

Can This Be England?

By

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(Show & Tell Theatre Company)

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Introduction

The intention of “Show and Tell Theatre Company” is to devise a play which can be used as a consciousness raising exercise, and as the first part of a discussion evening.

Scripts are carried throughout and there is no attempt to give a ‘finished’ performance. It is as if the audience is looking in on an early rehearsal. This makes it much easier to perform the play anywhere and with little preparation.

The actors not performing are seen by the audience sitting to the side of the acting area, supplying effects where necessary and changing small pieces of costume to denote different characters.

The positioning of the props to right or left of the stage area before the start of the play is important.

The idea is that play is followed by a discussion and a chance to tell stories.

Notes

ONE plays KATE

TWO plays PENNY and ABBY

THREE plays SUSIE, THE HEALTH WORKER & FRAN.

Can This Be England?

SCENE 1. KATE'S LIVING ROOM

The acting area has a table placed more or less centrally with a chair stage right.

The actors are first of all just referred to by a number, but in this scene ONE will play KATE, TWO will play PENNY and THREE will play SUSIE.

ONE and THREE enter together, right. ONE sits at the right of the table. She carries her script which she leafs through looking confused. THREE is similarly confused by her script.

ONE: This is really confusing.

THREE: The script or the benefits?

ONE: Both. But the benefits mostly.

THREE: There are just so many of them.

ONE: I know..... I'm supposed to be Kate, aren't I?

THREE: Yes... I think so.

ONE: Disability unspecified. Has a carer.....oh, and a cat.

TWO enters and stands at the table between them. She looks slightly less confused. The leafing through the scripts continues.

TWO: We'll have to say it's happening at a particular time. Say towards the end of 2012?

THREE: Yes, otherwise it'll be out of date when we do it.

TWO: Exactly. There's this thing called P.I.P. coming in for a start.

ONE and THREE look at her aghast and then go back to their scripts.

THREE: Oh, I'm Susie, Kate's sister..... I've broken my wrist. I'm in plaster and on the phone! How will that work?

TWO: I'm Kate's carer, Penny. But she'll be off by then. I can come on sort of invisibly and hold your script.

THREE: Thank you. (Two exits, right)

ONE: Well, we'd better get on with it or the audience will leave.

THREE: Right. (to the audience, as THREE goes off right and sits out of the acting area). This is now Kate's living room.

KATE has closed her eyes. A moment of quiet. Then PENNY enters, right, putting on her jacket or otherwise showing that she is getting ready to leave.

PENNY: I'm just off, Kate..... Oh, sorry, were you asleep?

KATE: No, just resting my eyes for a moment.

PENNY: Right. Your tea's ready on the side. It's Thursday. Can you remember if it's the grey bin or the re-cycling bags?

KATE: Grey bin, I think.

PENNY: I'll put it out as I go.....

KATE: Thanks.... What are you doing this evening?

PENNY: Can't decide. We might go down the pub. There's a darts match.we might get a takeaway and put our feet up in front of the telly....What about you? Any of your nice music on?

KATE: I can't. I've got to do the(choosing her word) flipping form.

PENNY: Oh, I'd call it worse than that if I were you. Can't you have your music on in the background?

KATE: Can't concentrate on both.....Have you seen Tigger?

PENNY: Not around.

KATE: I know you don't like mice –

PENNY: (looking round anxiously) No, I don't like mice. Have you had one in here? Did he bring one in?

KATE: Yes, I think he must have finished it off though.

PENNY: Oh, no. Oh, I'm glad you didn't tell me. No wonder he hasn't eaten his food..... Anything else I can do?

KATE: No, thanks very much, Penny. See you tomorrow.

KATE stares at the form, which is her script. PENNY is going when she suddenly turns back

PENNY: I know what I was going to tell you! That Mrs Bunting.

KATE: What about her?

PENNY: I bumped into her in the Co-op. Our trolleys collided round the end of an aisle. Said she'd seen you out in the town and you were looking well. Were you on the mend?

KATE: *(puzzled)* Seen me? In the town?

PENNY: Must have been when you went for that eye test.

KATE: Oh. Meg drove me. It was one of my bad days. Dropped me off outside the opticians. I just walked across the pavement and into the shop. Then she picked me up afterwards. That woman!... Well, I never saw her.

PENNY: It probably wasn't her at all. One of her spies. She's got three sisters and umpteen children and nephews and nieces. They all live within a few streets of each other and they're on their mobiles the whole time. Not a thing happens in this place but they don't know about it. Her house is a branch of the Department of Work and Pensions, you know.

KATE: Yes, I do know. ...What did you say?

PENNY: I said you were long term disabled and you had your good days and your bad days.

KATE: What did she say?

PENNY: Nothing. She just looked at me....She's pig ignorant.

KATE: Oh, never mind..... You go.

PENNY: Well, I thought I'd better tell you.

KATE: Yes.

PENNY: And don't do too much writing. You'll ruin your eyes.

