

Norma Gets the Axe

A 10-minute play

by Rom Watson

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2018

Cast

DONA HOLLOWAY, William Castle's associate producer, 45 years old
WILLIAM CASTLE, film producer and director, 49 years old
NORMA, famous actress, 63 years old*

*If necessary or judicious, NORMA may be played by a man in drag.

The location: the production offices of William Castle Pictures at Columbia Pictures Studios, located near the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Gower Street in Hollywood, CA.

The time: 1963.

The lights rise on an office. WILLIAM CASTLE sits at his desk, a cigar protruding from the corner of his mouth. Born April 24, 1914, he was a prolific film producer and director, famous for using gimmicks to promote his films. DONA HOLLOWAY enters. Born April 18, 1918, she used to work at Columbia Pictures as Harry Cohn's secretary until his death. She now works with Castle as his Associate Producer.

DONA HOLLOWAY

I talked to Joan Blondell's agent. Joan required sixty-two stitches.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Ouch.

DONA HOLLOWAY

There's no way she'll recover in time to do the picture.

WILLIAM CASTLE

We can't push back the start date. We'll have to replace her.

DONA HOLLOWAY

That's what I told her agent.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Any ideas?

DONA HOLLOWAY

Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? was a big hit last year. What about Joan Crawford?

WILLIAM CASTLE

NO. Anyone but Joan Crawford.

DONA HOLLOWAY

She's a good actress.

WILLIAM CASTLE

She's a VERY good actress. Joan Crawford is compelling no matter what role she plays. When she's on screen, you can't take your eyes off her.

DONA HOLLOWAY

So why don't you want her in the picture?

WILLIAM CASTLE

Because she's crazy! Besides; she won't do it for less than fifty thousand dollars.

DONA HOLLOWAY

Well . . .what about Norma Desmond?

WILLIAM CASTLE

Who?

DONA HOLLOWAY

Norma Desmond. Silent movie star, larger than life but a good actress. About the same age as Blondell and Crawford.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Oh wait, now I remember. Used to be in silent pictures. Used to be big. But didn't they lock her up for killing a screenwriter?

DONA HOLLOWAY

Yes. Twelve years ago. But in Hollywood killing a screenwriter is par for the course.

WILLIAM CASTLE

I've wanted to, many times. But how can she be in the picture if she's locked up?

DONA HOLLOWAY

Through the prison's work-release program.

WILLIAM CASTLE

What?

DONA HOLLOWAY

I got a call from the warden of the women's prison. She's been calling various producers around town, to see if they have any work for Norma.

WILLIAM CASTLE

What is she, her agent now?

DONA HOLLOWAY

No, but the warden needs the work-release program to benefit every inmate. Even Norma.

WILLIAM CASTLE

I guess she wants to keep her job as warden.

DONA HOLLOWAY

Exactly. She told me the work-release program hasn't really been working out for Norma. Apparently the only thing she's good at is acting.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Why am I not surprised.

DONA HOLLOWAY

Last week Norma worked one day in the kitchen of See's Candy and caused an explosion. They're still cleaning the chocolate off La Cienega Blvd. [law-see-EN-uh-guh]

WILLIAM CASTLE

And why should I hire a convicted killer?

DONA HOLLOWAY

Because the prison would pay her a stipend. Bill, you wouldn't have to pay Norma Desmond a dime.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Bring her in!

DONA HOLLOWAY

I thought you would say that. She's outside now, waiting to audition.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Good call.

DONA HOLLOWAY

I took the liberty of having Frank Tuttle bring over a prop for her to use.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Great. Let's see what she can do.

DONA crosses to the doorway and calls offstage.

DONA HOLLOWAY

Miss Desmond? Mr. Castle will see you now.

NORMA DESMOND enters, carrying an axe. She is older than when she appeared in the film *Sunset Boulevard*. Perhaps she wears a turban.

NORMA DESMOND

I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille.

WILLIAM CASTLE

It's a pleasure to meet you. Thanks for coming in to read for us.

NORMA DESMOND

I'll audition for anything that gets me out of prison.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Raise the axe above your head. Like you're about to chop off someone's head.

NORMA DESMOND raises the axe and
assumes the pose of an axe murderer.

WILLIAM CASTLE (CONT'D)

Good; good. You look very much like what we had in mind. You can put the axe down now.

NORMA DESMOND

If you don't mind I think I'll hang on to it. It will help me get into character.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Okay. You know, this picture could be your comeback.

NORMA DESMOND

I hate that word! It's . . . a return.

WILLIAM CASTLE

A return.

NORMA DESMOND

A return to the millions of people who have never forgiven me for deserting them.

DONA HOLLOWAY

That's great that you have fans after all these years.

NORMA DESMOND

They still write me fan letters every day. They beg me for my photographs. Why? Because they want to see me! Me! Norma Desmond! I'll show them! I'll be up there again, so help me! What's the name of this picture?

DONA HOLLOWAY

Strait-Jacket.

NORMA DESMOND

I've worn one of those.

WILLIAM CASTLE

You have? I see. Well, that's wonderful, you can bring that experience to the role.

NORMA DESMOND

I bring my whole life to any part I play. I become one with the character.

WILLIAM CASTLE

You're famous for your work in silent pictures. However, Strait-Jacket--

NORMA DESMOND

I am not *famous* for my work in silent pictures, I am legendary.

