

All The King's Horses

By Doug DeVita

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CHARACTER NAME	BRIEF DESCRIPTION	AGE	GENDER
Anna	A headstrong Swedish Exchange Student	25	F
Hella	A no-nonsense Psychotherapist	65	F
Liz*	An overly charming Egg Broker	40	F
Anna's Mother	Cold, easily exasperated Mother	49	F
Harriet Clarke*	A pot smoking Shrink	50	F

A / indicates overlapping dialogue. Words that are struck through (like ~~this~~) indicate a character interrupting themselves.

SEMI-FINALIST

Middlebury Acting Company's AMERICAN DREAMING 2022 New Plays Festival

SYNOPSIS

Foreign exchange student Anna thinks meeting egg broker Liz to be the luckiest break she could have as a struggling actress in Hollywood. And when Anna proves to be quite fertile, the unscrupulous Liz begins shopping her around for donation after donation. But – as Anna recounts to Hella, a court-ordered therapist working through her own personal crisis – when Anna's fertility begins to decline, both she and Liz react in ways that have devastating consequences for both of them.

SETTINGS

As a memory play, no real sets are required. The various locations can be suggested with lighting, sound, and a few pieces of furniture. The action should be fluid and almost dreamlike.

BIO

Doug is a two-time O'Neill Semi-Finalist (*Fable* and *Just A Rumor*), Semi-Finalist for Barrington Stage Company's Burman New Play Award, Normal Avenue's New American Play Series, and Campfire Theatre Festival (*Phillie's Trilogy*), Semi-Finalist for B Street Theatre's New Comedy Festival (*Goddess Of The Hunt* and *Upper Division*), and Semi-Finalist for We Screenplay's Diverse Voices Competition (*The Fierce Urgency Of Now*). His work has been seen in New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, New Jersey, Connecticut, and London, and has been developed at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC. He is a member of the Dramatists Guild, and has had work published by Next Stage Press and Smith & Kraus.

Los Angeles, circa 2000, and in memory: 1995 – 1999. A harsh white light comes up on Hella, a psychotherapist in her mid-60s. She speaks directly to the audience; there are remnants of her native German accent in her speech.

HELLA

It isn't a particularly violent crime – no one is dead – but the voracious energy, the meticulous planning with which she carries it out is shocking. She isn't a particularly violent girl. Girl? She's nearly 30 now... Dear God, sometimes I wish I still smoked. I know I can't smoke in here, and really, a therapist who smokes like a fiend in private is a cliché, but damn, there are times... She has a drive, a fierceness, a determination to follow her own rules, to be right at all costs, a damn the torpedoes full speed ahead attitude that barely masks her childlike innocence... Innocence? Innocence is not the right word... Petulance.

(She smiles to herself, a little ruefully.)

There is a childlike petulance about her I recognize.

Sounds of surf. Soft, sun-infused light comes up on Anna, a tall, strikingly beautiful blonde, not quite 30. She's sitting on the beach, aimlessly sifting sand through her fingers. She watches as a sand crab scurries across her blanket. She picks it up, gently, placing it on the sand.

ANNA

And how are you today, Sebastian? Crawling into your hole, and pulling it in after you?

Cracking sounds, like an eggshell breaking against the rim of a dish, begin. Soft at first, but they grow louder.

Anna gets up and stretches. She picks up a piece of kelp that's washed up on the beach, and looks around.

ANNA

This place looks like a mermaid's graveyard.

(To the kelp.)

Which one were you? Ariel? Ursula? The great Triton himself? Whoever. Now you're just washed up on the beach. Dried out and useless.

HELLA

A petulance that barely masks the frightened, desperate, lonely child put in front of me. A child I don't want to deal with, but nonetheless have no choice but to take on. An uncomfortably familiar feeling.

ANNA

(To the kelp.)

Dead. Lucky bastard.

HELLA

Session One.

Lights shift. Softer, muted, perhaps as if coming through the slats of wooden blinds or plantation shutters. We're in Hella's office.

HELLA

(To Anna.)

So. Tell me.

ANNA

What?

HELLA

What's on your mind?

ANNA

Aren't you supposed to tell me?

HELLA

That's not quite how it works, Anna. I can't help you if you don't tell me what's going on in your life.

ANNA

Haven't you read the court order?

HELLA

I have.

ANNA

So then you know what's going on in my life. What time is it? Can I go now?

HELLA

You seem angry, Anna.

ANNA

No shit, Sherlock.

HELLA

Hella. My name is Hella.

ANNA

It was a joke, I'm calling you Sherlock / because

HELLA

/ I know why you're calling me Sherlock, and I prefer you call me Hella.

ANNA

Wow. No sense of humor. That's frightening.

