

THE BRIDES OF SWEET WILLIAM

- Characters
- Willie – A man of about thirty.
 - Patty – (Cleopatra) - A divorcee who's admitted to forty-nine for over five years.
 - Judy – (Juliet) – Another divorcee who's admitted to forty-nine for over ten years.
 - Betty – (Lady Macbeth) - Another divorcee who has renounced all chronological arithmetic and just claims to be younger than Patty and Judy.
 - Lance – Another man of about thirty.

Scene

The stage is split in two.

On the "ladies' side", taking up about two thirds of the room is a make-shift type of place where theatre auditions happen. At a minimum, it would have a utilitarian type of table, and at least four chairs. There is also a sandwich-board sign that reads, "Alimony Players - Auditions."

In the other third of the stage – the "guys' side" - is a bachelor apartment, with some fairly advanced electronics, but mostly it's cluttered with clothes, fast food packaging, and anything else that hasn't been picked up in weeks. However, if the staging needs to be minimal, a small table surrounded by stacks of boxes, with a portable computer and a couple of chairs will do.

Scene One

As the play begins, a spotlight focuses on the table in the apartment, where Willie sits in the gloom, eating a Mr. Goodbar chocolate bar and typing on his computer. Willie is pretty much a slob. The light from the computer screen illuminates his face. After a few moments, the lights go down on Willie.

Scene Two

The spotlight next shines on the other side of the stage onto the audition sign and on Patty, who is dressed as Cleopatra in her homemade Queen of the Nile death robes, complete with two fake snakes, or perhaps snake hand-puppets. Patty reenacts Cleopatra's death scene from Antony and Cleopatra. She has more enthusiasm than acting talent.

Patty: Come, thou mortal wretch,
 (To the snake, which she applies to her breast.)
 With thy sharp teeth this knot intricate
 Of life at once untie; poor venomous fool,
 Be angry, and dispatch. O! couldst thou speak,
 That I might hear thee call great Caesar ass
 Unpolicied.
 Peace, peace!
 Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
 That sucks the nurse asleep?
 As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle, -
 O Antony! – Nay, I will take thee too.
 (Applying the second snake to her other breast.)
 What - should – I - stay -
 (Milking the moment, she falls on her asps in a sprawling heap and dies.)

The spotlight goes down on Patty and comes up on Judy, who is dressed as an Elizabethan Veronese teenager. She carries a plastic rose, and rhymes off Juliet's show-stopping soliloquy.

Judy: O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father, and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.
'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O! be some other name:
What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection that he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name;
And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.

The spotlight goes down on Judy and comes up on Betty, who is depicting Lady Macbeth, in plaid pajamas and a Tam o'Shanter cap. Using a plaid wash-cloth, Betty gives her rendition of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene. Betty also has limited talent, but apparently great ambition.

Betty: Out damned spot! Out I say! One: two: why then 'tis time to do't: hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?
The Thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now? What, will these hands ne'er be clean? No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that; you mar all with this starting.
Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!
Wash your hands, put on your nightgown, look not so pale: I tell you yet again Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on's grave
To bed, to bed; there's knocking at the gate: come, come, come, come, give me your hand: what's done, cannot be undone: to bed, to bed, to bed.

When Betty finishes her speech, she pulls out a harmonica, and starts to play "Scotland the Brave". As the lights come up on the three women, Patty rises from the dead, and she and Judy continue rehearsing their roles and mouthing their lines. Eventually Betty's playing falters, and she finishes off by slowing down and loudly over-blowing the final four or five notes to get them right.

Betty: Damn! I keep sucking when I should be blowing.

Patty: I'm sure every woman in the Alimony Players has had one husband or another who's told her that. You've always been a slow learner, my dear.

Judy: *(Flourishing her rose at Betty.)* And Betty, please take my advice for once. Appropriate props can be very effective. But a mouth organ! It's so...common.

Betty: *(Flicking her washcloth and honking menacingly into her harmonica at Judy.)* Judy, the music adds an extra dimension to my performance. Although I realize anything beyond two dimensions is out of your depth of comprehension.

Judy: I was just offering some constructive criticism.

Betty: If we're talking criticism, let me return the favour. About your soliloquy. It sounded like your milk of human kindness had curdled. When I starred as Juliet with the Alimony Players in 1989...

Patty: It was 1979, Betty. And 1969 too.

Betty: You should know, Patty. You were there with me.

Patty: *(Brandishing her snakes.)* But I was very young.

Betty: Old enough to play my nearly toothless nurse.

Judy: What time is it?

Patty: *(Looks at her watch.)* Two minutes to seven.