KATE: Bye.

KATE stares at the form for a moment or two, sighs and puts it down again

KATE: I like to think of Tigger. Out and about. I know exactly where he goes. He goes down to the bottom of the garden and jumps onto the coal bunker. Then onto the wall. On the other side there's an old pear tree. He climbs down that. And then he's in long grass. And he's not Tigger anymore, he's Tiger. And he stalks as if he's in a jungle. It gets wilder and wilder down there. We're lucky. Not many people know about the place. There's even a stream. A bit overgrown but he likes to drink out of it. I think there must be a spring because the water bubbles up....

FX. KATE's phone rings and she mimes picking it up.

Hello?

THREE as SUSIE walks onto the stage, from right, miming carrying a mobile phone. She holds her arm as if in a sling. TWO might hold her script. SUSIE's husband, Kevin, interrupts the phone conversation constantly but only SUSIE can hear him.)

SUSIE: Hello, Kate, darling. I'm ever so sorry. I know it's been ages. Things are really difficult here. You'll never guess what! I've broken my wrist. I fell off my bike. Honestly of all the daft things.....Oh, shut up Kevin. I hadn't had a drop. I lost my balance, that's all... It's making life so complicated, Kate, darling, and I can't come and see you because I can't drive the car. I have to go everywhere by bus and you know what the buses are like round here.... Non-existent....But everyone's being so kind. Except Kevin. He just grumbles all the time because of course he's having to do extra. He's having to (loudly and pointedly) get off his fat btm and come out of retirement and actually help me....He's just about to take Hannibal out for a walk.... Aren't you Kevin?....(off the phone) No, Hannibal isn't a waste of space. If anybody's a waste of space, Kevin, you are! His lead's in the usual place on the back of the door. Don't you want to send your love to your sister-in-law.....What?....(back to KATE) Kev sends his love, Kate. How are you darling? Are you managing?

KATE: Yes, I'm managing. I'm fine. You just take care of yourself. I'm so sorry about your wrist.

SUSIE: Well, if I came to see you it would mean three buses.... People are ever so kind though. As soon as they see the plaster they start wanting to help. Carry bags of shopping and so on. And I've had so many offers of cooked meals. People just leave little dishes of stuff on the back doorstep. Because Kevin can't even boil an egg, you know.....My goodness this has given me a lot more sympathy for people like you, Kate. Thank heavens you've got Penny and everyone supporting you. That's such a relief to me. Is everything going all right?

KATE: Yes. Yes, really. Don't worry Susie.

SUSIE: Well, Kevin would drive me over in an emergency. You know that, don't you darling. I've got four more weeks in this thing. I can't tell you what a relief it'll be to get it off. My arm itches, you know. I had to ring the NHS Helpline, I was going mad. They said stick a knitting needle down inside the plaster and give it a good scratch! Who'd have thought of that?

KATE is feeling very tired and needs to end the call.

KATE: Goodbye, Susie. Thanks for ringing.

SUSIE: Bye, darling.

SUSIE and TWO go off the acting area, left, talking to Kevin)

It is on the back of the door, Kevin. You're not looking properly. Maybe it's under your coat.... Oh, do stop grumbling!... No, it isn't raining.

KATE "puts down her phone".

KATE: (sighs) I sometimes wish I had an arm or a leg in plaster. It's an instant message. I need help. And also it says that the disability is temporary. You can look forward to getting back to normal.....It's not really an advantage looking as if there's nothing wrong with you.....

ONE stands and comes out of the character of KATE.

END of SCENE

SCENE 2. PORTAL HOUSE, COLCHESTER.

Actors TWO and THREE return to the acting area and all three are now themselves again, and consulting their scripts.

ONE: So, Kate's filled in the form the ESA 50, and it's now 3 weeks later and she's been summoned to an interview. I'm going to stay as Kate all the way through just so we don't get confused. Is that right?

TWO: Yes, that's what we decided. I'm really not in this next bit so I'll sit it out. (*TWO leaves the acting area, right.*)

THREE: I'm not sister Susie in this next bit. I'm the Health Worker for ATOS and I'm interviewing Kate.

THREE exits right. ONE goes off, left, and brings on the second chair which she places a little away from the table. She places the box on the chair. Offstage, ONE puts on a jacket and picks up a handbag. She now sits nervously at the side of the stage as if in a waiting room. TWO brings on lap top, which she places on the right side of the table to give the effect of an office.

TWO This is now Portal House, Colchester.

FX. A mobile phone starts to ring. THREE enters right as the Health Worker (HW). She carries a handbag and rummages through looking for the phone.

HW: Damn these bags! You can never find anything. Where is it!

After further rummaging she finally mimes retrieving phone.

FX. Ringing tone stops.

