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Cast of Characters

ITCHY

KNEE

PROFESSOR UNFRENABULOUS

WAN VICTORIAN HEROINE

FUNNY OLD MAN

A CAST OF THOUSANDS (which in practical terms means a chorus of about ten actors—see Notes.)

Setting

A bare stage. Its bareness is clearly a statement. Its emptiness screams at the audience the words of Peter Brook: “I can take any empty space and make it into a stage.” It is aggressively bare.

Notes

The Chorus: Directors are encouraged to make full use of the chorus, working them in even when not specifically required to do so.

The songs for The Nineteenth Century Operetta are available as sheet music (see back of script) and standard MIDI files (contact Playscripts, Inc.).

The author grants permission for groups to omit swear words as required.

Acknowledgements

Reflex Action was first performed by Broadway High School, Virginia in 2001. It was directed by Timothy Reger. The cast was as follows:

KNEE	Holly Packard
ITCHY	Nick Herrick
PROFESSOR UNFRENABULOUS	Jeremy Arbogast
CHORUS	Christine Andes
	Rachel Andes
	Amanda Boitnott
	Emily Bowman
	Alice Breeden
	Doreen Davis
	Brook Miller
	Blair Zarembo

REFLEX ACTION

by Douglas Craven

(We hear the voices of the CHORUS building backstage as the lights come up.)

CHORUS. *(In a babble:)* A bare stage. Its bareness is clearly a statement. Its emptiness screams at the audience the words of Peter Brook: "I can take any empty space and make it into a stage." It is aggressively bare.

(Layered into this speech and repeated several times are the words "Woodpecker," "Point," and "Fear Unfrenabulous!")

(Enter ITCHY and KNEE.)

KNEE. You know, I've noticed that most drama is just two people talking.

ITCHY. Really?

KNEE. Yes, and they generally chatter aimlessly until something happens.

ITCHY. Is that so?

KNEE. Yes.

ITCHY. Except for the occasional long pause.

(Long pause.)

KNEE. Then what happens?

ITCHY. Hmm?

KNEE. After the pause.

(Pause.)

KNEE. I said, "And then what happens?"

ITCHY. Oh, generally a cue.

KNEE. Like what?

(A phone rings.)

ITCHY. I'll get it.

KNEE. No, don't. There's no suspense if you answer it right away.

ITCHY. Oh.

(It rings again.)

KNEE. You know the funny things about phones in theatre, as opposed to the real life phones you and I enjoy and use almost daily, Itchy, is that they so rarely ring at regular intervals.

(He pauses. The phone finally rings.)

KNEE. They seem to wait for the character to finish his lines. *(Long pause.)* And then they ring.

(The phone rings.)

ITCHY. I'll get it, Knee. *(Pause.)* Where do you keep your phone?

KNEE. I keep it over there. Under that Special.

ITCHY. The what?

KNEE. The blue light.

(A blue special shines down.)

ITCHY. I still don't see it.

KNEE. *(Moving to answer the phone:)* Right here.

(He answers the phone and hands the invisible receiver to ITCHY.)

KNEE. It's one of those mime phones.

ITCHY. Oh. I was going to buy one of those m'self. Hello? Yes? Yes? Really? When? Well!

(He hangs up.)

KNEE. You know, it's strange that you didn't give him time to answer any of your questions.

ITCHY. Yes, wasn't it? Even more strangely, I heard everything he said.

KNEE. Who was it?

ITCHY. It was my Arch-Nemesis, Professor Unfrenabulous, Master of the Dark Domain.

KNEE. How did he get my number?

ITCHY. I have “Call Forwarding.”

KNEE. Ah.

ITCHY. Well, you don’t want to miss an important call like that one.

KNEE. What did he say?

ITCHY. He just called to introduce The Conflict. He’s planning to drop by later with his Hideous Army of the Putrefying Undead. He says that he will have some information that will be of great interest to me, and that he plans to wreak horrible revenge on me and to torment and kill us both. And then the zombies will eat our eye-balls.

