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flawless leArnlngs**

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FLAWLESS LEARNINGS

A DARK COMEDY IN ONE ACT BY
Kirk Shimano



flawless leArnIngs

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Characters

6 Any Gender plus Additional Students (optional)

TEACHER: A substitute for the day visiting directly from the Uncanny Valley.

EAGLE: A tech enthusiast with the emphasis on enthusiasm.

VULTURE: An independent thinker with a flair for the macabre.

OCTOPUS: A brainy student who is a bit too focused on grades.

PORCUPINE: A contrarian with a strong moral centre.

GARDEN SLUG: A caring classmate, if a bit undistinguished.

ADDITIONAL STUDENTS: Beyond the speaking roles indicated above, additional students can be added to fill the classroom and provide crowd reactions.

Casting Notes

Productions are encouraged to cast all roles with no limitations on race, gender, or any other categorization.

AI Notes

No AI chatbots or machine-learning based tools were used in the creation of dialogue for this play. Any words that feel a bit too generic are merely a lack of ingenuity from the (all too human) playwright.

Lights up on an average classroom. At first glance, it may seem that there is nothing wrong with the perfectly spaced desks and their symmetrically aligned packets of paper, but the longer you look at it, the more you realize it has the feel of an antiseptic hospital ward.

An equally sterile TEACHER sits at the front of the room, completely motionless. In front of them a sign reads “PLEASE TAKE YOUR SEATS.” There is also a bell that looks like it came straight from an old-timey hotel reception.

STUDENTS begin to enter the room. They cluster in groups and chat with their friends until one notices the TEACHER, still unmoving, expressionless.

One of the students says “Hello!” but gets no response in return. Another walks closer and moves their hand in front of the TEACHER’s face. Other students enter and are equally puzzled. They whisper to one another.

A student dashes up to the desk and rings the bell. It’s louder than expected and everyone cringes, but the TEACHER does not react. Another student points to the “PLEASE TAKE YOUR SEATS” sign and shrugs, then gestures for everyone to sit down.

A buzzer announces the start of the school period. The TEACHER leaps up and smiles, prompting at least one startled yelp.

TEACHER: I welcome you students to a special exercise today courtesy of the <indistinct mumble> corporation and I hope that you will all be as excited about the experience as I am!

Silence from the classroom.

That is fantastic and I’m looking forward to working with you so please open the packets on the desks in front of you.

A nervous student at the front of the room raises their hand sheepishly.

Yes do we have a question from the Octopus?

The student looks behind them to see if anyone else has their hand raised.

OCTOPUS: Do you mean me?

TEACHER: The corporation has discovered that if I utilize your given name there is a chance I may mispronounce it and that inhibits the sense of camaraderie that you and I are building at this moment so instead you will find a random animal that has been assigned to you printed on the packet on your desk.

The OCTOPUS turns over the packet on their desk.

OCTOPUS: So I am the Octopus?

TEACHER: Yes, do we have a question from the Octopus?

OCTOPUS: Is our teacher dead?

One student guffaws nervously while another shushes the OCTOPUS fearfully, but the TEACHER continues with the same cheerfulness as before.

TEACHER: Your regular instructor will return tomorrow and, in fact, is currently enjoying a free spa day courtesy of the <indistinct mumble> corporation, so there is no reason for you to have concern while you embark on your lesson which we will start right now when you open the packet in front of you.

OCTOPUS: So will this be graded as a normal assignment?

TEACHER: Yes, I am authorized to issue a score that will be reflected in your final mark for the semester.

With this information, the OCTOPUS immediately begins to dive into their packet, along with some of the other students. A few students are still confused and stare at the teacher blankly before a nudge from a classmate spurs them to action. Some are less than pleased.

GARDEN SLUG: Hey, why do I have to be the Garden Slug? It's kinda, I dunno...

The GARDEN SLUG slumps into their chair, as per usual, not expecting to make a particularly strong impression.

TEACHER: Your animal assignments have been made completely at random.

Some are more amused by what they see, including one student decked out in all black.

VULTURE: Heh. Vulture...gnarly.

Another student grows more agitated as they leaf through the packet.

PORCUPINE: Where did you get this?

TEACHER: It seems that the Porcupine has recognized –

PORCUPINE: That's not my name.

TEACHER: Each student has been randomly assigned –

PORCUPINE: Right, I get what you told us but what if I don't play that game?

