

LEADING LADIES

dinky little town in Southern England, and Katherine Hepburn was born in Cape Cod someplace with a knife in her teeth. You are not defined by where you start, but by where you end up. As for the play, there are two rules for every actor: remember your lines and don't bump into the furniture. That is my line. Noel Coward stole it from me. As for traveling or not traveling, you will get to Paris one of these days if I have to carry you on my back and swim. And when you get there, you will look around and say to yourself: I was just as sophisticated before I left, only now I need a bath. All right?

MEG... All right.

LEO. Good. And remember: Lines,

MEG. And furniture. Got it. Maxine... thank you for staying for the wedding.

LEO. My dear, I think of nothing else.

(At this moment, JACK REENTERS as STEPHANIE, only he's dressed for his role as OLIVIA in something wildly seductive and outrageous — Spanish perhaps — and he's not happy about it.)

JACK. Well. Are you happy now?

LEO. Stephanie. You look as ridi - as charming as I hoped you would. All right, everyone, line up, please. Line up. Let me see my cast all together. Let's go ...

(The cast lines up, a truly motley crew of all shapes and sizes, variously terrified [BUTCH], over-confident [DOC], confused [AUDREY], annoyed [JACK] and thrilled [MEG]. They should remind us of the mechanicals in A Midsummer Night's Dream — a valiant band of well-meaning locals who haven't got a clue.)

LEO. Now I want each of you to recite your favorite line from

LEADING LADIES

the play, in character, reaching way down deep, showing me the absolute finest performance of which you are capable. Sir Toby.

(Each character steps forward, does his or her speech and steps back in line.)

SIR TOBY/DOC. *(Rollicking, hands on hips — truly awful.)*

What a plague means my niece to take the death of her brother thus?!
Ha! Ha! I'm sure care's an enemy to life! Ha ha! Ho ho! Ha ha!
Rollicking.

SIR ANDREW/BUTCH. *(Strikes his pose.)*

Methodks sometimes
I have no more wit, Mississippi,
Than a Christian or an ordinary man has, Mississippi!
Oh had I but followed the arts, Mississippi!

OLIVIA/JACK. *(The great diva.)*
By the roses of the spring,
By maidenhood, honor, truth and everything,
I love thee so, in spite of all thy pride,
Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide!

VIOLA/MEG.
As I am man,
My slate is desperate for my master's love.
As I am woman *(Now alas the day!)*,
What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe?

SEBASTIAN/AUDREY. *(Very Brando, both in voice and gesture.)*
Ah, me. My stars shine darkly over me.
I seek in this strange land my sister,
My twin, in hope she is not drowned.

LEO. And there you have it. Each one better than the next.
Soon this room will be decorated like a fairy land and we, the actors

LEADING LADIES

of this comedy called life, will be presenting a one-in-a-million performance of Twelfth Night, and all I can say is May God Be With Us!

(The lights change and the cast scatters.)

Scene 3

(As the lights change, we hear a dance band in the garden playing a popular dance tune of the period over the clinking of party glasses. In a blue half-light, our company of actors helps move the furniture back into place; simultaneously, stagehands dressed as caterers begin decorating the room with flowers, a screen and a punch bowl and glasses. Small white fairy lights come on in the garden — and by the end of the transition, the room looks joyfully party-like.

It's ten days later and the party is in progress. Just as the caterers finish decorating the room, the lights come up on the balcony above the living room, and DUNCAN enters from down the hall. There's a telephone up there, outside Meg's bedroom, and he picks up the receiver and dials, furtively. He's extremely upset.)

FLORENCE. *(Off.)* Duncan, get down here!

DUNCAN. *(Calling.)* I'll be down in a minute, Florence! *(To himself.)* You old bat! *(Into the phone.)* Ah, Inspector Ballard, it's Reverend Wooley again. Sorry to bother you at this... Yes, I know it's seven-thirty, but I've been trying to get you all... Well, you didn't answer any of the messages! Now listen, I'm at Florence's house right now, at the party... Well I'm sorry you weren't invited but I

LEADING LADIES

wasn't in charge of the guest list... Well, yes, I had some influence, but... Yes, the food is excellent, I'm very sorry you weren't invited, but please just listen! Do you remember I told you about the telegram from the real Maxine and Stephanie — well, it said they'd arrive this morning and they aren't here yet! Of course it has me worried! I told you about this whole thing weeks ago! You were supposed to help me! Yes I am, very upset, and I'll tell you why. Because Maxine, the big one, told me this morning that she overheard Florence changing her will. She's leaving everything to Stephanie, the smaller one... Yes, they're both large, but one is bigger than the other! The point is, Stephanie doesn't deserve it!... Well, yes, I hope Florence lasts forever, but it isn't very likely, now is it?

FLORENCE. *(Off.)* Duncan!

DUNCAN. Shut up! *(Into the phone.)* All right, I'll tell you what I think you should do. I think you should arrest them both. Right now. Send a squad car... Of course you need evidence, but you were supposed to find it! That's your job!... I'm not criticizing you! I'm stating a fact!

FLORENCE. *(Off.)* Duncan! Where the hell are you?!

DUNCAN. I'M COMING! *(Into the phone, desperate.)* Look, just do something, but do it now!... Thank you! *(He hangs up.)* God!

(He realizes what he just said — at which moment, the lights change and a tango starts to play. FLORENCE appears, dressed to the nines, and starts tangoing. She has taken years of lessons and has great flair. DUNCAN ENTERS and joins her. He's miserable. They complete the first section of the dance and dance out — as AUDREY and BUTCH dance into the room. AUDREY is terrific. BUTCH is trying hard to keep up. They perform the second section and then go — as STEPHANIE and DOC enter