HELLA

It must be frustrating for a stand up comic to be stuck in a room with someone who has no sense of humor. Do you like making people laugh, Anna?

ANNA

Look, can't you just sign that damn paper saying we've done this, and let me go back to my life?

HELLA

We have to complete 10 sessions before I can sign this.

ANNA

Yes. I like to make people laugh.

HELLA

Why?

ANNA

The last time I went to a shrink she just signed the form and that was that.

HELLA

I go by the rules. Haven't *you* read the court order?

Anna gets up and starts pacing.

ANNA

I like the power I feel when people are laughing at my jokes. I'm in total control of the room, and when I kill, I really kill. *That's* why I like making people laugh.

Lights shift. Sound of laughter.

HELLA

I see.

Spotlight on Anna, with a mic in hand.

ANNA

So the next time you're sitting on the 405 freeway praying you don't miss your plane and see that blue, yellow, and white factory, just remember IKEA is the Swedish word for shit. Which is probably what you'd been saying for the last hour anyway. Shit! IKEA! Shit! IKEA! Shit! IKEA! Shit! IKEA!

Wild laughter and applause. Abrupt light shift back to Hella's office.

HELLA

I'll remember that the next time I'm on my way to LAX.

ANNA

It's the greatest high. Hearing people laugh at my jokes.

HELLA

Do you make your mother laugh?

ANNA

People love me when I make them laugh.

HELLA

But what about your mother?

ANNA

I could make Liz laugh.

HELLA

(Referring to her notes.)

Yes. Liz Clarke. The woman who arranged all of your donations.

...

How do you feel about being an egg donor?

ANNA

It feels great knowing there are kids out there with my superior Swedish genes.

HELLA

Do you like children, Anna?

ANNA

God, no! I'm never having any of my own. Ever.

HELLA

I see. Tell me about your mother.

ANNA

You're not going to let that go, are you?

HELLA

Of course not.

A stand off, and then gradually the lights shift to Anna's Mother. She's in her late 40s, attractive, and speaks with a Swedish accent. Sounds of an airport; the announcements are in Swedish (and maybe a few other languages TBD.)

ANNA'S MOTHER

You're sure you want to do this?

ANNA

I'll be happier in California, mom. It's sunny and warm there.

ANNA'S MOTHER

You're going to be happier studying in Italy. It's warm there too. That's a fiasco. Teaching aerobics in Stockholm is going to make you happy. That doesn't work out like you planned. Now going to Los Angeles to be an "actress" is going to make you / happy

ANNA

/ MOM! I'm going to finish my studies and finally get my degree. At UCLA. I thought you'd be happy about that.

ANNA'S MOTHER

Another fancy university you can't afford.

ANNA

I got a government scholarship, mom, you know this!

ANNA'S MOTHER

And if you mess this one up you're going to have to pay it all back. Meaning I'm going to have to pay it all back.

ANNA

It's only one more year. Then, maybe, I'll *think* about becoming an actress. AND I'm not going to mess it up this time, Mom.

ANNA'S MOTHER

I'm just afraid this going to end in disaster, like every one of your schemes.

ANNA

I wish you could, just once, be happy for me. Support me for a change.

ANNA'S MOTHER

You're 25 years old, Anna. I can't keep indulging your craziness anymore. This is it. Once you're on that plane, you're on your own.

ANNA

I'll call you when I get to Los Angeles.

Anna tries to hug her mother, but is rebuffed.

ANNA'S MOTHER

There's a nine hour time difference. Don't wake me up.

The lights shift back to Hella and Anna; we're back in the present. Anna is angry.

HELLA

You've talked to her about what's happened?

ANNA

...

She told me it was all my own fault and not to expect her to help me.

...

She said I was crazy.

...

I really am on my own.

...

I never want to talk about her again.

We hear a timer DING.

HELLA

I'm sorry, Anna, but our time is up for today.

ANNA

Good! Because if this is what it's going to be like for the next nine weeks, I'm out. Now.

HELLA

You don't have choice, dear. Not if you want me to help you stay in this country.

ANNA

Shit.

HELLA

Do me a favor, Anna? Whatever dreams you have between now and next week, write them down.

ANNA

I never dream.

HELLA

Never?

ANNA

Never.

HELLA

You may find yourself remembering your dreams now.

ANNA

I just told you. I. Never. Dream.

HELLA

You never dream. You never want children. You never want to talk about your mother again. A lot of absolutes.

ANNA

I'm Swedish. The country of Absolut.

(Unnerved by Hella's lack of reaction.)

You know? Absolut? The vodka?

HELLA

Not everything is a punch line, Anna.

ANNA

Damn, you're a tough audience.

The lights return to the harsh light on Hella.

