

SURELY, YOU JEST!

a diminutive comedy

by

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SURELY, YOU JEST!

Characters

Jeremy Quip: The staff jester in the offices of Seamless Consulting

Julia: Jeremy's co-worker and friend

Celeste: Jeremy and Julia's boss

Burgoyne: Celeste's higher-up, from Amalgamated Consulting Groups Corporate Headquarters

Time: The Present

Place: The one-room office of Seamless Consulting

(As the play opens, Jeremy Quip is alone in a small, tidy office. The office is furnished with desks [3], office chairs, telephones, etc., and has one door to the imagined corridor or foyer beyond.)

(Jeremy wears a contemporary business suit. Aside from the sparkle in his eyes, his appearance is only remarkable for the jester's "cap and bells" that crowns his outfit. He paces the office -- energetically rather than nervously -- accompanying his graceful, nimble strides with a patter of material that he is rehearsing.)

JEREMY

(Rehearsing to himself)

Well, I'm certainly glad that it's finally Friday.

(He stops pacing and addresses the audience.)

Is that funny? To say I'm glad that it's Friday, when it's really only Monday?

(To himself)

I think it will be funnier if I save it for Tuesday, actually.

(He takes a small notebook out of his breast pocket, makes a note, and then resumes his pacing as he brainstorms.)

Hmm . . . Monday jokes, Monday jokes. I want to avoid the obvious ones, of course.

(He stops pacing.)

But I can't be too daring, either. Most people aren't on the ball enough on a Monday morning to follow anything really off-the-wall. Nothing too cerebral, nothing too subtle

(A little discouraged, he again turns to the audience.)

No wonder people hate Mondays.

(Julia enters. Her appearance and manner could be described as "bohemian professional", i.e. a compromise between free-spirited artist and pragmatic 9-to-5-er. This morning she looks sleepy, semi-disheveled, and slightly harried; but her eyes light up when she sees Jeremy.)

JEREMY

(Talking to himself, in an emphatic tone that is accompanied by exaggerated gestures)

Who keeps sending us all these Mondays, anyway? I distinctly remember ordering a mixed assortment of Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays for this office.

JULIA

(As she settles herself at her desk)

Hi, Jeremy. Happy Monday.

JEREMY

(With a combination straightperson/audience now present, Jeremy immediately hits stride. He approaches Julia with a twinkle in his eye and lets the tomfoolery flow.)

"Happy Monday"? You mean . . .

(He pauses as if coming to an important realization.)

. . . it's Monday's *birthday*? But . . . but . . . nobody told me. And here I was just bad-mouthing Monday, too. I feel awful.

(Julia dissolves into giggles.)

JEREMY

This is terrible. I don't have a gift for Monday, or anything!

(Beat)

Of course, Monday didn't get *me* anything for my last birthday.

(He pretends to reflect.)

I guess we're really not that close, Monday and I. After all, we only see each other about 52 times a year.

(Julia continues to laugh, then pulls herself together and starts to get organized for her workday. The telephone rings.)

JEREMY

(Answering)

Good Monday -- er, good *morning*, Seamless Consulting. Jeremy speaking

[Pause.] No, I'm sorry, she's not in yet. Would you like to speak to Julia, our designer? [Pause.] Me? I'm the staff jester [Pause.] The staff *jester*, that's right [Pause.] What do I do? Don't you mean, "How do I do?" As in, I'm finethanksandhowareyou? Actually, I could never really warm up to that "How do you do" question.

I mean . . . how do I do *what*? Anyway, I can have Celeste get back to you, sir. I'll just need the names of three personal references -- not including stuffed animals.

[Pause.] Glad I could help. Bye now.

(He hangs up the phone, efficiently.)

JULIA

(Doubtfully)

You *helped*?

JEREMY

(He shrugs.)

Well, the part about my helping was really more a theory than an airtight conclusion.

JULIA

So what did he want?

JEREMY

You know, I don't believe he mentioned that. Somehow we seemed to get sidetracked.

(He quickly pulls a hand mirror out of a desk drawer, and scrutinizes his face.)

