



Denver Center  
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# InsideOut

PRODUCED BY THE MARKETING DEPARTMENT OF THE DENVER CENTER THEATRE COMPANY

OCTOBER 2003



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## LOBBY HERO

Oct. 23 - Dec. 27 • The Jones Theatre

WILLIAM: You just do your best and let the chips fall where they may.

—Lobby Hero

This modern morality play takes place during 24 hours in a Manhattan high-rise apartment lobby. The hapless young security guard is faced with his own ethical dilemma when the morals of his “by-the-books” supervisor and a veteran New York police officer along with his eager rookie partner collide with the security guards work-a-day world. The law, its enforcement, personal responsibility and the “macho male” are comically rendered in this tale of four characters trying to do the right thing, if only they knew what the “right thing” was!

DAWN: How are you supposed to know if you're right, and everybody else is wrong, or if you're just wreckin' your own chances?

—Lobby Hero, p. 73.

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# The Playwright

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**Kenneth Lonergan**, the son of a doctor and a psychoanalyst, was born and raised in Manhattan. His story reveals a charmed path to success. His interest in writing was sparked when he was asked to collaborate on a play by his high school drama teacher. In 1982 at age 18, he won an award in Stephen Sondheim's first Young Playwrights Festival, a success that led him to New York University's playwriting program. From there, he got work writing speeches and industrial shows, while staging one-act plays for the Naked Angels Troupe in New York. He garnered attention for his 1993 one-act play *Betrayal by Everyone*, that focused on a trio of disaffected, well-off 20-something New Yorkers and featured Mark Ruffalo in its cast. Lonergan expanded this work into a full-length piece retitled *This is Our Youth* and earned notoriety as a writer of great dialogue with a 1996 off-off-Broadway staging and the 1998 off-Broadway version. In both cases, Ruffalo reprised the role of the slightly vacant slacker named Warren.

A screenplay written on spec about a gangster who seeks treatment for depression was optioned in the early 1990s and, though it received numerous rewrites and was worked on by 14 additional screenwriters, *Analyze This* (1999) gave Lonergan his first screen credit. The film, which starred Billy Crystal and Robert De Niro, became a box-office hit, and grossed more than \$100 million. With this success and his theatre accomplishments, Lonergan emerged as a writer in demand.

Rather than take the numerous offers he was given, Lonergan wrote and directed an independent film that went on to earn much praise. *You Can Count On Me* (2000) centered on the relationship between a single mother who remained in her hometown and her younger brother, a screwed-up wanderer. His script was richly detailed and nuanced, showing the ebb and flow of sibling love and rivalry. Lonergan proved himself a strong director of actors, eliciting believable performances from his leads, Ruffalo and Laura Linney, as well as strong supporting turns from Rory Culkin (as Linney's son) and long-time chum Matthew Broderick (as Linney's fussy boss). At the Sundance Film Festival it shared top honors with *Girlfight*. *You Can Count On Me* went on to pick up numerous citations, including several for Lonergan's screenplay and an Academy Award nomination for Linney's performance.

His other 2000 big screen effort, *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*, did not fare as well. Remaining faithful to the spirit of the Jay Ward cartoons, the film's mix of live action and animation didn't seem to impress critics or audiences. Lonergan's most recent work was as one of several scriptwriters for Martin Scorsese's film *Gangs of New York*.

# Morality **PLAYS** and Comedies

“Veracity is the heart of morality.”  
—Thomas Henry Huxley,  
*Universities, Actual and Ideal* (1874).

**M**orality plays first appeared in the 14th century and were written to show the continual struggle between good and evil as well as to apply Biblical teachings to the problems of every day life. Moralities fell into two basic categories: those that dealt with some limited problems and those that treated the whole of man’s life. *Everyman* (c. 1500) represents the first type; in it, Everyman is called by Death, struggles to escape and finally resigns himself to his fate. Before he goes, however, he seeks a companion to accompany him, but only Good Deeds will go with him to the grave. Of the second type only one example, *The Castle of Perseverance* (c. 1425) survives. It depicts Mankind’s progress from birth to death and shows the final judgment on his soul.

In the 16th century the morality play underwent some changes. For one, the didactic intention was altered with songs and dances to attract a paying audience and, in some instances, was used to treat secular subjects. In other cases the morality play was adapted as a weapon in the religious struggles of 16th century England, while a revived interest in ancient Greece and Rome introduced classical themes. As the morality play became increasingly secularized during the 16th century, the distinction between it and other drama vanished.

