

DANCING WITH N.E.D.

A full-length play
By Tyler JC Whidden

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CAST

Claire: 55, female

Peter: 20s – 30s, male

SETTING

Present.

Scene 1: I'd Like To Thank The Academy.

As a spotlight suddenly illuminates CLAIRE, confetti is falling around her and a crowd can be heard screaming "Surprise!" amid cheers and clapping and laughter. It's quite the party. CLAIRE stands CS below a banner that reads "Happy Birthday, Claire!" She is holding a glass of champagne. She has long blonde hair, too much jewelry and is wearing a dress. She is covered in silly string and elated as she screams in genuine surprise.

CLAIRE

Oh, Jesus! You scared me!
What *is* all this? Is this a party? A surprise? Party? For me? You guys! What are you *all* doing here?
A speech? I couldn't. Really . . .
Ok. Ok. Maybe just a few words . . .
First, thank you. I look at all these faces and –
– Jean? Is that you? Jean, you're here!?! Look at us – we made it! (Unbelievable.)
Albert. My husband. My loving husband, always by my side. Did you do this, Albert?
Fifty-five. *Fifty*-five.
I remember when my mother turned 54. I baked her a cake. And had to eat it *myself*.
She wouldn't celebrate it. She wouldn't *talk* about it. In fact, I'm sure she would pretty much kill all of you right now.
(Maybe she knew she wouldn't see 55.)
Well, it's been a great 55 years.
Is that my cake!?! Oh, it's so huge! Do you know I've *never* had a cake before? I mean one just for me. This is too much.
Sometimes I look back on my life and think about how it's all like a vignette . . . scenes that we remember like a movie. Some scenes were funny, some romantic, some hard.
And, you all were there for me. Every one of you. From the phone calls and the emails and the facebook group thing that you all put together for me . . . Thank you. So much.

Lights up suddenly on stage to reveal
CLAIRE is alone in her house. PETER who has just entered the home has turned on the lights. The house is messy and CLAIRE looks more haggard now that the lights are on.

PETER

Claire?
Claire.
Who . . . are you talking to?

What are you doing here? CLAIRE

I'm always here. PETER

You're early. CLAIRE

I'm late. PETER

What's the date? CLAIRE

Tuesday. PETER

The date. CLAIRE

The 10th. PETER
That's a nice dress.

This old thing? CLAIRE (sullenly)

Have I seen you wear that before? PETER

It's for special occasions. CLAIRE

Is this a special occasion? PETER

Not since you showed up. CLAIRE

It just looks like you're having a party. PETER

A party? There is virtually nothing in this house that says I was having a party. CLAIRE

PETER

There's a banner.

CLAIRE

Lots of people have banners.

PETER

Yours is covered in silly string. And, so are you.

CLAIRE

Is that weird?

PETER

You have confetti in your hair.

CLAIRE, having forgotten she was wearing a wig, carelessly removes it and hands it to PETER. We see her head is shorn and she is wearing a bandana.

CLAIRE

Take care of that, will you?

PETER

Is that real champagne you're holding?

CLAIRE

There might be a glass left over for you.

PETER

Where did you get that?

CLAIRE

It's French, I think.

PETER

It might be a little early to start drinking, no?

CLAIRE

That depends on what you mean by "start."

PETER

I don't think you should be –

CLAIRE

– Relax, I just needed something to wash the pills down.

PETER

You can't be mixing alcohol with your medicine.

CLAIRE

Who's mixing? I take the pills first, *then* the alcohol.

PETER

(taking champagne from her on his way to the kitchen)

Why don't I dump this in the sink and make some tea.

(off-stage)

You know, you should wear dresses more often. It suits you.

CLAIRE slowly begins removing her dress and we see that she is wearing a bathrobe underneath. This could be a while as she's still coming down from her "daydream."

PETER

(off-stage)

Maybe get out more often.

(entering from kitchen)

The water's on.

You're changing?

CLAIRE

Changing? No. I'm not changing. Nothing ever changes.

PETER

I meant your dress.

CLAIRE

I know what you meant.

PETER

You looked very pretty.

CLAIRE

So says you.

PETER

Why don't you keep it on?

CLAIRE

I'm saving it.