It must be these sideburns.

(Julia laughs.)

JULIA

Hey, let me see that mirror.

(He hands it to her.)

JULIA

Just between you and me, my hair is really out of control these days. I'm not clear on what I'm supposed to do with it between haircuts.

JEREMY

Hmm . . . if you're not clear on it, maybe you should be using a clarifying shampoo.

JULIA

Something's got to improve up there, or I'm going to have a conniption fit.

JEREMY

(Cheerfully)

You know what they say . . . "If the conniption fits, wear it."

(She glares at him.)

JEREMY

Okay, so maybe my advice is useless. But so *much* of it -- what a bargain!

(Julia smiles.)

(Celeste enters. She is dressed in impeccable business attire. Her air of brisk competence is accompanied by the subtle but unmistakable glow of sympathetic camaraderie that makes her a "pal" to her two employees.)

JULIA

Hello, Celeste.

CELESTE

Good morning, Julia. Hi, Jeremy. Jeremy . . .

JEREMY

Who's there?

CELESTE

Excuse me?

JEREMY

No, no. You're supposed to say "Jeremy who?"

CELESTE

I am? Why?

JEREMY

That's just the way it works. Look, we'll recap: I said, "Knock knock," and then you said --

CELESTE

But you didn't say "Knock knock."

JEREMY

Who's there?

CELESTE

(Attempting to remain serious, but grinning despite herself)
Jeremy, you did *not* say "Knock knock".

JEREMY

"Jeremyouididnotsayknockknock" *who?*

CELESTE

(Now openly laughing)
Okay, I give up. Can't you be serious for a moment?

JEREMY

(With mock huffiness, wagging a forefinger at her)
I am *not* being paid to be *serious*.

CELESTE

(Her face clouds over.)
Listen, Jeremy . . . can I meet with you in the inner office?

JEREMY

(With apparent earnestness)
With all due respect: I'm afraid that is a request I cannot comply with.

CELESTE

(Stunned)
What? Why not?

JEREMY

(Flashing a manic smile)
Because we don't have an inner office.

(He laughs impishly.)

CELESTE

Oh. That's right, we don't.

(To the audience.)

I hate these cheap sets.

(She sighs, then turns to Julia.)

Julia, I'd like to speak to Jeremy in private. Would you mind taking a break for a few minutes? You know, go get yourself more coffee or something?

JULIA

(Mimicking Jeremy's "serious" tone of a moment ago)

I'm afraid that is a request I cannot comply with.

CELESTE

Huh?

JULIA

I can't get myself *more* coffee, because I haven't had *any* coffee yet.

(She laughs girlishly and vacates the office.)

JEREMY

You see? I really am an inspiring influence.

CELESTE

Influence?

JEREMY

(Gesturing at the door through which Julia has just left)

On Julia. Granted, she stole that particular gag from Lewis Carroll . . . but he's out of copyright, so I think it'll be okay.

CELESTE

Jeremy, let's sit down.

(They sit.)

CELESTE

I like you, Jeremy.

JEREMY

(Blushing)

Aw, gee, Celeste, the feeling is mutual. I like me, too.

CELESTE

Last Friday, I received the new budget, and --

JEREMY

Wait a second. "Last Friday" meaning three days ago, or "last Friday" meaning the Friday before that?

CELESTE

Does it matter?

JEREMY

Of course it doesn't matter! Do you think I'd be bothering to quiz you about something that *mattered*?

CELESTE

All right. On the *most recent Friday that we had*, I received our new budget from company headquarters in Des Moines.

JEREMY

I didn't even know we had a company hindquarters in Des Moines.

CELESTE

Headquarters.

JEREMY

Or that either.

CELESTE

And I was dismayed to see that your salary -- the position of in-house jester at this location -- does not appear on their budget.

JEREMY

Hmph. That *is* an embarrassing omission. Boy, the folks back in Des Moines are sure getting sloppy lately, aren't they.

(He folds himself up into an exaggerated "sulking" posture and pouts.)

It's lucky I'm not sensitive.

