

'First Draft'

Play by Yale Udoff

ACT ONE

The court is dimly illuminated by one overhead light. DAVID, seated behind the press table, studies some notes. Seated behind the lamp at the Officials' table is GENE. PHIL, PAULA and ROSALIND occupy the team bench. Somewhere near the top of the bleachers sits BERNARD. All are casually dressed and hold a few pages of manuscript.

JOSHUA enters through the small door in the partition wall. He holds, examines the court, heads for the basket, stops, looks up at the net.

MAX

"My boy will be better than them all. Better than them all..."

(JOSHUA moves to the wall, turns a switch: overhead gym lights flare to life. He moves to the top of the circle, turns toward the basket, and lets go an imaginary two handed over-the-head set shot)

JOSHUA

"Swish... Swish..." (Rubs his back; it hurts) "Sometimes I think... I think of it as the greatest moment in my life. We had a lousy team - well, not actually lousy. Just not so good." (Slight pause) "That night... that night they were there - lovely laughing girls with clear smooth skin all rooting for that top jock fraternity against us. I was as hot as I'd ever been. High arcing set-shots that scraped the sky before dropping cleanly through. I was on fire! They couldn't stop me. Swish. That marvelous sound, that sound that says it's all as it should be. Swish... I felt blessed."

MAX

(Moves onto the court)

"Why?" (JOSHUA is not aware of him) "I repeat, Joshua - why?"

JOSHUA

"You--?"

MAX

"Why such a thing, a boys' game, was for you this 'greatest moment'?"

JOSHUA

"You. Here?"

MAX

"Why not?"

GENE

(Stands)

Okay, hold it!

MARK

What's wrong now?

GENE

(Glancing toward David)

Stop me if I'm off the track, David. (To MARK) But it's wrong to do a take when you turn and discover your father, Max. The audience will accept he's in your mind.

MARK

I thought a little emphasis wouldn't hurt.

GENE

It's much quieter. It's in here. (Taps his forehead) So you wouldn't make any melodramatic gestures.

PHIL

Except if you're nuts.

(GENE looks at PHIL critically)

MARK

That's just it. I'm not sure where it's going. (To DAVID) I know we only have a few scattered scenes, bits-'n-pieces, but isn't it a play about a man who gave up his dreams -

GENE

Address your questions to me, not the playwright.

MARK

Sorry.

BERNARD

It is confusing, a little.

GENE

Right, because what we have here are some scenes from a larger work. Which is why we are here - to try and help David clarify, like we all agreed.

MARK

And get first shot at that upcoming production. (To DAVID) You did say they've committed to four weeks this summer in Connecticut?

DAVID

July fifteenth. Rehearsals mid-June.

PHIL

Connecticut in the summer is great. Especially if it leads to New York in the fall. And with your current hit - a lock.

GENE

Okay, back to Mark's "You--?" No, better yet - let's cut it altogether. (To DAVID) Agree? (DAVID nods, signals to GENE. They confer) Sure, it's in the same direction. (To MARK) Mark, cut your response, "You...here?"

MARK

(Upset)

My line again.

GENE

Bernard, you then pick up on...
(Moves to BERNARD, points to the pages)

BERNARD

(To David)

You know, I don't like this name, Max. Too ordinary.

PAULA

(Playfully sarcastic)

Would you prefer Chester?

GENE

Paula! Bernie!

(ACTORS return to their spots)

BERNARD/MAX

Okay, okay. (Slight pause) "Why such a thing - a boy's game - is so fondly remembered. Especially on the day you become forty-five, when boys' games should be far far behind."

JOSHUA

"Never stop, do you?"

MAX

"Because I'm dead doesn't mean I have to shut up. So find a ball, take a shot."

JOSHUA

"The balls are locked away. Jerry has the key. He'll be here soon."

MAX/BERNARD

(Affectionately)

"Jerry - Jerry the shrimp?" (Confused) Jerry - who the hell is Jerry?

PHIL

Me. (Looks to GENE) I think..?

DAVID

He's only mentioned here. I haven't written him yet.

PHIL

Like most of the parts I've played.

DAVID

He'll probably enter...in the second act.

PHIL

Like most of the parts I've played.

PAULA

(To Gene)

No one has asked me, but we really could use some sort of idea as to who this shrimp is.

GENE

(To David)

It would help.

DAVID

(To Mark)

He's an old friend. You grew up together. He teaches at this high school...and every year for the past four or five, he opens the gym at night, on your birthday, so you can come, be alone and shoot around.