Comedies are more difficult to explain and one has to examine theories that have developed since ancient Greece. In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the philosopher wrote that “the derivation of the word ‘comedy’ is from the Dorian word *comae* for outlying hamlets, while the Athenians called them *demes*, thus comedians got their names not from their revels, but from their strolling from hamlet to hamlet.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Aristotle deemed comedy “an imitation of men worse than the average—the ridiculous and the ugly.”<sup>2</sup>

George Meredith (1828-1909) was an established novelist and poet when he gave a lecture “The Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit”

to a London audience in 1877. In it he said comedy is ambivalent in its social meanings for it is “both hatred and revel, rebellion and defense, attack and escape, revolutionary and conservative, sympathy and persecution.... Comedy can be a means of mastering our disillusionments when we are caught in a dishonest or stupid society.”<sup>3</sup> After the audience recognizes the misdoing and mistakes, we liberate ourselves by laughing. Bonamy Dobrée (1891-1955), a French critic, editor and teacher, was a scholar of Restoration Comedy. He wrote that comedy should be divided into three categories: critical, free and great. “Critical” comedy sets out to correct manners by laughter; “to repress eccentricity, exaggeration and any deviation from the normal.”<sup>4</sup> In “free” comedy there are no valuations, no judgments, can be careless and even immoral. “Great” comedy, however, deals with the disillusionments of mankind and the failure of man to realize his desires; it comes when our positive attitude turns negative and doubts undermine our values. Dobrée cites *Don Quixote*, *Volpone* and *Coriolanus* as examples. In his essay, “The Argument of Comedy,” Canadian professor and critic Northrop Frye suggests that comedy is designed not to condemn evil, but to ridicule a lack of self-knowledge, while Susanne Langer, American philosopher and author, writes “real comedy... presents the image of livingness... and takes the form of temporary triumph over the surrounding, complicated world.”<sup>5</sup> To be very succinct, the creator/cartoonist of *L’il Abner*, Al Capp, said comedy demonstrates “that nothing is ever entirely straight, entirely good, entirely bad, and that everything is a little ridiculous.”<sup>6</sup>

The constant in comedy is endurance: man’s ability to pick himself up and keep going. One of the chief characteristics of modern drama is the blurring of distinction between tragedy and comedy. Finally, Athene Seyler and Stephen Haggard believe comedy is simply a point of view. In their book, *The Craft of Comedy*, these British actors, feel comedy is “distorted truth” and a comment on life and human nature from the outside.<sup>7</sup>

# Bullies and WHISTLE Blowers

BILL (to Dawn): ...but you don't come down here from the Police Academy in your little pigtails and tell me what to do. OK? I tell you what to do.

—Lobby Hero

Is Bill a bully? According to [www.NoBully.org.nz](http://www.NoBully.org.nz), “bullying is when someone keeps doing or saying things to have power over another person.”<sup>1</sup> Though Bill is supposed to be mentoring Dawn, he makes her feel uncomfortable, threatens her, sexually harasses her and makes her do things she doesn't want to do. His behavior makes him feel tough and in charge; he establishes his power base by belittling her to gain prestige in the Police Force. When he intervenes on behalf of William's brother, he feels important, but his meddling only makes matters worse for everyone.

Conversely, is Dawn a whistle blower? When she

DAWN (to Jeff): ...but it's still your responsibility to tell the truth and obey the law. You just can't make it up when there's some part of it that you don't like....”

—Lobby Hero

pumps Jeff for information and then divulges it, is she exposing Bill for what he is and the danger he poses? Whistle blowers are “dissenters” or “inside informants” who provide evidence about public health, safety, fraud or abuse of office. Well-known whistle blowers include Jeffrey Wigand, the hero of *The Insider*, who disclosed the evils of the tobacco industry; Serpico, who exposed the corruption in the New York Police Department; and Karen Silkwood, the woman who demonstrated the dangers of working in a fissionable materials pressing plant. Sherron Watkins uncovered the mess at Enron and had her picture on the cover of *Time*; however, Linda Tripp revealed the Clinton-Lewinsky affair and was labeled “a snitch.”

So how does one decide to “whistle blow?”

