

To...Or Not...

by

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DESCRIPTION

Abortion may well be the “Civil War” of our age, but 70-year old Alma Gordon is not going to let the barbarians win, which is why she engages in ritual combat and more with Melinda Marsh, young mother and pro-lifer, who is too young to remember the back alleys and casual carnage of the pre-Roe days.

CHARACTERS

- **Alma Gordon**, pro-choice protestor, at least 65 to 70 old. If a younger actor, the impersonation must be **very** good, but the preference is for an actor of that actual age.
- **Melinda Marsh**, pro-life protestor, 40

(**Note:** Ethnicity of the characters does not matter)

SETTING

- Large abortion protest rally in a major city

TIME

- January 22—anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*

MATERIALS

- Winter coats and other winter accouterments, as needed
- Two canvas bags, one for each character, in which they can carry things
- Placards with slogans on them attached to sticks; the placards must be able to be removed and put back on the sticks (probably with Velcro)
- Two chairs
- A small journal, which MARSH can carry in her coat pocket, with pencil
- A long knitting needle
- White sweater, small purse
- Grubby vest and lab coat
- Tupperware cup, with lid (or any plastic container with a lid)

SOUND

- Crowd sounds in the background
- Music for ritual combat scene: very percussive and heavy on the bass

- Three loud gun shots
- Other music/sound as indicated in script

NOTE: A second table is set upstage center, on which will be all props. When an actor “exits,” she will simply go upstage and stand by the prop table.

* * * * *

Scene 1

Just before the lights go down, the audience hears Lou Reed’s “Bus Load of Faith.” As the light go to dark, the music changes into crowd sounds at a large abortion rally: chants, etc. GORDON and MARSH enter and stand on chairs placed on opposite sides of the stage. They are chanting, holding placards that bear their words. They see each other, in the sense that they

GORDON

“Without a choice, you have no voice.”

MARSH

“Jesus loves every baby you kill.”

After three or four chants, the lights change to a lurid red; crowd sounds are abruptly replaced by low thumping diabolical music. GORDON and MARSH turn to face each other like ancient warriors and bow. They take the placards off their poles and face each other, combat-ready.

MARSH begins brandishing her pole; GORDON stands center, still, holding her pole in her hands. MARSH starts to circle. It is she who strikes the first blow; GORDON always fends off the blow without ever moving off her center. The combat should be ritualized. Their lines are said in rhythm to the combat, and when they say “Hee-yah,” that indicates a strike and block at the same time.

MARSH

Evil one. Baby killer.

GORDON

Religion-infected nutcase.

MARSH

Murderer. Hedonist.

GORDON

Sex-hating, family-values tightass.

TOGETHER

Hee-yah!

MARSH

You'd waste babies for pure convenience.

GORDON

You believe in gods that detest women.

MARSH

You slander motherhood.

TOGETHER

Hee-yah!

GORDON

Compassionate conservative.

MARSH

Liberal slime.

TOGETHER

Hee-yah!

GORDON

Shove women into the back alley.

MARSH

People should suffer the consequences of their sinful pleasures.

GORDON

Back-alley butcher.

MARSH

Godless wretch.

GORDON

Hee-yah!

MARSH

Hee-yah!

GORDON

Freedom is most important.

MARSH

Life is most important.

TOGETHER

Hee-yah!

MARSH

A fetus is a child.

GORDON

A fetus is a fetus.

TOGETHER

Hee-yah!

GORDON

Woman has the right to enjoy her body.

MARSH

Woman is a sacred vessel.

TOGETHER

Hee-yah!

The combat ends with each staff resting on the other person's left shoulder. In tandem, they draw the tips of the staffs across the throat to the right shoulder. When they reach the right shoulder, they should whip the staffs away, as if completing a cut. The motion should be as if they have just beheaded each other. Then they back off, bow like ancient warriors, re-attach their placards. Lights change. They look at each other, sensing something has happened, but they do not know what.

GORDON

Cold today.

MARSH

I was hoping for the January thaw.

GORDON

Be nice if the Supreme Court issued it in the spring, huh?

