EXTRACT

THE CRITIC

a play

by

Alex Broun

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The Critic

was first performed by

Hullabaloo Theatre

at

The Crypt Theatre – The Cat & Fiddle Hotel, Balmain, Sydney,

on **the 3rd of May, 2006,**

with the following cast:

ALAN FISHER: **Bren Foster**

KARL ANDERTON: **Richard Mason**

The production was directed by **Felicity Nicol,**
produced by **Louise Tychsen** with Dramaturgy by **Adam Gelin**, design by **Rebecca Williams** and lighting design by **Larry Kelly**.

Characters

KARL ANDERTON - a theatre critic, 50s.

ALAN FISHER - a playwright, 30s.

Scene

The living room of a suite in a shabby hotel.

Two tatty chairs and in front of them, a coffee table.

Near one wall is a mini-fridge next to a chest of drawers. On the chest of drawers is a phone.

Upstage left a door leads into the hotel corridor. Another door leads into a bathroom/bedroom area. Faded prints adorn the walls.

Time

The present.

“Alas, good friend, what profit can you see
In hating such a hateless thing as me?”

- “Lines to a Reviewer”,
P. B. Shelley

1. Afternoon

DARKNESS

WE HEAR A KNOCK AT THE DOOR. SILENCE. THE KNOCK IS REPEATED - LOUDER. SILENCE.

THE DOOR UP LEFT OPENS, ILLUMINATING THE STAGE WITH A CHINK OF LIGHT.

KARL: Hello. Hello Mr. Shanley. (PAUSE) Mr. Shanley.

THE DOOR OPENS FURTHER.

IN SILHOUETTE WE SEE **KARL**, BACKLIT BY LIGHT FROM THE HALL. HE STEPS TENTATIVELY INTO THE ROOM.

KARL: Mr. Shanley?

SUDDENLY THE DOOR SLAMS SHUT, PLUNGING US BACK INTO DARKNESS.

IN RAPID SUCCESSION WE HEAR A SERIES OF POWERFUL BLOWS, ACCOMPANIED BY **KARL** CRYING OUT IN PAIN.

A FINAL LOUD ANGRY BLOW. WE HEAR **KARL** COLLAPSE ON TO THE CARPET. LONG PAUSE.

THE LIGHT IS TURNED ON.

AT THE LIGHT SWITCH, WE SEE **ALAN** - 30S, DRESSED SCRUFFILY IN JEANS, T-SHIRT AND OLD BOOTS.

ON THE FLOOR IN FRONT OF THE SOFA LIES **KARL**- 50S, SLIGHTLY OVERWEIGHT, DRESSED NEATLY IN SLACKS, A SHIRT AND COMFORTABLE SHOES.

BESIDE HIM ON THE FLOOR LIES A SOFT LEATHER BAG. A NOTE PAD AND A TAPE RECORDER SPILL OUT ON TO THE FLOOR. **KARL** IS STILL.

ALAN EXITS, RIGHT. HE RETURNS WITH A GLASS OF WATER. HE POURS IT OVER **KARL**'S HEAD.

KARL COMES TOO. HE STARTS TO GROAN. HE OPENS HIS EYES. SUDDENLY HE STARTS TO PANIC REALISING WHAT HAS JUST HAPPENED. HE SCANS THE ROOM QUICKLY

KARL: What is it? What’s going on?

HIS EYES SETTLE ON **ALAN**.

KARL: Oh, it’s you.

ALAN: Sir Karl.

KARL: Alan.

HE HOLDS HIS NOSE, WHICH IS OOZING BLOOD.

KARL: You broke my nose.

ALAN DOES NOT RESPOND.

KARL: I said - you broke my nose.

ALAN : If I broke your nose, you wouldn't be able to talk.

KARL WIPES HIS NOSE WITH HIS HANDKERCHIEF.

KARL: I should’ve known. John Patrick Shanley would never stay in a dump like this.

ALAN : Why'd you come then?

KARL: Curiosity killed the cat. I did think it all seemed a bit odd. Hotel room, mid-afternoon. Knock before entering, but I was blinded by my love for Shanley. Now there's a good writer. An intellect to be reckoned with.

ALAN: Pretentious crap.

KARL: In your humble opinion.

ALAN: Naturally.