Yes? Oh, hello Jan, No...Not yet. (*glances at watch*) It's only just half past. Yes, there's just one at the moment. She can wait a few minutes. (*Listens intently*) Well....I did tell you, didn't I?.....He didn't... No!... Yes...well I know I'd have done the same....yes...yes....(*laughs*) NO! Well... listen.... I'll ring you later...No, it shouldn't take long. (*presses keyboard of computer*).. it looks open and shut. I'm seeing 15 today.. yes, yes I know. Look. I'd better go.. Yeah, OK see you later.. Bye...

HW ends call, taps into the computer, stares at the screen

HW: Right, best get on with it.

Gets to her feet, crosses towards the centre of the acting space, opens "invisible" door, calls through

Mrs. Wright? Katherine Wright?

KATE: Yes.

HW: Come in. (Returns to desk, stands watching as KATE enters the room) Sit down (indicates the second chair. KATE crosses to the chair and hesitates, looks uncertainly at the box.)

Just lift the box. Put it over there (indicates a place 2 or 3 paces away) Now bring the chair a bit closer....(Indicates the side of the desk.)

KATE: Oh, yes... right... (goes through the action with the box, finally lifts the chair and carries it to the side of the desk. Sits)

I've bought my copy of the ESA50 form with me (rummages in bag, brings out envelope, places it on desk) I wasn't sure

HW: (ignoring envelope, staring at screen. Throughout the next few interchanges HW doesn't look at KATE at all. She focuses on computer.) Just to confirm.. you are Katherine Wright, 41 Seymour Avenue Great Rickling. Date of birth 19th October 1966?

KATE: That's right.

HW: How far away is that then?

KATE: Great Rickling? About 60 miles I think.

HW: And you last worked....?

KATE: (thinking) It must be six, no, seven years. I was doing an environmental project with Anglian Water and I.....

HW: (taps screen) .. and you have been on Employment Support Allowance ever since?

KATE: Yes. I tried going back but my doctor... he told me it was too soon.. I got exhausted again... you know, just ... well, he was right. My doctor.

FX Mobile phone starts ringing in KATE's handbag.

KATE: Oh dear, sorry... I'll just.. (She locates the phone in her bag and switches it off.) Sorry.

FX. End mobile phone ringing.

HW: You're supposed to switch it off in here. There's a notice.

KATE: It's my brother in law's. Or it was. He gave it to me. I get nervous when I'm out.

HW: (after a pause) How did you get here this morning?

KATE: Oh.. er... Meg, my friend, my neighbour really, she drove me. She's just gone into town to do some shopping.

HW: (tapping into computer).....travelled 60 miles by car.....

KATE: I didn't drive...I mean... I can.. could... but I don't at present because of....I just travelled in a car..

HW: (finally looking at KATE) That's what I've put—(indicates computer)

KATE: Only, it's just that when you said "travelled by car" it sounded as if I might have been the driver and I wasn't. I couldn't.

HW: (after a pause) Can you move your feet?

KATE: Sorry?

HW: Your feet. Can you move them?

KATE: Well yes, of course I can. You saw me. I walked from.....(indicates the door)

HW: Can you wriggle them for me?

KATE: Now?

HW: Just wriggle them. Wriggle your feet.

KATE does so. HW watches then types something into the computer

HW: How did you find it, moving the chair? Hard, easy?

KATE: Well, it's only a chair.

HW: And the box....you carried that OK?

- KATE: *(slightly confused by the question) It's an empty box.*
- HW: So...hard, easy? Do you have stiffness anywhere at the moment?
- KATE: I don't today. It's just when it's really bad, I can't do anything.....
It's all in here.*(pushes the envelope on the desk towards HW)*
- HW: We just need an accurate picture. So, no muscle aches and pains.
(enters something into computer) OK. Tell me what you did yesterday. Can you tell me a bit about that?
- KATE: *(now becoming distressed has started to rock slightly back and forth)*
Yesterday? Oh, it was Thursday wasn't it. Grey bin day. *(pauses)* I'm trying to think. Penny came, my helper. She made my tea. I went to the park, just sat in the sun for about half an hour. It was so lovely, all the flowers were out -
- HW Did you meet anybody?
- KATE: No. I don't talk to many people. I finished my library book while I was there. I remember that. And when I got back I had my tea but I can't remember what Penny left me.. ... I'm not being much help am I?
- HW: So, how far did you walk yesterday- roughly?
- KATE: Er..... about a quarter of a mile I suppose. Maybe a bit less... I like to try to do things when I feel OK.
- HW: So you managed to walk to the park unaided?
- KATE: Unaided?
- HW: Was anybody with you to help?
- KATE: No... I had my stick though, just in case. *(HW now turns and types into the computer, peers carefully at screen. She turns to KATE who is clearly anxious)*
- HW: Can you manage to shower by yourself or wash?
- KATE: Penny sometimes helps me in the shower. She stays outside and is there in case I need her. It all depends.
- HW: And dressing? Can you dress yourself?