KNEE. Well! What an interesting and dare I say Dramatic Premise!

ITCHY. I know. If this were a play, which it is not, but is, in fact, real life, we could now do a number of things.

KNEE. What are our options?

ITCHY. Well, we could become more and more tense as the pressure wears at us, until finally the thin veneer of Western civilization peels away, leaving us shouting at each other in a feral sort of way.

KNEE. Never happen.

ITCHY. Yes, it could.

KNEE. No.

ITCHY. I said, “Yes.”

KNEE. How would you know?

ITCHY. I do have a Masters degree, you know. I majored in Pinter.

KNEE. Always dragging out that damned degree, aren’t you, Itchy? You know, I’m sick of hearing about it.

ITCHY. I’m sick of your resentment!

KNEE. I advance on you!

ITCHY. I respond!

KNEE. I'm sick of your superior attitude. Why don't you just cut out this shit—this SHIT!—and reveal the hidden underpinnings of our relationship?

ITCHY. All right! I will! Ever since I got drunk at that Frat Party and my boyhood sweetheart lost her virginity to another man on the same day that my father gambled away the family homestead while drunk on overproof rum, and YOU failed to assuage my wounded soul and live up to my lofty hero worship of you, I have felt...less than adequate.

KNEE. I had no idea. Is it too painful to discuss?

ITCHY. Very nearly. It makes me want to pause.

(Pause.)

KNEE. The man who—with your sweetheart...who won your family farm, was he...could he have been...Professor Unf—

ITCHY. Don't! Don't go on!

KNEE. I'm sorry. I'll comfort you during a long pause.

(He comforts him during a long pause.)

ITCHY. Thank you. That was cathartic.

KNEE. For me, too. How about we introduce a new element? What else would we do if we were in a theatre, which, of course, we are not in. And if there were an audience watching us, which, obviously, there is not one.

ITCHY and KNEE. Let's think.

(They think.)

ITCHY. We could resort to speaking to each other in short lines.

KNEE. Ah. Stichomythia.

ITCHY. I beg your pardon?

KNEE. Stichomythia?

ITCHY. What?

KNEE. Sticho—

ITCHY. —mythia?

KNEE. No.

ITCHY. Yes.

KNEE. No.

ITCHY. Yes. Why?

KNEE. Why?

ITCHY. Yes.

KNEE. 'Cuz.

ITCHY. Ah.

KNEE. Understand?

ITCHY. I don't—

KNEE. —don't see.

ITCHY. Never say

KNEE. That? Never?

ITCHY. Say? Never see!

KNEE. See never?

ITCHY. (*Making wavy motions with his hands:.*) Never sea.

KNEE. Yes.

ITCHY. No, no.

ITCHY and KNEE. Long pause.

(Long pause.)

KNEE. Woodpecker.

ITCHY. Wood pecker?

KNEE. No. No woodpecker.

ITCHY. What?

KNEE. Never, see?

ITCHY. Never. See.

KNEE. Woodpecker. Never.

ITCHY. Uh... *(Pause.)* Sorry. Are we still...stichomythicizing? I was enjoying it until the woodpecker. What woodpecker?

KNEE. It all happened so long ago. Do you mind if I deliver a monologue about it?

ITCHY. Go ahead. You were really patient with my Pinter thing.