HELLA

And she is one tough cookie. Brilliant at dodging my questions, it's so clear she's trying to hide behind a mask of false bravado. And as much as I don't want to take on this case she is exactly the kind of challenge I relish. As Freud said, "There are no accidents."

...

I believe that.

The lights fade on Hella. We hear the sound of surf, and as the lights shift to a sunnier, warmer tone, we see Anna sitting on the beach, again sifting sand through her fingers and staring out at the water. We hear the voices in her head.

ANNA'S MOTHER (V.O.)

I'm just afraid this is going to end in disaster. Like all of your schemes.

ANNA

Jesus.

Cracking sounds start again. Anna picks up a piece of kelp and begins playing with it.

ANNA'S MOTHER (V.O.)

I can't just hop on a plane and fly to California, Anna, even if I could take the time from work. Which I'm not sure I can right now. I told you when you left Sweden...

We hear another voice, softer and warmer, cutting in.

LIZ (V.O.)

I don't know what you want from me, Anna...

ANNA'S MOTHER (V.O.)

... I can't keep supporting your craziness anymore...

LIZ (V.O.)

... I can't help you anymore. I'm sorry, sweetie.

ANNA'S MOTHER (V.O.)

Crazy. Crazy. Crazy...

LIZ (V.O.)

Sorry. Sorry. Sorry...

Their voices fade. Anna starts pulling the kelp apart.

ANNA

You're not sorry, Liz, so shut up! You could have helped me. I thought you liked me. And I'm not crazy, Mom. I'm not. I'M NOT!

Anna picks up the pieces of kelp and flings them back into the ocean.

HELLA

Session Two.

The bright light of a Southern California afternoon pours through a large window, illuminating Anna and Liz in its warmth. They are in Liz's office at Wilshire Fertility Group on Wilshire Boulevard in Westwood. Liz is 40-ish, bubbly, warm, forthright.

LIZ

You must be Anna!

ANNA

Yes, ma'am.

LIZ

Oh, call me Liz, Anna sweetie! Ma'am makes me feel so old. So, you want to be an egg donor?

ANNA

Yes, ma... Liz.

LIZ

Do you know anything about the process?

ANNA

I know a little, from what my friend Maja* told me.

(*Pronounced "My-YAH.")

LIZ

Maja? Oh, that's right! You're one of the referrals from my "FSS Exchange!"

ANNA

I beg your pardon?

LIZ

Oh, don't mind me, sweetie. Lately I've been getting a lot of foreign exchange students from UCLA donating their eggs. I call them my "Foreign Student Stock Exchange," or FSS Exchange for short.

ANNA

Oh. That's funny.

LIZ

This will be the first time you're donating?

ANNA

Yes.

LIZ

First of all, Anna sweetie, we are very particular when choosing our donors. We want to make sure we choose women who are primarily motivated by a need to help infertile couples, not ones driven by financial gain. Do you understand?

ANNA

Oh. Yeah. Sure.

Liz hands Anna a thick stack of papers.

LIZ

Good. Now. First, you will have to fill all of these out. Just necessary information about your family history, general health and personality. May I ask if you've ever had an abortion?

ANNA

Uhm... yes... I got pregnant when I was studying in Italy.

...

Does that mean I can't donate now? I really need the money... I mean, I really want to help someone have a child.

LIZ

Oh, no Anna, it's great you've had an abortion! It shows us you're fertile.

ANNA

Oh. Yeah. Of course!

LIZ

Now, you do understand that donating your eggs is not a simple process?

ANNA

(Playfully.)

Don't I just come to the clinic, have my eggs removed and go home with a big fat check? I'm free at 4:00...

LIZ

(Laughing.)

Oh, Anna, you're a funny one. No, sweetie, it's not like a sperm bank. Men have it so much easier: they jerk off into a cup and get 50 bucks.

For us, it's actually a very complicated process. There are quite a few drugs and hormones involved. To start, you and the recipient mother have to take a drug to synchronize your menstrual cycles. When your cycles are in sync you'll have to take another drug to stimulate your ovaries into producing as many eggs as possible. Then the eggs will be surgically removed. It's a simple operation but nevertheless requires a short hospital stay. You may experience some pain and swelling after the eggs are removed, you may experience mood shifts, very similar to PMS...

ANNA

Uhm... I've never had PMS.

LIZ

Seriously?

ANNA

I just bleed for a couple of days, and bing bang boom done.

LIZ

Then you are a very lucky young woman, Anna sweetie. Now. After the operation you'll take a few more drugs to get your hormones back to normal. The whole process shouldn't take more than a few months, hopefully no more than three. But since this would be your first donation it would be prudent to count on at least four months from start to finish.

ANNA

Oh.

LIZ

Is everything all right?