According to Sissela Bok in her essay “Blowing the Whistle” (1981), there are three issues an individual should consider. One is dissent: will the whistle blower's action benefit the public and prevent more wrongdoing by a person or business? The second is loyalty: because whistle blowers breach loyalty to their colleagues or agency, they should view their actions as a last option. The third criterion is accusation. “Publicly accusing people of serious wrongdoing requires that the whistle blower meet a number of ethical obligations.”<sup>2</sup> One of these is to do some soul-searching about their own motives, bias, revenge or desire for personal gain.

So, in the end, does Dawn qualify as a Karen Silkwood or a Linda Tripp?

He trudg'd along unknowing what  
he sought,  
And whistled as he went, for want  
of thought.

—John Dryden. *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), “Cymon and Iphigenia,”  
l. 84.

# Doing the RIGHT Thing

JEFF: I'm just a very empathetic person and to tell you the God's honest truth, Dawn, I feel a little bit responsible for the mess you're in....

—Lobby Hero

Play fair. Don't steal. Don't lie. Clean up your own mess."<sup>1</sup> These are the lessons Robert Fulghum learned in *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. What's necessary to live a meaningful life isn't complicated, it's living it that becomes difficult. When we are young, the difference between right and wrong is easily defined, and if we don't see it, parents, teachers, religious leaders and friends are there to point it out. But as we grow older, right and wrong are not simple matters any more and making choices can become moral headaches.

In Aaron Hass' book *Doing the Right Thing*, he asserts there are certain criteria that are universally held: "fairness, duty or a responsibility to others, dignity and self-control."<sup>2</sup> Plato and Aristotle believed these qualities sprang from natural desires, but in the past and present centuries, exercising these attributes has become more complex. In these tangled times—of wars, justified or senseless; leaders, intelligent or incendiary; stock market deals, fraudulent or fair—our moral compass has become cloudy and we tend to act morally only when it is convenient for us to do so.

To Bill in *Lobby Hero*, right and wrong are simple: they are the Law and the authority it gives him. Yet he lies, commits adulterous acts, bullies his partner and generally acts like a jerk except when it concerns loyalty to the force and his job. There his belief will not be swayed even when his career is threatened. Should we respect Bill? Do we have to like him?

In *Why Good People Do Bad Things*, Bruce Hamstra writes that empathy lies at the core of moral development. "Our ability to experience the feelings of other people, their pain or joy" might be inherent, but learning can enhance this quality.<sup>3</sup>

But in a society of workaholics with overwhelming personal, professional and familial responsibilities, who has time or the inclination to teach "empathy"? Are we so self-preoccupied that we don't really hear or see the pain and powerlessness of those around us? Preschool children display more responses to the needs of others; in a study of sympathy by psychologists, nursery school children showed diverse reactions to a peer's distress, "including comforting and helping the victim, asking questions of the troubled child, punishing the agent of the child's distress, protecting the victim and asking an adult for help."<sup>4</sup>

Jeff says he is a very empathetic person, so William tells him his troubles and subsequently Jeff blabs them to Dawn. Is he truly trying to help her... or score points with her? William is concerned for his brother, but he fires a sleeping security guard who is within two years of retirement. Dawn rats out Bill's behavior; is she concerned at all about his career, her own career or just gaining revenge? Finally, to Dawn's question of how do you know if you're doing right or wrong, Jeff replies: "I don't know. I never tried to do anything before."<sup>5</sup> His answer might come from the prime minister of France in 1938, Leon Blum, who wrote: "I have often thought morality may perhaps consist solely in the courage of making a choice."

BILL: You know: the Law? It has rules? Right and wrong? You're not allowed to break it?

—Lobby Hero

# LOBBY

# HERO's

# Home

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The director suggests that the building in the play is located between 6th and 7th avenues between 40th and 50th streets in Manhattan. Though this neighborhood has no name, it boasts many significant landmarks. One of these is the Algonquin Hotel on West 44th Street between 5th and 6th avenues. Built in 1902, it became the center of literary and theatrical life in the 1920s and 30s. It was closely associated with *The New Yorker* magazine and the home of the Algonquin Round Table. This group consisted of theatrical and literary figures including Alexander Woollcott, drama critic of *The New York Times*; Harold Ross, founder of *The New Yorker*; Dorothy Parker and Robert E. Sherwood, both writers, and Robert Benchley, humorist. From time to time, actors and other writers were invited.