KARL: Where is he anyway?

ALAN: New York probably. (AMERICAN ACCENT) “You should check your sources more closely.”

KARL: Thanks for the tip. Nice touch. The accent. You should've been an actor.

ALAN : You'll pardon me if I don't value your opinion too highly.

KARL: Naturally. Can I go now?

ALAN : Not just yet.

KARL LOOKS DOWN AT HIS BAG. HE LOOKS TOWARDS THE UP LEFT DOOR.

ALAN : You'd never make it.

KARL: This is a little extreme, even for you.

ALAN : Perhaps.

KARL: Could I have a towel or something?

ALAN MOVES TO KARL AND PICKS HIM UP.

KARL: What are you doing?

ALAN PUTS **KARL** IN TO A CHAIR.

ALAN GOES TO THE CHEST OF DRAWERS. HE TAKES OUT TWO PAIRS OF HAND CUFFS AND SOME ROPE.

HE GOES BACK TO **KARL** AND CUFFS HIS HANDS TO THE ARMS OF THE CHAIR.

KARL: I'm being taken hostage. How exciting.

ALAN KNEELS AND TIES **KARL**'S FEET TO THE CHAIR'S FRONT LEGS.

KARL: If you're looking for ransom, I wouldn't hold my breath. My ex-wife'll be glad to get rid of me and my parents gave up years ago.

THE TYING IS COMPLETE. **KARL** STRUGGLES. HE IS HELD FAST.

KARL: I could scream.

ALAN : You could also lose half your teeth.

KARL: Good point. You're not going to do anything, are you? (PAUSE) Right. Looks like we're in for an afternoon of high drama? Schaeffer with a touch of Stoppard.

ALAN : More like O'Neill, with a touch of Chekov.

KARL: (LOOKING AT HANDCUFFS) Props too?

KARL BEGINS TO STRUGGLE ONCE MORE. HE STOPS.

KARL: This couldn't just be about the review, surely? It must be more than the review.

ALAN : You've got too much power. It's time to cut you down to size.

KARL: It could’ve been worse. You could’ve written a ten minute play. (WEAK LAUGH) Bad joke. Listen, how about I say sorry and you let me off with a slap on the wrists?

ALAN : The curtain has just come up and we're in for a tense first act.

KARL: I was just doing my job.

ALAN : You did a little more than that.

KARL: I was harsh, yes, I admit it. But justifiably so. The structure was weak and clumsy.

ALAN : "Haphazard and confusing".

KARL: The characters shallow and one dimensional.

ALAN : "Laughable and facile".

KARL: And the whole thing was just so dull.

ALAN : "A tedious evening that is mercifully short."

KARL: The set was good.

ALAN : "At least there's still the furniture to admire.”

KARL: What an impressive memory you have.

ALAN : Melbourne's cancelled.

KARL: You can hardly blame me for that.

ALAN : And Perth and Brisbane.

KARL: They'll be others. You can bounce back. You've done it before.

ALAN : My agent doesn't seem to think so.

KARL: She's ...

ALAN : "Parted company".

KARL: There's plenty of agents.

ALAN : But only one critic.

KARL: You can't just blame me. The other's ...

ALAN : Slammed me too?

KARL: Were just as harsh. What about Peter - and Lloyd?

ALAN : They all take their lead from “the Axe”. They just copy out yours and put it under a different by- line. You know that.

KARL: You're exaggerating.

ALAN : You - know - that!

KARL: Flattering, isn't it? I think I'd like to go home now.

ALAN : I've been working on the play for five years. Not one, not two, not three - five years.

KARL: "Ulysses" took twelve.

ALAN : This was meant to be my come back. My triumphant return. "Once more into the breach".

KARL: It's not my fault I didn't like it.

ALAN : A national tour and then perhaps London. Washington were interested.

KARL: I have to tell the truth.

ALAN : All gone in five hundred words. "Phoenix sinks without trace."

KARL: Don't blame me for the title. Talk to the subbies.

ALAN : They're playing to ten percent. Tony's going to give it a week and then cut his losses. Seven more actors back on the dole cue.

KARL: My responsibility is to my readers. I must report to them what I see, without fear or favour.

ALAN : I got a standing ovation!

KARL: A very short one from half the audience.

