Excerpt from “Conduct Unbecoming” – play by Stuart J. Brown

https://stuartjbrown.com/full-one-act-plays/conduct-unbecoming/

ACT I

SCENE I

[The living room of an old mansion. JONATHAN KLINE and MELISSA HANLON walk in the front door laughing.]

JONATHAN

I knew there was going to be a new member of the conduct board, but I didn’t think it would be someone as pretty as you.

MELISSA

Oh, Jonathan. You’re so fresh.

JONATHAN

I’m just telling you the truth. No harm in that, is there?

MELISSA

No, of course not, but you’re gonna make me blush. Wow. This is some place.

JONATHAN

In all my years at the college, I’ve never been here. It’s quite impressive.

[ARLENE ROBINSON enters. Looks around. Impressed.]

ARLENE

Not bad. Not bad. Melissa, are you feeling better?

MELISSA

Yes, thanks, Arlene. I don’t know why I started feeling so queasy on the boat ride over here. I’m usually pretty good on the water.

JONATHAN

It was a bit choppy out there. Nothing to feel embarrassed about.

MELISSA

I know. I just wanted to make a good impression on everyone. This is the first time I’m meeting you all.

ARLENE

Well, I for one am very glad there’s another woman joining the conduct board. These old farts were getting kind of boring.

JONATHAN

You made an extremely good impression on me. If that counts?

[MELISSA gently rubs his arm.]

MELISSA

Of course it does.

ARLENE
Melissa, I didn't get a chance to talk to you much on the ride over here. A certain someone was monopolizing your attention [laughs]. What department are you in?

MELISSA
Theater. I'm teaching a couple of courses and running the Summer Theater program.

ARLENE
I'm in Psych. I love the shows they put on.

MELISSA
This will be my first summer. Right after we get back from this training, we go into rehearsals.

ARLENE
What's the show?

MELISSA
We're going to do the musical Kimberly Akimbo. It's a bit quirky, but has a great story and score. It's small, but has a number of parts students can play. I've been able to work my connections to bring in two Equity actors.

JONATHAN
Equity?

MELISSA
Sorry, they're the professional acting union. People that perform Off-Broadway, Broadway, and most of the large regional theaters in the country are Equity. It'll give the production more of a higher quality sheen.

JONATHAN
That'll be an improvement.

ARLENE
Oh, Jonathan. They haven't been that bad.

JONATHAN
As my students would respond – just saying.

ARLENE
Ignore him. What else will be playing?

MELISSA
We have two others. Little Shop of Horrors, which will utilize the puppetry program at the school. I've seen the designer's early sketches for Audrey II…

JONATHAN
Sorry to interrupt, but I'm not a big musical theater fan, and I've never seen…the show. So, who's Audrey II?

MELISSA
It’s not a who. It’s a what. Audrey II is a giant man-eating plant rendered as a puppet. In a way, it’s the star of the show. I think what the puppetry program has planned will be really amazing. Did you know the program is one of the only ones in the country?

ARLENE
I didn’t know that. Can’t wait. What’s the next show?

MELISSA
Bye Bye Birdie. It’s not a very adventurous summer, but it should prove popular with the faculty and staff that live in the area as well as the town folks. Next year, I’ll do some more challenging shows.

ARLENE
Well, put me down for a subscription.

MELISSA
Thank you, Arlene.

ARLENE
Jonathan?

JONATHAN
I’ll think about it.

[ARLENE moves over to one of the walls and starts knocking.]

JONATHAN
What are you doing?

ARLENE
Checking for secret passages or hidden rooms. A big old mansion like this has to have some concealed chambers.

JONATHAN
I think you’ve been reading too many Agatha Christie novels.

ARLENE
You’ll see.

[ARLENE continues knocking. She stops.]

Aha!

MELISSA
Did you find something?

ARLENE
I think so.

[ARLENE keep knocking. Above where she is knocking is a sword hanging on the hall. Her knocking loosens it and it begins to fall. JONATHAN sees this and grabs her. MELISSA screams.]

JONATHAN
That was close.

MELISSA
Too close.

ARLENE
Thanks, Jonathan.

JONATHAN
Don’t mention it, but please be a bit more careful? We don’t know what secrets this place might hold.

ARLENE
Will do.

[ARLENE goes through the kitchen door.]

MELISSA
That was exciting. Good thing nothing serious happened.

JONATHAN
Would have been a great way to start the weekend.

MELISSA
Arlene seems a bit quirky, but fun in a…

JONATHAN
Odd way?

