

THE JOKER

CAST

SUE - the on-line gambler

LAURA - Sue's flat-mate

JAN - Laura's friend

MUM - Sue's mother

ROYCE - Mum's boyfriend

STEVE - the landlord

THE JOKER - male or female

GAME SHOW HOST + 2 ASSISTANTS

This can be played by five or six actors, by doubling.

For a cast of five, Steve and Royce can double. The Joker and Jan can double. The Gameshow host and his/her assistants can be played by anyone except Sue.

This has a cast of 1M and 4F.

The Joker could be a separate M or F part, as you need. Jan too has a large enough part for exam purposes, and she can take part in the gameshow too. The Joker could be the gameshow host to give variety to his part.

This gives a cast of 2M and 4F or 1M and 5F, as required.

The play lasts about half an hour.

SCENE 1

extract 1

Sue is sitting facing the audience, working on a laptop. She is totally engrossed in what she is doing. Laura calls from off-stage.

LAURA Sue.

No reply.

Tea's ready.

Still no reply. After a few seconds Laura enters, carrying a mug.

I thought you'd gone out. What are you doing?

Sue hastily shuts the laptop as Laura tries to look over her shoulder.

SUE I was busy.

LAURA Right. Anyway I'm just going. [**She starts to go out and Sue opens the laptop again. Laura hesitates.**] By the way, Steve came for the rent last night. I gave him my share...

Sue looks rather uncomfortable.

He's coming back for yours tonight.

SUE Right. OK. That's OK.

LAURA All right. See ya.

She goes out.

SUE Yeah, see ya!

She goes back to the lap-top and we see from a projection on the back screen that she is playing on-line poker. We see a losing hand and she looks agonised. She closes her eyes and the Joker enters and stands behind her.

JOKER That wasn't very clever, was it?

Sue is startled, then she recovers and shrugs.

SUE Just bad luck.

extract 2

SUE Hello, Mum.

MUM Hi, Sue, how's it going?

SUE Oh, you know. Going. How're you?

MUM Bloody awful. You would *not* believe the day I've had. You got any fags?

SUE Mum! You know I packed up more than a year ago!

MUM Oh yeah, I forgot. I'm dying for a fag.

SUE I think you should pack up as well. It makes you feel better, you know.

MUM Stuff that. We all need some pleasures in life. God knows there aren't many. Could you just lend me a couple of quid, Sue ...?

SUE Well, I'm a bit ...
MUM Just till Friday. I'll pay you back when I get my cheque.
SUE Well, all right. [*Hands over the cash.*] Just till Friday.
MUM Promise. Ta for that, Sue. See you Friday.
JOKER And you never got the money back?
SUE I never do. That's why I moved out, Mum's hopeless. I mean, I love her and all that, but she's useless with money.
JOKER Your Dad?
SUE Don't ask.

extract 3

Laura and Jan appear at the front of the stage and meet up with Steve, who enters from the other direction.

LAURA Hi, Steve. Thank God it's Friday.
STEVE Hello, Laura. Hello ... [*He clearly does not know Jan.*]
LAURA Jan.
STEVE Hello, Jan. [*To Laura.*] You on your way home? Because if you are ...
LAURA No, not yet. We've got a visit to make.
JAN She's going to look at a flat with me. Help me make up my mind whether to start living a free and decadent life.
LAURA It's only a few minutes away, so it would be good. As long as it isn't a complete tip.
JAN In which case I'll keep looking. No hurry. Apart from the absolute need to get away from Mum!
LAURA Your Mum's fantastic. If I were you I'd never leave.
JAN Well, you know what it's like. She waits up for me, that sort of stuff. And now I've got a promotion ... But I love her to bits. I'd just rather do it from a distance.
LAURA If you're not doing anything, Steve, you could come with us. You're the expert!
STEVE Well, I wouldn't mind having a look at the opposition. Keep in touch with the market. That sort of stuff. I guess I can go round and see Sue later.
LAURA Come on then. Let's go flat hunting.

Sue has been playing poker on the laptop throughout the conversation. She looks really excited and pleased. She closes the lid of the laptop, leans back with her eyes closed - the lights dim and return to normal as Laura and Jan re-enter.

JAN Well, I didn't think it was that bad.
LAURA Steve knows what he's talking about. I think you should take his advice.
JAN I thought the rent was reasonable.
LAURA But Steve was right about the kitchen. Imagine sharing that with two more people!
JAN It depends who they are. You know, I might just hang on a bit till I know who else is moving in.
LAURA *doubtfully* But Steve says he doesn't think it's such a good idea.
JAN Laura, do you think Steve might be thinking he'll have a spare room himself soon?
LAURA Oh, I see what you mean. Sue. [*Sighs.*] I don't know. It depends if she sees sense. But she doesn't seem able to leave that lap-top alone.
JAN What an idiot!
LAURA Yeah, well. But she has had a bad deal. You should see her mother.
JAN Excuses. Nothing could be that bad.

extract 4

SUE I had a win. A good win. I put the computer away. There was enough to pay the rent. But ...

JOKER But?

SUE Then I realised that I had enough for the rent but no more - nothing left to spend. And I needed to get some food in - you know, coffee, milk and stuff. I can't leave it to Laura to buy everything. I don't want to upset her. [**A pause.**] I like this flat. The first night, when I moved in here, was one of the best of my life. Just being on my own, and independent. Just being away from Mum. And Royce.

JOKER Royce. Yes.

SUE Oh, he was such a creep. They'd come back from the pub. Mum would pass out on the sofa and he'd start - making suggestions.

JOKER Suggestions?

SUE Yes.