MARSH

They should never have said anything at all.

GORDON

I'm sure the back-alley butchers' lobby would've liked that.

MARSH

I'm going back.

GORDON

If you get your way, we all will.

MARSH goes back to her station. The crowd sounds come back strong. GORDON returns to her station. They both take up their chanting again.

They chant five times, then they and the crowd sounds cut out abruptly.

Everything goes to darkness and silence, and in that dark and silence three loud gun shots rings out.

* * * * *

Scene 2

In the darkness, transition music: Lou Reed's "Common Ground." GORDON and MARSH bring the chairs to the center stage; this is a "coffee shop."

MARSH sits in one chair, writing furiously in a journal with a pencil. A thermos is at her feet. Her placard is on the floor next to her. GORDON enters with a cup of coffee and watches MARSH for a moment. Transition music becomes background music in the coffee shop. During the scene they take off their winter clothes and put them on the chairs.

GORDON

Surprising you don't rip through the paper.

MARSH

Oh. You—

GORDON

Go ahead.

MARSH

No, I'm finished.

(reluctantly)

Would you like to sit down?

GORDON

No.

MARSH

All right.

GORDON

Because then we'd have to chat the chit, wouldn't we, and we probably don't have much to say to each other.

MARSH

All right.

GORDON

But if I did sit down, could you pretend?

MARSH freezes. Lights down; bright light on GORDON, who steps out.

GORDON

I know I couldn't. I'd want to bite her head off. No one her age should have strong principles, especially religious ones. There's nothing like principles to screw up your morality.

Light off. MARSH unfreezes.

MARSH

I wouldn't pretend— I don't do that. We might be able to share—

GORDON freezes. Lights down; bright light on MARSH.

MARSH

Share what? She's believes in killing babies! And at her age! She should be stuck on an ice floe and put out to sea.

Light off. GORDON unfreezes.

GORDON

Share what? Common ground? Big myth.

MARSH

Think so—

GORDON

Based on what?

Bright light on both. Each line in each pair of lines said alternately, distinctly and slowly.

GORDON
You have a god, I don't.

MARSH
I have a god, you don't.

GORDON
I believe in the Constitution—

MARSH
Life begins at conception—

GORDON
—you believe in the Inquisition.

MARSH
—the soul begins at fertilization.

The lines are repeated, said at the same time.

GORDON
You have a god, I don't.

MARSH
I have a god, you don't.

GORDON
I believe in the Constitution—

MARSH
Life begins at conception—

GORDON
—you believe in the Inquisition.

MARSH
—the soul begins at fertilization.

Bright lights off.

GORDON

You and I— You know, in an earlier age and different gender,
we'd duel.

Music change: something baroque, from an age of elegance, harpsichord. It continues underneath. Lighting change: something warm, candle-like.

They move downstage and face each other; they should pretend they are dressed well: adjust cuffs, smooth lapels, etc. Lights dim on the coffee shop.

MARSH

You are a godless infidel, you know.

GORDON

“Godless infidel”—

MARSH

Just thought I would note that.

GORDON

Always that weakness for redundancy: you see, an infidel is
God[ess]—

MARSH

And your next dinner date with Satan is—?

GORDON

But always first-rate conversation!

MARSH

You use blasphemy like a condiment.

GORDON

Sign of a well-balanced mind.

MARSH

Referring to your own?

GORDON

Not yours, obviously—at least not while it's so God-infected.

MARSH
You always overreach yourself.

GORDON
What's an appetite for?

MARSH
To control.

GORDON
To control it is to kill it.

MARSH
To kill it is to find salvation.

GORDON
Synonym for boredom.

MARSH
If you had God for your tutor—

GORDON
My rooty-toot-tutor!

MARSH
—he'd strip that pride from your tongue.

GORDON
Which means I would have less to wag—

MARSH
Ah, the serpent flicks!

GORDON
—and be that much less charming.

MARSH
A blessing for us all.