KNEE. Thanks. Long ago, I was small. It's funny, isn't it, how we start out small and then we grow bigger? So many important things happen when you are small. So many things happen for the first time not long after you are born. Well, I lived in Northern Ontario, where I could hear the sounds of the loons *(Waits for the sound effect:)* and the wind amongst the pines. *(Again. He moves DC. The light favours him.)* I used to live in an old-fashioned place, where you would often hear the sound of an old fiddle player adding atmosphere. *(Fiddle music.)* The place was called Woodpecker Plateau. Do you know, I used to wonder why they called it that. So, I asked my brother. "Why?" I asked him. "Why is this place called Woodpecker Plateau?" He did not know. I asked my father and my mother. When I was small, they were very big. I felt sure that they would know. "Why is this town, this small town in Ontario, with the rustic ambiance, called Woodpecker Plateau?" Their answer seems to echo in my mind, even as I say it. *(Man and woman's voices echo his lines as he speaks:)* "We do not know, Knee," they said. "It's just called that. It's just called that!" To this day, it plagues me. It jumps on my brain when I least expect, causing me to emote, to *emote!* Woodpecker Plateau! Woodpecker Plateau! Even as I enunciate its consonants clearly, it torments me. Wuuh. Ppppppuh. Wwwwooddd Pppeckkkerrr. When I eat. When I sleep. When I make love to a woman. Woodpecker Plateau! Woodpecker—! But there was not a plateau, Itchy. And there was not! a single! woodpecker!! Ever! Not a single one. Do you see now? Do you see?

(He appeals to ITCHY, who has fallen asleep.)

KNEE. Look at him. I listen to his character revelation, but when it's my turn, he falls asleep. *(He gives ITCHY focus.)* I give him focus.

ITCHY. Yes, I do sleep. That is to say, I was awake and now I am sleeping, though I am talking but am nonetheless soundly at rest. In short, I sleep. And I begin...to dream.

(We hear artsy music with appropriate lighting effects. I suggest Enya. Conventional stage dream stuff.)

ITCHY. I dream...of dance drama. I see them...the Chorus.

(Enter the CHORUS, moving very symbolically indeed, sporting those plastic "Burt Ward" cheapie masks common in theatre. All wear black spandex.)

ITCHY. And in my dreams...the dancing turns to allegory. I see movement which might be interpreted, by a Grade Ten drama teacher on amphetamines, to be symbolic.

(It is accompanied by a CHORUS MEMBER on a bongo.)

ITCHY. Look out! Your backs'...to the audience! Don't...don't make a line. The triangles! Remember the blocking triangles! Oh, God. Body bags!

(Enter several actors in spandex body bags.)

ITCHY. Stretching. Flexing. Pressing their faces against the spandex skins. They all cross the proscenium. No! No! Don't cross the fourth wall! Don't!

(The actors cross the fourth wall.)

ITCHY. No! Give the audience their space.

(The figures retreat.)

ITCHY. And then suddenly...stillness.

(A single bongo beat. All freeze, some in awkward positions.)

ITCHY. A freeze. Taaaaaa-bleau. Some awkward positions. And out of this penetrating symbolic stillness, it comes: choral reading.

CHORUS.

One person speaking

Another responding

Another disputing

Another shouting

Many people say one line!

Guttural sounds rrrrr rrrrrr RRRR rrrrrr.

Singing! Surprising notes!

CHORUS!!!!

CHORUS SOLO. One thin voice takes focus.

CHORUS. Stop that! Starting a rhythm.

Woodpecker woodpecker woodpecker

Woodpecker woodpecker woodpecker

No No No.

MALE VOICES. Woodpecker

FEMALE VOICES. Woodpecker

MALE VOICES. Woodpecker

FEMALE VOICES. No! Woodpecker

MALE VOICES. Woodpecker

FEMALE VOICES. Woodpecker

MALE VOICES. No!

HIGH VOICES. We have high voices!

LOW VOICES. We have low voices!

CHORUS. Sound effects! *(They add sound effects.)* We build. We build and build. Building. Falling. Building and building and building to...SOLOS!

SOLO 1. There are more Big Macs in Ontario than there are woodpeckers.

SOLO 2. But in Cambodia, there are none! Woodpeckers, that is.

CHORUS. Not Big Macs. He means woodpeckers.

SOLO 2. Right.

CHORUS. Think about it!

SOLO 3. The ozone layer is growing back.

