



play Costs Nothing to Jest

by Nuzhat Amin Mannan

(All the characters and events are purely fictional. Any similarity perceived or any malice detected is purely accidental and unintentional)

Characters:
Policeman/also plays another role
Pedestrian (# 1): /also plays another role

Pedestrian (# 2):
Street urchin, also called Totka
Spectator (# 1): An art critic
Spectator (# 2): A slob, runs a business

Playwright: Expedient man of the Arts
Actor: Who plays the policeman's roles.
Doorman/also plays another role.
Orderlies: Who work in the station.

Act I Sc i

(The play opens with the audience getting to see a stage with bad setting showing a quiet road)

Policeman: I hate my job. I love myself. Is that wrong? I wish you'd stop looking like you are better than me, son of no Bara Shahib.

Pedestrian (# 1): Pul-ee-se! You — complaining about your job? If any one does things that tell what he is — I'd think of a police.

Policeman: Hey you, stinkbomb, see the zebra line?

Pedestrian (# 2): Yeah. On your scalp. Louse breeder.

Policeman: I don't need to do this, you know, but I could punch your paunch out through your sockets, needle head. One scum swiped — one would notice the air's cleaner, wouldn't one?

Street urchin: Want a flower for Begum Shahib at home, Policeman hoozoor? Spare me a fiver, hoozoor, mummy is dying, really — grave truth, solemn oath to you hoozoor, mother needs coffin clothes.

Pedestrian (# 1): He's looking at his eyes? Do you see how piteous his eyes are? Poor mite!

Pedestrian (# 2): Ym. Phony tears, phony whines.

Pedestrian (# 1): Phony or not — if he's crying for his mother — he gets a dine from me, if he's crying for his daddy — he'll get a stick from me. Mother — that's essential — think of it — womb — paradise hereafter — what not? Hey, urchin — I love mummy well too — you buy a bit of nice tea and daal poor with this now — never mind the coffin — mum will go to heaven with or without coffin clothes — tell her that for me.

Pedestrian (# 2): Cute stuff. I bet you're the kind who saves girls from lecherous goondas and drops them politely at home.

Pedestrian (# 1): I, actually did once, fly eye, if it's any business of yours. Girls are to be respected, even the ones that bat their eyes at you fifty times per second.

Pedestrian (# 2): (Surprised and going to enlighten on the subject) You saw these ones too? Ones that bat their eyes — tell you to get the follicle out of their eyes? Before you know it, your purse is gone, wamoos!

Policeman: You two louts are under arrest for loitering, for immoral thoughts and for bad mouthing about society.

Pedestrian (# 1): (With increasing authoritativeness) You are suspended. I am High Authority, you... less than soil caked under my soles. Streets full of comedians these days.

Policeman: (with decreasing calm) I don't believe you. Any way what did I do? Sir, I was just following orders. Sir, pity, sir.

Pedestrian (# 2): (smirking) High Authority! I bet the urchin's your son. I bet you know his mother, I bet you know one who bats her eyes...

High Authority: (resigned and impatient) This is what you get in a free country. Get independence, have insolence. Freedom... of... of... how did you put it... yes... "immoral thoughts." Totka, call a baby, take them into custody.

Totka: (sounding efficient) Baby, yes right away, *Papaji* — where to — to the morgue?

High Authority: Later perhaps to the morgue. We follow the book as one says in civilized places.

(All exit)

Act I Sc ii

(Audience seen watching the play)
Spectator (# 1): I wonder, is it prudent, do you think to make statements like this? You know, it doesn't help in getting people to follow the law better.

Spectator (# 2): Misguided generation, that's what I say. No values, anywhere, I'm disgusted. *Chee-ee!*

Spectator (# 1): Don't say? Why are you disgusted? You have any better ways of running things?

Spectator (# 2): Crummy! Did I say

that? I'm disgusted I spent thirty taka to watch this. Hard earned money! No dad of mine was a zamindar or a loan defaulter, *yaar*.

Spectator (# 1): Tsk. Tsk. Don't call me 'yaar', please. I'm talking to you — just because you could tell me what to write. I've got to write out something on this play tomorrow. What were you saying about loans? What has that got to do with anything? I say, stop judging people by those who repay micro-credits and those who default big loans!

Spectator (# 2): One'd think there was no difference at all? No wonder we're in a state. Say which newspaper did you say you wrote for?

Spectator (# 1): I didn't say. I'm a freelancer.

Spectator (# 2): A free what? What do you lance?

Spectator (# 1): Never mind. Do you think the plays any good?

