

BETTY CORNING

The intensely private wife of Erastus Corning. (*No dialogue.*)

**SETTING**

Albany, New York

February–September, 1977

# THE TRUE

## Scene 1

*The family room of the large, comfortable ranch-style home shared by Dorothea Noonan and her husband Peter, and which is frequented by Erastus Corning.*

*Each has their usual place in the room—Dorothea's being a small sewing table with an electric sewing machine; Peter's being a black Naugahyde chair, and for Erastus, a brown cloth chair. Peter sits with the evening paper and several magazines; Dorothea works intermittently at her sewing table. All three have glasses of scotch.*

*Erastus isn't in his chair tonight; he's standing, looking out of the sliding glass door at the manicured backyard. He does this in spite of his left hip, which causes him pain, and forces a limp into his walk.*

*The TV drones, un-watched, in the background. It is late in the evening of February 28, 1977.*

*Silence. Dorothea's machine whirs. Then:*

DOROTHEA. *(At her sewing.)* Go home to Betty.

ERASTUS. I'm all keyed up.

DOROTHEA. Peter, finish your drink and drive him up the hill.

ERASTUS. I'm perfectly fine to drive myself.

DOROTHEA. Yeah, but I'll bet you had a few at the club.

ERASTUS. —*Peter's* had a few.

PETER. —All right, everybody, no big deal, I'll just drive you up to Betty.

DOROTHEA. *(Under her breath.)* Whatever the hell Betty's gonna do.

*Small guffaw from Peter. A tense silence. Polly's sewing machine whirs and then stops.*

ERASTUS. —Betty's trying her best.

DOROTHEA. I would never mean it like that.

ERASTUS. Well she puts up with a lot.

PETER. Oh, Polly didn't mean it like that.

DOROTHEA. Even if I did sort of mean it like that.

PETER. —Polly—

DOROTHEA. —It's just an enduring mystery that's all, here you are with a day like the one you've had and where's Betty? Anybody know? Nobody knows. Home doing whatever the hell she does.— That's all I meant. That's not an insult, it's just a fact.

ERASTUS. It's just that I can't have Betty dragged into things anymore.

DOROTHEA. *I never dragged Betty into anything*

ERASTUS. You drag her in all the time.

DOROTHEA. I do no  
such thing! Peter...

ERASTUS. But I don't  
want to make a thing  
of it.

PETER. Oh you do  
so. All the time.

Peter! I just make *remarks*,  
my little remarks, they  
cause that much pain?

Not going to make a  
thing of it.

Right, you do, Polly,  
which is called drag-  
ging her in.

*Silence. Polly looks from Peter to Erastus.*

DOROTHEA. —Well holy hell, when did everybody get so sensitive, I can't make a joke?

ERASTUS. You can make a joke! All right? I'm just...!

PETER. *(To Polly.)* He's keyed up.

ERASTUS. ...I'm all keyed up!

DOROTHEA. Which is what I'm saying, go home to Betty, you've got to get some sleep, it's going be a marathon next few days.— That's *all*, Erastus. That's *all* I meant. *(Muttered.)* All of a sudden, can't make a joke.

*Tension. Polly's sewing machine whirs. Erastus doesn't stir.*

PETER. *(To Erastus.)* Or! Stay, have another.

DOROTHEA. You know what, Peter, that's actually not helping. Look at him, he needs a good night's sleep, then come back to all this tomorrow with a little rest.

PETER. He's all keyed up! What's he gonna do, go home to Betty, pace back and forth all night? Better for him to do it here, have another scotch.

PETER. *You know where the guest room is, just stay.*

ERASTUS. (*Small beat.*) Naw, I gotta go home to Betty.

DOROTHEA. —Sweet Heavenly Father.

*Small beat. Polly's sewing machine whirs.*

ERASTUS. And what's the matter anyhow, your phone doesn't work?

DOROTHEA. (*Polite, firm, skewering.*) Erastus? The telephone works. It worked all day long today, and I'm thankful for the quiet.

ERASTUS. Too quiet.

DOROTHEA. What is this, a war picture? (*Dramatic, to Peter.*) *Too Quiet, Peter.* (*To Erastus.*) Spoke to practically every Democrat in Albany today, plus I swear to God half the Republicans, people aren't callin' *here* any more, they're all home getting drunk.

ERASTUS. Well you shouldn't play my spokesman.

DOROTHEA. —I shouldn't play his spokesman, Peter.

—If somebody wants my opinion, Erastus, I'm going to give it.

PETER. Usually even if they *don't* want it.

DOROTHEA. Yes Peter, thank you very much. (*To Erastus.*) And what spokesman things did I do today? Answer my telephone?

PETER. (*Overlapped.*) Everybody relax, it's been a stressful day.

DOROTHEA. (*Overlapped.*) It's my own house, Rasty, you're suggesting if the telephone rings I shouldn't answer it? Well I mean Peter pays for it, don't you Peter, the house—

PETER. —I try my best—

DOROTHEA. —But it's *my house*. When the telephone rings...