- KATE: *(slightly affronted)* Of course I can! This is ridiculous! I've already said all this in the questionnaire. Sometimes I haven't even got the energy to talk to my sister on the phone. My doctor understands *(pauses, almost crying)* I just get exhausted by..... well, just sitting is all I can do. Some days I just have no energy
- HW. *(looking at watch)* Unless there's anything you aren't clear about Mrs Wright, I think we've finished.
- KATE: Oh, is that it? I thought you'd ask me about my medication... stuff like that.
- HW: That's not my job. I just try to see if you are capable of working. Your doctor deals with the medication side of it.
- KATE: Oh. I see. So that pantomime with the box.....and wanting to know what I did yesterday.....
- HW Mrs Wright, you do realise this is a Work Capability Assessment interview? We need an accurate picture of what you can do.....
- KATE: *(distressed)* Accurate? But it's ridiculous. You can't know . You can't tell how I feel.. just because I could go for a walk yesterday.. it doesn't mean I can do it today.. it all depends... I get so tired, you know, it feels as if I 'm carrying lead weights ... and I can't ...I freeze sometimes and I have to sit and wait before I can get home....and in the shops the words won't come and I can't find my purse...and
- HW: *(stands and comes around her desk)* That's all for now Mrs. Wright. Don't upset yourself. You'll hear from the Dept. of Work and Pensions in due course,. They'll let you know the decision.Do you need to claim expenses? If so, just pick up a form at reception on your way out. Thank you.
- KATE: Thank you!

HW escorts Kate to the "door" shows her out, returns to her desk, enters something into the computer then mimes taking her mobile from her bag, opens it, scrolls and listens.)

HW: Oh, hi, Jan, it's me again. Yes, I've got 10 minutes till the next one. How about you? An occupational health report? Oh hell, it's that one is it? Abigail what's it? Isn't she the one who worked in the same office.... yeah..... killed in an accident or something? Didn't they think it was suicide? No...no but it's upsetting (*listening*). It's no joke, is it?

Is she coming in? ...Oh...I see telephone... (*laughs*) well at least she won't need to ask about taking her clothes off.....(*listens*) I thought I'd told you ... no, it was this woman came in last week and started taking her clothes off....yes....yes. right here in the office... she thought I was going to examine her... as if! No, I could scarcely keep a straight face... I had to tell her.... (*pauses, listening*).... Well best of luck with it... these internal disciplinary's are always worse. At least the usual punters don't know too much... Yeah.. Me too..... See you later. Bye.

END OF SCENE

THREE comes out of character and exits right with lap top.

SCENE 3. KATE'S LIVING ROOM

TWO enters with letter which she puts on the table. ONE removes the chair from left of the table. The box remains on the floor. THREE enters right.

ONE: So, where are we next? Oh, Kate's living room.

THREE: And when are we?

TWO: Three weeks later.

THREE: That long? I'd say the Health worker had made up her mind within five minutes...

ONE: And do we need this?

TWO: The empty box.

THREE: Ah, but is it!

ONE: (*picking it up*) Yes, definitely empty.

TWO: Oh, I see. It could contain a metaphor.

ONE: A very light one.

THREE: Maybe it represents a Pandora's Box of potential woes and misfortune.

ONE: Then I'd say it's been opened and the contents have been released...

TWO: All except for one thing...didn't Pandora shut the lid before Hope escaped?

ONE removes the box from the acting area, taking it off left. THREE exits right. ONE (KATE) sits to the right of the table looking at the contents of an envelope she has just received.

FX. Knock at door. KATE replaces letter on the table.

KATE: It's not locked, Susie.

SUSIE (THREE) enters fiddling with handbag. Both are barely listening to the other, caught up in their own worlds.

SUSIE: Hello, darling! More Forms? You must be sick of them! (*She goes to take the letter*)

KATE : (*Snatches it back*) It came in the post...the results of my medical...

SUSIE : Oh, that's good...

KATE: No, it isn't. They say I'm fit. Capable of work...

SUSIE: But that is good. You must feel like going mad stuck in here. If you're better you can start looking forward to things, getting out...

KATE: My benefit has been stopped. The bills... I don't know how I'll manage...

- SUSIE: I know when the Doctor said the plaster could come off I could have hugged him. So heavy - like wearing a suit of armour. I thought wonderful, now I can get back to normal. It was awful having to rely on Kevin - not depend, just rely!
- KATE: Capable of work – what work? She asked me if could lift an empty box, move it a few feet - I never dreamed that was a job selection test.
- SUSIE: Lots of places use boxes. Charity shops – that would be a nice little job. You know how much you love your books – I bet you could get first dibs on new donations. Might find a rare first edition.
- KATE: But they mostly use volunteers...it doesn't pay.
- SUSIE: Oh I wouldn't say that, supporting a worthwhile cause, giving back to society –
- KATE: No Susie, I mean it doesn't pay me money. I need an income. It says she examined me - that she asked specific medical questions. none of that happened!
- SUSIE: Are you sure, Katie? Even on a good day you can forget things.
- KATE: Well, yes, I must have been having a marvellous day then, to be so fit and ready for the job market. This is all lies.
- SUSIE: I only thought you'd be glad of a change. I really don't know how you stand it, cooped up in here day after day...
- KATE: I don't have much of a choice, unless you consider the alternative.
- SUSIE: A charity shop?
- KATE: Dying...
- SUSIE: Oh Kate, don't say such a horrible thing! These people must know what they're doing, they're professionals.
- KATE: Are they? This doesn't reflect the interview I had. I need to phone the Job Centre – to tell them it's a mistake.....
- SUSIE: Why don't you ask to speak to that woman you said was helpful?
- KATE: Helpful?