Spectator (# 2): As a street person — I'm not free to lance my ideas, *yaar*. As a person with an artistic temperament I'll tell you — I am a nihilist. Put that down. Nee-h-il-is-tic. Spelt like lipstick. Got that? (Light fades)

Act II Sc i

(Stage shows outside of the theatre building.)

Door keeper: (sings) I am like a river. I'm so hurt that my tears break out like a flood. Hum, hum, hum.

Playwright: Not a bad voice you've got there. Can use you on the stage sometime.

Door keeper: Please, hoozoor, I'll be eternally grateful. My dad was poor. Singing is my soul, door keeping is no job for me, sir.

Playwright: Hey, don't lose your job on my account. I will think of putting a Baul or Sanyasi in my next production. I can't pay the artistes, though, Credit. *Understand?*

Door keeper: You take care of *polam's* hunger Shahib, I'll take credit, no problem, no problem.

Act II Sc ii

(In an interrogation chamber)
High Authority: Who put you up to doing this?

Policeman: Benign Sir, I'm ignorant, foolish — I don't understand what you say.

(High Authority spits in a spittoon and twiddles his thumb)

High Authority: I'll see what I can do about that. Come, sit in my chair — ask me something, I'll tell you — sitting on your side of the table is making your mind muddy.

Policeman: Sir is joking. Me, in that revered seat? I have no information, little post-holder that I am. No one discusses anything with me, hoozoor.

High Authority: Who was it? How did you know who I was? Have you been surveillancing me? Are they sending alley cats to the main streets? Who is it — names, dates, bribe amounts — I want the whole lot.

Policeman: Sir, mighty knowledge sir, I'm a humble cop, sir. Ideals, sir, put me here. Father dead, father-in-law quite well-o-do, sir — no need to work. Ideals, sir, love for motherland, put me here, sir. I beseech you, sir, believe me — I don't know anything.

High Authority: You see, I can take you really up. Fortunate me, I can also make you deformed like Totka the urchin. You don't get that, do you? Who? Why? Why? Who? (almost screaming deafeningly)

Policeman: Check my records sir — never bribe taking, never, touching inmates, all clean sir. "Who — Why" difficult questions, sir. Nobody really knows. Me, a petty fry. Sir, you powerful, you see things that are not seen.

High Authority: I'm booking you on charges of being a nuisance to the city-traffic, also on other charges, like you've just called me a liar.

Policeman: (growing desperate and surly) My father-in-law, sir, will look into the matter, you, whoever you are, my wife's aunt will get the *fakir* only 300 taka that will get you such a curse that you'll be crippled from your haughty, crooked nose downwards, for the rest of your life. Then you will know — Who? Why? Why? Who?

(High Authority blanches. Hand bound the policeman is taken away by orderlies. All exit.)

Act II Sc iii

(Outside the theatre building)
Playwright: (beaming) I have a socially conscientious play out there on the stage. I've people actually paying money to watch this stuff. I've artistes on credit. I feel like a creator of the highest sort. God, this was easy. Life shouldn't be this easy.

(Worriedly) There must be something

wrong with me. I know it's society — I can't feel any belongingness — that must be it. This society is not fulfilling me, in ways I can't quite lay my finger on.

Door keeper: Sorry, to butt in. I have a message for you from inside.

Playwright: (jumping up) Gosh, you don't go about creeping and startling creative people like that, my good new. Remember that what inside are you talking about?

Doorman: Inside, the roundabout's of the stage, you know — where the play's on.

Playwright: I hate it when you low lives become intellectuals.

Doorman: Not intellectuals, sir, just informed. They tell me to tell you, sir, that one of the actors is not here, sir. Hepatitis sir. Could the third act be dropped out, sir — they want to know.

Playwright: No, no, the show must go on. Ask them to repeat the first Act. Call

it an improvisation. I'll write out a new Act right now.

Doorman: Such genius. Can I sing as a Sanyasi?

Act III Sc i

(Stage shows the audience in their seats)

Spectator (# 2): Hey did I miss something? I went to get a refill of my *jhaal moori*.

Spectator (# 1): I don't believe you have.

Spectator (# 2): Have some *jhaal moori* — what happened?

Spectator (# 1): Thank you *mon ami*. Well, let me see — there is a policeman minding his business, there are two smart pedestrians and there's an urchin. They foul mouth each other, one pedestrian says he is High Authority and takes the policeman and the other loutish pedestrian into custody. The

urchin Totka fetches a baby taxi.

Spectator (# 2): Can't be. You've been sleeping.