PETER

Why don't you put on another one?

CLAIRE

None of my clothes fit me anymore, Peter. They're relics from a different life and person. Luckily, bathrobes are one-size-fits-all.

PETER

Maybe, tomorrow, we go out and get you new clothes.

CLAIRE

You will be happy to know that I took a shit this morning.

PETER

Congratulations.

CLAIRE

And it was glorious. Like a pretzel –

PETER

– Wow, that's –

CLAIRE

– Or a brain –

PETER

– graphic.

CLAIRE

All I did was sneeze and – poof – it came out.

PETER

Bless you.

CLAIRE

I couldn't remember the poop-phrase you tried to make me learn –

PETER

– "Brown, no frown. But, red means dead."

CLAIRE

Catchy. Is that another medical marvel you Googled online?

PETER

Looks like you had quite the party. I'll be cleaning this mess for days.

CLAIRE

Hemingway was here again. The slob.

PETER

Wow. You've been getting really caught up in your daydreams lately.

CLAIRE

Daydreams? Chemo long ago zapped my ability to daydream. Fortunately, I can swallow the ability to care.

PETER

So, how many pills *have* you've swallowed today?

CLAIRE

Would you be a dear and make me a pina colada?

PETER

No.

CLAIRE is now fully in her robe.

CLAIRE

You're cute.

PETER

We're not going through this again.

CLAIRE

Ok, Jacob, let's compromise. You *may* make me a pina colada.

PETER

You're not having a pina colada.

CLAIRE

Is this why, every week, I pay you more than you earn?

PETER

You pay me exactly what you offered.

CLAIRE

No haggling? That should have been my first clue.

PETER

You called me Jacob again.

Excuse me? CLAIRE

You called me Jacob. PETER

No I didn't. CLAIRE

You did. PETER

So, as your boss, I decide what I wear, drink and discuss. With you. The hired help. CLAIRE

Is that right? PETER

Yes. CLAIRE

Ok. I'd like a raise. PETER

Request denied, but I appreciate your upbeat attitude when you come here. CLAIRE

Well then, looks like I'll need to steal your booze to supplement my income. PETER

Good luck, I keep it locked in my gun safe. CLAIRE

You don't have a gun safe. PETER

So says you. CLAIRE

Garcon – I would like a glass of your finest coconut/rum concoction blended with ice and cream. A cherry would be nice, but a slice of pineapple would really make my day.

You're cute, *except*, mixing alcohol with your medicine could have detrimental effects on your ability to continue breathing. Which means I would have to find new work and, as you freely remind me, I'm not qualified for much. PETER

CLAIRE

At least you're self-aware.

PETER

So maybe we should trust my ability to read the pamphlets regarding your medicine –

CLAIRE

– You mean Google? –

PETER

– and the negative effects mixing it with alcohol would have on your oh-so-fragile body.

CLAIRE

I wasn't mixing.

PETER

So says you.

CLAIRE

It's not going to be tofu and vegan meals from now on, is it?

PETER

I hope not.

CLAIRE

I still haven't flushed the toilet from earlier, so feel free to check my stool anytime you want. I'll try not to throw it at you.

PETER

Hmm, I can't wait to see it.

So, listen. It's a beautiful day outside. What say we get you into clothes that *don't* say "Four Seasons - Maui?"

CLAIRE

I like this robe.

PETER

Yes, you've worn it every day for the past month. But, it's beginning to attract flies. And I don't want people throwing change at you on the street.

CLAIRE

Again with the change.

PETER

Claire, we can't stay in here all day.

CLAIRE

We can, actually. I've done it. It's quite exhilarating.

PETER

It's not exhilarating. It's unhealthy. The fresh air and sun may help sober you up.

CLAIRE

You really think *that's* what I need?

PETER

We can go for a walk.

CLAIRE

I went for a walk today.

PETER

A peaceful stroll to your gun safe doesn't count.

CLAIRE

Touché.

PETER

So, I'll make us a nice lunch. We can picnic. I assume you haven't had breakfast yet, so I'll make a quick snack before we go.

CLAIRE

As a matter of fact, I had a great breakfast.
With Winston Churchill. He hit on me.

PETER

Did he now?

CLAIRE

He's very charming. But that could have just been the drinking.