ALAN : They stood and applauded my work.

KARL: It was opening night. The house was stacked.

ALAN : Most of the audience hated my guts!

KARL: The play didn't work.

ALAN : People were in tears.

KARL: I'm not surprised. (SLIGHT PAUSE) This is ridiculous. A critic can't close a show. Many a time on Broadway a show has been panned only to go on to become a huge success. Look at Cate Blanchett.

ALAN : We're not on Broadway.

KARL: It's a universal principle.

ALAN : On the day you're review appeared we had ten thousand dollars worth of cancellations. The phones haven't rung for a week.

KARL: The word was out.

ALAN : No one had even seen it. Word of mouth takes at least a week.

KARL: You shouldn't've been depending on a good review. It's ludicrous business sense to depend on a favourable review.

ALAN : We were counting on a bad one.

KARL: Well you got it.

ALAN : What we weren't counting on was the "worse review in Australian theatre history." A grand slam from the Axe.

ALAN GOES TO THE DOOR. STUCK ON THE BACK WITH STICKY TAPE IS A CLIPPING FROM A NEWSPAPER.

ALAN : (READS) "In a many chequered career Fisher has hit a new low. 'Phoenix' is the poorest new Australian play in recent, or ancient, memory."

KARL: I did like Barry Otto.

ALAN : (READS) "But the play. Awful. Awful. Awful."

KARL: It was unfavourable. I grant you that.

ALAN : "The worse review in Australian theatre history."

KARL: That was an exaggeration.

ALAN : She's your editor.

KARL: Your letter just inflamed things. If you'd let it die a natural death.

ALAN : Your reply didn't help.

KARL: I had to answer the allegations. And we did sell a lot of papers.

ALAN : And that's what it's all about isn't it? I was just cannon fodder so you could sell a few more of your precious papers.

KARL: Not at all. We just happened to sell more papers that day than usual.

ALAN : So even more people read about my "lackadaisical mish-mash." How nice.

KARL: That's one way of looking at it. I suppose. The artist must be respected –

ALAN: Respected?

KARL: Treated fairly, but in the end -

ALAN: "Awful. Awful. Awful." Is that being respected? Is that being treated fairly?

KARL: I am a critic. I offer an opinion. A lone voice. It is up to the reader what credence they choose to give it. If you're so passionate about the play, then work on it. Re-write. Tighten up the first act. Give it a new title. Put it on in Canberra. Who knows what could happen?

ALAN : No theatre in Australia would touch it.

KARL: Then stage it yourself. Ever heard of "writer-producers."

ALAN : And where pray tell am I suppose to get the money? Sell my kids?

KARL: The corporate sector. Sponsorship is available.

ALAN : For the "worse Australian play in recent memory"?

KARL: Write something new. Onwards and upwards.

ALAN : You going to pay the bills in the meantime?

KARL: Get a job. Write at nights.

ALAN : I already have two.

KARL: You must have some money put aside.

ALAN : I had fifty thousand of my own money in Phoenix!

PAUSE.

KARL: Well there we have it. The "Ibsonian" secret. And only just into the first act. The crucial motivation that drives the action of the drama. A penniless man driven to a desperate act.

ALAN : This isn't a game!

KARL: Of course not. But if you don't mind me saying this just gives weight to my argument. The show couldn't have been much good if you had to put up the money for it in the first place.

ALAN : You are either very, very brave. Or very, very stupid.

KARL: Come, come. We are reasonable men. We are participating in a reasoned exchange of views.

ALAN : I am far from reasonable at this moment.

KARL: One would think now was the time when you needed to be most reasonable.

ALAN : I had to put up the money. Who was going to touch me after "Strange Days"?

KARL: You can't blame me for that too.

ALAN : You hammered it.

KARL: Well I didn't like it either.

ALAN : You axed me. Twice.

KARL: Maybe you're in the wrong line of work. Now might be the time to face facts. Perhaps you're just not meant to be a dramatist.

ALAN : All my life I've wanted to be a writer.

KARL: I said dramatist, not writer. Many a fine wordsmith has not had the craft to construct a play.

ALAN : I meant plays.

KARL: Well, many are called - few are chosen.

ALAN : Chosen by you.

KARL: I am not God. I give an opinion.

ALAN : You ripped me to shreds.