

Play based on the song '*Hey there, you with the stars in your eyes*'

Cast:

Miranda, career woman, wealthy, single, expensive life-style, lives in the city.

Briony, Miranda's older sister, spinster, still lives in parent's rambling country house, manages large garden and a number of livestock on her own, self-sufficiency is her mantra.

Claude, dotes on Miranda, has lived in UK a long time although he is French and goes out of his way to be 'Gallic'.

Scene 1 Miranda's London flat/Briony at the old house.

Stage divided into two; one side with telephone on ornate, polished hall console; the other side has telephone amidst a clutter of papers and odds and ends on a dusty gate-leg table, window to one side. Two telephones ring. Enter Miranda and Briony on their respective sides of the stage.

Miranda: Briony? Hello, darling. How are you?

Briony: Miranda! Haven't heard from you for ages. I'm fine thanks. And you?

Miranda: Busy, busy - you know me. Chasing my tail the entire time. Didn't even get to pilates this week. Had a presentation at work followed by the usual drinkies and cardboard canapes - such a bore. Mind you, the new director is a great improvement. Really shaking things up. Donald, that's the director, took me out for a working lunch the other day. He's restructuring each department in turn - starting with mine. Lots of ideas. I'm really excited. I have to tell you, Bri, he's a bit of a dish, and he told me he is recently divorced. Perhaps my luck has changed at last, *(laughs)* who knows? Now Bri, its such a long time since I've been down to see you and the old place, and it's so awful in London just now. Absolutely stifling. So I thought I might pop down.

Briony: Well of course. Sounds as if you are going to be busy all summer if you're restructuring. *(sounds vague)* Don't you have to do all that consultation business with staff? Anyway, you must tell me more about your dishy director when you get here. Now when - *(looks out of window and shouts)* Oh stop that, you stupid chicken!

Miranda: What?

Briony: Sorry, dear, wasn't meaning you. I've just planted some cabbage seedlings and one of the chickens is scratching them out of the ground.

Miranda: Don't you keep them in a coup?

Briony: No, although I do cover them with fleece to keep the Cabbage White's at bay.

Miranda: Heavens! Don't the chickens mind being covered in fleece in all this heat?

Briony: What? Why would I put fleece on a chicken?

Miranda: But I thought you said ...oh, never mind. You know how ignorant I am about all the marvellous things you do to keep that place going. Don't know how you do it all on your own. Anyway, you don't mind me and Claude (*pronunciation as in 'abode'*) coming down?

Briony: No, of course not. Gosh I haven't seen Claude (*said as in 'clawed'*) in ages.

Miranda: The dear man doesn't change, still pretending to be so terribly French, although I'm sure he's lived in London longer than I have. And do remember to say his name properly, he gets awfully tetchy if it's pronounced wrongly. It's Claude - rhymes with commode, remember?

Briony: Oh dear, sorry. I'll try to remember - commode - Claude - commode -.

Miranda: That's right. He's quite devoted to me, in a rather whimsical fashion, but I couldn't disappear off without letting him know where I was going, and then of course he said he would love to come down too, so - (*faint sound of door bell*) Oh, now what? Door bell's ringing - I better go. See you.

Briony: Bye, bye. Oh, Miranda - wait! You haven't told me when you are coming? (*beat*) Oh, drat. Well, s'pose I better go and tidy upstairs. (*Looks out of window and shouts*) No, you bloody daft hen, get off there!

End of scene.

Scene 2: At the old house. The patio.

The patio is surrounded by verdant plants and has a small overgrown space USSR which is presumably a path leading off into the garden. There are four tatty deckchairs arranged around a small table. A crumpled newspaper on one of the deckchairs, wellingtons and other gardening/small holding paraphernalia strewn around.

Voices off stage, rattle of keys and sound of door opening.

Miranda: Just put the suitcases by the stairs, darling.

Miranda enters, USL high heels, pencil skirt, jewellery and sophisticated hair style. She's carrying her tablet/laptop. Followed by a moustached man wearing a striped blazer and cravat.

Miranda: Mmmm, isn't the air fresh after that stuffy car? I knew we shouldn't have tried the motorway - probably would have got here at least half an hour ago if it wasn't for all the traffic. *(Calling)* Briony? Briony we're here. She'll be somewhere in the garden.

