

THE ROOM

By J. B. Cheaney

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STORY OF THE PLAY

The room is a refuge, a rather undefined space with no pressure from the outside world. But how long do you need to feel safe before stepping out into the real world? Each character must make that decision himself - Ben, the abused child, Cherelle, acerbic but filled with apathy; Tony, who covers his shortcomings with a smart mouth; Sandi, whose pushiness covers low self-esteem; John, who has a real edge of menace, and others.

This play involves serious themes that should present a challenge to young actors, but humor, realistic characters, and discernable conflicts will hold their interest. The play may be staged quite simply, making it ideal for school and student theatre groups. There is particular emphasis on character development. Though the characters are somewhat delineated in the *dramatis personae*, many gaps are left for the actors themselves to fill in personality, background, and motivation. Since much of the dramatic tension stems from how the characters react to each other and to their situation, there is purposely room for thought and development.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 m, 4 w)

BEN: about 10-12 years of age; an abused child, possibly autistic. Nothing else is known about him. Other than humming a few bars of music, he has no speaking lines.

CHERELLE: 15 or 16. Sharp, acerbic, with a shell of apathy.

TONY: about 14. Bright, quick, and bombastic, he seeks to cover a multitude of shortcomings with his mouth.

ALIX: about 15. Shy and very uncertain of herself.

JENNIFER: 16. Attractive, popular, and wiser than she knows, she's been running lately on a strong undercurrent of anger.

SANDI: 17. A bit pushy at times; the take-charge type who tries to know what's best for every-body. Her managing style hides low self-esteem.

JEFF: 16. Sandi's boyfriend, or perhaps more likely her project. He sees himself as pretty good on the basketball court but low on brain-power.

JON: 16. The villain, if there is one; he's fallen in with the wrong crowd. There is a very real edge of menace in him.

SETTING/PROPS

All the action takes place in a rather undefined space known as The Room. A dark background is preferable, and the only set pieces are a doorway at CS, a chair to the R of the doorway and a bench to the L. All entrances and exits will be through the doorway. The play may also be staged in the round, with action taking place around the doorway. Once a character passes through, however, it must be understood that he or she is either "in" or "out."

The only props needed are a paperback romance novel for Cherelle and a pencil stub for Jennifer.

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SCENE 1

(AT RISE: CHERELLE is in the chair, engrossed in a book. BEN is seated on the farthest end of the bench, just sitting and staring, as he will throughout the play. A few seconds after the LIGHTS come up, TONY is seen running from L to R upstage. A few seconds more and he runs R to L downstage, pauses L, look around in panic and then runs off SL.)

JON'S VOICE: *(Offstage R.)* There he goes!

ADULT VOICE: *(Offstage R.)* Well, catch him!

(TONY appears UL, creeping along as though his back is against a wall. HE disappears behind the door.)

JON'S VOICE: *(Offstage R.)* Stop right there. Don't move!

(Suddenly, the door opens and TONY falls inside. As HE lies on the floor, gasping, CHERELLE glances up from her book.)

CHERELLE: You'd better close the door.

(TONY seems not to hear. CHERELLE heaves an exasperated sigh, stands up and closes the door, then sits down again and resumes reading.)

ADULT VOICE: *(Offstage R.)* Okay, so where'd he go?

JON'S VOICE: *(Offstage R.)* But he was right there a minute ago. I swear he was ...

(Voices fade. After a moment TONY rolls over on his back.)

TONY: Where did that door come from? *(HE sits up, facing audience.)* Where am I? *(Receiving no answer, HE turns slowly, gets up and goes to the door. After a moment, he opens it.)*

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CHERELLE: I wouldn't do that.

JON'S VOICE: (*Offstage R.*) Hey! There he is!

(*TONY slams the door, turns around and leans his back against it.*)

CHERELLE: (*Not looking up.*) Told you.

TONY: All right, all right. Does this door lock somehow?

CHERELLE: Don't need a lock. (*SHE turns a page.*) They won't find it.

TONY: Oh, yeah? How come I found it?

CHERELLE: You weren't looking for it.

TONY: Oh. Sure. I get it. (*Moves DS.*) Yeah. It's like perfectly clear to me now. There's just one thing I don't understand. (*CHERELLE makes no answer, so HE repeats, a little louder.*) I said, there's just one thing I don't understand.

CHERELLE: (*Absently.*) What's that?

TONY: Everything! (*Pause.*) Look, do you know what conversation is?

CHERELLE: No.

(*TONY marches over and grabs HER book without warning.*)

TONY: Sure you do. Here's some conversation, right here. (*Reads haltingly.*) "'Oh, Jason, I've missed you so much! Jason smiled then ... tenderly as he touched her cheek -"

CHERELLE: (*Lunging at HIM.*) Give me that!

(*TONY climbs up on the bench beside BEN.*)

TONY: (*Reading.*) "'My darling Cathy, didn't I tell you I'd be back before the frost?' He pulled her close. 'Say you'll never leave me again,' she whispered."

CHERELLE: Give it back!

TONY: Oooh, this is hot! (*HE fans himself with the book before handing it over.*) Listen, my heart's going thumpa thumpa.

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CHERELLE: *(With feeling.)* You ... *(SHE clutches the book.)* Never mind.

TONY: My darling Cathy, will you please tell me what's going on here?

CHERELLE: You're just lucky I didn't bust you one.

TONY: Oh yeah? Come on, bust me one.

CHERELLE: It's against the rules.

TONY: What rules?

CHERELLE: The house rules.

TONY: This is great. I ask you a question, you give me an answer. The answer don't make a hell of a lot of sense, but -

CHERELLE: Watch your mouth.

TONY: Hey, do I have amnesia or something? Are you really my mom?

CHERELLE: That's another rule.

TONY: What? You mean I can't say hell? I learned worse from my grandma.

CHERELLE: You can say hell. That's where we all come from ... hell. But don't get too ... you know, descriptive? Or you're out.

TONY: I'm out of what? See, that's what I want to find out. What am I in, that I can be out of?

(ALIX enters SL, JENNIFER enters SR, both sobbing. Alix reaches the door first, passes through it and throws herself on the floor; Jennifer is close behind. The hardness of the floor is obviously not what they expected; both sit up, startled, glance around at each other, then at TONY and CHERELLE.)

ALIX: What --

JENNIFER: How --?

TONY: All of a sudden I don't feel so lonely.

ALIX: *(To JENNIFER.)* What are you doing in my room?

JENNIFER: *(To ALIX.)* What are you talking about? It's my room!

CHERELLE: I can see it's gonna be one of those days. *(SHE closes her book and drops it on the floor.)*

End of Freeview

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