SOLO 4. Recycle carbon monoxide.

CHORUS. Think about it!

SOLO 5. Weeds are hardier than grass.

SOLO 6. Pike is tastier than bass.

SOLO 7. We are trapped when we escape.

SOLO 8. Richard Simmons used to be a grape.

CHORUS. Think about it!

SOLO 9. You.

SOLO 10. Me.

MALE VOICES. All of us male voices.

FEMALE VOICES. All of us female voices.

ANDROGYNOUS VOICES. Those of us with androgynous voices.

CHORUS. And you...yes, you. There in the audience. Sitting in the third row. The man in the blue shirt. Yes, we mean you. We are all Professor Unfrenabulous. *(Pause.)* In a strictly allegorical sense, of course. Think about it!

SOLO. Think about how short your life is and that we just wasted fifteen minutes of it with this...

CHORUS. ...crap! *(Building:)* Building...wooooooodpecker!

(They move off in a very impressive choreographed way.)

KNEE. Wake up! Itchy, wake up!

ITCHY. No, woodpecker. Richard Simmons!

KNEE. You're all right!

ITCHY. I dreamed about theatre.

KNEE. Theatre is a dream.

ITCHY. That's so Shakespearean.

(Coronets without. Enter a fully dressed Elizabethan nobleman, sword, doublet, hose, codpiece. He strides to centre stage. Both ITCHY and KNEE show great expectation as he prepares for a lofty performance. Lights up on him. He clears his throat. He exits.)

KNEE. Now that was just strange.

ITCHY. Yes. Nice acting stance, though, I thought. Things are getting a bit...absurd, don't you think?

(Lights from above, harsh and bright, making the actors look stark.)

KNEE. Banana.

ITCHY. We should go.

KNEE. We really shouldn't.

ITCHY. Why not?

KNEE. We're waiting...for somebody.

ITCHY. Who?

KNEE. I can't say. Copyright.

ITCHY. Oh. Yes, absurd. *(Lights return to normal.)* Not to say farcical.

KNEE. *(Absurd British accent:)* Farcical?

(Very quick farce. Sounds of doors slamming, backstage. Actors cross the stage seemingly trying to avoid each other. Improvised dialogue, short lines only: "Oh, God. My wife!" and "Reginald, you've forgotten your trousers" sort of thing. Older man. Young woman. Man in tuxedo top, heart jockey shorts and a chihuahua. Woman in lingerie. Impressive old man from the next bit of the play. Bertie Wooster and Jeeves. Dowager and maid. Drunk servants. Suddenly, all is still.)

ITCHY. I need a rest. If this were a play, which I know that it is not, we could hold out for intermission.

KNEE. Unless this was a One-Act. *(Pause.)* Perhaps if we just had a moving silence.

ITCHY. With some public domain music?

KNEE. Satie for preference.

ITCHY. Just the thing. Perhaps with a subtle fade. Oh, yes. I could do with a bit more tableau.

(We hear “Troisieme Gymnopedie” by Erik Satie. ITCHY and KNEE in tableau. Lights down one half. Lights up. Music down.)

ITCHY. Much better.

KNEE. Do you know what this whole situation reminds me of?

ITCHY. What is that, old bean?

KNEE. All of this reminds me of...

ITCHY. What, dear boy?

KNEE. It jolly well reminds of...

ITCHY. Of a Nineteenth-Century Operetta, old fruit?

KNEE. Just what I was going to say!

(They begin pistoning up and down to a Gilbert and Sullivan-inspired tune.)

Nineteenth-Century Operetta (When I Was a Tiny Little Boy)

KNEE.

When I was a tiny little boy
 My mother and father did take me
 To the theatre where the actors all
 How happy did they make me!
 And all that time
 To the song and the rhyme
 Of classics light and tragic
 I sat and marvelled at the wonder of
 This very British musical magic.

(The CHORUS moves in, pistoning and picking up the “bum-bums.”)

