

# **HOAX**

**By Bryan Harnetiaux**

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**Characters:** Phil - late twenties

Star -late twenties

Vera - much older

**Time and Place:** Now, at Vera's place

### PRODUCTION HISTORY

*Hoax* premiered at the Spokane Civic Theatre 2003 Playwrights' Forum Festival on June 6, 2003 in the Firth J. Crew Studio Theatre, directed by Maynard Villers.

(A room with a table and three chairs. At rise, it is completely dark. A door opens and light and noise spill into the room, illuminating the table and chairs. Traffic, and perhaps gunfire, are heard off, in the distance. PHIL and STAR enter, with a lit candle. The door shuts, closing out all noise and light, except for the candlelight. Silence.)

PHIL  
What the hell.

STAR  
Okay. It said not to be alarmed. To wait.

PHIL  
You wanted mystery.

STAR  
It's exciting. Phil. Isn't it? You promised.

PHIL  
There's nobody here, Star. Nothing.

STAR  
We're here. Well, we are. Maybe we're early.

PHIL  
We're not early. She's late, if she exists.

STAR  
(Calling out.)  
HELLO.

PHIL  
(Altering his voice.)  
Hello – hello – hello – hello –

STAR  
Phil!

PHIL  
But not too much mystery.

STAR  
I knew it was you.

PHIL

Sure.

(PHIL examines the door. STAR has the candle.)

Over here.

STAR

What are you doing?

(STAR holds the candle up near where he is running his hands across the surface of the door.)

PHIL

Great.

STAR

It said to wait. Let's just wait and see.

PHIL

We can't see. I'd settle for seeing. This is your craziest thing yet.

STAR

You're the one who found the ad.

PHIL

Don't try to make this about me. You're the one who had me look.

STAR

Phil, I was desperate. No counselor, no minister, not even *Dear Abby*.

(Calls out again.)

HELLO. It's better than nothing.

PHIL

It's a joke, Star. The *amazing* Vera. We're paying eight hundred dollars an hour for this.

STAR

Four hundred. And I put up half.

PHIL

For a half hour – that's eight hundred dollars an hour. No, actually, it's twelve. The rate doubles after the first half hour. That's twelve hundred an hour.

STAR

Or, let's see, ah, - twenty six thousand four hundred a day. We should just declare bankruptcy now. Phil, we just got here. Breathe, will you.

PHIL

What about the key?

(She gives him the key, and they gather at the door, examining it.)

Great. Great. No knob, no keyhole, nothing. Remember, I'm the one that wanted to elope.

STAR

(Suddenly.)

*SHAZZAM!!*

(PHIL jumps.)

It was worth a try. Come on –

PHIL

You think this is fun -

STAR

- here we are. Alone, candlelight.

PHIL

And who would know if we were swallowed up –

STAR

We would –

PHIL

Did you tell anyone we were coming here?

STAR

No, yes-no. I didn't say where. Did you?

PHIL

No. Stupid.

(Calling out.)

HELLO! WE NEED YOU TO OPEN THE DOOR –

STAR

Ollie, ollie, oxen-

VERA

(From across the room.)

Free, free, free.

(VERA emerges from the darkness with an unlit candle, which she will light off the other one. She is much older than PHIL and STAR, wears wraparound sunglasses, and laughs as much as she talks.)

Hello.

STAR

Hi. We're Star and Phil. We have an appointment. You know that. And you're Miss Vera.

VERA

I know that, too. Star and Phil, which one's which? You don't look much like a Phil, but you sure look like a Star.

(VERA crosses to the table and sits, setting her candle down. STAR joins VERA, sitting across from her, and sets the other candle on the table. PHIL remains standing.)

Stand if you like. The disbelievers tend to stand. The eventually sit, or fall down.

(VERA gives a brief INCANTATION, speaking in tongues.)

Worth a try. So, this is still earth. Business first. Gotta eat. Your balance is two hundred dollars, cash.

PHIL

Now?

VERA

Right there in the paper – upon arrival.

PHIL

It also says we get a half hour. We waited five minutes for you –

VERA

You think it's a good idea to get on my bad side?

STAR

Phil, come on.

VERA

You don't know what I can do – maybe turn you into a toad or somethin'.

PHIL

I'm not looking to be difficult. You have our down payment. You make us come down here – at some personal risk. I mean, I pay a contractor –

STAR

(To VERA.)

Is this part of our thirty minutes –

VERA

Mm-hum.

PHIL

- I pay a contractor half down, I see his work before he gets the rest. I can assure you we're good for it.

VERA

Oh, I know. You're not very liquid, though. Seem to favor real estate.