ANNA

Well, yeah, except I'm done with school soon, and if I don't get my green card I might have to leave in less than four months. That wouldn't give me enough time.

LIZ

No, sweetie, it wouldn't. I'm sorry, Anna, but unless you can guarantee you'll be here for the next four months at least, I'm afraid you won't make a viable candidate for us. Such a pity. You're so beautiful, I'm sure I'd have prospective parents lining up for your eggs.

Lights fade on Liz and come up on Hella's office.

ANNA

And that should have been the end of it.

HELLA

But obviously, it isn't.

ANNA

Obviously.

HELLA

I know you have your green card, so I'm assuming it was your overwhelming need to help an infertile couple that drove you back to Liz?

Sound of laughter. Spotlight on Anna, again with a mic in her hand.

ANNA

And that's how I became just another Government funded-Swede at UCLA, a campus overrun with Government-funded Swedes, Orange-haired Asians, and tight-assed East Coast Liberals trying to pass themselves off as Airy-fairy West Coast Radicals. All of them furnishing their off-campus apartments with stuff from IKEA. So remember: the next time you're sitting on the 405 freeway praying you don't miss your plane and see that blue, yellow, and white factory, just remember IKEA is the Swedish word for shit. Which is probably what you'd been saying for the last hour anyway. Shit! IKEA! Shit! IKEA! Shit! IKEA!

(She smiles at the laughter.)

Thank you! Thank you very much!

She bows and runs into Liz as exits.

LIZ

Oh, Anna, sweetie, you are so funny! I love your act!

ANNA

Liz?

LIZ

Maja told me you got your green card, and you're performing here now. That's wonderful, sweetie.

ANNA

"The FSS Exchange" works fast. Yeah, I'm going to be staying in L.A. Maybe get an agent, see where it goes.

LIZ

With your looks, you shouldn't have any problems.

Lights shift. We're back in Hella's office.

HELLA

She actually sought you out?

ANNA

Yes.

HELLA

Oh, she's good.

ANNA

You have no idea.

Lights shift. We're back in Liz's office.

LIZ

Anna sweetie! Thanks for getting here so quickly!

ANNA

It wasn't easy. My piece of IKEA car is in the shop. Again. I had to take the bus!

LIZ

Oh, I'm sorry about that. Anyway, you got here! As I mentioned last night, I think I have a prospective couple for you. Of course, I'll need a few baby pictures to show them... What's wrong, Anna sweetie?

ANNA

I'll have to get the baby pictures from my mother in Sweden. She'll want to know why I need them / and

LIZ

/ And you don't want to tell her. Oh, Anna sweetie, I understand. I don't get along with my mother either. I'm sure you'll think of some clever little white lie she'll believe.

ANNA

I don't like to lie, Liz. Especially to her // She can always tell // She just knows when I'm lying to her.

LIZ

You seem like a smart girl. You'll find a way to get them, I'm sure. Let me go ahead get you scheduled for a physical with our doctor, and I'll make an appointment for you to see our psychiatrist...

Lights shift. We're in Hella's office.

HELLA

And that would be the shrink you mentioned in our last session?

ANNA

Yeah. Dr. Harriet Cooke.

HELLA

Harriet Cooke?

ANNA

Yes. Do you know her?

Lights change to the harsh light on Hella.

HELLA

Harriet Cooke. That knocks me for a loop; no one's told me Harriet is involved in this mess. There's no mention of her anywhere in the case file. Just four photo-copies of the same less-than-thorough mental evaluation with a rubber stamp signature from a "Dr. Frederun Bösen-Blum." Who, I've now ascertained, does not exist.

Lights switch back to Anna and Hella.

ANNA

Tell me how you know Dr. Cooke.

HELLA

I don't know Dr. Cooke.

ANNA

Yes, you ~~do~~ // I saw the look ~~on~~ // your face when I mentioned her name.

HELLA

You're dodging my question, Anna.

ANNA

You're dodging mine. Tell me how you know Dr. Cooke.

HELLA

I don't have to answer your question. You, my dear, do have to answer mine.

(She shows Anna the form.)

If you want me to sign off on this session.

ANNA

That's blackmail.

HELLA

That's right. So tell me about your mother and the baby pictures.

ANNA

You're relentless.

HELLA

(Smiling.)

Yes. I am.

Lights shift to isolated spots on Anna and her mother, each on the phone. Anna's light is warm and sunny, her mother's is cold and drab.

ANNA'S MOTHER

Do you know what time it is here!?!

ANNA

Sorry, I forgot.

ANNA'S MOTHER

Uh huh. What do you want?

ANNA

I need you to send me some of my baby pictures.

ANNA'S MOTHER

Why do you need your baby pictures?

ANNA

Do you really want to know?

ANNA'S MOTHER

What are you doing I'm not going to like?