

THEATER IS THE THING WITH TENTACLES

by Ed Valentine

(2W, 2 M, 1 GIANT SQUID)

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SETTING:

A stage. Show curtain and proscenium. As the audience enters, there should be at least 5 chairs onstage for the characters in this “play-within-a-play.” (Even better: 3/4 staging, or some of the “real” audience members sitting in seats on the stage with the characters in this play seated among them.) The BOY, the GIRL and the CRITIC take their seats as rest of the audience enters. Two chairs are empty, marked ‘reserved.’

CHARACTERS:

GIRL AND BOY

Younger, hipper theatergoers.

WOMAN

Older, well-dressed theatergoer.

CRITIC

Withered. Inkstained. Smells of coffee, cigarettes, newsprint and binaca.

...and:

THE SQUID

As big and wet and pink as possible.

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SCENE: A show curtain inside a false proscenium. BOY, GIRL and CRITIC take their seats with the rest of the audience. The action begins when an usher leads the actors playing the WOMAN to an empty seat; she fusses with coat and program as the lights lower a bit. Meanwhile, GIRL turns and speaks directly to an audience member.

GIRL

Excuse me. Excuse me - how long does this run? I mean, how long does it go, the whole thing? My husband and I have to go home and have sex.

BOY

Omigosh, honey...

GIRL

Ooh, that sounds really wrong. I mean, we're not sex fiends or anything. We just need to get home and have sex really soon.

BOY

This is so embarrassing...

GIRL

We're trying to have a baby, it's been a problem, kind of. Constantly. So I'm on all these hormones, he has to inject me over and over again.

BOY

Please stop.

GIRL

And then we have sex. At prearranged times. And very very carefully. With strategy. It's like playing mah jongg. It's not as bad as it sounds.

BOY

Actually, it's worse.

GIRL

Why did you say that? Don't you want a baby?

BOY

Yes of course, of course I do, but –

GIRL

It's not his fault. He's not sterile or anything. His little swimmers are fine!

BOY

Please!

GIRL

And it's not my ovaries, either, they're as pink and ripe as grapes in a Napa Valley vineyard. But still... Well, *something's* wrong. I'll tell you this, because you're probably thinking it, and I'll save you the trouble of asking, but we like sex as much as the next folks. We have sex as much as anyone. As much as *you*, I'm sure.

BOY

More, maybe. Maybe more, even!

GIRL

When we can. We're very busy.

BOY

I'm a stock analyst, it's very stressful.
(Lights lower a little more.)

CRITIC

Hey.

GIRL

Really really busy.

CRITIC

Hey. Can you two SHUT UP PLEASE? The play is starting.

BOY

Oh. Oh yes. Sorry. We're very sorry. Sorry.

2

A VOICE

Ladies and Gentlemen: the management requests that you kindly take a moment before the performance begins to make sure your cell phone is turned off.

(WOMAN, CRITIC, GIRL and BOY all reach to turn their cell phones are off, the cells beep noisily as they put them away. Sound: an orchestra tuning up.)

WOMAN

OH NO!

CRITIC

What?

WOMAN

Nevermind – I never said anything. Well, perhaps I did, but it didn't mean anything. Anybody can say anything, you know. Anybody can say anything and it doesn't mean anything for heaven's sake: *Dungarees! Chow-chow! Honolulu! Testosterone!* They're just words. *Avocado! Metatarsal!* Oh, God, I left the oven on. I was cooking dinner, and I knew I had to get to the theater, and I was thinking about the parking and the crowds and the tickets and all, so I forgot -

CRITIC

To turn the oven off.

WOMAN

Right.

CRITIC

Great. *Shhhh!*

GIRL

Ma'am? Ma'am? Shall we call the cops, or the neighbors? We should call someone. Shouldn't we call someone. We should call someone.

(BOY gets out cell phone.)

Put your cell phone away! Respect the stage, the stage!