STAR

You know that by just—

VERA

Internet. Checked you out. Got to these days. Some people don't like what they hear - Last time I let someone pay afterwards, it got ugly. And I'm not in construction. This fella, he wanted to know how he's gonna die. That's not what I do. I told him, kept tellin' him. He just keeps at it - when, where, how, *why*. Finally, it gets to me - I am human - 'n I tell him he might be hit by a bus. Well, he just goes off, throws a conniption, all in a huff, calling me a liar and a charlatan - though I don't 'spect he could spell that - and stomps right off on out the door - and gets hit by a bus out front. *WHAM!* He didn't die, though. Near broke about every bone in his body. Never said I was perfect.

(PHIL sits down, and takes out two one hundred dollar bills.)

And those first five minutes - which was only about half that - I was busy watchin' you. Learn a lot that way.

(VERA holds out her hand for the money. PHIL offers it to her, but she does not take it. Finally, PHIL lays the money in her hand. VERA takes the bills, *snaps* them, smells them, and puts them away.)

I do love the smell of a hundred dollar bill. First National Bank, unless I miss my bet.

(PHIL and STAR exchange glances.)

Internet. Well now, let's unscrew the inscrutable. We all know you're gonna die someday, so let's get to the important stuff - about livin'.

(To PHIL.)

Now. You're mighty protective of Star, here.

(To STAR.)

And you seem to like it. 'Course a good dog can give you that.

PHIL

I don't like you.

STAR

Phil.

VERA

No, that's fine.

STAR

He's not exactly happy to be here.

VERA

He's bein' honest. That's important. The good news is we only got a few minutes left together - I'll gut it out if you will. There's no refunds. This is scary stuff. Tellin' the world you wanna

be one. So one does, one doesn't. Lemme guess! No, no, you're not payin' for guesses. Give me your hands.

(They join hands, forming a circle with their arms. There is a warm, peaceful moment. VERA HUMS, beckoning them to join.)

Come on, dig deep now.

(Still HUMMING, STAR, then PHIL, join in. The HUMMING subsides and circle dissolves. VERA reaches across with her left hand and takes STAR's left hand, then reaches across with her right hand and takes PHIL's right hand, pulling them toward her, forming an X with their forearms. At this, PHIL and STAR jump as if shocked, crying out in alarm.)

Well, guess we don't have to worry about *that* part of your relationship.

PHIL

You could've just asked.

VERA

No fun in that. Why talk when you can feel it. Can't fake that.

(To PHIL, who is feeling under the table.)

You lookin' for a gadget?

STAR

Phillip has to solve everything.

PHIL

You don't just conjure up volts of electricity.

(PHIL slowly waves his hand in front of VERA's face; there is no reaction.)

VERA

Some people do, if they're lucky. So, when's the wedding?

(PHIL continues to try to detect whether VERA is blind, as STAR silently protests.)

STAR

We don't know. We haven't – it's me. I'm not sure. Phil is.

PHIL

We're not even engaged. The ring's in the back of the freezer. She won't decide.

STAR

That's not true. I said no. For now. That's a decision. Not the one you want. I also said I love you, and that I'm happy the way we are.

PHIL

Ask her. It's why we're here.

STAR

I want to know how you know.



PHIL  
We've been together a year.

STAR  
It's just a ring, Phil.

VERA  
Hey, now, this isn't about blame, is it? I don't do blame.

STAR  
I wanna know, when's the best time?

PHIL  
You mean other than now.

VERA  
The best time's when you're ready.

STAR  
We are together. I mean, I don't know why all of a sudden –

PHIL  
All of a sudden? I'm ready, Star. Been ready. For months.

STAR  
I know. Boy do I know.

VERA  
What, now. Whoa - there's other- who are these – there's other people in this room. Who are they? What child? Tell me. They're talkin' to a little girl and boy. Lookin' at something!  
(Speaking in TONGUES again.)  
That you, Star? An' you're brother? Drinkin' champagne.

STAR  
Champagne? I don't, what do you see?

VERA  
No, no, that's before. Your folks' anniversary.

STAR  
They let us have a small glass. It tasted awful. It felt good.

VERA  
They look so happy.

STAR  
(Hereafter increasingly upset.)  
Yes. Please – Phil. Do you see anything?

VERA  
And you're so happy.

STAR  
Yes. We were. We were all so happy.

VERA  
And now they're talking to you around the table.

STAR  
No. Daddy -

VERA  
There's a book or somethin' on the table. They want to show it to you.

STAR  
Mama.

VERA  
It's right there. See it? Help her, Phil.

STAR  
No.

VERA  
Take her hand.

PHIL  
Is this necessary?

VERA  
(To STAR.)  
What do you think, honey?

PHIL  
Just read her palm –

STAR  
Please -

VERA  
What do you see, child?

- don't.

STAR

- or whatever you do. What's this got to -

PHIL

She's got to find the moment. What's that on the table? Next to the cup?

VERA

No.

STAR

Leave her alone.

PHIL

She's way too alone. We got to get inside this, don't we honey?

VERA

I don't, I don't know.

STAR

There, it's knocked over. Red, maybe cranberry juice.

VERA

*Hi C.* Cherry.