Judy: Oliver Lawrence should be arriving any minute now. Isn't that exciting? He said seven sharp, didn't he? All day long I've been watching the clock, reminding myself, "Tonight! Tonight!" *(She says the words "Tonight" musically as if she's breaking into the song from West Side Story.)* Ohhh... It makes me want to sing.

Patty: I thought we might start with some refreshments when he gets here. *(She motions to a dish on the table.)* I baked sex-in-a-pan.

Judy: And I brought macaroons.

Betty: Mr. Lawrence may want to get down to business and watch our auditions right away. He must have a very full schedule.

Patty: But he'll probably be hungry. After flying in from New York City.

Judy: Imagine Mr. Lawrence coming from so far away to hire the three of us for his show! What a thrill! We've been waiting so long for our big break. Now look out Broadway. Here we come!

Patty: It's still hard to believe, isn't it? But from his very first message he made it quite clear. He wants all of us. Apparently actors with our years of experience in Shakespearean roles are rare. Who knew?

Betty: Although if he decides to pick just one person, I'm certain it'll be me. Judy, did we ever find out if Mr. Lawrence received the funds we sent to cover his travel costs?

Judy: Oh yes! He sent an email and thanked us for the six hundred dollars. He even promised to repay any money he didn't spend.

Patty: *(On tip-toes with excitement.)* Any minute now, a man we've never seen before is going to walk through that door and change our lives forever! I feel warm breezes of Karma flowing from

Oliver Lawrence already. (*Primping at her costume.*) So give me my robe, put on my crown; I have immortal longings in me!

Fade to black

Scene Three

The lights come up on the other side of the stage where Willie sits typing.

Lance enters with two paper cups of take-out coffee. He puts one beside Willie. Lance sits as Willie keeps typing.

Lance: So Willie, what are you writing this time?

Willie: My revenge play. Want a Mr. Goodbar?

Lance: (*Takes the chocolate bar and eats it with his coffee.*) I thought all your plays were revenge plays.

Willie: (*Also unwrapping a chocolate bar.*) Funny, Lance. You ever heard of the Alimony Players drama club?

Lance: That bunch of divorcee amateurs?

Willie: Right. The troupe's been around for a hundred years. And most of the old dames in it are founding members.

Lance: What have you got against them?

Willie: Every season they run a series of off-the-wall productions called the Skewed Ideals Festival.

Lance: Yeah. I went once. It was bad. Never again.

Willie: Last fall I sent them my incest play. I even paid a ten dollar fee to enter their competition. But it was rejected. Those battle-axes from the dark ages didn't put it on!

Lance: Geez. Willie, your script must have been really awful.

Willie: There weren't any parts for old women. That's all they're looking for.

Lance: Who'd want old broads in an incest play?

Willie: And to top it off, they sent me this cheesy letter, inviting me to help out with the shows they chose over mine! They even requested a cash donation.

Lance: After scooping up your ten bucks, they asked for more?

Willie: That's why I'm writing my revenge play, Lance.

Lance: Whew. I pity the Alimony wives' ex-husbands.

Fade to Black

Scene Four

As the lights come up on the ladies' side of the stage, it's now seven thirty. Judy and Betty are getting anxious, pacing the room. Patty is sitting in a serene yoga-type pose.

Patty: I'm sure there's a logical explanation. And it's still just seven thirty.

Judy: He must have been held up somewhere. Coming all that way. There are always flight delays. And traffic.

Betty: *(Looking at her cell phone.)* There's no message. Judy, didn't we ever get his cell number? He's late. Oliver Lawrence is late. There ought to be a god damn message.

Judy: We had no reason to call back and forth by phone. He responded so promptly by email.

Betty: Well he's not answering now.

Patty: Perhaps he's still up in the air. I expect he'll be ravenous when he gets here. I'm glad we've got the sex-in-a-pan.

Judy: It's not like he can simply vanish, Betty. We have his email address. And his website. Even his picture.

Patty: Oliver Lawrence is a very attractive man. With such sincere eyes.

Betty: He'd better show up. He's got our six hundred bucks.

Judy: Not to mention our ticket to stardom.

Patty: Don't worry. He *needs* us - for his show. He's bound to appear. Any second. I can feel it in my bones. Now just relax. Centre yourselves. Breathe deep.

Fade to black

Scene Five

The lights come up again on Lance and Willie.

Lance: So what's your revenge play about?

Willie: *(Dying to tell.)* You really want to know?

Lance: Sure. Tell me.