SUSIE: Yes. You remember...it was last year, I think. She had a nice name...whatever was it? Abigail something.

KATE: Abigail. Oh, yes.

END of SCENE. ONE exits left with letter. THREE steps out of role

SCENE 4. THE JOB CENTRE

TWO holding name badge comes on to join THREE

THREE: So in this next scene you are an advisor working at the Job Centre.

TWO: A specialist advisor –

THREE: Specialising in what?

TWO: (consulting script again) Persecuting vulnerable people I think.

THREE: No!

TWO: Not officially. It's dealing with all the health related benefits.

THREE: How many are there?

TWO: Now you've got me....Incapacity Benefit, Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance....

THREE: Disability Living Allowance?

TWO: No, astoundingly that comes under a different department - not the Job Centre.

THREE: One thing less for your character to worry about.

TWO: She's got enough to deal with. Nearly two hundred people on her caseloads.

THREE: And now Kate's coming to see her.

THREE exits right. TWO puts on name badge and sits right of the table. THREE brings on laptop and places on the table. ONE brings on chair from left. She puts on jacket and picks up handbag and sits left of the acting area.

ABBY: (STANDING UP FROM BEHIND TABLE) Katherine Wright?

KATE enters

KATE: Yes

ABBY: Take a seat. Now, tell me what I can do for you.

KATE sits. ABBY sits.

KATE: Well, I remembered you were very helpful when we spoke last year –

ABBY: (referring to the screen) Oh, yes, a phone interview –

KATE: Yes. I'm just so worried about this letter. (she passes it to Abby who reads it) It says I'm capable of work. I've passed – or failed – depending on how you see it. I phoned the benefit office for help and they said my ESA will now stop but I can claim Unemployment - Job Seekers instead -

ABBY: It sounds strange but I have to ask – how do you feel about this?

KATE: I'm devastated - I don't know what I'm going to do –

ABBY: You disagree with the decision?

KATE: Yes! I have my better days and my dreadful days - but to be found fit, able to find a job - to hold down a job - I just can't imagine.

ABBY: Then we can appeal.

KATE: Appeal?

ABBY: Yes, the benefit office didn't tell you that I take it?

KATE: No, no. Job seekers. Available for work.

ABBY: Yes... you're not the first. Shuffling a customer from one benefit to another and hope they just fall through the gap in between. But anyway, the appeal sets out the reasons why you disagree with the decision of the work capability assessment. As soon as the office receives it your money will be paid again. If the appeal is successful you're back in the system.

KATE: And if it isn't?

ABBY: We go to Plan B.

KATE: Which is?

- ABBY: You would need to supply evidence of a change in your condition - not specifically worse, just a change to the original diagnosis.
- KATE: Well, I don't know - it varies, but doesn't exactly change.
- ABBY: Don't let's worry about that for now. I just want to make sure you understand how the whole process works...
- KATE: Yes, thank you, I appreciate that. It's all so complicated. The not knowing, that's even more stressful.
- ABBY: I know. Anyway, your GP, or specialists, if needed, could you get support from them?
- KATE: Yes, I have a lovely GP. I actually managed to speak to him yesterday - he was shocked when I said I was apparently fit for work. Actually, I think more than shocked, offended.
- ABBY: Yes, the system does seem to dismiss what your GP or consultant has diagnosed – after all they're not a bunch of amateurs.
- KATE: There's my disability living allowance, has that stopped? Do we need a separate appeal?
- ABBY: No, that has nothing to do with the Work Capability Assessment – you can receive Disability Living Allowance whether or not you're working.
- KATE: Good –one thing less to worry about.
- ABBY: Yes...although DLA is being replaced with the Personal Independence Payment. It sounds more positive than DLA.
- KATE: The PIP?
- ABBY: Just so it doesn't come as a shock when you're assessed for that.
- KATE: Another medical?
- ABBY: From what I understand, these really are medical assessments, not work related.

KATE: But that's what I expected this time. A medical examination. I thought it would be a doctor - someone who understood my condition.

ABBY: It should have been carried out by a health care professional - but no, not necessarily a doctor.

KATE: And the questions were so odd - didn't seem relevant to me. Could I dress myself, walk a certain amount of steps. I wasn't allowed to explain how the condition affected me. It was all so -

ABBY: Random.

KATE: Yes...and so I wasn't surprised I'd failed to convince them.

