

UNDERCOATS

by

Roger Pinkham

ISBN: 1-873130-00-7
The Playwrights Publishing Co.

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UNDERCOATS

ROGER PINKHAM

Roger Pinkham is an Anglo-Welsh playwright and novelist, who teaches art and design history in Cardiff. Formerly he worked at the V&A Museum in London, and was a founding curator of the Theatre Museum. An acknowledged specialist on the 19th and 20th centuries he has published many articles and books. He believes that drama is a natural and integrated part of the psyche whether people are aware of it or not. The playwright's job is to collect what is in the air and to shape it in accordance with some pertaining laws of humour or tragedy which may be called universal truths. Demonstrating these in the cinema or on television is more difficult since both are slaves to naturalism. On the other hand the theatre, with its power to embody myth and re-jig time, is in a much better position to reach the bed-rock of truth, whether palatable or not.

Undercoats is an attempt, by humorous means to explore a scene of some desolation, and is the author's first published play.

NOTES:

1. This play is devised as a series of scenes, or turns interspersed briefly with music, like a revue. The music could be raucous Dixieland jazz or completely abstract like Bach or Couperin on the harpsichord. It is not essential to have music but it enriches the acidity. There is one piece necessary, Louise, sung by WYN in Scene 3.

2 The playing should be quick, and broad in the spirit of let all attention focus on ME ! Each character should try to grab the audience whenever they have the chance.

3 Where external sound is required it is indicated in the script as SFX or as Voice Over

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Characters

8 roles; can be played by 6 actors.

All, except THE YOUNG MAN and THE NURSE, who are English, should have lilting South Wales accents.

GWYNETH WILLIAMS,	24, dark, pretty, undemonstrative
GARETH WILLIAMS,	22, slightly younger brother; thuggish, jeans, leather jacket
WYN WILLIAMS,	their mother; dressy, handsome, lively type, could be a redhead. And WYN's GHOST, voiced over, Scene 6
ROBERT WILLIAMS,	her husband; small, stocky, bespectacled, in overalls. And ROBERT's GHOST, voiced over, Scene 6
THE YOUNG MAN,	refined Englishman, GWYNETH's friend DOCTOR, male or female. If male may be doubled with THE YOUNG MAN
NURSE,	male or female, cockney accent
WOMAN TV ANNOUNCER,	Scene 4. Voice over. May be doubled by female NURSE

Costumes should not be too naturalistic.

Written for proscenium theatre, and set in the Williams' home in the Cardiff area of South Wales, with excursions to a hospital ward and a court room; at the present time. In essence the set consists of drapes with a small table, two rough chairs, a bed seen end on, and TV set, but in the imaginative eyes of the protagonists it is much more glamorous than this. This play can be made suitable to other areas of the UK.

A black comedy or cabaret—satire first performed at Croydon Warehouse Theatre on 20th November 1989 by Equity South & East directed by Richard Osborne

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(SCENE 1. Hospital ward at night; dimly lit above a small table, centre. Two humble chairs at either side of it. Behind table seen dimly is the end of a bed. Nothing else in this room.

Seated at the table, are GARETH WILLIAMS, and his sister GWYNETH. He wears a leather jacket, she an overcoat)

- GARETH: ... but I told you before Gwyneth -
- GWYNETH: - lower your voice for goodness sake.
- GARETH: All right then. Look I told you..
- GWYNETH: You didn't, Gareth. I promise you, I swear you didn't, Gareth.
- GARETH: (Takes out a cigarette) Look —
- GWYNETH: Don't smoke. You cant smoke here.
- GARETH: (With a half shout of exasperation) did tell you Gwyneth that she promised me —
- GWYNETH: Sh. People are trying to sleep here.
- GARETH: - our mother promised me the hand-made grand piano, when he passed on. As he has.
- GWYNETH: Now look, isn't that a lie? Anyhow you can't play. She promised me the grand piano. On my life.
- GARETH: And can you play? (Over his shoulder to someone) Okay, okay, I'm sorry then. You get to sleep. (To GWYNETH) Yeah? I don't believe it.
- GWYNETH: And the music stool. What's the good of a piano without a music stool?
- GARETH: Your guess is as good as mine. All right have the piano stool, but I'm having the motor mower, and the Rolls Royce, and the water bed-
- GWYNETH: - right but i insist on the cocktail cabinet. And what about the jacuzzi now?
- GARETH: I'm having it. Right? I'm having them both. One upstairs, one down. And when you move out -
- GWYNETH: - look, it's indecent this. He's hardly cold and we're squabbling over the heirlooms.

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GARETH: You're squabbling over them. Why don't you just give them to me? You'd be much happier. You're not materialistic like me. I need them.