Willie: Well, there are these three has-been actresses from No-where's-ville, who are in charge of the Alimony Ladies' Players. They don't know it, but they've been duped by a guy who approached them over the internet. He's pretending to be this Broadway producer, who's putting on this wacky

show, where all the characters are based on leading female roles taken from Shakespeare. You with me Lance?

Lance: Uh-huh.

Willie: Good. So this phony impresario contacts these desperate ex-housewives and says he wants to come and audition them for his play. He lays it on really thick, saying he needs actresses with years of rich, meaningful experience in parts full of passion. And as he's the first and last chance they've ever had at fame and fortune, they swallow his pitch, hook, line and sinker. The president of the club is Lady Macbeth. She's a real hardnosed bitch, but naturally her ego gets her into trouble. The treasurer is Juliet – the squishy and gullible type, who should never be in charge of money. And the artistic director is Cleopatra – a flaky tart with a queen complex. Together they make a perfect cast for a scam scheme. The play opens just as they're waiting for the talent scout to show up.

Lance: (*Suspiciously.*) OK. Where does the swindle come in?

Willie: The producer tells the broads that all he needs to make the trip to No-where's-ville is enough cash to cover his expenses. So in a heart-beat, these washed up Shakespearean wannabees steal the funds from the group's bank account and send it to him. But of course they're left forever waiting in the wings. Simple. But ingenious. And with three old lady roles in the script, all dressed in god-awful costumes, the Alimony Players will gobble it up.

Lance: (*Looking like he's afraid to ask.*) And what about your revenge?

Willie: (*Standing - proudly.*) Lance, I'm not just another hard-done-by playwright. You're lookin' at the real life big shot producer who doesn't exist!

Lance: (*Jumping up – waving.*) *What?* You actually set up a scam to steal from these unsuspecting women? Just because you forfeited ten bucks when they rejected your crappy play?

Willie: (*Hurt.*) It wasn't a crappy play.

Lance: Willie, you can't do that! Or since you did, the joke's over. It's time to fess up and return the cash.

Willie: I can't give the money back. I spent it on E-bay. Want another Mr. Goodbar? (*Reaching into a box.*) I've got about a thousand of them. They offered free shipping. A deal like that was too sweet to resist.

Lance: (*Rejecting the chocolate bar.*) Willie! How could you double-cross those poor ladies?

Willie: It was easy as pie. I pretended to be affiliated with a New York cattle-call website, but I gave them my "exclusive" email address, so they could contact me "directly". (*He shows the quotes with his fingers.*) That made the old biddies think they were special. And for my piece de resistance, I sent them this picture of myself. (*He thrusts his computer into Lance's face.*)

Lance: (*Aghast.*) That's the Old Spice Guy!

Willie: (*Gleefully.*) Exactly. On a horse. Those sex-starved grannies would do anything for a man who looked like that. They didn't even see through my plot when I said my name was Oliver Lawrence. Like Laurence Olivier - only reversed. Talk about blind ambition.

Lance: (*Shaking his head.*) How much did they give you?

Willie: Six hundred bucks. I wanted a thousand to travel first class, but they said six hundred was all the dough they had.

Lance: (*Grabbing Willie.*) You schmuck!

Willie. Lookit. Those broads didn't have to believe me. And they didn't have to embezzle their club's cash. And they didn't have to send it to me. Considering the divorces these women must have been through, they've obviously been fooled by men before. So shame on those guys. But if these dames allowed me to fool them again, then it's shame on them this second time around.

Lance: You're disgusting. (*He pushes Willie away.*) And why are you still bothering with your revenge play? If you submitted it to the festival, you'd be giving yourself and your hoax away. Then the revenge would be on you. Are you that stupid?

Willie: Hmmmm. I was going to think about those details later. At the moment I'm on a roll. Once my creative juices well up, I have to go with the flow and write whatever gushes out. *Ars gratia artis*. You know - art for art's sake. The MGM motto.

Lance: Have you also considered that now you've tricked the Alimony Players out of their money, there probably won't be a drama contest this year?

Willie: Excellent point. I hadn't reached that plot twist in my script yet either. I suppose I'll work through it eventually.

Lance: And most important. What's going to happen to those ladies you deceived?

Willie: (*Looking at his watch.*) Actually they're waiting for me at the theatre right now. And as I'm nearly an hour late, they're probably pretty nervous.

Lance: Well, they deserve an explanation. And if you won't show up to tell them what's going on, I will.

Willie: Here. Take them some Mr. Goodbars. (*He stuffs several handfuls of chocolate bars into Lance's hands and pockets. As Lance leaves, he calls out.*) Thanks for the script advice, Lance. And let me know if the Skewed Ideals Festival will ever be staged again!