Spectator (# 1): Yeah? Who says? You didn't hear me snore? Well, did you?

Spectator (# 2): You've just told me things that already happened in Act I.

Spectator (# 1): (surprised and feels enlightened) Hey, I didn't realise that. I wasn't sleeping, believe me. Art critics are insomniacs. Remember that. Gosh, this is fresh, it's new, isn't it — to have Act I repeated as Act III? What did you say before — Nihilism? This is it! Wow, what an experience.

Spectator (# 2): You eat my *jhaal moori*, you borrow my art ideas. What a living you make, man!

Act III Sc ii

(Stage shows urchin and High Authority being handed some scripts from behind the curtain. Looks of dumb stares from urchin and High Authority)

Urchin: Audience would think we've run short of things to say. High Authority Sir.

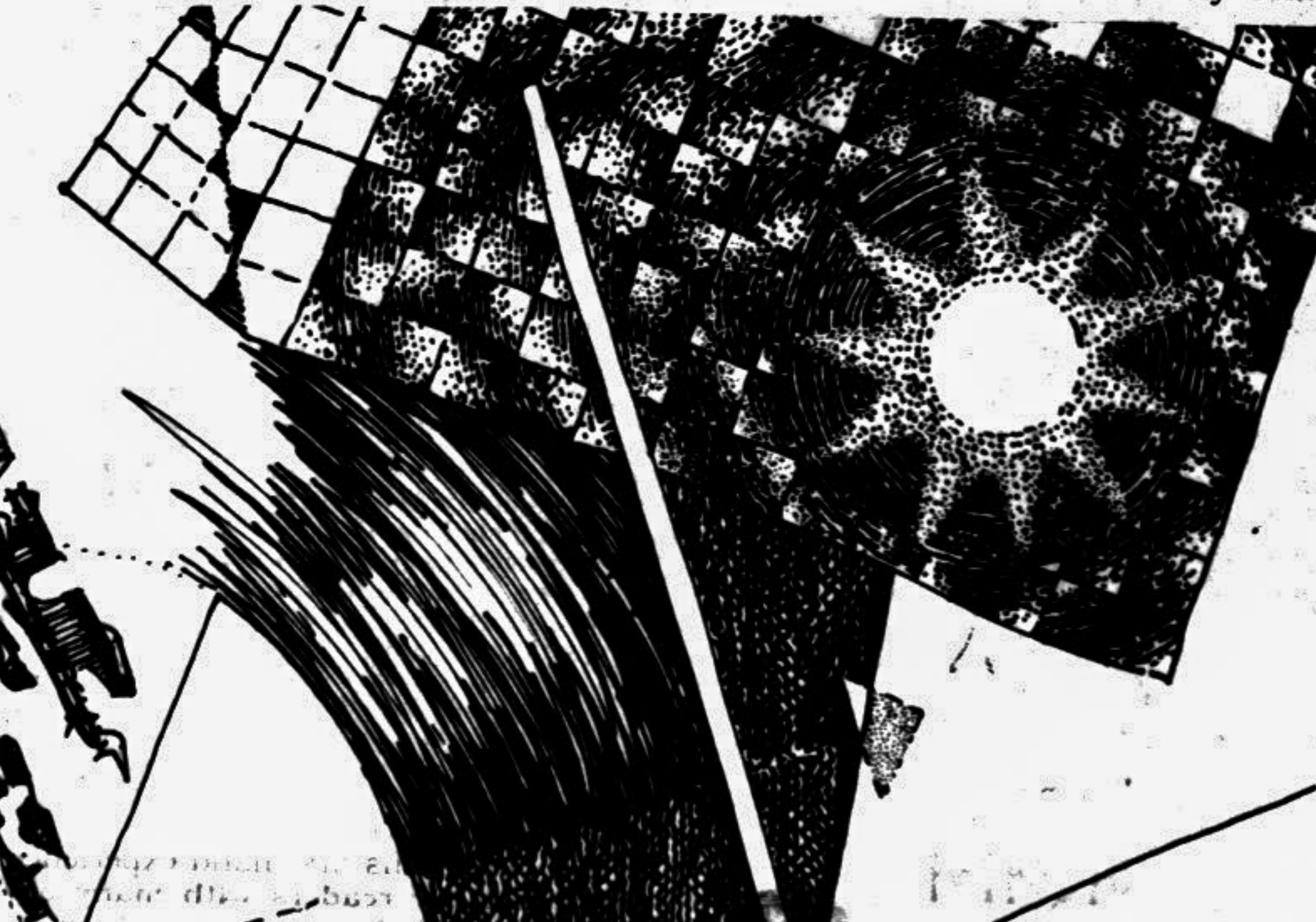
High Authority: Why, delightful son of the streets?