STAR

Good, good. Cherry *Hi C.*

VERA

I'm sorry – I'll clean it.

STAR

Help us here, Phil. Talk to her.

VERA

I'm sorry.

STAR

Can't hurt any more than it does. Star?

VERA

This is a bunch of crap. Can't you see she's –

PHIL

VERA

What's on the table, honey? Talk to us 'bout what's on the table.

PHIL

That's it! Let her be. Come on, Star. Let's go. You open that door. We're gone.

(VERA reaches across the table and touches STAR. STAR freezes, transfixed.)

Star.

(Looks at VERA.)

St- Whaa – what'd you - Star! You get her back! Whatever you've –

VERA

She's just froze up for a bit.

PHIL

(Moving toward VERA.)

Old lady, we're leavin' –

VERA

(Holding up her hand.)

Don't even think about it.

(PHIL stops, and turns away from her abruptly, refusing to make eye contact with her.)

VERA

You've got a couple a minutes left and I'm gonna do my work.

PHIL

What'd you do? When will she –

VERA

When she's ready. What are these people doin' with this little girl? Showin' her. Look at me.

PHIL

How do you know I'm not looking at you?

VERA

I know.

PHIL

(Sill averting his eyes.)

Whatever mumbo jumbo hypno-crap you pulled on her, you're not - not me.

VERA

You know what they're lookin' at on the table? You care?

(More INCANTATIONS.)

It's a, a calendar. A calendar. They're showin' their little girl and her brother. One day she's sippin' champagne, then cherry *Hi-C*, and sortin' out visitation rights. You know 'bout all this? See what happened here -

PHIL

What do you want! I could have you jailed.

VERA

You better get a lawyer and have 'em read that waiver you signed. This ain't summer camp. There's no rules in here. You agreed to let me at your souls, find out what you look like. Right now, I can't see you two past sundown.

PHIL

Is that what you're going to say? If it is, then say it, and let us outa here.

VERA

What'd she mean *all of a sudden* you wanna get married?

(No response.)

What's so all of a sudden?

PHIL

It's, it's been a year. We've lived together a year.

VERA

So? That mean you gotta get married? According to what – Retail Jewelers' Association?

PHIL

I, I need something more, something solid. I don't like living in the wild. She knows that, and it doesn't matter. Ah, what do you know. Living in this cave with your parlor tricks. What do you know about all of us out there?

VERA

I know love.

PHIL

She doesn't want the package, and I do. It's that simple.

VERA

Don't waste your breath on me. Talk to Star. Tell her what you believe.

PHIL,

She won't listen. I've tried. Not gonna happen.

(STAR flinches imperceptibly at this, unnoticed by PHIL.)

VERA

And you know that. Huh, what's that?

(INCANTATIONS again.)

Who's here? Ho, now. Whisperin' in your ear. Cozyin' up. She with you? Huh? You want me to tell her what I see.

(PHIL takes money out of his wallet through the following.)

PHIL

You're crazy. You charge extra for these visions. I want out. Now.

VERA

Who is this, Phillip? You let her in here. Not me.

PHIL

What are you talking -

VERA

Lickin' her chops like she just might devour you.

PHIL

Look ... Why are you doing this? You're an evil, malicious -

VERA

Just an ole' robin. I cock my ear and listen. An' here's this nightcrawler squirming about underneath, an' I naturally wanna yank it right outa the ground.

PHIL

(He lays money on the table.)

Think what you like. Tell her what you like. We're done here.

VERA

(Fingering the money; not referring to STAR.)

What about her?

PHIL

Who? There's nobody here.

VERA

That's not what I see. Not what you feel. She goin' with you? Huh?

PHIL

Yeah. You gonna stop her?

(At this, STAR strains to stay within herself.)

VERA

I can't do that. What about Star?

PHIL

What you said – you don't see us past sundown.

VERA

You can live with that?

PHIL

If that's how you see it.

VERA

If that's how it is.

(Beat.)

If that's what you want – the two of you.

PHIL

That's what it is.

(STAR bursts to life, screams and jumps on PHIL in a fury; between painful groans and PHIL's protests of "Hey"; "Stop it"; "Star" etc.)

STAR

You phony bastard!

(STAR's fury subsides. They separate and stand facing each other, panting.)

PHIL

What the hell –

VERA

I never said she couldn't hear you.

(The door suddenly opens and light spills into the room, with traffic sounds, etc. STAR exits. VERA and PHIL face each other for a moment.)

Now we're done here.

(PHIL turns to go.)

VERA

(Indicating the money on table.)

Take that with you.

(PHIL picks up the money and starts to exit. VERA calls to him, holding up her hand and beckoning with her fingers.)

The key.

(PHIL stops, and turns. He tosses the key towards her. She is motionless as the key flies past her, landing behind her. PHIL exits. The door closes, and there is only candlelight and silence. VERA blows out one of the candles, and takes the other one and exits, picking up the key off the floor as she leaves.)

(Blackout.)