

# **THE WAKE-UP CALL**

A ten-minute play by

**ROY PROCTOR**

# THE WAKE-UP CALL

## Time

Way past midnight

## Place

A living room and a bedroom in a mid-size American city

## Characters

RANDALL MURROW, 27, an actor, good-looking, slightly drunk

MAURICE SAINTSING, 56, a theater critic, sleepy, ruffled, the worse for wear

## Setting

Stage left: RANDALL's living room, represented by a worn easy chair and an end table with a lamp. On the table are a TV remote control, a beer bottle and a cell phone. Stage right: MAURICE's bedroom, represented by a bed and a night stand with a lamp, a clock, a traditional land-line phone, an answering machine, several pill bottles and a heavy supply of bedtime reading.

*(Lights up on RANDALL's living room. A wee-hours talk show can be heard on an unseen downstage TV. RANDALL, dressed in jogging shorts and T-shirt, sprawls in his easy chair. He's reading a folded newspaper, and it's evident he doesn't like what he reads. He jumps up, paces, takes a final swig, exits left to kitchen with empty bottle, returns with a new one, takes a swig, sits, takes another swig, then a deep breath. He reads the newspaper again, grows angrier than before, looks at his watch. He looks up a number in the phone directory on the bottom shelf of the end table, switches the TV off, picks up the cell phone, takes a deep breath and begins to dial. . . .Phone rings in MAURICE's darkened bedroom. MAURICE stirs, mumbles incoherently and reaches for the phone on the fourth ring.)*

MAURICE

Hullo.

RANDALL

Yes, sir, is this . . . uh . . . Saintsing the theater critic?

MAURICE

Maurice Saintsing speaking. *(pause)* And you?

RANDALL

Never mind who I am *(pause)* YOU STEAMING CROCK OF SHIT!

*(MAURICE sits up and turns on the lamp. He's wearing boxer shorts and an undershirt.)*

MAURICE

What?

RANDALL

You heard me.

MAURICE

Who is this?

RANDALL

That's not important.

MAURICE

The hell it's not! You woke me up.

RANDALL

Good! I don't give a flying fuck.

MAURICE

Well, I do. It's almost 2:30 and I was sound asleep. I answered only because my mother is gravely ill. I thought the hospital might be calling.

RANDALL

I'm sorry about your mother.

MAURICE

Thank you, but that doesn't excuse your waking me up in the middle of the night. *(pause)* Or your obscene language.

RANDALL

You're the real obscenity, Saintsing.

MAURICE

I don't talk to anonymous callers, especially not when they're abusive. Goodnight.

*(MAURICE bangs the phone into its cradle, exits right to the bathroom.)*

RANDALL

*(glaring at his phone, forming choice phrases in his mind)*

You don't get off THAT easy, buddy.

*(RANDALL redials number; MAURICE's phone rings five times, then transfers to the answering machine as MAURICE reenters his bedroom.)*

MAURICE

*(recorded voice)*

Hey! This is Maurice. I can't come to the phone now, but I'm glad you called. Please leave a message at the beep.

*(Beep.)*

RANDALL

So you think you can take potshots at actors, shoot 'em in the balls, then hide behind your voice mail. You're a coward, Saintsing, a chicken-shit coward. *(pause)* Pick up the phone. Talk to me, dammit!.

*(RANDALL slams the phone down on the night stand and begins to ponder his strategy. MAURICE stares at his answering machine, then crawls back in bed. RANDALL works up the nerve to call again. MAURICE's phone rings. He answers on the fourth ring.)*

MAURICE

*(warily)*

Hello?

RANDALL

*(jeeringly)*

It's me-e-e-e-e-e!

MAURICE

Look, whoever you are, if you don't stop this, I'll call the –

RANDALL

I don't care who you call. I don't care if I ever get a role in this fucking town again. I'm Randall --

MAURICE

Randall Murray?

RANDALL

You got it.

MAURICE

The talented young actor, right?

RANDALL

Ha!

MAURICE

"Death of a Salesman," right?

RANDALL

Look, Saintsing. You can't sweet-talk me. I'm pissed. Royally pissed. Fed up. You call yourself a critic, right? That's a hoot! You're a critic because you can't do anything else. You're a sad, destructive, lonely old man. You know that? A pitiful jerk-off excuse for a human being. If you

were such a hot shot, you'd be writing plays instead of tearing them apart. You'd be encouraging young actors instead of ridiculing them. You'd be supporting the theater, cheering it on. Get a life, man. *(extended pause)* Are you there?

MAURICE  
*(pause)*

Yes, I'm here.

RANDALL

Why don't you say something?

MAURICE

I'm listening.

RANDALL

Well, what do you have to say for yourself?

MAURICE  
*(after a long pause)*

It's like this, Randall. You just want me to be a cheerleader. Why would readers trust me if I liked everything coming and going? Why would the Gazette keep me? They'd fire me because I had no taste and no readers. And they'd be right. So what do you want me to do?

RANDALL

I want you to make the Gazette run a correction. I want you to apologize. In writing!

MAURICE

Apologize for what?

RANDALL

For being such a son of a bitch. For displaying your ignorance so shamelessly.

MAURICE

Correct what?

RANDALL  
*(picking up folded newspaper)*

Correct this: *(reading)* Murrow, who showed such promise as the son in Arthur Miller's "All My Sons" two years ago at Playhouse 60, throws "Death of a Salesman" under the trolley car. He's fatally miscast as Willy Loman. He looks and acts young enough to be one of Willy's sons. It's impossible to shake off for long the feeling that Murrow and the on-target actors playing sons Biff and Happy are not actually brothers. Not only that, but the always estimable and impeccably cast Lucille Thimble comes off looking like Willy's grandmother instead of his wife. The script tells us one thing, but our eyes and Murrow's failure to spin any illusion of age tells

us quite another. *(pause)* You still there, Saintsing?