Claude: Well, mon petit chou, it is no worry because we are 'ere together, and that is all that matters.
He tries to put his arms around her but she moves adroitly out of his reach.

Miranda: Must be near enough gin o'clock. What say you have a wander through the garden to find Briony, while I rustle up a long, cool G & T for us? There's usually some about somewhere. Briony may be a bumpkin, but she's hasn't forgotten all her upbringing.
Starts to set up her tablet/laptop on a side table.

Claude: *(peering into the verdure)* I don't know whether I have the suitable footwear. There is quite a lot of grass.

Miranda: Well of course there is, that's what we English call a lawn - although this one is not quite what is seen at the Chelsea Flower Show. Just keep to the path, darling, and remember not to stop near any of the goats. They're usually tethered but they do like to jump up and try to eat your clothing.

Claude: *(hands protectively holding his blazer)* À Dieu ne plaise! *(trans. God forbid)*. Oh well, if I must...

Miranda: Yes, off you go. I must just check to see whether Donald has read my report. His comments will be really helpful and he was such a darling to suggest I leave it with him before I came down here. *(to herself)* There's a lot riding on that report, so I hope the signal's going to be alright here. *(to Claude, who is still on stage by the path, watching her anxiously)*
I'll have the drinks ready by the time you get back.
(Sits down with her back to him at her tablet/laptop)

Claude waits for a minute, shrugs and exits USL.

End of scene.

Scene 3: In the garden

Bird song. Claude is walking along a winding path which zig-zags around the stage. There is a greenhouse door USR which is hardly visible through the vegetation.

Claude: Miss Bri-oneee, 'allo, are you there?

Silence, save for bird song.

Claude: We are 'ere. Miranda is 'ere et mois, Claude.

Sound of a door shutting. Claude picks his way through the foliage and comes across a shirt hanging from a branch.

Claude: *(forgets the French accent)*. Huh, funny place to dry your washing.

He leaves it and carries on, only to find some shorts in the path. He studies them and then looks around nervously.

Claude: Perhaps the goats are loose?

He finds a garden fork stuck into the ground, with a bra hanging from it.

Claude: Ah, bunting! No *(picks up the bra and examines the cup size)* Extraordinaire!. Qu'est ce qu'arrive? Miss Bri-onee, are you OK? Where are you?

Briony: *(Muffled voice from a shed)* Don't come a step nearer. I - I can't come out.

Claude: Oh! Er - 'ello, this is Claude *(finally seeing the greenhouse)* I think you are in the shed, are you not?

He starts to move forward.

Briony: Stay exactly where you are.

Claude: *(He stops abruptly and looks around again, nervously)*. What is it? The goats? *(Looks down and around his feet)* Is there danger?

Briony: No.

Claude: *(Gallic shrug)* Madame, I am at a loss. What is the matter? *(pause)* It must be very hot in there, under the glass.

Briony: Yes it bloody is.

Claude: Well - why don't you come out? I am perfectly 'armless, as you know.

Briony: I can't, Commode - er Claude. Can't come out.

Claude: Can't?Can't....*(begins to realise the situation)* Oh, oh, I think I am seeing the light. Er, would you like me to bring you the shorts and, er, other items? I can leave them by the door?

Briony: *(relieved)* Oh, yes please. It was so hot, you see and I was digging...I just kept peeling off the layers, if you see what I mean.

Claude: Ah, yes, like the French oignon, n'est pas? Wait a jiffy and I shall bring the clothing - I am your Sir Galahad!

End of scene.

Scene 4: The patio again.

All three are sitting in deckchairs, sipping G & Ts, tray of drinks on the table. They are laughing, although Miranda is clearly tense and anxious, whilst trying to appear at ease.

Miranda: Honestly, Bri - what on earth do the neighbours think of you? I'm surprised you haven't been arrested for indecent exposure. And when you knew we were coming down too.

Briony: I keep the hedges high so the neighbours don't see me. Anyway, you never told me exactly when you intended to get here.

Miranda: Oh, well never mind. I've had a lot on my mind. Isn't this lovely. Don't you think it's lovely, Claude dear?