Willie sits with his head propped in his hand, eating a chocolate bar and staring at his computer screen, as the lights fade to black.

Scene Six

The lights come up on the ladies' side of the stage. It is now eight o'clock. The women know they've been scammed. But they don't want to leave, as that would give final validation to the fact that they've allowed themselves to be taken for a ride. While the others pace and dither, Patty sits at the table (or on the table), eating her sex-in-a-pan from the pan.

Patty: Oliver Lawrence – or whoever he is - was just too handsome to be true. His face was as the Heavens, but his heart was straight from Hell.

Judy: No one's as good looking as the Old Spice Guy. If only we'd realized the picture was a fake right away. Then all this would never have happened.

Betty: Judy – wasn't it your idea to send that deadbeat the cash?

Judy: You're not pinning this one on me, Betty. I may be treasurer. And I may have made the actual Paypal transfer, but you and Patty bullied me into it. Remember how the two of you ganged up? As president of the Alimony Players, Betty, you advised me not to be infirm of purpose, and that a six hundred dollar slip of the fingers was a small price to pay for the chance of a lifetime. And Patty, as artistic director, you threatened that I'd never act in any future productions if I didn't do as I was told. Then to calm things down, you both swore we'd pay everything back as soon as we signed our first contract.

Patty: Oh what's the use. Eternity was in our lips and eyes. But now we're bankrupt, we'll have to close our doors - and none of us will ever appear on-stage again.

Betty: *(Distracted.)* Nought's had. All's spent. We really screwed up. What will I tell the Board of Directors? They may press charges.

Patty: We could call the police ourselves.

Betty: And tell them how we stole the money we lost? Don't you dare!

Judy: We should all just go home.

Betty: Yes. What's done is done.

Lance enters. He's looking around to make sure he's in the right place. Then he sees the audition sign, and looks at the three oddly dressed ladies.

Patty: You're not... by any chance... who we think you could be.

Lance: No. But I know who you wish I was. But I'm not him. No one is.

Betty: How can we be sure you're not the person you say you aren't?

Lance: Please. I'm finding these multiple negatives very confusing. My name is Lance. I am not Oliver Lawrence, who you probably know by now doesn't exist. But I was just with the person who pretended to be Oliver Lawrence. And a few minutes ago, I discovered what he did. So I'm here to say I'm sorry for what happened, at least for myself, if not on behalf of him.

Betty: Is he sorry? And is he going to give our money back?

Lance: He's already spent the money. But he sent these along. *(Lance empties his pockets.)*

Judy: Chocolate bars! Is that his apology for stealing six hundred dollars?

Lance: I'm not convinced he meant to apologize. But I'm afraid this is all he came up with.

Patty: Why did he do it?

Lance: He had a petty grievance concerning a script he submitted that was refused by your Skewed Ideals Festival. So he was writing another play in reaction to that grudge. But his issues took over, and the whole thing got blown out of proportion. You might call it an experiment in creative reality gone wrong.

Patty: *(Holding out her spoon.)* Would you like some sex-in-a-pan?

Judy: *(Holding a plate.)* Or a macaroon?

Lance: Thanks. *(He takes a macaroon.)*

Betty: *(Suddenly brightening.)* You know, an idea just hit me. I believe there's a way out of our problems after all.

Patty and Judy together: Really?

Betty: Yes. It's so simple. I should have thought of it right away. Back in 1918, when the Alimony Players were founded by Mrs. Wallis Warfield Switchman, she set aside her annual alimony stipend - one hundred dollars - to establish the President's Alimony Reserve. From the very beginning, the existence of the endowment was kept secret - passed down from one president to the next. When I took over as chief executive, I was told the funds were to be used only in situations of desperate need - and that for a century, no president had ever withdrawn a nickel. That's why I never considered it. Although by now, the portfolio's grown to over ten thousand bucks.

Patty and Judy together: Oh my!

Betty: But it seems the time has come to take out six hundred dollars. To ensure the survival of the Alimony Players in general - and to save our skins in particular.

Patty: I'm sure Mrs. Switchman would have approved.

Judy: Yes. Even if she didn't appreciate all of our reasons for doing it.

Lance: Then it looks like the Alimony Players is returning to business as usual. Congratulations!

Betty: Thanks. Except we'll no longer be entertaining overtures from unknown sources. Right girls?

Lance: Well, I don't want to take up any more of your time. So I'll be on my way.

Patty: Shall we be seeing you at our Skewed Ideals Festival?

Lance: *(Squirming.)* Umm. Errrr.