MAURICE

Yes, I'm here.

RANDALL

Well, goddamit, what do you have to say for yourself? You have no idea how hard it'll be to go in that dressing room tonight. How hard it'll be to greet the audience in the lobby after the show. Or go home with my girlfriend.

MAURICE

I'm sorry you feel threatened, Randall.

RANDALL

You should be!

MAURICE

Bbut there's nothing to correct.

RANDALL

What? What do you mean? And don't you Randall me!

MAURICE

There's nothing to apologize for.

RANDALL

You've got to be kidding.

MAURICE

Blame the director. He cast you.

RANDALL

He cast me because he thought I could play Willy. He picked me when the old guy playing Willy had to drop out because he couldn't remember his lines.

MAURICE

Well, your director was dead wrong. Blame him. You have to look the part. You have to act the part. You have to embody the character. That funny gray stuff in your hair and your phony stooped-over walk don't cut it.

RANDALL

You're wrong! Dead wrong!

MAURICE

Oh, I can be wrong as a critic, Randall. If I say the wall is green when it's red, I'm wrong. If I say the play is set in the Civil War when it's set in the Revolutionary War, I'm wrong. If I say Sally Philpott plays the mother when she actually plays the mother's kid sister, I'm wrong again.

RANDALL

Exactly.

MAURICE

But I can't be wrong when I report my reactions and express my opinions honestly. Opinions aren't right or wrong. They just are. They're personal. And my opinion is that you're entirely too young to play Willy Loman.

RANDALL

What gives you the right to have an opinion anyway?

MAURICE

What gives anybody the right to have an opinion? What gives you that right?

RANDALL

You know what opinions are like, don't you? They're —

MAURICE

Spare me. I've heard it too many times before.

RANDALL

Well, it's true.

MAURICE

Randall—

RANDALL

Don't sweet-talk me, Saintsing. I'm warning you.

MAURICE

Then don't Saintsing me. My first name is Maurice. Are you telling me that nobody has a right to form an opinion of what you do? You exhibit yourself before an audience. The theater charges people money to see you act. You build your career on public acceptance.

RANDALL

The audience does have a right to its opinions.



MAURICE

Precisely. And who is the critic except just one more person sitting in an audience? Let's say a full house is 500 people. Each of those people, including critics, will filter the stimulus from the stage through their unique bodies of human experience. Each will come up with a response that is different, at least by degree.

RANDALL

But the audience doesn't display its ignorance so shamelessly and publicly. How come you're the critic anyway?

MAURICE

I got the job. Simple as that. And I've kept the job for 25 years because the readers trust me to call the shots as I see them. They pay attention to what I say. My readership share is sky-high. If I'd been the cheerleader you want me to be, The Gazette would have fired me after a year.

RANDALL

*(softening slightly)*

I don't know about that.

MAURICE

Well, I do know. Look, Randall. OK. Let's put this in some kind of perspective. Each of us has a job to do. An important job. God knows we aren't in it for the money. We're each trying to make the community a better place. So I go to the theater one time and feel trashed by what I consider your lousy casting. So what? You pick up the paper the next day and feel trashed by what I've written. So --

RANDALL

You're damn right.

MAURICE

But so what? That doesn't mean we can't respect each other. I do the best job I can, given my circumstances, and you have no reason to doubt that. You do the best job you can, given your circumstances, and I applaud that. But each of us has failings and limitations. For me, limitations of space and deadlines and editor's whims, limitations of intelligence and sensitivity and knowledge and writing ability.

RANDALL

You can say that again!

MAURICE

*(ignoring him)*

And you, my friend, have your limitations as well.

RANDALL

I don't –

MAURICE

Limitations of bad casting, bad direction, bad scripts. Worst of all, audiences so listless they could have mailed in their applause. Audiences so dead to the world that they refuse, absolutely, stubbornly refuse to give you the energy you need to get through the evening. *(long pause)* Are you there, my talented friend?

RANDALL

*(long pause to ponder)*

I'm here.

MAURICE

So why don't we just acknowledge our deficiencies, along with our humanity, and be friends and call it a night?

RANDALL

I don't –

MAURICE

Think about it.

RANDALL

But I don't --

MAURICE

Look, I meet up with friends – other journalists, the arts crowd, hangers-on -- every Monday night for Happy Hour at Chumley's. 5 to 7. Why don't you drop by sometime? Chat over drinks. Maybe find a table. Nothing that would compromise us. No conflict of interest. Just a friendly drink. Bring your girl if you like.

RANDALL

*(reluctantly)*

Thanks for the invite.

MAURICE

One more thing, Randall. I really admire you. I want you to know that. I admire your passion for theater. I admire your passionate desire to get ahead. I even admire your guts in waking me up at 2:30 in the morning. It shows you care. I could never have been an actor, but I dreamed of being one when I went to the movies as a kid. I could never have lived with all the instability

and uncertainty. I needed that steady paycheck. I didn't have what it took. I didn't have the guts. I sold out. I hope you don't.

RANDALL

*(after a long pause)*

Mr. Saintsing, I'm, uh, I'm really sorry I woke you up.

MAURICE

You did it in a worthy cause. Sleep well.

RANDALL

You, too.

MAURICE

See you at Chumley's.

RANDALL

Goodnight.

*(Lights fade to black as they contemplate what has transpired.)*

**END OF PLAY**