ABBY: Would you like to take the appeal form home to fill in, or shall we complete it now. I can pop it in the internal post.

KATE: Now, thank you. I am rather shaky, not sure how long I'd take.

ABBY: There's no rush. Or, although I have been told that my neat handwriting does look like a ransom note, I can complete it for you. I am only allowed to write exactly what you want me to.

KATE: Really, that would be wonderful.

ABBY: O.K then.

END of SCENE

ONE goes off right with lap top and handbag. TWO remains onstage.

SCENE 5. FRAN'S LIVING ROOM

THREE enters from right as FRAN. She brings on needlework. TWO removes name badge

THREE: So you are still the advisor and you've popped in to visit your mother? What's your name again?

TWO: Abigail.

THREE: I think it would be - Abby.

TWO: Abby, yeah. And what about you...maybe Hilda?

THREE: Hilda! Oh no! A Hilda wouldn't have an Abigail for a daughter. Something classic and timeless. Francesca - yes, Francesca. Fran for when she wants to be a bit more trendy.

TWO: Good, that's settled...except, as you're playing my mother there's only one thing I'm going to call you...

THREE: Oh dear - which is?

TWO: Mum.

TWO exits right. THREE is now playing FRAN. She sits left of the table doing her needlework. ABBY enters from right. She takes up a pose and does the Brownie Guide Salute.

ABBY: I promise that I will do my best, do my duty to God. To serve the Queen and help other people and to keep the Brownie Guide Law.

FRAN: You can still remember it dear. You always loved being a Brownie.

ABBY: I did. Took that vow seriously - putting others before myself, doing a good deed every day. Mum, was I - what's that Victorian word - was I a prig?

FRAN: No...stubborn, independent, cheeky. Pretty much the same as you are now just shorter. Not the description of a prig.

ABBY: Himself says I just liked belonging to a junior paramilitary organisation.

FRAN: Well you were very keen on joining the actual army for a while.

ABBY: Until I realised that joining up meant giving up my right to question the moral choices about the work, where you were sent, the conflicts. And yet, that's what I am now. Conflicted. And I'm not in the army.

FRAN: Every job has its own rules, Abby.

ABBY: It was just today, even though I've heard it so many times before, today I really took offence at the message from our team meeting. Earn those Brownie Points. Reach the targets by any means necessary. Suspend benefits, reduce benefits, cancel benefits.

FRAN: You can't just invent things to catch people out. *(pause)*

ABBY: No? Do you remember those badges I used to work towards?

FRAN: I should do - it was me who sewed them onto your uniform - you never did aim for the needlework one. Little embroidered patches...Cookery, Hostess...and of course, the Writer and Reader ones.

ABBY: Badges of honour. So if I came in now and said, *Mum I've earned some Brownie Points, can you sew these new badges on my sleeve - Causing Distress (financial and mental), Manipulating Statistics, Creative Caseload Reduction...* how would you feel about that?

FRAN: That I probably wouldn't rush for the sewing box. Is it really that bad?

ABBY: I keep thinking about Nina...when she said – *if I kill myself, do you think it would change anything? Will the managers realise what it is we're doing to people?* (ABBY sits)

FRAN lays down her sewing, gets up and moves towards ABBY

FRAN: No job is worth that – suicide as a means of protest?

ABBY: I know.

FRAN: It was a terrible accident, Abby - a coincidence.

ABBY: I know, Mum. But I can't stand the thought that during what turned out to be her last months of life, she had felt so morally compromised by her job.

FRAN: And do you? (*moves away*)

ABBY: Yes. I wouldn't mind if the system was fair - crikey, I wouldn't mind if it was logical. But it's deliberately complicated and constantly changing and yet the same schemes and philosophies are just recycled.

FRAN: The deserving poor. That was a Victorian favourite. Perhaps they'll bring back infant chimney sweeps and universal rickets next.

ABBY: Don't give them any ideas!

FRAN: If you're that unhappy perhaps you should take some leave - or look for another job.

ABBY: Easier said than done - I am in the business of knowing how tough the job market really is.

FRAN: Just remember, your health comes first. We don't want your bowels getting irritable again.

ABBY: My bowels have been irritable for months, Mum. I'm just trying to take each day at a time. Maybe I could book some holiday...before I'm forced to take sick leave. Wouldn't want to affect the office statistics by being ill again - just two more days day off and I've hit the official trigger point.

FRAN: Oh, is that a sort of anti-Brownie Point....?

ABBY: Exactly! It starts a disciplinary process.

They both laugh wryly.

END OF SCENE

TWO exits with needlework, right, THREE sheds the character of FRAN for the HEALTH WORKER

SCENE 6. A TELEPHONE CONVERSATION - HEALTH WORKER AND ABBY

ONE brings on laptop, and places at right side of table.

THREE: Oh dear, I'm back as the Health Worker from ATOS.

ONE: Poor Kate, what now!

