

PERUSAL SCRIPT

COUGHLAUGH

A Theatrical Experiment in One Act

by Eric Samuelsen



Newport, Maine

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COUGHLAUGH

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PERUSAL SCRIPT **CoughLaugh** A Experiment in Theatre by *Eric Samuelsen*

The set consists of two chairs, one left and one right, some distance apart but facing slightly towards each other. Each has a small table next to them; the chair to the left has a table to its left, and the chair to the right has a table to its right. Upstage, and centered between them, is a kitchen table, with two chairs, set with plates, cups, and silverware.

The cast is two actors, HE and SHE. They could be played by two men, two women, or a man and a woman, but what's important is that they wear clothing that is very gender-specific. As the play begins, HE is sitting in the left chair, and SHE is sitting in the right chair. HE's reading a newspaper. SHE's watching TV; a remote is on her table).

The central premise of the play, and the First Rule, is that the actors do absolutely nothing unless prompted by a sound from the audience. This doesn't mean they freeze. HE reads his paper, SHE watches TV. But they don't do anything else. If no one in the audience makes a sound, then they sit silently, HE reading, SHE watching, forever. They can turn pages, or push buttons on the remote, but that's all the movement they should perform.

Note: in one performance, the audience, a group of professors at an academic conference figured out what was going on very quickly, were angered by it, and absolutely refused to move or make a sound. We ended up with a stand-off, at least twenty minutes long, with actors not moving, audience silent. The actors said afterwards that it was a particularly interesting performance, a battle of wills between them and a hostile audience. The post-show commentary was brutal, which I found most interesting, and which in no way negates the value of the experience, or validity of the experiment.

The Second Rule: when an audience sound initiates an action, the actors must complete the entire action before going on to another action. For example, if someone in the audience coughs, they complete the entire Cough action even if someone in the audience laughs while they're doing it. Only when they've completed the Cough action can they begin the next action, the Laugh action.

The Third Rule: for each action, I have indicated which actor should initiate it. Cough, for example, is a HE action. HE initiates the action if HE hears a cough. If SHE hears a cough, and HE doesn't hear it, then SHE does not begin the action. LAUGH, on the other hand, is a SHE action. Again, they only perform a LAUGH action if SHE hears it. Laughter tends to build, so SHE also has the sole task of determining how many laughs SHE's going to respond to.

The play has been performed several times. In general, performances lasted 25-35 minutes. One performance lasted 7 minutes, another 48. In theory, a performance might never end. Or it might be 3 minutes long. It entirely depends on the audience.)

COUGHLAUGH by Eric Samuelsen. 1M 1W From 7-45 minutes. (*For performance by Professional Theatres, College and University Groups, Community Groups, High Schools*) Have you ever attended a play where the actors seemed to do absolutely nothing? Well, here is that premise taken to the extreme. HE is reading a newspaper. SHE is watching television. They do nothing, until they hear a sound. Then they take the audience on a journey of frustration and laughter until the final sound brings a halt to the proceedings. This play has caused every emotional response possible from its audiences. And it is highly experimental. No performance has ever failed and some audiences have guessed early what was happening. Sometimes it took them a very long and hilarious time to get to the end. This script is a perfect blend of improvisation and control. You'll have fun... and so will your audiences. **ORDER #3041**

Eric Samuelsen taught at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio before joining the faculty at Brigham Young University in 1992. He became head of the Playwriting program at BYU in 1999. He has also taught as an

adjunct faculty member in the Religion department. He retired from BYU in 2012.

As a playwright, Samuelsen has had twenty-seven plays professionally produced in Utah, Indiana, Louisiana, New York, and California. Some of his plays include *Gadianton*, which has seen three professional productions across the country, *A Love Affair with Electrons*, *Family*, *The Plan*, and *The Way We're Wired*. He is resident playwright at Plan-B Theatre Company in Salt Lake City, who designated their 2013-14 season a 'Season of Eric, including productions of six of his plays.

He is a member of the Playwrights' Circle, and the Dramatists Guild. He is three-time winner of the Annual Award in Playwriting offered by the Association for Mormon Letters (AML) and he became president of AML in 2007. In 2013 the organization awarded him the Smith Pettit Award for his lifetime work as a playwright. He has been a staff writer for the on-line satirical magazine *The Sugarbeet*. He was also featured in the book *Conversations with Mormon Authors*, edited by Chris Bigelow. He is a noted Ibsen translator, and has also published scholarly articles on 19th and 20th century Scandanavian Theatre, and more recently, on LDS drama and film. He blogged at *Mormoniconoclast.com*. Eric died in September of 2019 after a long battle with polymyositis. This has left a huge hole in the Theatre Community within, and outside of, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Play Itself

ACTION ONE: COUGH

Initiated by HE, reacting to an audible cough by an audience member.