Urchin: We just repeated one whole Act.

High Authority: That's the beauty of it, my child. There is something profound about our lives — it doesn't change much — it doesn't change at all. Must be Philosophy. I had a Master's degree in it once, an M. Phil in Literature too.

Urchin: No wonder, highness sir, that you are so powerful a master now. What will happen to rude, lying, threatening, policeman and loutish pedestrian, *hoozoor*?

High Authority: Advise me, Urchin, you are more street wise. Should I do what my conscience says and send them upstairs? Or should I fear curses and send them back to where they come



from? **Urchin:** Personal well-being and professional duty — a film dilemma, sir.

High Authority: No, no repulsive brat of the slum kingdom — it's nihilism — not dilemma — cinema I know, I'll consult a property developer gentleman, they can make a mountain out of a mole hill, you know. He'll show me dimensions of this situation that I'd never dream of in my sweetest sleeps.

Urchin: Hoozoor knows best. Will I get the BMW, sir?

Act III Sc iii

(Close to the stage, near the wings)

Playwright: That went smoothly, even though they made it up mostly. What do you think, Door keeper, may be I am politically incorrect here — should I say entrance manager?

Door keeper: Excellent brain wave.



You should have seen the shock on the audiences' faces. They were sick with thought.

Playwright: Sweet to hear, kind friend of the art world. Tell me some more. How's the acting? Are they pulling it through, do you think?

Door keeper: No question at all — I hear they are very realistic — almost life like — but of course being high art — they are very unreal too.

Playwright: The wretch with hepatitis is being fired as of this moment. You're hired. What role did that wretch have?

Door keeper: Your guess is good as mine. Sir, make him a Sanyasi, creator unparalleled. Songs, high thought, rustic life, common problems — all fit.

Playwright: Do we have any girls in this play?

Door keeper: I don't think so. I would have noticed.

Playwright: (briskly) : That settles it.

You'll be a young working girl. Can you act? Never mind. Acting feminism is easy. On to the stage. Move. Move. Move. (Door keeper gasps in horror and admiration)

Door keeper: Do you think I could do that?

Playwright: Yes, yes why not — what does a female do on stage that you can't do? Strut, pucker, cry, whine, melt, small roses, borrow handkerchiefs —

Door keeper: The costume, I feel embarrassed sir, to divulge all my hesitations, sir, maker of the greatest show on earth.

Playwright: What about the costume? God, you people are the limits. You way your tail for a job, a role and then you begin to form opinions, discover crises. Stop being silly and go and say your lines.

Door keeper: Yes sir. There are no lines remember sir? Never mind, sir.

Act IV Sc i

(A street corner in front of a nice office building)

Policeman: (breathing fresh air): Blessed orderlies! Nice work, even though I don't know how I do it sometimes. Fictional father-in-law, imaginary aunt, infallible curse threat. I'm impressed. I ought to think of a career change. Writer, dramatist, politician, preacher, bureaucrat, entrepreneur... I know... I've got it. I will be a...

(Young girl waltzes in. Actor-Policeman stares bewilderingly. Lets his scripts down in despair)

Young girl: May I come, sir?

Policeman: What is it? Gosh, you're ugly. I don't have too much time to waste. What is it?

Young girl: I'm sorry you think so. I can work like a devil, if I were given an opportunity.

Policeman: (looking pleased): Do I look like a man giving jobs?

Young girl: You're not? What are you offering?

Policeman: Can you work, say, in a property developer's office — doing you know, whatever they do?

Young girl: I work like a devil, I said. You say 'Developer', what sort of a devil is that?

Policeman: Sharp, sharp — ugly but sharp. Never mind. I'll worry about that, you go and wear a smart outfit and see me in my office tomorrow.

Young girl: Come to office? To work, sir?

Policeman: (testily) Work, yes, work. You know the verb? Pay cheque at the end? Jolly, ugly girls shouldn't have to ask such questions one would have thought! No, times are really bad.

(Exit)
(From off-stage the Policeman-Actor is heard shouting "Who the hell is she?")

Act IV Sc ii

(Stage shows audience in their seats)

Spectator (# 1): Nice girl?

Spectator (# 2): Where?

Spectator (# 1): The one on the stage — who got the job.

Spectator (# 2): Not my type.

Spectator (# 1): What's your type?

Spectator (# 2): Small, thin, delicate, fair. Gosh I hate that woman's wig.