—Let's put it this way. In my opinion?

PETER. Here she goes.

DOROTHEA. In *my* opinion, today wasn't the day to get aloof on people.



ERASTUS. —I wasn't...! ...*Aloof!*

DOROTHEA. So if you don't want me to be your spokesman?—Which I'm *not*. Then pick up your *own* God-damned phone, talk to people.

ERASTUS. I talked to *plenty* of people today.

DOROTHEA. Dan had promises out to a lot of people. You'd think everybody would have a little respect for the dead, but people can't help themselves.

ERASTUS. Well, there's a lot to figure out, isn't there.

DOROTHEA. See, I should imagine you would think twice about saying something like that because to most people "there's a lot to figure out" means *tough shit*.

PETER. (*Quiet.*) Polly.

DOROTHEA. —What.

PETER. Ease up.

DOROTHEA. (*Sweetly.*) —I'm eased.—This is me being eased.

*Long beat.*

ERASTUS. (*Quiet.*) I just...expected for some reason he'd pull through.

DOROTHEA. Which you were pretty much the only person on earth thought that, he was ninety fuckin' one.

*Erastus waves Polly off, lost in thought. Polly's sewing machine whirs. Erastus notices a little drink left in his glass. Finishes.*

ERASTUS. Well. Thanks. For... For always having...

DOROTHEA. (*Overlapping.*) No no no...

ERASTUS. (*Overlapping.*) —I'm serious, now.

DOROTHEA. (*Overlapping.*) —Spare everybody the sentiment, this isn't any time for sentiment.

ERASTUS. (*Overlapping.*) —For always having your door open. To me.

DOROTHEA. What are you talking about, of course our door is...

ERASTUS. —I'm serious! I, this... It's very important to me. That... that you two...have been here. For me. All these years.

*Small pause. Polly stares over her sewing light at Erastus.*

DOROTHEA. *Have been here?*

ERASTUS. Yes!—*You know. That you are. Here. For me.*

*Small beat. Polly's sewing machine whirs. Erastus doesn't move. Polly lifts the needle on her machine, cuts a thread. Fixes Erastus with a look.*

DOROTHEA. Charlie Ryan.

ERASTUS. Fuck that fucking Charlie Ryan.

PETER. Aw, holy hell, great way to get him relaxed, Polly. Truly, terrific.

DOROTHEA. —Well I don't know what the hell he's just sitting there for, he's obviously not ready to leave, *I'm* the one keeps telling him to go home to Betty, I'm just looking out for his health, you can't go too long with the weight of the world like he has, sleep is what he needs, but you know what? Looks like he wants to talk it out! And *you* want to drink! So fuck *me*, what do I know, let's go, let's talk it out. I would rather do it now than make polite noises at him, have him call the house at two in the morning like he does.

ERASTUS. I never call the house at two in the morning.

DOROTHEA. Maybe not in the last few *weeks*.

ERASTUS. Well if I ever did, it was a mistake, it's not something I should be doing.

DOROTHEA. Should according to who? You want to call, call. No one here cares if it's two in the morning—be quiet, Peter—personally I'm glad you have someone to talk to, if you can't talk to Betty—

ERASTUS. —*I can talk to Betty!*—

DOROTHEA. —I'm not saying you *can't!* Why do you keep making this conversation about Betty? Well if you're callin' here at four in the A.M., it's obvious you want someone other than your wife to talk to.

ERASTUS. Why do *you?*—Why do you? Peter, why does *she?*—*You're* the one who just said I can't talk to Betty, I'm simply talking about what time I should or should not call.

PETER. (*Overlapping, pacifying.*) All right, all right, all right, all right.—*OK you two.*

# THE TRUE

by Sharr White

5 men, 2 women

When it comes to Polly Noonan, there's no fine line between the political and personal. For her...it's only personal. Especially now that her hero, "mayor for life" Erastus Corning, is in a pitched battle for control of the Albany Democratic Party. *THE TRUE* explores the bounds of love, loyalty, and female power in the male-dominated world of 1977 machine politics.

*"...a damn good time... One of the themes Mr. White tries to pull from the historical record is the way a powerful woman like Polly was forced in those days, and perhaps even in our own, to operate within narrow tolerances for female behavior. ...THE TRUE is riveting."*

—**The New York Times**

*"In his laser-focused view, White shows us exactly how machine politics works without taking a moral position on the patronage system on which it's based. ...Anyone who has ever been involved in a political campaign should find this play enthralling."*

—**Variety**

*"White's stage version of Noonan [has] got smarts to spare, energy to burn, and that specific combination of verbal acrobatics and intriguing inner life that's catnip to actors... White's dialogue is audibly fun to speak, and often peppered with political observations that feel meaty and real."*

—**New York Magazine**

Also by Sharr White  
ANNAPURNA  
THE OTHER PLACE  
THE SNOW GESE  
and others

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