FIRST REACTION

HE: (Reacts to a story in his newspaper.) Huh.

(HE turns the page. As he starts to turn the page, she reacts to her TV program.)

SHE: (In disgust.) Nuh.

(She picks up her remote, changes the channel, returns the remote to the table.)

REPEAT FIVE TIMES

(In other words, they perform the First Cough reaction the first five times HE hears a cough.)

SIXTH REACTION

HE: Hmmph.

(HE flings the paper on the ground in disgust. HE gets up. SHE tosses down her remote in disgust.)

SHE: Grrrrr!

(SHE gets up. HE crosses to her chair, SHE crosses to HIS chair. They sit down at exactly the same time. She picks up his paper, begins reading. He watches TV.)

(They return to the FIRST reaction, only now HE's watching and SHE's reading. For the next five subsequent Coughs, they continue as above, performing each other's actions. After the tenth repetition, they repeat the SIXTH reaction—they trade chairs again. In other words, their actions and dialogue are determined by the chair they're sitting in, and they trade chairs after every fifth cough).

ACTION TWO: LAUGH

Initiated by SHE, reacting to an audible laugh from an audience member.

FIRST REACTION

(They both stand, stretch, yawn, and then sit again.)

REPEAT EIGHT TIMES

NINTH REACTION

(They both stand, stretch, yawn, then perform a Charleston dance step for an eight count. They then sit.)

TENTH REACTION

(They stand. They each take off their clothes. They lay them on the floor in front of them. They cross to each other's clothing pile, high fiving as they pass. They put on each other's clothes. They return to their chairs.

NOTE: it's not necessary that they undress completely; that's up to the director's discretion.

Perhaps they're wearing very baggy costumes. Perhaps SHE's wearing a very feminine, frilly apron and HE's wearing a sports coat and tie, and they just exchange apron and sports coat/tie.

The point is, they change roles: HE becomes SHE and SHE becomes HE.

NOTE: the Ninth Laugh reaction will probably generate more laughs. So will the Tenth. SHE is responsible for determining how many laughs SHE's going to respond to. SHE, in this case, means whichever actor was SHE when the Tenth reaction began. It's entirely possible that SHE might decide that the laughs are sufficient to warrant repeating the First reaction eight more times, initiating another Ninth reaction, and then another Tenth. That's HER decision.

Presumably the audience will stop laughing eventually.)

TWENTIETH REACTION

(Repeat the Tenth reaction, with this change. As they cross each to each other's clothing pile, instead of high fiving, they stop. SHE slaps HIM (stage slap, obviously.) HE slaps HER back. They then back up towards their clothing piles, warily keeping an eye on each other. Finish the rest of the action as before.)

THIRTIETH REACTION

(Repeat the Twentieth Reaction, with this change. As they cross to each other's clothing pile, instead of slapping each other, they face each other, crouched for martial arts combat. They slowly circle each other, then back towards the clothing piles. Finish the action as before.)

FORTIETH REACTION

(Repeat the Thirtieth reaction, with this change. As they cross to each other's clothing pile, instead of crouching for martial arts, they snarl at each other like feral dogs, slowly circle, then back to the clothing piles. Finish the action as before. Then repeat the entire cycle, as needed.)

ACTION THREE: Rustling program or paper rustling.

Initiated by HE, in response to an audible rustling program.

FIRST REACTION

(HE looks up from his paper. Turns to SHE.)

HE: Cue tip?

(SHE stands, brings him a cue tip. SHE either gets the cue tip from her purse, or from a drawer in her table—director's choice. SHE gets up, walks to his chair, hands him a cue tip. HE sets it on his table.)

HE: Thanks.

SHE: Glad to help.

(SHE returns to her chair, sits.)

REPEAT FOUR TIMES

FIFTH REACTION

HE: Cue tip?

(SHE stands, but does not bring HIM a cue tip this time. Instead, SHE walks over to HIS chair, picks up one of the four cue tips that have accumulated there, and sticks it in his ear. As SHE does so, HE takes another cue tip and sticks it in another ear. They slowly rotate the cue tip three times, remove it, repeat with another cue tip. SHE then collects the four used cue tips, holding them gingerly by her fingertips, and takes them back to her table, where SHE sets them down.)

NOTE: After the performance of the Rustling Program Fifth reaction, this action is retired. Any subsequent program rustling sounds are ignored. It's also likely to generate laughter, initiating appropriate LAUGH responses.

ACTION FOUR: Audible vocalizations.

Initiated by SHE, in response to audible words from the audience. This refers to anything spoken by an audience member, even if whispered.)

(The SCRIPT/OUTLINE continues for NINE more pages.)