MELISSA
I was thinking more idiosyncratic.

JONATHAN
She can be a pain in the neck.

MELISSA
That’s rather harsh.

JONATHAN
You haven’t sat through conduct meetings yet. She just goes on and on about nothing.

MELISSA
I’m sure she has her reasons.

[ARLENE comes back out the kitchen door.]

ARLENE
Kitchen’s in there. I found a note from the caretaker.

JONATHAN
A caretaker? That’s convenient, having someone like that on the island.

[ARLENE reads the note.]

ARLENE

He says he's sorry he couldn't be here to meet us, blah, blah, blah. There's plenty of food in the refrigerator. He'll see us tomorrow morning. He's right. There's no problem of us going hungry. There's plenty of prepared food in the frig and some red meat in the freezer for you guys. I wonder if he knows where the secret passages are?

MELISSA

That's comforting knowing there's someone like that here, on the island watching over us.

JONATHAN

Why do you say that?

MELISSA

No reason. It just does.

JONATHAN

Arlene, did you go down into the basement?

ARLENE

What?

JONATHAN

The basement. Isn't there a doorway in the kitchen?

ARLENE

I guess so. No, you're right. There is. I didn't bother. Too interested in scoping out the refrigerator.

MELISSA

I thought you said you've never been here before.

JONATHAN

I haven't. I just figured a house like this has to have a basement and where else would the entrance be, but in the kitchen.

ARLENE

I'm gonna check out what's through here.

[Just as ARLENE finishes, CRAIG RAMSEY quickly enters and moves to a corner, followed by ADAM LEVY, who is uproariously laughing at CRAIG RAMSEY.]

ADAM

You are one for the books, Ramsey.

CRAIG

Leave me alone.

JONATHAN

What's going on?

[ADAM pulls out a flask and takes a long swig.]

ADAM

I'm surprised you didn't notice, lover boy. Our esteemed colleague here was trying to figure out how to put the moves on our new board member while we motored over to this god forsaken place. He kept circling the deck, hoping you would've moved elsewhere so he could swoop in. But you never left her…I'm sorry, we've never been properly introduced. Professor Adam Levy, Department of Mechanical Engineering.

MELISSA

Melissa Hanlon. Department of Dramatic Arts.

ADAM

A thespian. How precious. Over there is Associate Professor Craig Ramsey, Plant Science.

CRAIG

Nice to meet you, Professor Hanlon.

MELISSA

Good to meet you, Craig.

[ARLENE returns to the living room.]

ARLENE

There's a billiard room and library through there. A lot of dark paneling. Overstuffed chairs. It's like one of those snooty British gentleman's clubs. Hey, Adam and Craig, glad you finally decided to join us.

ADAM

Excuse me for interrupting your house tour, but is that Professor Hanlon? I'd be surprised. There aren't many faculty with full professorships on campus.

MELISSA

I'm an Assistant Professor.

ADAM

Thought so. That seems more appropriate.

JONATHAN

Why do you say that, Adam?

ADAM

No reason.

ARLENE

Right. [turning to MELISSA] You're a woman.

ADAM

You woman. Always a plot behind everything. How 'bout Ms. Hanlon is new and would start off at that rank? Isn't that a simpler answer?

CRAIG

Why are you such an asshole, Levy?

ADAM

Dear me, the mouse that roared. I'm all a twitter.

[ADAM approaches CRAIG and gets in his face.]

What’re you gonna do? Huh?

[CRAIG pushes ADAM, who momentarily stumbles. ARLENE has moved over to a sideboard, looking at framed photos atop.]

CRAIG

One day…one day.

ADAM

What?

[ADAM pushes CRAIG back.]

CRAIG

You’re gonna get your’s.

ADAM

I’m quivering in my boots.

JONATHAN

Would you two cut it out. You’re behaving like children.

[ADAM pulls out the flask for another drink.]

ADAM

I hope this place has some liquor stashed somewhere.

JONATHAN

Is that all you think of?

ADAM

Do you have any better ideas, besides shagging you-know-who?

[JONATHAN moves towards ADAM.]

ARLENE

Hopefully, the caretaker has whatever might be here locked up.

ADAM

A caretaker? How gothic. Does he cook?

ARLENE

Hey, have you seen these old photos? I guess they’re the family that used to own the place.

MELISSA

I wonder what they were like?

ARLENE

You can tell a lot about people from their family photographs.

ADAM

Spoken like a true psychologist.