JOKER *after waiting, realising Sue isn't going to say any more* Such as ...?

SUE *not looking at the Joker* Such as suggesting I might give him a kiss. And - trying to put his horrible ugly hands on me. [**She gets increasingly distressed.**] And then he ... one night he ... he came into my room. He was drunk. So was Mum. She was flat out. It was horrible. I left the flat. He'd collapsed in my bed and I spent the night walking the streets. He was still there when I got back. I had a shower and left for work. I took this flat the minute I saw the advert. I couldn't stand it any longer. [**A pause.**] I couldn't really afford this at first. Then I got a pay rise and it was easier. In fact it was fantastic. I could pay the rent and go shopping. [**She breaks down.**] I was so stupid! I was managing, but I thought I needed more. The poker seemed ... seemed ... like an easy way to ... I can't believe I was so stupid. I feel so ashamed. Anyway, I've got to go and meet Mum.

JOKER But aren't you expecting another visitor?

Sue looks puzzled.

Steve.

SUE It's all right. I'll be ten minutes, that's all.

She goes out.

JOKER *with a shrug* Some people are very hard to help.

EXTRACT from Production Notes

PRODUCTION NOTES + TECHNICAL CUES etc.

INTRODUCTION: THEMES, THE PLAY'S INTENTIONS

The play is mainly about the addictive dangers of on-line gambling. Its tone is serious and made more interesting because Sue reveals so gradually what a troubled background she comes from. The play cleverly turns us round from condemnation of Sue's stupidity to sympathy for her situation, without ever letting go of the hopelessness of depending upon games of chance to solve anyone's problems.

There are elements of abuse hinted at and even a slightly supernatural twist through the character of the Joker. Is he a kind of guardian angel? We'll never know.

CHARACTERS

SUE - a young woman in her early twenties. She has already done well to have a secure job and to have left a family background of hopelessness and abuse. Her addiction to on-line gambling is partly a way of trying to get out of her own feelings of lack of self-esteem, partly to make her life better, to hope that more money might be an answer to all her problems. Gradually, during the course of the play she grows, as we see her realising her own stupidity, facing up to her feelings of low self-worth and winning through, not only coming through her problems but also landing a top job and financial security under her own power. She needs to have a stronger regional accent than Laura or Jan; she has come from a poorer background.

LAURA - another young woman of about Sue's age. She is more 'typical', being full of concerns about boyfriend troubles, shopping and so on. Yet there is more to Laura than just that. Though tempted to side against Sue with her bitchy friend Jan, Laura never turns totally against Sue. She always says she likes her though she is worried about what is happening to her. It is the fact that she sticks up for Sue in the end and turns out to be a staunch friend after all that gives Laura her interest.

JAN - is less fully rounded than the other two girls. She also is much the same age. She still lives with her family and is dying to get out and independent. One of the reasons she is nasty about Sue is perhaps because she wants to take her place in the flat and have fun sharing with Laura. She is much more shallow than either of the other two, with a distinctly bitchy streak. There is also a snobbishness about her. She calls Sue 'common', which is contrasted with Laura who, despite Sue's awful mother, never tars Sue with the same brush.

MUM - Sue's mother. She is a feckless woman who drinks, smokes and sponges on her daughter. But there is love between her and Sue. Though Mum has been a walking disaster area and has not given Sue the best start in life, to put it mildly, she is nonetheless really proud of how well Sue has done. When Sue is threatened in any way - either physically by the nasty Royce or by the bitchy remarks of such as Jan - Mum's maternal instincts come to the fore. She puts herself in danger to punish Royce for abusing Sue. She is fierce in her condemnation of Jan and Laura who she sees as looking down on her daughter. She is also very honest about herself. She knows that she has not been a good mother and by the end of the play she is clearly trying to improve her own life - though there is still a long way to go. She needs to have a strongish regional accent.

ROYCE - Mum's boyfriend. Like Mum, he is a heavy drinker who uses Mum, perhaps with an eye for an easy life for himself. He takes advantage of Sue, knowing that Mum is too drunk to know. He believes - wrongly - that Mum is also too much of a drunkard to care. But he under-estimates Mum, probably out of a deep-seated misogyny, and

therein lies his downfall, in the end. Royce needs to sound rough and his way of moving is sloppy.

STEVE is the landlord. We are told that he is attractive 'for an older man' [by Jan.] He says that he rents out this flat so as to pay off a 'loan' - which may be a student loan from University, or simply a mortgage for his own house perhaps. We are not told. If he is called 'older' I imagine that Jan would mean somewhere around the late 20s or early 30s perhaps. His pub conversation with friends and other clues don't give me an idea that he is very old at all. I would err towards the 'late 20s'. If Sue et al are around 20, 21, perhaps he could still be seen as 'an older man', and it would sit better with Sue's and his budding relationship at the end.

He worries about Sue and is clearly not comfortable with being a landlord in the old-fashioned heavy-handed way. He is comfortable socialising with his tenants and not comfortable with being demanding about the rent. All in all, it is harder work making a believable character of Steve than any of the others. You will need to fix on an age and background for Steve that makes him believable for you, the actor.

THE JOKER As a supernatural character, he is all wise, all-knowing, but there is a real sympathy to the character. He is like a firm but not frightening older brother, or kindly parent.

SETTING

The set has to be open enough to represent multiple settings. Sue and Laura's flat is often returned to, but there are street scenes, Mum's home, and all sorts.

I would advise keeping the centre and front largely neutral. Have a raised area with a railing, perhaps near one front corner of the playing area. This is the bridge; nice if it looks over the audience, so the railing or balustrade is right up close to the audience....