GORDON
Not all, obviously. But—

But— MARSH

Since God seems on holiday— GORDON

I must. MARSH

You must. GORDON

I must. MARSH

His viceroy. GORDON

In his name. MARSH

And your name—? GORDON

His name is mine. MARSH

I am sure that disappoints your parents. Well, then, I suppose— GORDON

It is time. MARSH

An imaginary butler comes up with an imaginary gun case.

Ah, the means to the end have arrived. GORDON

They mime taking out the guns, inspecting them, and so on.

Fit the mark? MARSH

GORDON

A blaze of craftsmanship.

MARSH

Once more, dear friend, I would like to appeal to your soul—

GORDON

Cannot appeal to what I do not have.

MARSH

Then, we have our course.

They stand back to back and proceed to march in opposite directions. After two steps, GORDON turns and follows MARSH, gun held out. MARSH turns and sees the gun.

GORDON

My advantage.

MARSH

Fair play?

GORDON

Ridiculous notion. There is nothing “fair” about your poison. My “must” is to stop it.

MARSH

By killing me?

GORDON

Of course not. Give me your gun. Give it. Ridicule makes the best cut.

GORDON fires one gun into the air—gunshot sound.

GORDON

And we’re off. You were ready, based on your shining “faith,” your “love of all life,” to erase me. No one, as far as I know, has ever been killed in the name of atheism. Only your kind kills in the name of the Prince of Peace. And if you are able to twist murder into a cleansing, then you are capable of painting any black evil white. Religious faith is a very evil thing, indeed—a wonderful whitewash for the dirtiest of desires.

GORDON raises the second gun.

GORDON

A duel implies equality—but why should I fight with such a
smelling mass of secondary hypocrisy?

(fires the other gun into the air)

It is finished.

(throws the guns on the ground)

I feel unclean in your presence—I must go wash myself in blood of
absinthe and baptize myself in the river of gin.

*Lights change to back coffee shop. Music changes back to Lou Reed. They move back into their
original positions.*

GORDON

But we won't duel.

MARSH

Too civilized for that.

GORDON

Too civilized?

(leans into MARSH)

It wasn't anybody on my side that shot doctors. No one from my
ranks stormed the clinics.

MARSH

Your side just kills babies.

GORDON

If only you knew what you were talking about.

* * * * *

Scene 3

*Sound: tinny radio as if heard through a wall—Paul Anka's "Having My Baby." GORDON puts
the placards and poles and one chair upstage. MARSH moves into a pool of light downstage: a
harsh white light. MARSH looks considerably younger through some small change in her
costume, e.g., a barette, which GORDON can give her, which holds her hair back. GORDON
hands her the long knitting needle, then waits by the prop table.*

MARSH

It can't be true.

(holds her hand on her stomach)

It can't be. It can't— It just can't— I can't— I can't— I won't—

She carefully gets down on her knees and very slowly mimes hiking up her skirt—excruciatingly slowly. When she has lifted it far enough, she slips the knitting needle underneath. Long pause. Then she takes it out, unused.

MARSH

(she begins striking herself with the needle)

I can't— I can't— I can't— I can't—

She remains kneeling. She folds her hands as if to pray, but they still clutch the needle. She lays the needle on the floor with both hands, as if it were a sword, then clasps her hands again.

MARSH

Hail Mary— Our Father—

MARSH waves her hands back and forth, as if she were erasing the words from the air.

MARSH

I have sinned— I have failed—

GORDON enters wearing a vest and dirty lab coat, carrying the white sweater, purse, and hat; she also brings the chair downstage center. A harsh white light. MARSH leaves the needle and sits in the chair. GORDON drapes the sweater over MARSH's shoulders and hands her the purse, and then steps out of the lights.

As GORDON says the names of the abortifacients, she circles behind MARSH. MARSH stands, steps downstage, and speaks to an imaginary doctor. GORDON's recitation should be continuous throughout, which means the names will be repeated.

MARSH

Excuse me? I'm sorry, I didn't hear— Well, I'm here to see the doctor.

GORDON

Pennyroyal, Snakeroot—

MARSH

I have an appointment. Yes, I do—see, there, in your book.

GORDON

Cotton root bark, Silphium—

MARSH

That's all right—I'll wait.