[JONATHAN and MELISSA pair off to chat. CRAIG and ADAM are off by themselves. ARLENE continues looking at the photos, then spies one in particular and picks it up. She carefully eyes it, looks towards the other faculty, back at the photo, then the faculty. She puts the photo down.]

ADAM

Where's our fearless leader? What's his name? Why did we have to come over on a Friday night, in the dark, to be…here…when he…he is a he? isn't he?…is somewhere else?

CRAIG

For once I agree with Levy.

ADAM

Why, thank you Craig. That and three dollars will get me a hot cup of java.

JONATHAN

He's Steven White. Coming over from Washington University in St. Louis.

MELISSA

Good school.

ADAM

What happened to the other fearless leader?

ARLENE

Don't you remember he told us at the last meeting of the semester that he was leaving?

ADAM

I wasn't at that meeting. I had a conflict that day.

CRAIG

Conflict my ass.

ARLENE

Andrew Blake is his name and he said he was going to some school in Maine. I can't remember which one.

ADAM

Does it matter? It's Maine.

JONATHAN

Do you read your emails, Adam?

ADAM

Only the important ones.

JONATHAN

In Steve's…important email about this training, he said he had a few last-minute preparations to make before coming over. He'll be here on the boat tomorrow.

ADAM

I guess that's something. At least we don't have to wait for him until tomorrow night.

ARLENE
There’s only one boat in the mornings on weekends.

MELISSA
How do you know all this?

ARLENE
I like to research places I’m going to.

MELISSA
I’d think it would be just the opposite.

ARLENE
They’re still in the off-season. July fourth weekend is when it starts to get busy.

ADAM
Why would anyone come over here?

ARLENE
There’s a beach area not that far that’s a popular day attraction. I think this is the only structure on the island.

CRAIG
Damn!

JONATHAN
What’s wrong, Craig?

CRAIG
There’s no cell service.

JONATHAN
Does anyone read their emails? It said the island is a dead zone. Nothing comes in. Nothing goes out.

CRAIG
I don’t know if I can go a whole weekend without checking my email.

ARLENE
It’ll do you good. You can relax.

CRAIG
You don’t understand.

ADAM
What’s wrong? Won’t be able to check the latest babes on your porn sites?

[CRAIG tries to get at ADAM, but JONATHAN holds him back. ADAM laughs. Lights begin to flicker.]

MELISSA
What’s that?

ARLENE
I guess the college hasn’t updated the electrical. The wiring must be ancient.

ADAM

It just gets better and better.

JONATHAN

I'll check the basement for fuses.

ARLENE

I saw a flashlight in the kitchen.

JONATHAN

Thanks. Be right back.

[JONATHAN goes through the kitchen door. ARLENE wanders back to the photos and puts her hand on the photo she held before. MELISSA follows her. ARLENE puts the photo face down.]

MELISSA

These are rather beautiful. Do you know if this family owned the whole island? Maybe used it as a summer get-a-way?

ARLENE

I think so. Probably why nothing else was ever built here.

MELISSA

Arlene…

[MELISSA looks over towards ADAM and CRAIG.]

Why do those two seem to despise each other so much?

[ARLENE tries to stifle a laugh.]

ARLENE

Despise would be too tame a word for the animosity they have towards each other.

MELISSA

So?

ARLENE

It goes back a number of years. Craig was up for tenure. I know he comes across as, well, rather strange, but he is a well-respected scholar in his field. He's published in a lot of refereed academic journals and even had two books published.

MELISSA

Sounds like a shoo-in for tenure.

ARLENE

That's what everyone thought. His department gave him their highest rating and the Dean of the College approved. It really was just supposed to be a rubber stamp by the Provost.

MELISSA

But that didn't happen?

ARLENE
No, but no one knew why. The Provost wouldn't comment and an appeal to the President of the school was shot down.

MELISSA
That doesn't explain the hostility between them.

ARLENE
I think it was a year later that word started to spread around the campus that Adam was the one that undermined Craig.

MELISSA
No.

ARLENE
Yep. As you've probably noticed, Adam has quite a drinking problem.

MELISSA
That's an understatement.

ARLENE
It turns out that the Provost and Adam are long-time drinking buddies and over some drunken stupor they dreamed up this plan to humiliate Craig.

MELISSA
Why would you do that with someone's career?

ARLENE
Because they're men in power and can do really stupid and hurtful things.

MELISSA
I don't believe it.

[The lights flicker again.]

ADAM
Why don't we call the caretaker and get him to fix these annoying lights. Oh, that's right. No cell service.

MELISSA
You were saying?

