

ACT ONE

New York City. The Music Box Theatre on West 45th Street, 1928. We are inside the producer's office, located within the theater. SAM HARRIS, the producer, and BASIL DEAN, the director, are going over the numbers for the out-of-town sales of "The Cat's Pajamas," a new play by Maxwell Barry. They are both smoking cigars.

SAM

You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time.

BASIL

Whoever said that obviously never saw "No, No, Nanette."

SAM

The public's fickle. One day they love you, the next you can't give seats away.

BASIL

That won't happen to "Cat's Pajamas," Sam. Look at the numbers.

SAM

It's the numbers that worry me. In ten years, I've never seen numbers this high. Atlantic City ... Philadelphia ... Boston ... The critics are suspicious. I have it on good authority Alexander Woolcott's thirsty for blood on this one.

BASIL

That's not all Woolcott's thirsty for. Rumor has it he closed Chumley's last night. Even sat right through a police raid. On his radio program this morning he said it's the only entertainment he's had all week.

SAM

What's the first rule at the racetrack? There's no such thing as a sure thing.

BASIL

This isn't the racetrack. On Broadway, the sure thing always wins.

SAM

That's what I thought about that Gilbert Emery play that closed after only five performances. Business is too good, I'm telling you.

BASIL

I'd hate to see you when a show's in trouble.

SAM bangs the desk, suddenly. BASIL looks up, a bit surprised.

SAM

It's this whole "Based on a True Story" gimmick, damnit. No one's ever done something like it before.

BASIL

Sure they have. It gets done all the time.

SAM

Never to this extent. To take a recent scandal and put it on the stage. The words "Based on a True Story" right below the title. I never liked this "true story" deal from the beginning. As far as I'm concerned, the theater is always true. If people want fiction they can read the newspapers.

BASIL

Relax, Sam. We've got the biggest hit on our hands since un-sliced bread.

SAM

I've never gambled this much on a show before. Between the two of us, Basil, a flop could ruin me. Not to mention what'll happen if Hearst decides to sue.

DOROTHY HAMILTON, Sam's secretary, enters. She is holding a stack of headshots.

DOROTHY

The actors are here to read for Thomas Ince, Sam. Do you want me to open up the backstage?

DOROTHY hands the headshots to SAM.

SAM

Let's keep 'em corralled in the lobby for now, Dorothy. Give 'em something to read.

DOROTHY

(starting to exit)

I'll try, Sam, but I doubt it'll do any good.

SAM

Oh, Dorothy, some more coffee, please.

DOROTHY

How do you take it, Mr. Dean?

BASIL

Hot.

DOROTHY exits. SAM glances through the headshots, discarding them one by one.

SAM

Stanley was perfect in that part.

BASIL

He was perfectly terrible. But a dead ringer for Ince.

SAM

Fortunately, not many people know what Thomas Ince looked like.

BASIL

They will once we open. The papers are bound to run his picture right beside the review.

SAM

There's got to be one or two decent actors who resemble Ince.

BASIL

All the good actors have gone out to Los Angeles to break into goddamn talking pictures.

SAM

What do they want pictures to talk for, that's what I don't understand. If they want to hear talking, they can go to the theatre.

HENRY TRAVERS, an actor who portrays William Randolph Hearst in "The Cat's Pajamas," enters.

HENRY

Excuse me, gentlemen ...

SAM

Morning, Henry.

HENRY

I wonder if I could have a moment of your time, Sam.

SAM

Sure, Henry, what is it?

HENRY

Well, I hope I'm not speaking out of turn, but it's come to my attention that Stanley has left the show.

SAM

Don't worry, we'll have his replacement by this afternoon.

HENRY

That's what I wanted to talk to you about. You see, I have this nephew ...

BASIL

Don't we all.

SAM

Can he act?

HENRY

Well ... he's very eager ...

SAM

All right, tell him we'll take a look at him later on.

HENRY

Actually, he's here now, if you've got ...

SAM

Sure thing, Henry, send him in.

HENRY

Thank you, Sam.

BASIL

Mr. Travers, you have a monologue in Act One, when Hearst tells Davies how much he adores her. Your style is quite humorous.

HENRY

Thank you, Mr. Dean, I –

BASIL

Unfortunately, this is not a vaudeville revue. Please deliver the lines as intended.

HENRY

Yes ... yes, of course ...

HENRY exits.

BASIL

I told you we should have gone out for breakfast. We're sitting ducks here.

SAM

Who knows, maybe the kid can act.

BASIL

You taking odds?

DOROTHY enters, with two cups of coffee.

DOROTHY

It's a fresh batch, Mr. Dean.

BASIL

Mm.

SAM

Say, Dorothy, what's your opinion of these numbers? A little high, don't you think?

DOROTHY

Highest I've ever seen.