Moves several steps, as if into another room; she speaks to the doctor.

GORDON

Aloe, Wormwood—

MARSH

Oh, yes, thank you— Well. My problem?

GORDON

Rocket, Calomel, Hyssop—

GORDON stops to watch MARSH during these next lines.

MARSH

Yes, I did make an appointment. No, no, most everything feels fine. Most everything. Not everything, no. I'm pregnant. I'm sure. Three—this would make three.

GORDON

(without moving)

Rue, Myrrh—

MARSH

He's a night watchman—not a large salary, no. Though he says they might be hiring up soon—but no, no guarantee of that. We barely have the money for the four of us—neither of us have had new clothes— the children—

GORDON

(without moving)

Black cohosh—

MARSH

He doesn't believe in using— Catholic. I can't agree with what you just said—but I agree with it.

GORDON
(moving again)

Seneca, Rockrose—

MARSH

I can't have this baby. It will kill me. I bled so much— I know you can't— I know— I shouldn't have come— What?

She takes something handed to her: a note, which she opens to read.

GORDON

Blue cohosh, Sweet cicely—

MARSH

He will— Of course, you're right, not out loud. But he will? Of course, of course, no mention. Thank you.

GORDON

Once these remedies were ours. Our knowledge. Our power. Now taken from us and dropped into the hands of men.

Change of lights, and MARSH in now in GORDON's "office," which is the chair.

GORDON

Do you have the money?

MARSH

Yes, yes, I do.

GORDON

Good. You can pay me after. You know what you're doing?

MARSH

Yes.

GORDON

Are you sure?

MARSH

Yes.

GORDON
Does anyone know you're here?

MARSH
No.

GORDON
Come alone?

MARSH
Yes.

GORDON
That's not good. Who's going to take you home?

MARSH
There's the bus— We don't have a car.

GORDON
The bus! This isn't like getting a cavity filled!

MARSH
It's the opposite—I know.

GORDON
I don't like this.

MARSH
You can't turn me away! I've got the money!

GORDON
Didn't he—

MARSH
I'll be all right. I'm strong.

GORDON
Didn't he tell you to bring somebody— I should send you home—

MARSH
I won't come back— It's now—

Catholic? GORDON

I can't have a third. MARSH

Does your husband— GORDON

Not a thing. MARSH

Usually best. Well. GORDON

GORDON exits. MARSH sits, and the light tightens to her face. During this next speech, the actor and director can add any words or lines that bring out the emotional impact.

MARSH
Oh, God— Oh my God— That hurts! I'll try. No, stop, that hurts!
Ahhh! Gently, gently, oh please— Ahhh! Hail Mary—mother of
God—sinners— This - is - not - me— This - is - not - happening—
(sings)
Maresy dotes and dosey dotes and little lambsy divey, a kiddly
divey too— Ahhhhh!

This last is a long drawn-out howl of pain. Lights bump to black in the middle of the howl, so that it ends in darkness.

Sound: crowd noise as at top of show, strident and loud.

* * * * *

Scene 4

GORDON brings in the other chair; MARSH puts sweater and purse on the prop table. The two chairs face each other: the inside of a police van. They should have their winter gear on. Lights up: MARSH nervous, GORDON feisty. Crowd sounds muted. The dialogue should move briskly.

GORDON

And that's how it fucking used to be.

(to officer)

Hey, Officer Krupke! I have to pee. No? That contravenes the Geneva Convention on Urination Protocols. My hands?

(sighs)

Cops: if you can't beat 'em—they beat you. Have to pee?

MARSH

No.

GORDON

I have a bladder the size of a half walnut.

(to the officer)

Do you get a commission for each back you crack?

(to MARSH)

So they nabbed you, too?

MARSH does not answer.

GORDON

First time? Not mine. Me and Paddy O'Wagon here are intimates.

MARSH does not answer.

GORDON

Fuck! I really have to go. Do you have something I can use?

MARSH does not answer.

GORDON

Cup, bottle, sandwich bag, jar, Tupperware for Christ's sake?

MARSH

I have a cup. A plastic cup. With a cover.