CELESTE

It's not an omission.

JEREMY

Omission, oversight . . . whatever you want to call it.

CELESTE

It's not an oversight either, Jeremy.

JEREMY

(Getting a little nervous)

Error? Solecism? Glitch? Faux pas? Blooper?

(Celeste shakes her head "no".)

JEREMY

(Increasingly worried)

Blunder? Clunker?

(Now frantic)

Gross negligence and incompetence??

CELESTE

(With a pained expression)

No, Jeremy. I called and asked them about it. I had to phone three times -- on the first two tries I got a fax machine, which was lacking even the rudimentary personal charisma of our corporate boss. But I kept trying, because I was really hoping it was a mistake.

JEREMY

(He snaps his fingers.)

Mistake! Of course! *That's* the word I was looking for.

CELESTE

But it wasn't. The fact is, they will no longer pay for us to have an office jester.

JEREMY

I'm being laid off??

CELESTE

I'm really sorry, Jeremy.

JEREMY

Believe me, I'm as sorry as you are.

(Beat)

I'm just a little wittier, that's all.

(Beat)

And possibly more sexy, depending who you ask.

CELESTE

I'm signing your severance check right now. I thought you'd want to get it over with.

(She struggles with an uncooperative writing instrument.)

Bah! This pen isn't worth the paper it's written on.

(She tosses it aside, grabs another, and signs the check. She hands it to Jeremy, who looks at it glumly and pockets it.)

(Julia enters.)

CELESTE

Hi, Julia. It's okay, you can come on in. We were just finishing our discussion.

JEREMY

That's right, we're
(He chokes back a sob)
. . . all finished.

JULIA

(She looks from Jeremy to Celeste, and back again.)
What's wrong?

JEREMY

Julia, they've abolished my job. They obviously don't recognize the importance of having someone around who always provides
(He begins bawling)
. . . laughter.

JULIA

(Shocked)
But Celeste, what will we do without Jeremy?

JEREMY

(Still sniffing a bit)
You'll just . . . have to . . . entertain yourself, Julia. Meaning . . . that when you say "Knock knock" . . .
(He bursts out into another fit of crying.)
You'll already know who's there. Waaaahh . . .

JULIA

(Walking to Jeremy and putting a hand on his shoulder)
Let's have dinner tonight, okay? Can I take you to the Trattoria?

JEREMY

(Cheering up a little)
Thanks, Julia. I'd love to. How about 7:00 -- or is that too late?

JULIA

Nope.

JEREMY

Too early?

JULIA

No, no, it's perfect.

JEREMY

Well, do you think it's *too* perfect?

JULIA

(Laughing, though her eyes look ready to tear up)
No, Jeremy. I think it's just perfect enough.

(There is a knock-knock on the door.)

JEREMY, JULIA, & CELESTE

Who's there?

BURGOYNE

(Off)

Mr. Burgoyne.

JEREMY & JULIA

Mr. Burgoyne who?

CELESTE

Oh. That's Mr. Burgoyne from Des Moines. He's here to finalize the budget with me.

JULIA

Wow -- that was fast.

JEREMY

Hey, it's only a ten-minute play.

(Julia nods sagely.)

(Celeste opens the door to Burgoyne, a bland-looking middle-manager. He carries a notebook.)

CELESTE

Please come in, Mr. Burgoyne.

(Sad, but trying to keep things moving along in a business-like way)

I'd like you to meet Julia, our designer. Julia, this is Mr. Burgoyne from Amalgamated Consulting Groups, our parent company.

JULIA

(Stiffly)

How do you do.

CELESTE

(Gesturing toward Jeremy)

And this is --

JEREMY

Oh, don't mind me, Mr. Burgoyne. I'm just a figment of your amalgamation.
(He turns away and walks across the office to his desk, where he begins quietly packing up his things.)

BURGOYNE

(He is not totally oblivious or insensitive to the downbeat mood in the office; but he habitually does his best to ignore anything he doesn't quite know how to deal with. His manner is consequently neutral and matter-of-fact.)

Are you hungry, Celeste? I thought we could review the budget over lunch.