WILLIAM CASTLE

I meant to say legendary. But have you ever done a talking picture?

NORMA DESMOND

No, we didn't need dialogue. We had faces then. Besides, I can say anything I want with my eyes.

NORMA demonstrates.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Strait-Jacket is not going to be a silent movie. Do you have any experience at all working with dialogue?

NORMA DESMOND

I started my career in vaudeville. I can say lines.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Good. That's a relief.

DONA HOLLOWAY

Did you look over the sides I gave you?

NORMA DESMOND

I memorized them. I'm a very quick study.

DONA HOLLOWAY

Terrific. Whenever you're ready then.

NORMA takes a step or two upstage and turns her back, taking a moment to prepare for her audition.

WILLIAM CASTLE

(Whispering.)

Dona, does she seem nutty to you?

DONA HOLLOWAY

(Whispering.)

All actresses seem nutty to me.

WILLIAM CASTLE

(Whispering.)

She looks like a man.

DONA HOLLOWAY

(Whispering.)

Twelve years in prison will do that to any woman. Don't worry; Ben Lane is a genius with make-up.

NORMA turns around and begins her audition. Though her acting style is a bit larger than life, it is obvious she's a good actress. William and Dona see why she was a silent film star: she's a captivating performer who holds the attention of the audience.

NORMA DESMOND

"I can't wear those clothes. I've tried to do it, just to please you. But you've got to understand, when I put those clothes on, something happens to me. Something frightening."

The scene ends. NORMA relaxes.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Good.

DONA HOLLOWAY

Yes, very good. Can we see the other scene? I'll read Alison's lines.

DONA gets a copy of the scene from William's desk. NORMA again takes a step or two upstage and turns her back, taking a moment to prepare for her audition.

WILLIAM CASTLE

(Whispering.)

She's good.

DONA HOLLOWAY

(Whispering.)

And think of the money we save if we hire Norma.

WILLIAM smiles and nods.

WILLIAM CASTLE

(Whispering.)

Fifty thousand dollars!

NORMA turns around and begins the scene.

NORMA DESMOND

“I see. You’re ashamed; aren’t you. Because I was in the sanitarium.”

DONA HOLLOWAY

“Why were you in the sanitarium?”

NORMA DESMOND

“I was . . . it was . . . I was ill.”

DONA HOLLOWAY

“It wasn’t just a sanitarium, was it. Was it!”

NORMA DESMOND

“No! No it wasn’t! It was an asylum! It was hell! Twenty years of pure hell! But I’m not ashamed. I paid for anything I did. You’ll never know how much I paid. I’m alright now. I’m alright--”

WILLIAM CASTLE

Let me stop you there. That was good, but I feel as though you’re holding back.

NORMA DESMOND

Holding back?

WILLIAM CASTLE

Yes. You seem . . . afraid of the material. You need to really feel this woman’s anguish. I want you to let loose.

NORMA DESMOND

Let loose? I can do that.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Relive your own experience of going to prison for murder. Try it again, from your last speech.

NORMA starts the speech again. This time she allows herself to connect with the material on a very personal level.

NORMA DESMOND

“It was an asylum! It was hell! Twenty years of pure hell! But I’m not ashamed. I paid for anything I did. You’ll never know how much I paid. I’m alright now. I’m alright; you see, it’s all over with. They let me go. I’m alright. I’m alright, I tell you.”

NORMA starts to lose her grip on reality.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Much better. Thank you.

DONA HOLLOWAY

We’ll let you know through the warden what we decide to do.

NORMA DESMOND

“I’m alright, I tell you. You must listen, I’m alright. I’m alright!” “Leave me alone! Leave me alone! I’m not guilty! I’m not guilty!”

WILLIAM CASTLE

(Whispering.)

What is she doing?

DONA HOLLOWAY

(Whispering.)

Letting loose.

WILLIAM CASTLE

That’s all we need to see. Thank you for coming in.

NORMA DESMOND

What is the scene? Where am I?

WILLIAM CASTLE and DONA HOLLOWAY exchange worried looks.

NORMA DESMOND (CONT’D)

Do you mind if I say a few words? Thank you. I just want to tell you how happy I am to be back in the studio, making a picture again! You don’t know how much I’ve missed all of you. And I promise I’ll never desert you again. You wonderful people, out there, in the dark.

WILLIAM CASTLE

Thank you. Next.

NORMA begins to relive the night she shot her lover.

NORMA DESMOND (CONT'D)

Don't hate me Joe. I need you. What are you doing, Joe? You can't go! I can't face life without you. Joe! . . . (To herself.) I'm a star. I'm the greatest star of them all. (Something inside of her snaps.) No one ever leaves a star.

NORMA raises the axe and exits. From offstage can be heard the sound of sound of people screaming, followed by the sound of an axe on wood, then more screaming. A man's decapitated head rolls on stage.

WILLIAM CASTLE

I hate method actors. Get me Joan Crawford!

Blackout. End of play.

ALTERNATE ENDING, if a decapitated head is not feasible:

NORMA begins to stalk WILLIAM and DONA, axe raised. They run and she chases them around the stage.

WILLIAM CASTLE

I hate method actors. Get me Joan Crawford!

NORMA chases them off stage and the lights fade. End of play.

[Note: Norma is a larger-than-life character, but William Castle and Dona Holloway were real people and should be played at such. If all three characters are played broadly then the play loses its basis in reality.]