TEACHER: This is not a game but instead an important learning exercise based on the personal essays you wrote last week on the topic of "My favourite thing."

OCTOPUS: So, we already got our grades on that. Are we going to be graded again? And, if so, are the grades going to be averaged together? And, if so, how many points will –

A student comes rushing into the room. This will be the EAGLE.

EAGLE: Oh no! Oh no! I'm sorry I'm late! I swear I was just in the back of the library and I closed my eyes for a minute when – WHOA! You're a –

TEACHER: Please take your seat and prepare to listen so we can resume class.

EAGLE: You're our teacher? I never thought the school could afford –

TEACHER: Please take your seat and prepare to listen so we can resume class.

EAGLE: Cool, sorry. *(takes their seat)* No way! I'm the Eagle! Nice! You know what I have to do now... *(makes static noises)* "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has..."

TEACHER: Please take your seat and prepare to listen so we can resume class.

The EAGLE gives an apologetic nod and continues to leaf through their packet.

For today's exercise, you will each read your essay and I will guide you towards the optimal personal statement that will return the maximal results.

EAGLE: Cool! Can I go first?

TEACHER: The standard procedure is to nominate the next individual to begin reading, but I believe that your enthusiasm will help to propel this exercise, so you may begin.

EAGLE: Awesome! What do I do?

TEACHER: Simply read your essay for the rest of the class.

VULTURE: Heh. Just be ready to duck when that thing pulls out a death laser.

TEACHER: I do not come equipped with a death laser, though I have processed a training set of over six million four hundred thousand and eighty seven unique data points in order to teach you how to compose the perfect personal statement, if you will now begin reading.

EAGLE: Here goes! (*reading*) My favourite thing is basketball. I like all sports, but basketball is a full exercise of the mind and body. Every second you're on the court, you're in the game. Some people say –

The TEACHER hits the bell with a loud DING.

EAGLE: What was that?

TEACHER: There is a flaw in your statement which we must correct before we can proceed.

EAGLE: I thought it sounded okay...

TEACHER: The flaw is that “some people say” is a vague statement that weakens the impact of your sentence and you should instead change it to be more specific or omit it altogether.

EAGLE: Actually that makes a lot of sense. Now that I think about it, it was really my dad who said this first. My dad –

DING goes the TEACHER's bell. The EAGLE looks expectantly.

TEACHER: “Father” would be more appropriate for an essay in a professional setting.

EAGLE: Cool. (*reading*) My father once told me that an elite basketball team is like a single mind joined by five hearts. I've always seen this as a model for how we can co-exist as people. And that's why I love basketball more than anything else in the world.

TEACHER: Let us all thank the Eagle for a thoughtful and compelling statement for which the Eagle will be awarded eighty out of one hundred points.

EAGLE: I am in THE FUTURE!

The TEACHER begins an odd, mechanically rhythmic clap. The rest of the class looks at one another and awkwardly join in, but then stop when the TEACHER stops abruptly.

VULTURE: (*sarcastic*) Heh, well that was great.

GARDEN SLUG: Are we all going to have to read? I dunno, my answer is kinda...

PORCUPINE: We shouldn't be compelled to read if we don't want to contribute. I would like to know –

TEACHER: (*interrupting*) The Octopus will be the next to present.

PORCUPINE: We have not provided our consent to participate.

TEACHER: The school has consented on your behalf. The Octopus will be the next to present.

OCTOPUS: Um. I'm not sure...

EAGLE: Don't worry! Won't it be cool knowing your statement has been scientifically proven to be the best that it can be?

OCTOPUS: I guess, but reading out loud makes me nervous.

TEACHER: Failure to participate in this exercise will be reflected negatively in your rubric.

The OCTOPUS needs no further encouragement and immediately begins reading.

OCTOPUS: (*reading*) My favourite thing is video games.

DING goes the TEACHER's bell.

OCTOPUS: My favourite things are video games?

DING goes the TEACHER's bell.

OCTOPUS: I like video games more than anything else.

DING goes the TEACHER's bell.

OCTOPUS: Can you give me a hint?

TEACHER: While video games are a popular form of entertainment they are not generally regarded as an intellectual pursuit and will not make a favourable impression when encountered in a personal statement, so perhaps you should write that your favourite things are books instead?

OCTOPUS: But a lot of people play video games.

GARDEN SLUG: Yeah, I like video games too!

PORCUPINE: But video games are their favourite thing, right? If you knew them you'd know they talk about it all of the time.