Spectator (# 1): Why any one would want anything small, thin, delicate — I don't know. I like the heavy ones.

Spectator (# 2): (animatedly) Really? Here's my business card. I run a marriage consultancy shop. We're stuck, getting some of the heavy ones parried off into marital bliss.

Spectator (# 1): I'm married. A happily married one, if I may add. I am expecting to be a father soon, second time.

Spectator (# 2): Spare me the details, please! You come to watch a play, you sit next to some one you've seen for the first time and there you are, obligingly listening to their perky personal lives, God!

Act IV Sc iii

(Outside, near the entrance of the theatre)

Playwright: Hey you, Mr Actor-Policeman, I thought I'd tell you — marvelous job chap. Who would have guessed — you didn't have the slightest idea that we didn't have a script for this. Surprised, weren't you, to see this young woman sailing in? Had no idea what was happening, did you? I knew it, I knew it — best way to bring out an artistic performance. Tonight would put people getting Emmy Awards to shame.

What acting, what presence. What lines! I'll pay you extra, you know for the lines you made up. Brilliant. Royalty awards, citations — your name will be with mine.

Actor (Policeman): Playwright Shahib, spare me your surprises and

your female actresses — where do you get them from?

Playwright: — Divine inspiration, smart business sense — it's your pick. (both exit)

Act V Sc i

(An office room)

High Authority: I have an appointment with your boss.

Young girl: Really? We've just opened today.

High Authority: Are you implying that I didn't have an appointment just as I said I did?

Young girl: I'll tell him, you're here. Your name?

High Authority: That's confidential. You puzzle me — I've never felt such a desire to be this rude with any female before. Let moving, now.

Young girl: Won't you take a seat? (In the boss's room)

Policeman: (now developer too): Are we having our first office argument with our first client?

Young girl: Some one has come, sir. He doesn't say who he is.

Policeman: I'm not going to either. Show him in. And stop looking so hurt. Office life is a dog's life. Beware. (High Authority is led in)

High Authority: I can't divulge too much information. It's a private matter. (Policeman/Developer smiles as he readjusts his disguise)

Pol-Dev: How can I help?

High Authority: I had on official purposes taken someone really mean off the streets. Now, I'm being issued threats. Should I relent and let the miscreant go — or should I do my duty?

Pol-Dev: I know it — you thought this was a clairvoyance shop. Right?

High Authority: No. I know who you are.

Pol-Dev: Really? Why not? I know you too! Don't we know all?

High Authority: What? Is that nihilism?

Pol-Dev: No, it isn't. Tell me how can a property developer help you?

High Authority: With insight, far-sight — whatever it takes. Hey, fees also no problem.

Pol-Dev: Charges for consultation are exorbitant. I'll say that. Beware now, before you commit anything. I'll have somebody make a computerized profile of your problem. One hour later the data will be analyzed. I'll be then able to tell you exactly where you stand. Good bye, sir.

High Authority: Confidentiality, you understand, don't you?

Pol-Dev: Who better than us to keep your troubles a secret?

Act V Sc iii

Spectator (# 2): Play of identity. My thirty takas! I'll demand a refund. 10 Takas for the *jhaal moori*, too.

Spectator (# 1): What's bugging you? **Spectator (# 2):** Don't you see? Old tricks of the bag. Stock comic situations, dupers being duped. Bad horse-play!

Spectator (# 1): I didn't see any horses. Now who's been catching a few winks?

Spectator (# 2): The play, you imbecile. It's a bad play about disguises and identity, appearance and reality.

Spectator (# 1): Hey, slow down a bit, let me get this down properly.

Act V Sc iv

(Inside the Property Developer's office)

High Authority: Do we have a solution?

Pol-Dev: We make dreams come true. We explain nightmares. Psychoanalysts developers rolled together. Service — that means everything to us.

High Authority: The solution?

Pol-Dev: I'd hate to have told you to let the miscreant off — you know it's bad for your image — authorities have to be steady in their judgements, leadership is not like what one writer says — now like butter — solid — now melting into ghee. But we can't have curses on you, just for public convenience. That's why the computer, High Technology says — have someone reliable, you know discreet, confidential-minded, have him discover one day that the miscreant is missing. The bird's gone. Free. No fault of yours. Maybe some of the system's. But let's face it — who bears grudge against the system? All will be smooth, forgotten in two days' time.

High Authority: You say High Technology suggests that! I feel so much better that I've been here. Can I introduce you to Totka — my kindness keeps him alive, even though I say so myself. Please accept him as my payment for your most generous assistance.

(curtain drops)