Claude: *(getting up to pour himself another drink from a tray on a table)* Yes, delightful, except - there is a strange smell coming from somewhere. Do you have trouble with the drains, Brioneee?

Briony: *(sniffing the air)* Mmm - I wonder if it's the comfrey?

Claude: 'umphrey? You have a smelly friend here?

Briony: It's in the waterbutt.

Claude: You have a man in the waterbutt?

Briony: No! I'm making liquid manure. I'm hoping to sell it.

A mobile 'phone rings. Miranda grabs a 'phone from her handbag.

Miranda: Donald? Oh hello. Thank you for calling. I just wanted to know - just one moment (*holds phone away from her while she talks to Briony and Claude*) Excuse me - I just need to talk to my Director.

She disappears into the house USL.

There is a silence while Briony and Claude sip their drinks.

Briony/
Claude: (*both speaking at the same time*) Would you like to see / I expect Miranda

Claude: Pardon. After you.

Briony: No, no. What were you about to say about Miranda?

Claude: I was going to say that I expect Miranda will be some time. She spends most of it trying to speak to this new director, Donald. (*pause while he takes a sip of his drink*) Look, Brionee, can I be frank with you? I am worried about Miranda.

Briony: Oh dear. Well it is bound to be about her work. She has no other interests. Always has been totally single-minded about her career. Ah, perhaps this is about the new chap - Donald?

Claude: Yes, it is. You see - this man (*said with spite*), Donald. Well, it is like she has a school-girl crush on him. Every day it is Donald-this, and Donald-that. I have always thought of her as being sensible but she is acting crazy. I have never seen her like this before. He says jump, she jumps - and twice as high as anyone else! And, I think he is doing this deliberately.

Briony: What do you mean - deliberately? Do you mean he is - to coin a phrase - pulling her strings?

Claude: Exactly. I do not trust him and I think he has something up his sleeve. The more she does, the more he is asking her to do. I fear - I fear that he wants her to make a mistake, or even, oh well perhaps I imagine too much.

Briony: Have you told her your suspicions?

Claude: Yes, and she was angry. We had words. She said I was worse than her mother - telling her what to do! (*gallic shrug and sips drink. Speaks almost to himself*) I had hoped that I meant something to her. She is my bright star, but now I fear my star is getting further and further away from me (*glances up at Briony, clears throat, embarrassed*). Brionee, she works so 'ard and yet I fear that she does not see how this will end.

Briony: Mmmm. And how do you think it will end?

Claude: Maybe she makes a mistake, misses a deadline, I don't know. There is to be a restructure of her department, but when I asked her what are the plans, she would not tell me. I do know that there are plenty of youngsters waiting to step into her Jimmy Choos - you know what I mean? She is struggling to keep up - I know this. I think Donald is like a spider, setting a trap.

Briony: Oh dear, my poor Miranda. She always dreamt of success. She's fulfilled that, of course, although I don't know that she realises it ... or whether she realises how special she is - to some people.

Claude: Exactement. *(pause)* You know, I think that smell is coming from my shoes. *(Looks at the soles of his shoes)*. Oh, hell - I have shiiiiit on my crocodile shoes.

Miranda comes in from USL, there is clearly something wrong. She walks straight to the table and pours herself a very large G & T and knocks it back. Briony and Claude watch in alarm. She turns to them, and then suddenly starts to laugh slightly hysterically.

Claude: *(jumps up and goes to her, Briony also gets to her feet. Claude takes Miranda's hands in his)* Ma Sirène - what is it? What has 'appened?

Miranda: That bastard has just made me redundant. Can you believe it? After all this time? As of now, I am on garden-leave - just as well I came down here, wasn't it, Briony? He said my restructure plan was so good the department could run quite happily without me. Well of course, it bloody could. Stupid idiot was so up himself he couldn't see what I was trying to do. *(gives Claude a kiss on the cheek. Claude and Briony are still looking mystified)* Oh, Claude darling, I've just worked out how much redundancy pay I'll get. It's bloody marvellous. I just thank my lucky stars that Donald came along when he did. I cannot tell you how relieved I feel. I'm free. Come on, let's have another drink - we have plans to make.

End of scene.