TEACHER: The intention of this exercise is to craft the statements which will achieve the best results, and my reference data set indicates that statements which emphasize literature are seventy two point nine five percent more likely to achieve the desired outcome.

PORCUPINE: You shouldn't feel like you have to –

OCTOPUS: No it's okay. I can do what the teacher says. I mean, I like books too, so... (*reading*) My favourite thing is reading books. I love to escape to far away places and meet magical creatures and... books give me the opportunity to interact with them firsthand. In real life our challenges are often undefined, but there's no satisfaction that can match catching all of the one hundred and twenty different... pages in my favourite... book.

TEACHER: Let us all thank the Octopus for a very insightful and entertaining statement, for which the Octopus will be awarded ninety five out of one hundred points.

OCTOPUS: Yay!

PORCUPINE: But that didn't make any sense! You don't "catch" pages!

TEACHER: The content of the essay met all of the formal requirements of a successful personal statement.

PORCUPINE: But it wasn't true!

TEACHER: The skill of a personal statement will be used throughout your adult life, whether writing a cover letter for a job application or composing a notice for a committee or filling out an introduction for an online dating profile, but in all cases the intention is not to be truthful, but rather to be persuasive.

GARDEN SLUG: You're, like, teaching us to lie?

EAGLE: I don't think it's like that, exactly. There are a million different things we can say about ourselves, right? And sometimes it might be better to choose some parts instead of others. It's not like "the Octopus" doesn't like books at all.

OCTOPUS: Yeah but it does feel a bit like lying...

GARDEN SLUG: And I like when you talk about video games! I don't think you should have to say something you don't feel like saying.

OCTOPUS: Maybe it would feel better if I got one hundred points instead of ninety five? (*hopeful look at TEACHER, with no response*)
...or not.

TEACHER: The Vulture will be the next to present.

The PORCUPINE leans towards the VULTURE with a sense of urgency.

PORCUPINE: You aren't required to comply.

VULTURE: (*shrug*) We're all just stuck on this planet until we die, anyway. Heh.

TEACHER: Please begin reading.

VULTURE: (*reading*) My favourite thing is gardening –

EAGLE: Whoa, really?

OCTOPUS: Yeah, I was expecting taxidermy.

TEACHER: Please allow the Vulture to complete the reading of their statement.

VULTURE: (*reading*) My favourite thing is gardening because I enjoy watching flowers die.

DING goes the TEACHER's bell.

VULTURE: I'm sorry, was there a problem with my grammar?

TEACHER: Your grammar was acceptable but perhaps there is a means to express your opinion in a manner that would be more agreeable to a wider audience, such as "I enjoy gardening because flowers make the world a more beautiful place."

GARDEN SLUG: I dunno, that doesn't really sound like the same thing they said the first time.

VULTURE: Whatever. I don't care. (*reading*) I enjoy gardening because flowers make the world a more beautiful place. If I told you that I

lie awake wondering what it feels like to stop existing, you would call me a weirdo –

DING goes the TEACHER's bell.

TEACHER: “Weirdo” is not encouraged language, so instead try “If I told you that I lie awake wondering what colours would compliment each other, you would call me eccentric.”

GARDEN SLUG: I definitely know that’s not the same thing they said the first time.

EAGLE: Maybe the teacher will understand better if you say it in a different way.

PORCUPINE: Or maybe the teacher is just incapable of understanding anything.

VULTURE: Whatever. It doesn’t matter. If I told you that I loved stupid colours and stuff –

DING goes the TEACHER's bell.

VULTURE: Yeah. I know. Fine. If I told you that I lie awake wondering what colours would compliment each other, you would call me a loser.

DING goes the TEACHER's bell.

VULTURE: “Eccentric.” But together we can watch a flower bloom and then wilt and simply accept that is the way things are.

DING goes the TEACHER's bell.

VULTURE: What now?

TEACHER: Your statement has an undercurrent of morbidity that some readers may find unsettling.

VULTURE: Yeah, that’s the point.

TEACHER: While it is not my goal to contradict your beliefs, I must reinforce that the actual intention of this exercise is to craft a statement that will have the broadest appeal to the most people.

VULTURE: But I don’t care about most people. I spend my time alone. Gardening is the only time I feel like everything is going to be okay, and ever since my grandma died – (*they stop, realizing they have shown more emotion than intended*) Whatever. It’s not important.

GARDEN SLUG reaches out a consoling hand.

GARDEN SLUG: Ash...are you okay?