THREE: No it isn't Kate, it's Abby...

They wait expectantly for TWO to realise she is 'on'.

TWO: (looking at script) Yes – she got worse – she had to take time off.

THREE: And ATOS deals with customers and staff.

ONE: Because Abby exceeded her trigger point. Goodness, the system certainly moves fast when it wants to...

ONE exits right. TWO becomes ABBY. She is at home. The HEALTH WORKER sits on chair to right of table. She mimes dialling a phone number.

FX phone rings. ABBY switches on mobile phone.

ABBY: Hello.

H.W: Hello, is that Abigail?

ABBY: Oh.... Yes, it is.

HW: This is ATOS. You've been referred to us as part of a disciplinary process and my occupational health report will be passed to your managers for them to make a decision on your future employment. Has that been explained to you?

ABBY: Yes, yes it has...

HW: Are you OK to talk to me? Somewhere private?

ABBY: Yes, I'm at home.

HW: Not at work?

ABBY: Well, no. I haven't been allowed to go back. Until this report is made – or maybe -

HW: Can you give me a brief outline of how your sickness absence started?

ABBY: Yes, I had stress related IBS for three months - kept going into work – symptoms, general health getting worse. Didn't want to take any time off – we were, are, all living in a culture of fear where sickness absence is concerned. Sorry, just, can't really believe it's come to this.

HW: That's OK. Have you had Irritable Bowel Syndrome before - did something trigger it this time?

ABBY: Yes, and yes. A couple of bouts a few years ago but nothing like as prolonged. And yes, one of my colleagues was killed - an accident...but what made it worse, if that makes sense, is a few months before she had talked about killing herself because of work related stress.

HW: But it was an accident?

ABBY: Yes, a road traffic accident. But - I just couldn't stop thinking about what she'd said that time before. I've had some really demanding jobs over the years, stressful – but I never heard my colleagues talking openly about suicide as a means of protest...

HW: Well, I'm afraid I can't comment, it's not really relevant –

ABBY: *(gets up angrily and moves around)* Yes it is. You asked why I went off sick, what triggered my illness and so I've told you. I didn't go into work one day and a customer was violent, aggressive. That does happen in Job Centres when people are desperate, feel powerless. Or are just plain nasty. But it never happened to me - quite the opposite. Day after day of frightened, distressed people. It gets to you.

HW: And how do you feel now about a return to work? Your last statement of fitness for work from your GP put the reason as stress and anxiety.

ABBY: Yes, after about a week when I'd finally been off work with the IBS and what turned out to be shingles, I was advised that disciplinary proceedings were starting, and since then I've been increasingly stressed and anxious.... (*sits*)

END of SCENE

THREE removes lap top and replaces chair as for Kate's living room. Three exits right.

SCENE 7. A SPLIT SCENE – KATE AND ABBY

ABBY remains seated on left. KATE enters from right and sits. They address the audience.

KATE: It's the waiting –

ABBY: - that really gets to you.

KATE: Waiting for the post –

ABBY: - used to be so exciting. Birthday cards –

KATE: - parcels. The anticipation of little Christmases all year round.

ABBY: But when you're an adult it's pretty much the low-level dread of bills –

KATE: - depressing bank statements. And now this. Waiting for *the* letter -

ABBY: - the report. Their decision.

KATE: Their decision.

Three comes on and hands a brown envelope to both ABBY and KATE.

ABBY: On my future...

KATE: ...my future.

KATE reads her letter silently and looks relieved.

ABBY: *(stands) Dear Abigail, Following our meeting and subsequent ATOS report, I have decided that as your absence can no longer be supported I must dismiss you. You will be paid 100% compensation. (sits)*

KATE exits with letter right. Pause.

ABBY: *This reflects the efforts you have made to improve your level of attendance. You have the right to appeal. (Pause)*

The right? But not a hope. Time to go and see my old colleagues at the Job Centre. Time to sign on.

ABBY exits right

SCENE 8. FRAN'S LIVING ROOM.

FRAN brings on her needlework, moves chair left back to table. ABBY enters, right.

FRAN: So, how was it?

ABBY: Surreal. *(Sits down.)*

FRAN: You are just as much entitled to Unemployment - Job Seekers, whatever as anyone else.

ABBY: I know Mum. We can't manage just on Mike's income. I need a regular wage.

FRAN: It must have been good to see your friends.

ABBY: Yes - and no. Kept asking how I was feeling, was I better? And looked shocked when I said I'd been perfectly fine for ages I just hadn't been allowed to come back to work once the whole sickness disciplinary process had been started.

FRAN: Perhaps you've helped them – warned them. Shown that no-one is safe.