BOY

It's an emergency! I'll go out in the lobby.

WOMAN

You'll miss the play! Look, I'm sure it's fine. Maybe I didn't leave it on anyway.

BOY

You said you did.

WOMAN

I said I *think* I did, I'm not sure.

CRITIC

Might as well leave. I hear the play's just AWFUL.

WOMAN

Oh my God. Are you serious?

CRITIC

Bad theater. Boring.

WOMAN

Why do I come? Why do I keep coming to show after show, night after night, when I hate them all so much?

CRITIC

Why do any of us come? Oh, I forgot: it's my job.

GIRL

Oh! You're an usher?

CRITIC

No. I'm a Critic - Lucky me. What's your excuse.

WOMAN

Hard to say. I haven't enjoyed anything since *Peter Pan*, when I was four.

CRITIC

Peter Pan – ugh!

WOMAN

See, when I was a little girl I saw this production of Peter Pan, just a grade school production, it wasn't anything fancy, but they managed to do the flying and the Pirate Ship and the Crocodile and –

GIRL

And Tinkerbell!

WOMAN

Well, that was it! Best of all was that moment when, you know, poor Tinkerbell had drunk the poison and her light was going out? I'll never forget it: Peter turns to the audience and says "Clap your hands if you believe in fairies! Clap your hands, don't let Tink die!" And did I clap? Did I ever! I clapped so hard my hands stung for a week afterwards. I wanted so badly for Tinkerbell to live.

CRITIC

All children are idiots.

WOMAN

No, it's not that – I *believed*, oh, I believed. I wish I could feel like that again. Involved in a play. When Peter turned to the audience and asked us to clap – I mean, we were implicated, we were responsible.

CRITIC

You were implicated? You were *manipulated*, that's what you were.

WOMAN

I was four.

CRITIC

Manipulated.

WOMAN

I liked it. I've never gotten over it, never. I keep coming back, night after night, hoping I'll feel the same – and I never do. Never. All theater is boring. I've given up hope, really.

GIRL

Look - it's starting! I'm excited. Aren't you excited?

3

(The curtains part. A giant SQUID performs. Curtains close.)

4

(All sit with mouths agape.)

WOMAN

Did you see that?

GIRL

Oh my God.

CRITIC

What the HELL?

WOMAN

Did you see that?

BOY

Oh my God.

WOMAN

What WAS that? Did you see that?

CRITIC

I saw it, sure – I thought I was seeing a PLAY.

BOY

Honey, are you okay?

GIRL

Yes, yes, don't worry, I'm –

CRITIC

That's not a play.

WOMAN

No, it most certainly is NOT.

GIRL

Just a little frightened.

WOMAN

Well, it's frightening -

BOY

It's just a squid.

CRITIC

It's frightening that no one writes *plays* anymore.

GIRL

I just wasn't expecting a squid, that's all.

CRITIC

Oh, this is absurd.

WOMAN

I don't understand it.

GIRL

You know, I don't even like seafood.

CRITIC

You can't do that – put a squid onstage. It has no meaning, it isn't GOING anywhere, it doesn't amount to anything.

GIRL

I can't even LOOK at calamari - it makes me ill! All those little suckers and tentacles.

CRITIC

It's pronounced 'tentacles,' you know.

GIRL

Tentacles and suckers - even coated in breadcrumbs, squid are so visceral, so alive.

WOMAN

I know exactly how you feel, dear. I don't like sushi. Oh, I know in the circle I travel in, I'm supposed to like sushi, but I don't. Oh look - it's starting again.

5

(Curtains part. The SQUID performs for the 2nd time.)

6

CRITIC

What the hell is this? What the 'scuse me FRIG is going on here? Whatever it is, I hate it.

BOY

I dunno – I think it's kinda interesting.

CRITIC

Oh, PLEASE.

WOMAN

Young man – you do? But why?

BOY

I dunno. You don't see something like this everyday.