BERNARD

So that's why we're in a gym. It was when things went well for Mark - I mean, Josh. Like in the opening monologue?

MARK

Why do I want to be alone on my birthday?

(DAVID seem to grow uncomfortable)

GENE

It's answered later.

MARK

(Looks to pages)

Later? Where?

GENE

(Quickly)

Let's keep moving. Pick up where you left off, Mark.

JOSHUA

"Jerry teaches here. Remember how I begged you to come to our Friday afternoon games. You were always busy."

MAX

"I had a business to run. But forget Jerry for a moment, and tell me how you get from the office to here and it's not even six in the evening?" (Waits) "The suspense is unbearable.."

JOSHUA

"Every year on my birthday, I close the office."

MAX

"Since when!"

JOSHUA

"Since you 'passed away."

MAX

"Died. Say it. It's what happened to me - died."

JOSHUA

(With relish)

"Died."

MAX

"Typical. I die, you immediately play games behind my back."

JOSHUA

(Points)

"Sit at that table."

(MAX holds, then moves toward the table. Shirtboards, from a Chinese laundry, sit on it)

"Sit - at that end of the table. (MAX holds) Please.

MAX

"That's better, Joshua. Good manners I always liked."

(He sits at the other end and watches as JOSHUA numbers the boards from one through nine in bold Arabic numerals, then sits at his end of the table, flashes # 2)

JOSHUA

"Number."

MAX

"What?"

JOSHUA

"You can't have forgotten."

MAX

(Mischievously)

"Of course not. You were going to be better than them all. Number one before you even got to kindergarten."

JOSHUA
"Number - "
(Flashes numbers as indicated)

MAX
"Two."

JOSHUA
"Number."

MAX
"Seven"

JOSHUA
"Number."

MAX
"Four. See how smart your father is."

JOSHUA
"Was."

MAX
"Don't be disrespectful."

JOSHUA
"Number!"

MAX
(Hesitantly)
"Six..."

JOSHUA
"Number!"

MAX
"Nine..."

JOSHUA
"Sure of that?"

MAX
(Confused)
"Nine???"

JOSHUA
(Attacking)
"Are you sure!"

MAX
(With confidence)
"I am. *Are you?*"

(MAX pulls two shirt boards
from under his chair; he
flashes # 6)

MAX
"Number?"

JOSHUA
"...six."

MAX
"Number?"
(Flips # 6 upside down to make
9)

JOSHUA
(Unsure)
"Nine..?"

MAX
"Number?" (Flips # 9 to make it # 6) "Number!"

JOSHUA
"Uh, nine.. - six - no, nine."

MAX
(Rises)
"Stupid! This is six, this is nine."
(MAX starts to take off his
belt. ESTHER rushes in)

ESTHER
"Max, stop it! He's only four. He's afraid of you."

MAX
"Afraid? Who am I - some stranger."

ESTHER
"Be gentle with him."

MAX
"So he'll fall apart! No!" (Flashes #6) "Number?"

JOSHUA
"Siiix - no nine. Six-?"

MAX
(Raging)
"You'll remember it now, now you'll remember-"

ESTHER
"Max, be gentle with him. He'll learn - if you're gentle."

MAX

"Esther, this is my way. Leave us." (Slight pause) "Please."

ESTHER

"Be gentle with - "

DAVID

(Urgently)

Give him a chance, Bernie! (Controls himself. Moves to ROSALIND) Add a line. Say, "Give him a chance. He's only four. Be gentle..." (To BERNARD) Sorry, Bernie.
(Slight pause)

ROSALIND/ESTHER

"Give him a chance. He's only four. Be gentle..."

DAVID

Good. Thank you.

(ROSALIND moves to DAVID)

ROSALIND

Too many gentles in this script. Is that all women are in your mind - gentle, gentle, gentle! How about sexy, passionate, strong -

GENE

(cuts her off)

That's enough, Rosalind. Mark, continue.

JOSHUA

"Why'd you do it? Why did you make me so scared of making a mistake that I never had a chance not to?"

MAX

"That kind of talk is okay for weaklings, not strong men. And you, though you couldn't add were never weak. Only misguided. A painter, feh."

JOSHUA

"I was four. Four! I used to wait for you to come home so I could see how big you were. So all the guys on the block could see that my father had a new Chevy. Four doors."

MAX

"A Chevrolet was never a Cadillac. Anyway, six and nine or nine and six. What was so hard?"