PETER

His or yours?

CLAIRE

Peter, if you are going to continue to outwit me in this conversation, I may die insecure and defensive.

PETER

You're not going to die.

CLAIRE
Maybe you should check my shit.

PETER
You need fresh air.

CLAIRE
I need a liquor store that delivers.
Entertain me, Peter.

PETER
We're leaving soon.

CLAIRE
Isn't that the tragedy? Boredom? You go through your life fantasizing about your death –

PETER
– Nobody does that –

CLAIRE
– You think it's going to be dramatic – not an event, exactly – but something . . . like in the movies. And it's not like that at all. It's a fucking drag.

PETER
You know, Elvis died on the toilet.

CLAIRE
Yes. Thank you, Peter. You have earned your pay today.

PETER
Maybe you two have the same doctor.

CLAIRE
Peter, let me ask you a question.

PETER
While you put your dress back on?

CLAIRE
When I die, would you like my TV?

PETER
You have a TV?

CLAIRE
Of course not. I was just testing you.

PETER

You think I want the TV you don't have?

CLAIRE

I think you must want something.

PETER

I want to go to the park.

CLAIRE

Otherwise, why would a young man, well behaved and expensively educated, want to spend his days here with an old haggard like me?

PETER

You're not old.

CLAIRE

I thank you, though I am much older than many of the city's best doctors thought I would ever be.

PETER

Shows you what an expensive education gets you.

CLAIRE

Peter, stop what you're doing and look at me.

PETER

I'm trying to make you a bag for our –

CLAIRE

– I'm not a toddler. I do not need a bag.

PETER

Ok.

CLAIRE

But, don't forget the rum.

PETER

Not bringing rum.

CLAIRE

There is something I want to ask you. And it is important you're honest with me.

PETER

Ok.

CLAIRE

I don't have much in this world, Peter. Just my booze and drugs –

PETER

– There's no booze here –

CLAIRE

– And while I spend my last few hours on this earth –

PETER

– "hours" now, is it?

CLAIRE

It's important I have no loose ends when I go into the Great Fuck-off in the Sky.

PETER

You mean, in case you *can* take it with you?

CLAIRE

And inasmuch, I can no longer go on living without knowing you will be completely honest with me when I ask you this.

PETER

Should I sit down?

CLAIRE

Peter ... why does it smell like douche in here?

PETER

Is that your question?

CLAIRE

It's smells like my mother's bathroom in here, Peter. Like vinegar. What is that?

PETER

You smell vinegar?

CLAIRE

I smell it seeping through my pores.

PETER

Yesterday was Cleaning Day.

CLAIRE
(looking around at the mess)

Bravo.

PETER
And I read online that cleaning with vinegar is more effective and conducive to –

CLAIRE
– Sick and dying people?

PETER
To homes with sensitive allergies.

CLAIRE
I have allergies?

PETER
Plus it's more . . . eco-friendly.

CLAIRE
Oh, honey. I've gotten all I'm going to get out of this planet. The planet can go Stage Four and fucking die for all I care. But, the stench of vinegar makes me want to hurl on myself.

PETER
I'll add that to my list.

CLAIRE
You have a list of things that make me regurgitate?

PETER
That's precisely what it's called.

CLAIRE
Can you add "people who make lists" to it, please?

PETER
That's number one.

The door bell rings. They're shocked and awed.

PETER
What was that?

CLAIRE
I think it was the doorbell.

PETER
You have a doorbell?

CLAIRE
That thing hasn't worked in years.

PETER
Maybe it's in remission.

CLAIRE
Not in this house.
Oh, my god. Look at me!

CLAIRE begins putting her dress on.

PETER
Oh, sure. *Now*, you go to put the dress on.

CLAIRE
Peter, honey – why don't you clock in and get the door while I pretty myself for our guests.

PETER
You're expecting guests?

CLAIRE
Does anyone ever expect guests on a day like this?
Don't make them wait, dear.

PETER exits to the door. CLAIRE continues getting ready as she was at the top of the play, complete with dress and wig. She sets up some music and practices being surprised by a visitor, complete with champagne. After a moment, PETER re-enters carrying a bag of booze. CLAIRE goes to him ready to greet her loved ones.

