

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.

To...Or Not...

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.

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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 Godl[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 --

MARSH
But --

GORDON
Since God seems on holiday --

MARSH
I must.

GORDON
You must.

MARSH
I must.

GORDON
His viceroy.

MARSH
In his name.

GORDON
And your name -- ?

MARSH
His name is mine.

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

MARSH
It is time.

An imaginary butler comes up with an imaginary gun case.

GORDON
Ah, the means to the end have arrived.

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

MARSH
Fit the mark?

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.

(raises the second gun)

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 is 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 --

GORDON

Catholic?

MARSH

I can't have a third.

GORDON

Does your husband --

MARSH

Not a thing.

GORDON

Usually best. Well.

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 drivel! 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.

GORDON

Woman-hater.

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
You betray love.

MARSH
Creature of darkness.

GORDON
Creature of darkness.

MARSH
People should suffer for sin.

GORDON
Save us from Christ.

TOGETHER
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. You shall lose.

TOGETHER
Hee-yah!

GORDON
We shall win.

TOGETHER
Hee-yah! Hee-yah!

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."