ARLENE
As unbelievable as it sounds, that's what happened. The following year Craig was put back up for tenure, but that was after publishing two more journal articles. This time it was approved in a nanosecond. But Craig knew it was Adam and Adam reveled in that thought. Ever since then, there's been nothing but bitterness and loathing.

MELISSA
Why doesn't Craig just leave the conduct board and spare himself all this grief?

ARLENE
Give in to Adam? Ha. He doesn't want to lose another battle. No, those two will continue on the student conduct board until hell freezes over.

MELISSA
The way those two act, I wouldn't be surprised if they killed each other.

ARLENE
I teach Abnormal Psych and those two would be perfect exhibitions for my class.

[JONATHAN enters the room from the kitchen door, puts the flashlight down, and moves towards MELISSA.]

JONATHAN
Finally found a box of fuses. That should hopefully fix the problem.

[CRAIG tries his cellphone again.]

CRAIG
Damn this thing. Why the hell do we have to be here anyway? Such a waste of time.

MELISSA
Isn't this an opportunity for all of us to go over the proper procedures for student conduct cases? I know as someone who's new, it'd benefit me.

ADAM
Please. It's the student conduct board. This isn't, as the saying goes, rocket science. A student is charged. The administrator, whatever his name is, lays out the case, we ask insightful, penetrating questions, the perpetrator whines about their innocence and then we pronounce him guilty. What is so difficult about that

ARLENE
I believe the correct phrase is find responsible for.

ADAM
Responsible?

ARLENE
Yes, responsible for their actions.

ADAM
Well, of course the moron would be responsible. Responsible for their guilt. Why do these touchy-feely administrators have to be so PC? They're guilty. G-U-I-L-T-Y. So, if we occasionally get some facts wrong. It doesn't make a difference to their guilt.

CRAIG
Would you shut-up, you fool.

MELISSA
What are you talking about, Craig?

CRAIG
Nothing.

JONATHAN
There is something called due process.

ADAM
Why should we be worrying about giving criminals due process?

MELISSA
Have you heard of the Constitution?

ADAM
Sweetie…

MELISSA
That's Dr. Hanlon…

ADAM
Of course, Ms. Hanlon. I have heard of the U.S. Constitution. I even think it's a great document. Flawed, but not bad for something written by a gaggle of privileged white men hundreds of years ago. Oh, you'd appreciate this, *1776* is one of my favorite shows. But, I digress. We're a private college. We're not legally obligated to provide due process.

MELISSA
I would think morally we have a responsibility to do just that.

JONATHAN
There are judicial policies and procedures published in the student handbook that align themselves with due process which we are, therefore, required to follow.

ADAM
If you say so. I'm getting bored. Can we talk about something more interesting like my research.

JONATHAN
Always about you Adam?

ADAM
It is tough being me.

ARLENE
If Sir Levy is finished, can we revisit what Craig said a few minutes ago about why we're here. I mean, why we're really here?

JONATHAN
I was emailing with Steve before we left and he said mentioned about finding something from one of our cases last year that didn't seem right. He thought that would be a good jumping off point to review how we conduct ourselves during incidents and the subsequent hearings. That's in addition to the more routine procedures.

MELISSA
Do you know what he was referring to?

JONATHAN
He said something about the Benson case.

ARLENE
I remember that. Freshman student found dead in his dorm. Too much to drink and choked on his own vomit. That was an ugly one.

MELISSA
How horrible. His parents…

ADAM
He probably got started from raiding his parent's liquor cabinet. Speaking of liquor cabinet…

[ADAM goes through the kitchen door.]

MELISSA
Not to be insensitive, but how was that a student conduct case? I'm always getting students missing my Monday morning class after a weekend of drinking.

ARLENE
He was pledging one of the campus fraternities. Zeta Theta Rho. There're one of the most notorious on campus. I don't know how many times they've been put on social probation or been suspended.

MELISSA
Why hasn't their charter been revoked if they're that bad?

CRAIG
One doesn't mess around with the Zetas. They have connections on campus.

MELISSA
But, if they're that troublesome, surely that would trump…

CRAIG
You're not listing…Melissa. They have protectors.

JONATHAN
The Chair of the Board of Trustees and some very rich alums are all Zetas.

MELISSA
Oh.

ARLENE
Oh, indeed.

MELISSA
I know I'm new, but how did that become a student conduct case?

ARLENE
It was alleged there was an unauthorized party at the fraternity that night.

CRAIG
With plenty of booze.

[ADAM walks into the room with no liquor in hand.]

ADAM
Did someone just say the magic word?