SAM

It's this "Based on a true story" business. All of a sudden everyone wants to know the story *behind* the story. What's the matter with the story itself?

BASIL

Next thing you know they'll want to watch the rehearsals.

DOROTHY

I agree, Sam. It's the most ridiculous trend to hit Broadway since Fannie Brice. I imagine it'll be very popular.

MARGOT STEVENSON, the actress who portrays Marion Davies in "The Cat's Pajamas," enters.

SAM

You've hit the nail on the head as usual, Dorothy. Send in Mr. Travers' nephew, will you? Oh, and Dorothy, do you mind staying and reading with him?

DOROTHY

Not at all.

DOROTHY exits.

MARGOT

Is this a bad time?

SAM

For you, Margot, it's never a bad time. What's the trouble?

MARGOT

There's a problem with my costume.

SAM

Why? What's the matter with it?

MARGOT

It doesn't exist.

SAM

What do you mean?

MARGOT

I mean when I go to put it on, nothing happens. You don't want me going out there naked, do you?

BASIL

We might as well give 'em *something* for their money.

SAM

Talk to Ms. Johnston. [*Note: Mabel Johnston, Costume Designer.*] It must be getting cleaned.

MARGOT

I spoke to Mabel. She said she hung it there yesterday.

SAM

Then talk to Mr. McFadden. [*Note: William McFadden, Stage Manager.*] Tell him I sent you.

MARGOT

Thank you, Sam. I don't want to lose the dress – it came from Marion herself.

MARGOT exits. EDWARD (EDDIE) BRANDT, a young actor, enters, with DOROTHY. EDDIE is holding a script.

DOROTHY

This is Edward Brandt, reading for the role of Thomas Ince.

SAM

Well, young man, your uncle tells us you might be looking for a job.

EDDIE

Yes, sir.

BASIL

What would we have seen you in?

EDDIE

Oh, I haven't done any *plays* yet.

SAM and BASIL glance at one another.

BASIL

Well, what *have* you done?

EDDIE

I've been studying with the Russians.

SAM

The Russians?

BASIL

That's all we need, a Red in the cast.

EDDIE

(indicating his hair)

Oh, I can change it to anything you want.

SAM

Where have you been studying with Russians? In *Russia*?

EDDIE

No, sir. In Brooklyn.

BASIL

There's a difference?

DOROTHY

I've heard about this method. It's supposed to make actors more real.

BASIL

More real? Actors aren't real! They're actors!

SAM

Does this method have a name?

EDDIE

I don't think so. They're just calling it the method.

SAM

All right, let's read a few lines, see how "real" you are. Take it from Act One, Scene Three, the first time Thomas Ince and Marion Davies are alone together. Dorothy, whenever you're ready.

DOROTHY *(as Marion Davies)*

Oh, Tom, what am I going to do about Charlie?

Instead of saying his line, EDDIE looks up at the ceiling, picks some lint off his jacket, etc., in Marlon Brando style. He begins to speak, then changes his mind. Finally, BASIL can't take it anymore.

What the hell's he doing?

BASIL

I think he forgot his line.

SAM

But he's holding the script!

BASIL

Kid, what's the matter? You're supposed to say the next line.

SAM

I was just about to.

EDDIE

What are you doing, building up the courage?

BASIL

Try picking up the cue a little sooner.

SAM

Sooner?

EDDIE

Sometime before dinner would be nice.

BASIL

Let's take it again. Dorothy?

SAM

DOROTHY (*as Marion Davies*)
Oh, Tom. What am I going to do about Charlie?

EDDIE hesitates, but says the line after a moment. The problem this time is that he mumbles. He also improvises.

EDDIE (*as Thomas Ince*)
It's ... yeah ... I don't ... it's just ... unbelievable ...

SAM
Stop. Dorothy, what's his line?

DOROTHY

“I don’t know.”

SAM

Kid, we’re paying a playwright a lot of money to write this dialogue. If you want to change it, you better take it up with *him*.

EDDIE

Sorry, sir. It’s what we’ve been taught.

BASIL

Did they also teach you to *whisper*? If *I* can’t hear you, how the hell are you going to reach a thousand seat house? You get my point?

SAM

Thank you, kid. I think we’ve seen enough.

EDDIE

I can read more if you like.

SAM

No. Thank you. That isn’t necessary. Tell your uncle I said you’re a natural.

EDDIE

Gee, thanks, Mr. Harris!

EDDIE exits.

BASIL

A natural disaster, you mean.

SAM

Sweet kid, though.

BASIL

It’s a shame he’s an idiot.

At this moment, ARCHIE LEACH enters. He portrays Charlie Chaplin in “The Cat’s Pajamas.”

ARCHIE

Sam, I need to talk to you. Good morning, Mr. Dean. Good morning, Miss Hamilton.