JOSHUA

"Either way those numbers were, for a four year old, his introduction to knowing what it was to hate."

MAX

"Hate? Hate..?"

JOSHUA

"I didn't know what it was called then. I only felt what I later learned had a label, a name to an emotion."

MAX

"A boy four years old hates his father?" (JOSHUA nods. Slight pause) "This hate you say you felt - "

JOSHUA

"Did...feel."

MAX

"Now you could have been angry with me, that would be justified. But to hate, this is totally unjustified. In fact, if you think about it, I was teaching you not one, not two, but *three* big lessons. First, how it feels to hate. Second, and more important, how it feels to be unjustified. (Grandly triumphant) "Third and more important than one and two because it combines both - how it feels to be wrong because you are one hundred percent totally unjustified to feel such hatred!"

ROSALIND

(To Gene and David)

Excuse me. Don't you think I ought to say something more? Don't I exit too quickly? He is my son too.

GENE

Dear, your exit line is: "Give him a chance. He's only four. Be gentle." That is your exit line! (ROSALIND looks to DAVID, shrugs, sits) Bernie, pick it up where you left off.

MAX

(Checks pages; Cheery)

"So how's business, Joshy?"

JOSHUA

"We're the top graphic design house in the city."

MAX

"That's good. I knew you could do it."

JOSHUA

"You never said that to me. Ever."

MAX

"It wasn't something that had to be said. My son could do anything he put his mind to - only natural considering who his father is. Was."

JOSHUA

"Like paint."

MAX

"Listen, you wanted to paint. You painted. I told you what I thought of what you painted, you stopped painting. So like everyone else you had your fling before you became a responsible citizen."

JOSHUA

"Obviously being dead has made you no wiser than you were...before."

MAX

"That is an "opinion".
(GENE's cell phone rings)

GENE

Hold on, hold on. (He listens) Let's take fifteen for coffee.
(ACTORS AD-LIB their agreement.
PHIL and PAULA start out)

BERNARD

(To Phil)
Got any money - I'm out.

PHIL

For me this afternoon is a problem. I mean, I'm here, yet I'm not here. And the truth of the matter is...I could be in so many other spots where people would know I'm there - especially on my day off - when I'm here, but not. And you sweet lady, when do you arrive?

PAULA

Whenever David wants me to.

PHIL

Say things like that to me and life could be wonderful.

PAULA

(Laughs)
Your life.
(They exit. ROSALIND moves to
BERNARD)

ROSALIND

C'mon, I'll buy you a coffee.

BERNARD

I insist you let me pay you back.

ROSALIND

Don't worry, I will. You still owe me from Philadelphia.

BERNARD

The dollar wasn't worth much in 1774.
(They exit.)

GENE ends his call, moves to
DAVID who is at the Officials'
table glancing at the 6 & 9
cards)

DAVID

What do you think?

GENE

How many plays of yours have I directed?

DAVID

Enough.

GENE

That's what my agent says.

DAVID

Fire him.

(They both laugh. Slight pause)

GENE

Every writer, every man, has a story to tell about his
father. What makes yours any different?

DAVID

Perhaps it isn't. Maybe it's the same.

GENE

What does that mean?

DAVID

If it's the same, it's mine as well as yours.
(Slight pause)

GENE

He really use those shirtboards?

DAVID

No.

GENE

C'mon, some fresh air will do you good.

DAVID

I'll stay here, thanks

GENE

Suit yourself. Oh, my agent never said that - my wife did.

DAVID

Then fire her.

GENE

Too expensive. (Moves to the light switch) Save the city some electric.

(He turns off the overhead lighting except for one unit, exits. DAVID picks up the shirtboard marked # 9, examines it. He moves to the top of the circle, lets loose an imaginary set shot)

DAVID

Swish... Swish.

(DAVID'S FATHER, who will always be seen wearing a conservative dark business suit, moves out from behind the stands)

DAVID'S FATHER

I never spoke with an accent. Am I correct in stating that?

DAVID

Correct? Yes...

DAVID'S FATHER

Then why burden me with one?

DAVID

It works for me that way.

DAVID'S FATHER

Wouldn't it be easier to stick to the truth?

DAVID

(Turns to him)

What truth?

DAVID'S FATHER

That my name was not Max. That I spoke English as it should be spoken - without an accent.

DAVID

(Very deliberately)

You will speak the way I want you to speak.

DAVID'S FATHER

Not if I have anything to say about it.

DAVID

There was very little you had nothing to say about.