CLAIRE
Peter, my liege, who could possibly be surprising me at this hour –

PETER
– Nobody's here.

CLAIRE
Oh.

CLAIRE, dejected, begins slowly removing her wig and dress.

PETER

You ordered liquor to be delivered?

CLAIRE

Liquor? Really? Imagine that, I was *just* saying –

PETER

– Do you remember the discussion we had where I informed you of the effects drinking is having on your life?

CLAIRE

Peter, I can't be expected to remember every random thing you say to me.

PETER

I say it everyday.

CLAIRE

Let me see that bag.

PETER

No, I don't think I will.

CLAIRE

Peter, clearly I must have forgotten I called in for a delivery, otherwise, I would have had the blender out.

PETER

You *do* have the blender out.

CLAIRE

Brilliant. Let's make some noise.

PETER

Claire –

CLAIRE

– Peter, don't be such a downer, I called in one order. I wasn't even sure if they delivered to this area or not.

PETER

Chip says hi. He said they miss you and they'll charge it to your account.

Ugh, Chip's an idiot.
May I have the bag, please?

CLAIRE

CLAIRE goes to take the bag from PETER. He won't let go.

No.

PETER

Peter, let go of the bag.

CLAIRE

Claire. Stop.

PETER

Peter, just give me the bag, please.

CLAIRE

Why are you doing this to yourself?

PETER

As your boss, I *demand* you let go of the bag.

CLAIRE

Claire, is this really how you want to spend your days?

PETER

Don't tell me how to live my death.

CLAIRE

I'm dumping this down the drain.

PETER

PETER goes to enter kitchen, CLAIRE stops him and pulls the bag out of his hands. Angrily.

No. Goddamnit, Albert – why can't you just leave me the fuck alone!

CLAIRE

CLAIRE notices what she has just said and done. Long pause while she composes herself.

I'm sorry I yelled at you.

CLAIRE

CLAIRE goes to the kitchen with the booze. She loudly searches for glassware in the cupboards and we hear a blender go. PETER stands still for a moment, then opens the door to the bathroom. He peeks into the toilet, pauses, then flushes it. He's seen something he doesn't want to see. Finally, CLAIRE comes back in carrying two frozen drinks handing one to PETER.

CLAIRE

Peter. I have a fantastic idea. We're going to drink these two pina coladas. Then, we're going to drink two more. And we'll keep this pattern going until we puke coconut rum out of our noses. Ooh, add *that* to your list: "too many pina coladas." See? We're having fun already.

PETER

Claire, you can't keep . . .

CLAIRE

I'm not doing anything.

PETER

I'm trying to help you.

CLAIRE

You *are* helping me. You answered the door.

PETER

That's not helping you.

CLAIRE

Oh, right. You wanted to go to the park.

PETER

Yes.

CLAIRE

Well, now we don't have to leave. Everything I need is right here. Cheers.

PETER goes to the kitchen.

CLAIRE

Oh really, Peter. If you're gonna be such a Debbie Downer . . .

Hey, while you're in there, I can't seem to find my spiced rum from yesterday. . .

PETER returns carrying a birthday cake.

CLAIRE

What's that?

PETER

This is your cake.

CLAIRE

You . . . got me a cake?

PETER

For your birthday.

My mom didn't like getting older. So I had them put a "29" candle on it for you.

CLAIRE

You got me a cake?

PETER

I wanted to throw you a party in the park. A picnic. To surprise you.

CLAIRE

A party? For me?

PETER

To thank you.

CLAIRE

Thank me?

PETER

For the job.

And being . . . not always crazy.

CLAIRE

Peter.

It'll be crowded and I don't --

PETER

It'll just be us. You and me.

CLAIRE

I'm not ready.

PETER

You can bring *one* pina colada.

Can I change something?

CLAIRE

Don't change a thing.

PETER

You're cute.
One sec.

CLAIRE

CLAIRE exits to kitchen and goes through some drawers. Returns with a big "55" candle for the cake.

Nice candle.

PETER

I . . . bought it a long time ago. Just in case.

CLAIRE

CLAIRE exchanges the "29" candle with the "55" candle.

I *like* that I'm 55.

CLAIRE

It looks good on you.