Betty: Stand not upon the order of your going, Lance. And when you find your scum-of-the-earth buddy, let him know the rip-off play he's writing is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing - as my former husband once said.

Lance: Oh.

Judy: Good night! Good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow! *(She blows Lance a kiss.)*

Lance exits. After he's gone, the lights stay up. Patty dishes out the sex-in-a-pan, and Judy passes around the macaroons. As the food is distributed, the ladies might murmur "thank you", or "well girls, that was a close call", etc. Then as the women sit and eat, the lights slowly fade to black.

Scene Seven

The lights come up again on Willie, who is sitting with his head propped on his hand, half-heartedly pecking at his keyboard. Lance enters. Willie looks up.

Lance: I just came back to tell you again what a jerk you are.

Willie: So will there be a festival this year?

Lance: Yeah, Yeah. They got it straightened out. And they said to tell you that you're an idiot. And your revenge play is crap.

Willie: Where'd they get the money?

Lance: There was some secret reserve fund. Everything's going to be OK.

Willie: How much cash is in the fund?

Lance: Willie! I'm not telling you. Don't you think you've got too many candy bars already?

Willie: But how much?

Lance: Willie. You're a creep. Call me when you man up and stop living off little old ladies.

Lance leaves.

Willie: *(Getting up and calling at the door as Lance exits.)* Hey Lance! Thanks for bringing me the ending for my play!

The lights stay up on Willie, as he returns to his computer and starts typing rapidly.

Scene Eight

The lights come up on the ladies' side. They are still eating their desserts, and they continue to eat as they talk. Willie, on his side, with the lights still on him, types all the way through this scene too.

Betty: So foul and fair a day! My ex-husband used to say that too. I must admit, he had some good lines.

Patty: You know, it would almost have been a relief if we'd had to cancel the Skewed Ideals Festival. If only for this season.

Judy: Patty, what are you talking about?

Patty: It's so much work. Reading all those scripts. Then organizing performers and directors and everyone else.

Judy: You're right. It's exhausting. But how do we get out of it?

Betty: Ladies, we're actors. We could make believe we were intending to put on a pageant. And then just – not. *(She does a little shrug.)*

Patty: Betty, you mean – we'd solicit scripts – and fees - as usual. But we wouldn't mount any shows?

Betty: Exactly. We could simply announce that none of the works submitted was worthy of our stage. I heard that not so long ago, there was a year when the Pulitzer Prize for literature wasn't awarded. Because no book was deemed to have met their standard.

Judy: If a stunt like that was good enough for the Pulitzer Prize - then it's good enough for us!

Betty: And it costs fifty dollars to nominate a book for the Pulitzer Prize.

Patty: Maybe we should raise our entry fee to... twenty dollars!

Judy: Goodness. The Alimony Players have never charged that much for anything!

Patty: To accommodate playwrights on a budget, perhaps we could offer an express rate of five bucks. For that price a script could be turned down instantly, without even the pretense of being read. *(Judy and Betty both give Patty a withering look.)* Yes. Well, never mind.

Judy: But what would we do, if we weren't running the Skewed Ideals Festival?

Patty: The three of us could perform our Shakespeare scenes. Like Oliver Lawrence was proposing.

Judy: Patty, that's a brilliant idea! You're a genius.

Betty: Then it's settled. We'll call our show... The Brides of Sweet William!

The three women each raise a Mr. Goodbar in a toast, and they bump their chocolate bars together in the air.

All three together: To Sweet William!

For a moment, while the ladies unwrap their candy bars, there's an interlude of calm celebration.

Betty: Of course I'll get top billing. After all I came up with the title.

At Betty's remark, the three ladies start arguing and gesturing at once, outraged at Betty's latest comment, and at each other in general. They point their chocolate bars, snakes, rose etc. accusingly.

Betty

But you all know in your hearts,
I am the best actress

Judy

Betty, I'm sick and tired
of your arrogance.

Patty

I'm the artistic director.
I should have top billing.

Patty, no one would come
to see you.

And if I don't get any respect,
I won't participate

The show was my idea. Don't
forget that!

Just for once, Judy, stop
whining.

Remember, I spent a weekend
at the Humble School for actors!

Oh Betty, you were over the
hill years ago.

Et cetera

Et cetera

Et cetera

As Judy and Patty continue to bicker, Betty takes out her harmonica and starts to play "Scotland the Brave". As she plays, the other two women eventually throw up their hands and stop ranting and return to eating their chocolate and / or desserts. Meanwhile, on his side of the stage, Willie continues typing, faster than ever.

Fade to black.

**THANKS FOR READING THE BRIDES OF
SWEET WILLIAM**

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