Other significant buildings in the area include the New York Yacht Club at 37 West 44th Street. The land was given to the club by J. P. Morgan, financier and philanthropist; in the 19th century it was one of the most exclusive clubs in New York. On the same block is the Harvard Club designed by the famed architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White. It was built in 1895 for persons associated with the university who lived or worked in New York City. The Century Association has its headquarters at 7 West 43rd Street in a building designed by Stanford White. Founded in 1846 by William Cullen Bryant, it was intended to promote interest in literature and other fine arts.

At 131 West 55th Street is the City Center of Music and Drama. Originally built as a Temple for Shriners, it was bought by the city under Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia in 1943 and saved from demolition. It was the first home of the New York City Opera and the New York City Ballet and still stages cultural events. Town Hall, located at 123 West 43rd Street, also was designed by McKim, Mead and White to hold public meetings, lectures and concerts. It has hosted such artists as Richard Strauss, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Dizzy Gillespie and

opera diva Joan Sutherland.

Rockefeller Center, on a site bounded by 52nd Street, 5th Avenue, 49th Street and 7th Avenue, is probably the best-known landmark in the area. Planned and built from 1929, the buildings were designed to be three tall office structures and a new Metropolitan Opera House all surrounding a plaza. The Opera House pulled out, but the center now includes Radio City Music Hall, the RCA Building (now known as the General Electric building) and home of the NBC radio and television network. There are also restaurants, elegant shops, a skating rink and other commercial venues. The most distinctive sculptures are that of Atlas at the entrance to 630 5th Avenue and Prometheus in the Plaza.

The apartment building in the play is supposed to resemble the Dakota at 1 West 72nd Street. Located so far north from the fashionable parts of the city when it was built in 1882, someone likened it to the Dakota territory. Overlooking Central Park, the building has been home to such notables as Leonard Bernstein, Boris Karloff, Judy Garland, Lauren Bacall and, of course, John Lennon, who was fatally shot in front of the building in December, 1980.

# ACTIVITIES

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1. What moral considerations should be taken into account in choosing a career?

2. Is it morally objectionable to:  
hunt animals  
eat animals  
test drugs on animals  
wear a fur coat.

Discuss the morality of these issues.

3. What are your feelings on the death penalty? Should we or should we not eliminate it as a judicial punishment?

4. Find out more about Sherron Watkins, Roger Boisjoly and the Challenger disaster, Cindy Ossiass and the Northridge Earthquake, Hugh Kaufman and the Environmental Protection Agency, Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein and the Watergate break-in, Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers, Oliver North and the Iran-Contra affair and any other people who “blew the whistle.”

5. Moral Dilemmas:

A. You are driving to an appointment for which you are already late. Suddenly you witness a hit-and-run accident and manage to glimpse the last four digits of the perpetrator’s license plate. Do you:

- 1) Stop and help the victims and wait for the police
- 2) Drive on and plan to call the police after your appointment
- 3) Do nothing

B. You are in the grocery store when you see an old woman take a can of tuna fish and a can of soup and put them in her pocket. Do you:

- 1) Call the security guard
- 2) Offer to pay for the purchases for the old lady
- 3) Do nothing

C. A friend of yours is experimenting with illegal drugs. Do you:

- 1) Talk to him about the dangers
- 2) Tell his parents
- 3) Call the police
- 4) Do nothing

D. Your friend is telling “stories” about a female classmate and her sexual behavior. Do you:

- 1) Tell him to stop talking
- 2) Tell the girl about the stories
- 3) Do nothing

E. The traffic light is in your favor and you are

about to drive through when an elderly person enters the intersection. Do you:

- 1) Blow your horn furiously and shout
- 2) Put on the hand brake and help the old person
- 3) Just wait and then drive on

F. You are baby-sitting a young child when a movie comes on TV that is NC17 rated. It’s a movie you always wanted to see but were too young when it showed in theatres. Now it’s before your eyes. Do you:

- 1) Put the child in another room with some toys and periodically check
- 2) Turn off the TV or change channels
- 3) Have the kid watch it with you

G. You are overwhelmed with homework and under stress about a paper you have to write for a history class. While surfing the Net, you come upon a term paper site that happens to have one on your topic. Do you:

- 1) Buy it and turn it in as your own work
- 2) Buy it and use some sections of it
- 3) Do your own research and writing

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