CELESTE

That sounds good. It's been a long morning.

JEREMY

(Looking up momentarily from his packing)

Actually, it's been less than ten minutes.

(Celeste and Burgoyne do not hear this comment.)

BURGOYNE

You choose the place. I'm sure you know what's good.

CELESTE

Yes, there's a decent little French cafe on the next block.

JEREMY

(Looking up again)

Just don't order the crepes suzette. Last time we waited *forty-five minutes* before being told that they were fresh out of suzette.

(This quip gets no reaction from anyone. Burgoyne and Celeste exit. Jeremy continues to pack. Julia sits down at her desk, but she is unable to work.)

JULIA

Jeremy, I --

(Burgoyne re-enters, with Celeste in tow. He is laughing heartily, while she looks puzzled. He approaches Jeremy.)

BURGOYNE

Did you say "all out of suzette"? Hee hee, that's rich.

JEREMY

Sure. It's all that butter and eggs.

BURGOYNE

Hoo hoo You're quite a joker, aren't you.

JEREMY

(Indicating his jester's cap)

You catch on fast, sir.

BURGOYNE

So, what do you do around here, uh --

JEREMY

Jeremy. And I do exactly what I've been doing. Well, not *exactly* what I've been doing. I sometimes use different jokes.

BURGOYNE

Jokes? Your job is to make jokes?

(Lightbulb)

Say, no wonder you're funny! Y'know, it's strange . . . I don't remember seeing you on our payroll budget.

JULIA

(Bitterly)

That's because he *isn't* on it!

CELESTE

(Diplomatically)

Jeremy's was the position that was eliminated, Mr. Burgoyne. Remember -- the house jester?

BURGOYNE

House jester! Is *that* what that was? A guy who makes everyone laugh?

JEREMY

Of course. What did you *think* it was?

BURGOYNE

(Sheepishly)

Um . . . heh heh . . . we actually didn't know *what* it was, so we just sort of took it out of the budget.

JEREMY

(Sarcastically)

Oh. Okay. As long as I'm not losing my job for a *stupid* reason.

BURGOYNE

(Coming to life with a rare show of spirit)

Celeste -- forget everything I told you.

CELESTE

(Hopefully)

Ever?

BURGOYNE

I mean about cutting Jeremy's job. As soon as I get back to Des Moines, I'll meet with the corporate budgeting committee, and we'll get him back in the picture.

I happen to head up that committee . . . but nonetheless I do sometimes have a small influence on their decisions.

JULIA

(Overjoyed)

Thank you, Mr. Burgoyne!

CELESTE

(She breathes a sigh of relief.)

I am so glad this all worked out.

(To Jeremy, in a conspiratorial stage-whisper)

But don't you think it was a little bit *predictable*?

JEREMY

If it was so predictable, then why did you bother to make out my severance check?

(He holds it up to the light, then ceremoniously tears it into small pieces. He then tosses the pieces into his hat.)

JULIA

It's fabulous that you didn't have to lay anyone off, Mr. Burgoyne.

BURGOYNE

(Clears throat. He has returned to his usual doughy affect.)

Well now . . . uh . . . I didn't say I wouldn't lay *anyone* off.

CELESTE

You mean . . . ?

BURGOYNE

I'm afraid so, Celeste. There is someone else whose job I will now be forced to eliminate.

JULIA

Mine?

BURGOYNE

No, not yours, Julia.

CELESTE

(She gulps.)

Mine??

BURGOYNE

Don't worry, Celeste. It's not you, either.

(Julia and Celeste and Jeremy look around the office, confused.)

CELESTE

But then who?

BURGOYNE

(He consults his notebook, then looks up.)

The playwright.

JEREMY

(Indignantly)

The *playwright*? But we *need* him.

BURGOYNE

Not anymore. The play is about to end.

JEREMY

Oh.

JULIA

(Shrugging)

That's showbiz.

CELESTE

Wow. What a day.

JEREMY

Yeah! I sure am glad it's Friday.

(All four characters laugh.)

(Blackout.)

(The End.)