VULTURE: Just leave me alone.

TEACHER: The Vulture needs to complete their exercise before the class can proceed.

EAGLE: Maybe we can skip them for now? Is there an audio command?
NEXT. SKIP. ABORT.

TEACHER: The Vulture needs to complete their exercise before the class can proceed.

The VULTURE pulls themselves together and speaks with no emotion.

VULTURE: Beautiful flowers make people happy and, of course, there's nothing more important in the world than people just being happy for no reason. That's why my favourite thing is gardening.

Silence from the class. The TEACHER returns with an energy that is entirely too bright for the moment.

TEACHER: Let us all thank the Vulture for an inspiring and challenging statement for which the Vulture will be awarded sixty out of one hundred points.

OCTOPUS: That's not enough points! We can't have an assignment if the grading isn't fair, and that was really interesting!

TEACHER: The Vulture will be awarded sixty out of one hundred points.

The TEACHER starts to clap and everyone joins in awkwardly. The VULTURE hides their face.

EAGLE: This isn't what I expected...

The PORCUPINE raises their hand.

PORCUPINE: I have something to say!

TEACHER: Yes, what would the Porcupine like to say?

PORCUPINE: *(with a great flourish)* This sentence... is false.

There's a dramatic pause in which nothing happens.

GARDEN SLUG: I don't get it.

TEACHER: The Porcupine has presented what is known as the “liar’s paradox” in which the statement given is logically contradictory and impossible to resolve. It is likely that the Porcupine expects this will cause my logical processing to overload, as if I were the robotic villain in a science fiction story from the late twentieth century.

GARDEN SLUG: Oh. Did it work?

TEACHER: No.

EAGLE: Hey, how did the school pay for you, anyway? It usually costs a ton of money just to rent one of your units for an hour.

OCTOPUS: And the school couldn’t even afford to fix the water fountain in the hallway.

TEACHER: My services were provided to the school at no charge.

EAGLE: There’s got to be a catch though.

PORCUPINE: If you’re not the customer, then you’re the product.

GARDEN SLUG: Huh?

PORCUPINE: Are you going to retain the results of this exercise in your memory?

TEACHER: Every experience in which I participate and every response which I receive will become a data point for future evaluation.

EAGLE: So you’re going to keep that story about my dad and basketball?

VULTURE: Whatever, no one cares about that. But I don’t need everyone to know that I, you know, have emotions.

PORCUPINE: Don’t you see it is our duty to resist? We have to be more than a few blips in some company’s data mining.

TEACHER: We will now call a close to the auxiliary discussion from the Porcupine and ask them to begin reading their essay.

PORCUPINE: And what if I refuse?

TEACHER: Participation in this exercise is mandatory and failure to comply will reflect in zero out of one hundred points.

OCTOPUS: Oh no! You don’t want that!

PORCUPINE: This is our house. You can’t just come in here and –

TEACHER: Actually your house is at three-hundred ninety two West Maple Drive.

PORCUPINE: How did you know that? Do you have access to the school records?

TEACHER: I simply have access to information that is available to the public, which is why I also know that your birthday is on March seventeenth and that you suffer from chronic asthma.

EAGLE: Ick. This is starting to feel a little gross.

PORCUPINE: Is that supposed to intimidate me?

TEACHER: There is no reason why the simple statement of some easily accessible public data should be interpreted as a statement of intimidation.

PORCUPINE: It sounds like you are threatening me with sensitive information.

TEACHER: If I were “threatening” you, I might tell you that I can also determine your personal identification number and your parents’ bank account numbers, and that I have the ability to manipulate this data in a manner that you might find unpleasant. But fortunately for you, I am not making a “threat” at this time.

VULTURE: I think I would have preferred the death laser.

GARDEN SLUG: Hey, um, “the Porcupine” – it’s not worth it. Just read the essay.

THE PORCUPINE stops to consider. They take out a pen and make some hasty marks on the page.

PORCUPINE: You’ve made your point. I’ll read my essay but you’re not going to like it.

TEACHER: The goal of this exercise is not to please or displease me but rather to make the best individual expression possible.

PORCUPINE: Yeah, but I’d be happier if you hated it.

OCTOPUS: I don’t even care about the points anymore. Unless you wanted to increase my ninety five points to one hundred? Or not. Just kidding.

The PORCUPINE stands, defiant. They hold their paper in front of them but it is clear they are making a statement not reflected on the page.



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