PETER

I'm going to die tomorrow and I'd appreciate it if you didn't try to stop me.

CLAIRE

End of Scene.

Scene 2: A Walk In The Park.

CLAIRE in a spotlight.

CLAIRE
But I don't wanna go swimming.
Can't I just go back to the merry-go-round? I know you think they're childish, but it's still fun and it goes fast and I just hold onto the bars and watch the sky twirl above me and I don't wanna go swimming. It's hot and the sun is glaring and I wish it was a school day and they pick on me when I put on my bathing suit and call me "A-B-C".

CLAIRE (*cont'd*)

Can't we just go home and play "house"? You don't even have to throw me a party. I can make "dinner" and you can make yourself "drinks." Please don't make me change. The other girls are so . . . *developed*. I don't wanna go swimming . . .

Lights up on PETER who has just opened a can of soda, breaking CLAIRE from her "dream." He is sitting on a blanket setting up his picnic.

CLAIRE

Ack . . . it is fucking *bright* out here.

PETER

That's the sun.

CLAIRE

Jesus Christ, can they turn it down?

PETER

Take my sunglasses.

CLAIRE

(*taking them*)

Thank you.

I hope people won't see me wearing these and think I'm an asshole.

PETER

"ABC"?

CLAIRE

Hmm . . . kids can be so cruel.

PETER

Any Body Care?

CLAIRE

All Bra Claire.

PETER

Are you sure you don't want me to go back and get your dress? Or wig?

CLAIRE

Oh, I think it's time the villagers see the monster.
Peter, do you have mom issues?

PETER

"Mom issues"? You mean like Oedipus?

CLAIRE

You've known me going on four weeks, have you ever heard me reference anything Greek related?

PETER

Not sure.

CLAIRE

The Greeks are all, "People die in the water. Don't go in the water. How will I ever live without you?" They're weak.

No. "Mom issues." You know, a less than formidable relationship with one's matriarch leading to an inevitable ability to project complex ideals in relationships with women. And serial killing.

PETER

Did you Google that?

CLAIRE

My mother had a very . . . "stand-offish" approach to child rearing.

PETER

Well, people are as they were raised, I guess.

CLAIRE

She was very old when she had me. Well into her twilight years. It made her less of a role model and more of a . . . you know. She used to take me to this very park. But, she wouldn't let me play on anything.

By the time I was in my developing years, she forgot what it was like to be young. To be scared of other kids. To be scared of your body changing.

PETER

I know what you mean. When I was a teenager, I was always worried I would never grow leg hair like my friends had.

CLAIRE

Peter, maybe we spend the last of my time on this planet *not* talking about your body hair.

My point is, breasts are a very big deal for a young girl.

PETER

I think I speak for most men when I say they're a pretty big deal for us too.

She sees him cutting the cake with a spoon handle.

CLAIRE

What are you doing?

PETER

I'm cutting the cake.

CLAIRE

With a spoon handle.

PETER

Yes.

CLAIRE

Peter, you have a very peculiar way about you.

PETER

You're sweet.
So, can we talk?

CLAIRE

Talk?

PETER

About what you said back at the house.

CLAIRE

You did say *one* pina colada.

PETER

I didn't mean one pitcher. But that's not what I'm referring to.

CLAIRE

The Winston Churchill thing? Sometimes I see people and they like to have a drink with me. Am I supposed to tell *Sir* Winston "no"?

PETER

You know what I mean.

CLAIRE

Hemingway's mess?

PETER

Claire.

CLAIRE

Don't make such a big deal, Peter. People die everyday.

PETER

Not people who hired me to keep them alive.

CLAIRE

I didn't bring you here to keep me alive.

PETER

You didn't bring me here to watch you die.

CLAIRE

You remember why I hired you, Peter?

PETER

I'm the only one who answered your ad?

CLAIRE

There were lots of people who answered that ad.

PETER

No, there weren't.

CLAIRE

One guy anyway.

PETER

That was me.

CLAIRE

Really?

PETER

I guess, "Dying broad needs help tying up loose ends" just didn't attract too many capable hands.

CLAIRE

Present company included.

PETER

I was desperate.

CLAIRE

So was I.

PETER

If you're feeling worse, we should take you in.