- ABBY: But all good advisors know that Mum. One accident, one trick of fate and you might lose your job, your home, your sanity.
- FRAN: Still, good for you for going in and making your claim.
- ABBY: (*stands*) Ah, but have I? When I handed over my letter of redundancy, I was told that due to the way my job ended a doubt has arisen on my claim. A decision maker will let me know whether the claim can be allowed.
- FRAN: But you were working for the Job Centre - the Job Centre made you redundant?
- ABBY: Yes Mum. Surreal. Makes Kafka seem like Catherine Cookson.
- FRAN: This doubt business, is it to do with targets?
- ABBY: And a Brownie point for Mum!
- FRAN: But at least you are out of promoting all that anymore, Abby. Be thankful, love, you're in a better place.
- ABBY: I will be Mum, I will be. And for now I'm OK with where I am.
- FRAN: Which is?
- ABBY: The other side of the desk.

End of Scene

THREE exits left with needlework. TWO exits right.

SCENE 9. A SPLIT SCENE – KATE AND SUSIE.

KATE enters right and sits. THREE as SUSIE enters from left, and speaks throughout in a slightly defensive, whiney tone. She carries a hat. KATE and SUSIE each speak directly to the audience but are unaware of each other and freeze when the other is speaking.

KATE The letter came. It came yesterday. I won the appeal. I rang Susie.

SUSIE Now Kate's got her money reinstated she can start to look around her a bit. It's no good sitting about all day I know that - I couldn't do half the things I wanted to with a plaster up to my elbow.... She could get herself a little job in a charity shop or something. I tried suggesting that to her but she wasn't interested. Sometimes she can be very stubborn, but then who knows that better than me... she's my sister. I understand her better than anybody.

KATE I didn't feel anything at first. Just numb. And I suppose angry... that I should have had to beg.

SUSIE (*nodding in the direction of KATE*) It's like I can get my life back now. I've been on call every minute of the day – well, it's felt like that although Penny has been closer and done more for Kate. So I don't feel too bad ... after all she does get paid for it ... but still.....

KATE And then later on Tigger brought a mouse in. They were both running round in here. I used to be able to shut him in the kitchen and rescue the mouse. Usually.... Before I was ill.... I returned lots of them to the wild. I hope they made it. But yesterday.... I was the one shut in the kitchen. I just had to let events take their course. And strangely enough that's when it hit me. When I shut the kitchen door and just stood there.... waiting. And I started to cry. And I carried on crying. Strange things emotions. But true. I thought, I've got the appeal this time and I'm all right. For a bit. But for how long? Because I'll be assessed again. I don't know when. Nobody seems to know.

SUSIE My arm's better now of course but I was 4 weeks in plaster and I still have to go for physio. Have you any idea what it feels like not to be able to shower or even pull your own tights up!? You feel so helpless, and Kevin's no good, moaning all the time about not having a decent home cooked meal. He should try cooking with a broken arm. And he's been on about having a "Staycation" this year whatever that is. It's about money of course, he can be very tight, doesn't want to pay to go abroad this year. He knows how much I love the Maldives and it's 2 years since we were there. But it's no good complaining – we'll probably end up some place on the south coast—Bournemouth or somewhere.

Anyway the day the plaster came off I bought myself this hat to celebrate. What do you think? (*She puts it on, twirls, preens, then exits left.*)

KATE I don't know what happened to yesterday's mouse. Well, I do. When I eventually stopped crying everything seemed quiet in here. I ventured in and Tigger was curled up asleep.... He's outside now and I'm afraid there'll be another one today.

Off stage the cat flap is held up by TWO and the flap flipped up and down

KATE Tigger! Is that you? Are you alone? Oh, I do hope so.

KATE looks round anxiously. She feels trapped.

END of SCENE

AFTERWORDS

ONE, TWO AND THREE gradually drop their characters and look at each other as if they've been on a journey.

THREE: (To ONE) This has really got to you, hasn't it?

ONE: Kate deserved a happier ending.

THREE: Well I suppose, for good or bad, life goes on....

TWO: So, who's to blame?

ONE: Take your pick - ATOS –

THREE: The Job Centre, the DWP –

TWO: The system.

ONE and THREE agree

TWO: But what is the system?

THREE: ATOS, the DWP –

(Pause)

ONE: If no one questions it?

THREE: If no one challenges it?

TWO: If it's just accepted. The system is all of us.

They all face the audience and address it directly.

THREE: But what do you think?

TWO: What do you think?

ONE: And do you have a story to tell?

END OF PLAY

Notes.

ONE plays KATE

TWO plays PENNY and ABBY

THREE plays SUSIE, THE HEALTH WORKER & FRAN.

The intention of "Show and Tell Theatre Company" is to devise a play which can be used as a consciousness raising exercise, and as the first part of a discussion evening.

Scripts are carried throughout and there is no attempt to give a 'finished' performance. It is as if the audience is looking in on an early rehearsal. This makes it much easier to perform the play anywhere and with little preparation.

The actors not performing are seen by the audience sitting to the side of the acting area, supplying effects where necessary and changing small pieces of costume to denote different characters.

The positioning of the props to right or left of the stage area before the start of the play is important.

The idea is that play is followed by a discussion and a chance to tell stories.