CRITIC

No, no you don't, you sure as hell don't! Thank God!

7

(Curtains part. The SQUID appears with a skull in one of its tentacles. In a watery, squeaky sounds, attempts to perform the “Alas poor Yorick...” speech from *Hamlet*. Gives up. Bows. Curtains close.)

8

CRITIC

Who the frig is this play ABOUT? Who's the protagonist?

BOY

Well, the Squid, obviously.

CRITIC

You're gonna tell me the SQUID'S the protagonist?

BOY

Well, of course it is - we're watching it, aren't we?

WOMAN

Intently!

CRITIC

Ye gods, a SQUID? How can a squid be the protagonist? What can a squid do? What can it want? How can it change? Without those things, it's not THEATER!!! Well, I'm just glad there's no direct address in this play. You know what I mean, when actors turn right to the audience and address them directly, as if there was no separation at all. I LOATHE direct address! And I loathe squid. You know what else I hate? Clowns. You heard me: clowns.

GIRL

I hate clowns, too.

BOY

Does anyone like clowns? Anyone?

GIRL

It's what drew us together: a shared hatred of clowns. Oh, here it comes again. Hold me!

9

Curtains part. Music up. The SQUID performs a jazz dance. Hurts a tentacle. Limpes off. Keeps trying to dance anyway. Undulates, even though it's in pain. CURTAINS DO NOT CLOSE. SQUID keeps performing through the following.

WOMAN

Beshrew my heart but I pity the squid.

GIRL

Honey - it scares me.

BOY

Yeah, me too. And also –

GIRL

What?

BOY

Something else. Those tentacles, furling, unfurling. Those thick, meaty tentacles. The goo.

GIRL

It's terrifying.

BOY

And beautiful.

And terrifying. GIRL

Arousing. BOY

You think? GIRL

Well - I'm aroused. BOY

Amazing! GIRL

Yeah. YEAH!
(Overcome, they make out.) BOY

WOMAN
Did you see that? He grabbed her and kissed her.

CRITIC
Don't look at me. You should care more about your oven.

WOMAN
Oh, let it burn! By now, the kitchen's burned down and the walls have burned down and the roof has burned down and the house has burned down. Everything's gone up in smoke already so we might as well sit here and enjoy the play. Look at it - it wants us to enjoy it.

CRITIC
Lady, it's a SQUID.

WOMAN
I know, but oh, what a squid it IS! I wonder if it knows we're here? *Yoo-hoo! Here I am!*
(SQUID responds.)

WOMAN (continued)
SEE? See that? It DOES know we're here, and it glories in us and we glory in it, or we would, if we let ourselves! And that's what it's all about. Look - it wants us to enjoy it. That squid only wants to give us pleasure, it wants to share its joy – as it glories in the lights for a moment –
(The SQUID turns itself upside down, inside out. Glows.)
It makes me feel - I don't know - Something.

BOY
But what?

WOMAN

I can't say! But it does, it gives me a feeling of - I don't know. Joy?

CRITIC

JOY?

WOMAN

Joy's not the right the right word, exactly - words fail me. Look: gooseflesh! I've actually got gooseflesh! And - what's this? Tears? I'm crying. Crying! It's happened. It's HAPPENED! I'm involved, I'm engaged, I'm alive! Finally! At last!

(WOMAN and SQUID transfixed by each other.)

CRITIC

You suckers! Suckers! I can't believe you're falling for this. The Emperor has no boxers, okay? THERE'S NOTHING THERE! No characters, no conflict, no rising action, no climax, no catharsis, no conclusion! For God's sake, there's no major dramatic question in a SQUID! It's just an object...

WOMAN

An object of power!

BOY

That evokes feelings.

CRITIC

Of loathing!

GIRL

Or fear!

WOMAN

Or longing, too – intense...

GIRL

Abject fear - terror!

CRITIC

BULLSHIT. What's it's MEANING?

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