GORDON

May I?

MARSH

What?

GORDON

What?! Either give it to me or I stink up the joint.

MARSH gets a child's "sippy" cup out of her bag and hands it to her.

GORDON

And hold open your coat? Don't have much, but don't want to drive 'em crazy up front.

MARSH, showing great disgust, stands up, with her back to GORDON, and mimes spreading her coat. GORDON simply stands behind MARSH, facing upstage. There is a pause, then a sigh of relief from GORDON. There does not actually have to be any movement mimicking or sound of peeing.

GORDON

Ahhh, yes. That relieves the mind.

MARSH

Are you done?

GORDON

Wait. Wait. Wait. Yes.

MARSH

Can I sit down?

GORDON

May I. Go ahead.

MARSH sits. GORDON puts the cup under her chair.

GORDON

Ah, now I can concentrate.

A silence falls between them.

GORDON

Well.

MARSH does not respond.

GORDON

So, are you mad at me?

MARSH

No.

GORDON

No.

MARSH

No, I'm not.

GORDON

So forgiving. Well, I would've been mad if some dried-up little cunt presumed to tell me "how it was."

MARSH

Please don't swear.

GORDON

Admit it, though, you didn't know any of that.

MARSH

I'm sure Christ forgave those women.

GORDON

I'll bet your mother knew about those women. I'll bet she knew some of those women personally.

MARSH

My mother did a lot of work in the Church.

GORDON

I'll bet some people out there right now lobbing plastic dead fetuses are glad Jane Roe did what she did.

MARSH

I wouldn't know.

GORDON

No, you wouldn't. No, you wouldn't. Any kids?

MARSH

Two.

GORDON

I don't have any. Never wanted any.

MARSH

I can understand why.

GORDON

You can? Tell me.

MARSH

It wouldn't be proper—

GORDON

Tell me.

MARSH

I don't want to.

GORDON

I don't get it. Out there you people have no problem telling complete strangers that they're devil's shit—

MARSH

It's not about judgment.

GORDON

Lest ye be judged.

MARSH

We want them to remember their souls—

GORDON

Holy shoemakers—

MARSH

—and the souls of the babies.

GORDON

Yet in here, one on one—nothing.

(large mocking sigh)

I must be getting too old—I'm missing the connections.

MARSH

I don't know you.

GORDON

You don't know them.

MARSH

That's different.

GORDON

Zing, zing, miss, miss. Can you explain? No, don't. I'll just end up having to kill you—

MARSH

It's different—

GORDON

—for spouting nonsense in a contained environment.

MARSH

It's different because—

GORDON

Oh, Christ, she's off—

MARSH

It's different because it's clear why they're going where they're going.

GORDON

(looking around)

Any sharp instruments—

MARSH

They're going to kill a baby.

GORDON
(to the officer)

Can I borrow your truncheon?

MARSH

They're going to kill—

GORDON

Stop it! Just stop your drive! I get very fucking upset when I hear the voice of death buzzing so close.

MARSH

It's the voice of life!

GORDON

It's the voice of fucking death. It's the voice of the Grand fucking Inquisitor. It's the voice of the fucking hangman.

MARSH

I can't talk to you. You have no respect.

GORDON

One of the blessings of old age. So, let's shift— Two kids, huh?

MARSH does not respond.

GORDON

I always felt it'd be easier to know a dolphin's mind than understand what drove people to want children. How about you? Why? Accident? Huh?

MARSH

Both planned.

GORDON

That's good. It creeps up on so many people—insert here, and suddenly a child appears. So, why?

MARSH

A family completes me.

GORDON

Completes you. You like being a mother.

MARSH

It's one of the best things a woman can do. Actually, the best.

GORDON

The best.

MARSH

The best.

(indicating GORDON)

So, why not?

GORDON

I was blessed with a mother who never let me forget my world was the whole world. So that's where I made my home. I can never remember ever having the urge to slip one out the canal.

MARSH

You'd feel invaded.

GORDON

Perceptive.

MARSH

I was completely the opposite.

GORDON

You planned.

MARSH

Yes.