CHORUS. Bum bum bum bum bum bum bum.

KNEE.

I sat in my tiny tiny cozy plush seat
 And watched the players playing
 And wondered at the costumes, lights
 And scenical arraying
 And smelled that smell
 That magical smell
 Of the gaslit Drury Lane
 And oh that gas and oh that gas
 The smell of that gas...
 The smell smell of that gas...
 The gasssss...

(He peters out, obviously damaged by the gas.)

ITCHY. Perhaps damaged his brain.

ITCHY and CHORUS. *(Quickly:)* Bum bum bum bum bum bum
 bum bum bum bum bum bum bum bum.

(The Chorus leaves as a WAN VICTORIAN HEROINE enters.)

The Wan Heroine's Lament**WAN VICTORIAN HEROINE.**

The wan heroine sang a song so light
 And breezy sunny and hopeful
 That it banished all of his cares and frights
 And made him feel less moeful.
 But alas though he watch me sing my air
 As placid as a checker.
 He was tortured by the mystery
 Of the Plateau called Woodpecker.

CHORUS.

(As the WAN HEROINE accompanies with very high scales:)

Alas, alas, alas, alas, alas, alas, alas!

He was tortured by the mystery
 Of the Plateau they called Woodpecker
(Legato:) And the funny old man en-ters and
 changes the tone
 Of the play!

*The Obligatory Patter Song***FUNNY OLD MAN.**

I'm here to sing the patter song
The obligatory patter song
That kind that you can prattle to
And rattle off
And muddle through
It's amusing and it's popular.
It need not be grammatical.
I can say whate'er I wish to:
Sheep parts sputnik buttocks tactical!
There's a tricky bit right in here
That I cannot get my tongue around.
It makes me worry so I wish I'd left and had not hung around
About rubber baby buggy bumpers in Unique New Yo-ork's streets
And the sixth six sheik who kept six sick sheep
Upon his six slit sheets!
I've been practising my breath control
For months to get this damn song right
I thought I had it but I swear I caught
Pneumonia late last night
I'm almost finished though so I'm beginning to feel fabulous
And then we'll have a visit from Professor Unfrenabulous!

CHORUS. (*Abruptly coming on:*)

He swears he's sick he doesn't lie
He saw the doctor, thought he'd die
But now he feels quite fabulous
Bring on that Unfrenabulous!

(Long pause, expectantly.)

ITCHY. (*Recitative:*) I'm singing this recitative. It's a part of an opera or operetta...or even a muuuu-sical...without a set tune. Its purpose is to provide narrative development...

KNEE. Are you saying that Unfrenabulous has missed (*Crescendo:*) his CUE?!

ITCHY. (*Falling:*) Yes, I do.

ITCHY and KNEE. Then it's...

It's Time for the Finale

ITCHY, KNEE and CHORUS. ...time for the Finale
the impressive Finale
with harmony, diminishment, pause and rally!
It builds to a climax impressive and keen
With a rousing rendition of "God Save the Queen!"
God save our gracious queen
Long live our noble queen
God save our queen...

(Sound effect: a woodpecker. The CHORUS freezes on first hearing it. Pause. They begin to sing again. There is a second volley of woodpecker pecking, and the CHORUS turn their heads in carefully blocked random directions. Pause. A third volley of woodpecker sounds. They scurry off.)

ITCHY. That was quite a finale.

KNEE. Oh, my God. I think...I'm beginning to understand all of this.

ITCHY. Yes?

KNEE. You, me. All of this. We're not sitting in my house talking to each other about theatre.

ITCHY. We aren't?

KNEE. No. We are actually—in a play!

ITCHY. Really?

KNEE. Yes.

ITCHY. Well. That's a let-down.

KNEE. What's wrong?

ITCHY. Oh, I hate this self-reflexive theatre shit.

KNEE. If that's the end, I suppose we might as well fade to black.

ITCHY. Why the hell not?

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!

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