CLAIRE

I'm not feeling worse. In fact, I feel grand.

PETER

You're stoned.

CLAIRE

Very much so.

PETER

And you're hallucinating.

CLAIRE

We *are* still at the park, right?

PETER

You need to see your doctor.

CLAIRE

No, I don't. Things are as they should be.

PETER

I just think, given your history –

CLAIRE

– My history?

PETER

With your mother.

CLAIRE

What do you know about my mother?

PETER

Just what you've told me.

CLAIRE

And what does that have to do with me?

PETER

It's hereditary.

CLAIRE

It's a little late to worry about *that*, isn't it?

PETER

So, what are *your* "mom issues"?

CLAIRE

My mother's long been dead, Peter. I have no issues.

PETER

Doesn't sound like it.

CLAIRE

Hmm ... I've often wondered if she ever wished she could have ... warned me about anything. Given me advice that would have stuck with me.

PETER

Does parenting ever stick?

CLAIRE

She would take me to this very park.

PETER

And she wouldn't let you play on anything.

CLAIRE

She wasn't big on physical affection.

PETER

Again, if that's how *she* was raised ...

CLAIRE

People need physical contact to truly express themselves with their loved ones.

PETER

So, your "mom issues" have to do with her not hugging you enough?

CLAIRE

You joke, but I always swore that whenever I had children of my own, I would shower them with affection. Let them feel my maternal love. Hug them.

PETER leans in to hug her. She backs away.

CLAIRE

What are you doing?

PETER

I was going to give you a hug.

CLAIRE

Wow. That is *not* what I was going for.

PETER

Sorry.

CLAIRE

If you ever have children, Peter, love them. Show them you love them. Everyday. Because you never know when you won't have the chance anymore.

PETER

I guess it's easy to take people for granted. To think they're going to be around forever.

CLAIRE

We all have an expiration date.

PETER

Claire, yours is not tomorrow.

CLAIRE

Oh, honey, my expiration date is long gone. I'm just being stubborn.

PETER

Earlier ... with the party you were having ...

CLAIRE

That was just a dress rehearsal.

PETER

A dress rehearsal?

CLAIRE

It's important to play things out to make sure they go on without a hitch.

PETER

So we're having a party tomorrow, then?

CLAIRE

"We"?

PETER

Are you trying to keep secrets from me?

CLAIRE

I have no secrets to expose, they're all sealed in an envelope.

PETER

Well, let's have a party *now* and eat our cake.

CLAIRE

I'm not really in the mood to eat, Peter.

PETER

You haven't been eating much lately.

CLAIRE

Is that right?

PETER

How have you been sleeping?

CLAIRE

Standing up, mostly.

PETER

You still have a bed, right?

CLAIRE

Until you sell it.

PETER

Why don't you come sit down? I'll light the candle and you can make a wish.

CLAIRE

I don't believe in wishes, Peter.

PETER

You spend half your day in perpetual fantasy, surely you believe in dreams coming true.

CLAIRE

If dreams came true, we wouldn't be here.

PETER

Claire. If you come sit down, I'll let you finish your one drink.

CLAIRE

As if you could just take it from –

PETER takes her pitcher from her.

CLAIRE

(acquiescing)

Oh, fine. I'm not eating it, though.

PETER lights the "55" candle on her cake and lifts it to her face.

PETER

Ok, now close your eyes, make a wish and blow out the candle.

CLAIRE

This is stupid.

PETER

You can wish anything you want.

CLAIRE

If only wishes were heard, Peter.

CLAIRE stares at the candle thinking of a wish as we hear a young boy calling "Mommy! Look!" coming from off-stage. Claire looks, is startled, and runs towards the scream removing the sunglasses.

CLAIRE

No! Honey, don't go too fast. Those things are dangerous.

Quieter now.

CLAIRE

You'll spin around and around and around and you won't know how fast you're going until, eventually, you spin right off. Hang on tight, Jacob. *Please* hang on tight. Don't let go . . . forever . . . please, don't ever let go of the bars . . .

PETER

Did you make a wish?

CLAIRE turns back to the picnic scene, putting the sunglasses back on and leans to the cake. PETER hasn't moved. CLAIRE blows out the candle.

End Scene.