GORDON

You chose.

MARSH

Yes.

GORDON

Choice.

MARSH

Choice before conception.

GORDON

But once the sperm worms in—

MARSH

The choice isn't mine any more.

GORDON

Or anybody else's.

MARSH

It's murder. Murder can't be a choice.

GORDON

But what if you really believe it's not murder?

MARSH

Just like the Nazis? the slaver owners? Life has to be respected.

GORDON

I don't disagree with you there. Though we disagree completely. A dolphin would be easier.

GORDON gives her a look.

GORDON

Do you love me?

MARSH

What?

GORDON

Do you love me?

MARSH

What are you asking?

GORDON

Does this foul-mouthed geezer, this maybe dyke, merit love?

MARSH

Everyone does. I love you because Christ loves you. I love your soul.

GORDON
But what about me?

MARSH
I want to save your soul.

GORDON
I don't have a soul.

MARSH
You can't reject it.

GORDON
I do. Can you love me? Here's the test. I hate everything your Church stands for. Can you love me? I think religious faith is a form of insanity. Can you love me? I think your love of "life" is fascism. Can you love me? I think a Christian nation would be dull beyond belief and ripe with hypocrisy— Can you love me?

MARSH
I would love you, yes.

GORDON
As a duty.

MARSH
Personally, you disgust me. But charity—

GORDON
Condescension.

MARSH
You have more sin than I know what to do with.

GORDON
That's my vaccination.

By this time the crowd sounds have died down, and it is silent.

GORDON

Sounds like things have broken up.

(to the officer)

Is everything over? Can we go home now? I promise I will write 500 times— No sense of humor.

(to MARSH)

We're off to the station soon. I'm sure—I'm afraid—we'll see each other in a year, if not earlier. Been nice talking with you.

As the lights fade, GORDON makes a sign of the cross in the air. Lights out.

* * * * *

Scene 5

In the darkness, three loud gun shots, then crowd sounds at a large abortion rally: chants, etc. GORDON and MARSH place the chairs as at the top of the play and get their placards. They stand on the chairs and chant.

GORDON

"Without choice, you have no voice."

MARSH

"Jesus loves every baby you kill."

The chanting goes on for only 10 repetitions or so, then lights change to a lurid red; crowd sounds are replaced by low thumping diabolical music. MARSH and GORDON remove their placards from their signs.

MARSH begins brandishing her pole; GORDON stands center, still, holding her pole in her hands. MARSH starts to circle. It is she who strikes the first blow; GORDON always fends off the blow without ever moving off her center. The combat should be ritualized. Their lines are said in rhythm to the combat, and the whole thing should move very quickly. "Hee-yah" indicates when the blows are struck.

MARSH

Hee-yah! Demon. Child killer.

GORDON

Blind religious drone.

MARSH

Murderer. Hedonist.

Woman-hater. GORDON

Hee-yah! TOGETHER

You'd waste babies for pure convenience. MARSH

You believe in gods that detest women. GORDON

You slander motherhood. MARSH

Hee-yah! TOGETHER

You betray love. GORDON

Creature of darkness. MARSH

Creature of darkness. GORDON

People should suffer for sin. MARSH

Save us from Christ. GORDON

Hee-yah! TOGETHER

Freedom is most important. GORDON

Life is most important. MARSH

Hee-yah! TOGETHER

A fetus is a child. MARSH

A fetus is a fetus. GORDON

Hee-yah! TOGETHER

Woman has the right to enjoy her body. GORDON

Woman is a sacred vessel. You shall lose. MARSH

Hee-yah! TOGETHER

We shall win. GORDON

Hee-yah! Hee-yah! TOGETHER

The combat ends with mutual endangerment: their staves are poised to do great damage to each other. The staves rest on the other person's left shoulder. In tandem, they draw the tips of the staves across the throat to the right shoulder. When they reach the right shoulder, they should whip the staves away, as if completing a cut. The motion should be as if they've just beheaded each other. Then they back off, bow like ancient warriors. Lights to black.

Music for curtain call: Lou Reed's "Bus Load of Faith."