ARLENE
It was referred to Greek Life and then us.

JONATHAN
Matthew happened to be pledging that fraternity. Andrew and his staff from the Office of Student Conduct interviewed the Freshmen students in the pledge class. There weren't too many of them left. Rumor had it that the upperclassmen in the fraternity were so tough on their pledges that most left.

MELISSA
And did they confirm there was drinking in the house?

ADAM
Not a peep from any of them. They were all covering each other's asses.

ARLENE
Andrew still thought there was enough of a case, so the fraternity president was charged. He was so smug during the hearing.

MELISSA
And?

[Long pause as no one answers at first.]

CRAIG
And nothing.

JONATHAN
I was out of town during the hearing, but all charges were dropped due to…

ADAM
I believe the phrase is lack of evidence.

MELISSA
But, surely…

ARLENE
It was ruled an unfortunate accident.

ADAM
And life at our bucolic campus went on as usual.

[CRAIG clears his throat.]

ADAM
Do you have something to contribute, Craig?

CRAIG
If this Steve wanted the whole committee to go through training, where are the students? Why aren't they here? Why do they get off?

JONATHAN
It’s summer break. Unless they’re getting paid or earning college credit, they’re not gonna stick around.

CRAIG
What about us?

ARLENE
We’re contracted til June 1. He’s getting us right under the wire.

CRAIG
I have a summer school class I have to prep for.

ADAM
Right. The one you’ve taught for 20 years. Are you actually gonna update your syllabus this year?

CRAIG
At least I’m asked to teach.

ADAM
I don’t need the extra cash like some faculty do.

CRAIG
Really? With what you spend on liquor, I’d think you’d want as much money as you could get your hands on.

ARLENE
Jonathan, you seem to know the most about Steve. What’s the intel?

JONATHAN
I really don’t have that much information. I think he’s coming from a Big Ten school. Maybe Penn State?

MELISSA
Actually, it’s the University of Michigan.

ADAM
Well, well, well. Just blow me over with a feather.

JONATHAN
That’s “you could have knocked me over with a feather.”

ADAM
Thank you for the clarification, Professor English.

ARLENE
Melissa, how’d you know that?

MELISSA
It’s really nothing.

ADAM
No, please do tell. We are all ears.

MELISSA
Last year, my department chair was talking with his friend at Michigan who said we were very lucky that one of their better administrators, Steven White, had just accepted a position here as head of the Office of Student Conduct. The Michigan Chair said Steve had helped sort out a real bad incident for him.

ADAM
Now, this is sounding juicy. Go on.

MELISSA
That's really all I know.

ARLENE
It does seem rather odd that he would leave such a large school to come here. We're like one-tenth the size of Michigan.

MELISSA
I was thinking that myself. Maybe we can ask him when he arrives.

CRAIG
I heard he got into some trouble and was asked to leave.

ADAM
And here I thought you were only good at pollinating flowers.

JONATHAN
What else did you hear, Craig?

ARLENE
Yeah, spill the beans.

CRAIG
I have my sources.

ADAM
And what did Deep Throat tell you? Or, will you have to kill me if you squeal?

CRAIG
I heard he beat up a couple of frat boys who were harassing some Black students at an off-campus pizzeria.

ADAM
Oh, good. Our new head of student conduct is a convicted felon. Does it get any better than this?

JONATHAN
Adam, shut up. Craig, is that it?

CRAIG
Just that no charges were pressed, but that he agreed to resign his position.

ADAM
Sounds like someone needs anger management training.

MELISSA
I'm sure there's more to the story.

[JONATHAN yawns.]

JONATHAN
This is all very interesting, but I'm going to bed.

ADAM
That's the most intelligent thing you've said all night.

MELISSA
I'm right behind you.

ADAM
Not too close.

MELISSA
Adam, do you ever stop?

ADAM
Let me think…no.

ARLENE
I'm gonna stay up a bit. I'm almost finished with this great John Dickinson Carr murder mystery and that couch looks mighty inviting.

[JONATHAN walks over to ARLENE and gives her a flashlight.]

JONATHAN
Here's the flashlight I used earlier. Just in case the lights start to flicker again.

ARLENE
Thanks.

[The other four faculty say goodnight and walk upstairs. ARLENE takes her book and settles in to read. After a minute, the lights begin to flicker.]

Damn and just as I was gonna find out whodunnit. Let's see if I can find that fuse box.

[ARLENE picks up the flashlight, tests it, and walks thru the kitchen door. There is silence and then a blood-curdling scream.]