(The NURSE, wearing facemask, appears out of the shadows)

NURSE: (Mumbled) Your father's dead, dear.

GWYNETH: What?

NURSE: (Taking off mask. Cockney accent) Your father's passed way, dear.

GWYNETH: I know that.

GARETH: What's news?

NURSE: Oh you've been told? Sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings.(Leaving, then casually) Oh, your mother's dead too as a matter of fact. But I expect you knew that already.

GWYNETH: What? ... What?

NURSE: (Going)Oh gawd, I'm getting out of here. It's really been one of those days.

GARETH: Yeah. Have a cocoa.

GWYNETH: What did she say?

GARETH: Ma. Passed away. Sudden. Rushing after dad, Ike spect.

GWYNETH: What? ... How do you know about it? ... Eh, you know something about it, don't you? Gareth

(The DOCTOR comes in discreetly, from behind them. He is in white gown, with stethoscope, etc. He glances at GWYNETH, then hovers by her)

DOCTOR: And you are who?

GWYNETH: (Startled) Gwyneth Williams

DOCTOR: Oh yes of course. (Sits).

DOCTOR: Are you the elder, Gwyneth?

GWYNETH: Yes ... he's the baby.

DOCTOR: All right then ... Gwyneth?

GWYNETH: What, then?

DOCTOR: We'll probably have to do a post-mortem.

GARETH: ... God, I feel in the need of some air. (He goes off)

DOCTOR: Sensitive?

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GWYNETH: (Acidly) Oh very.. Post, what? What was that?

DOCTOR: An autopsy.

GWYNETH: Why?

DOCTOR: It leaves the body relieved of its torment and provides an explanation of what happened to it.

GWYNETH: But -

DOCTOR: We just need to be definite. Your father had had no medical treatment at all it seems.

GWYNETH: (Alarmed) But ... I thought you knew what -

DOCTOR: Not always. People die for various reasons. And in this case it was sudden.

GWYNETH: Yes.

DOCTOR: I Just hope you didn't mind too much. Said yes.

GWYNETH: Well.. I don't know, I mean.. Well. You tell me what it means?

DOCTOR: We have to open the body. Take out the organs. Look at them.

GWYNETH: What did you say? I wasn't concentrating.

DOCTOR: Do you have trouble with your ears?

GWYNETH: No, I'm just ... As you were saying?

DOCTOR: You don't really want me to say all that again do you?

GWYNETH: No. Well couldn't you?

DOCTOR: I thought you would have known. Why are you conducting this like a television interview?

GWYNETH: I suppose it's because I work in it.

DOCTOR: Do you? How interesting. Well we'll have to meet socially after all this is over.

GWYNETH: Er - well. If it has to be, it has to be.

DOCTOR: For Christ's sake there are thousands of autopsies carried out every day. They're routine. You can come and watch it if you like and bring a bloody television camera! And a crew who'll smoke and loaf about in the wards and drive us to distraction!

NURSE: Will you be needing me again?

DOCTOR: (Distracted) No, I don't think so. You can go.

NURSE: (Going off) Thank Christ for that. It's really been one of those days. I've never known anything like that. (To audience) You should come

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here every day not the occasional night, and see what really goes on. Right?

GWYNETH: Can you tell me something?

DOCTOR: Tell you what?

GWYNETH What, about my mother?

DOCTOR: What about your mother? I was under the impression the subject under discussion was your father.

(BLACKOUT)

SFX: Jazz over. Fade.

(SCENE 2: [Flashback] The same. Twenty years earlier. Morning. Young WYN WILLIAMS newly married, comes on, into her new home. She looks around her, and can tidy the table and chairs if she wishes)

WYN: Hullo, dears, I'm Wyn. Their mother. The one they're making such a fuss about. Lets forget all that.. and go back in time. I'm such a romantic by nature.. Robert not here yet ? I hope he's not setting the future pattern for our married bliss. Well, while we're waiting let me tell you something about myself. I'm Wyn Williams from Tongwynlais. The year is 1969. And I've just come from my wedding. On foot. Oh it was a flood of ceremony. That's poetic me. Activated largely by what's on cereal packets. Yes, when I'm eating Frosties my concentration may be far away - on the snow capping the valleys, or the country where the tiger comes from.. But I mustn't get carried away, which is what Robert is always saying to me. 'Concentrate on realities' So, let's have a look. Number one. This is our new house, and it doesn't have an ounce of plaster on the walls. Bare bricks. What is happening? Should I throw a fit - positive action by a new bride, or simper moodily in a corner? What's the strategy? But Robert says - Ah, and here he is.

(ROBERT comes on with flowers):

ROBERT: Sorry I'm late love. Offered to show me the back of the church see. It's got bad dry rot.

WYN: Oh was that an omen? Dry rot in religion?

ROBERT: Been there a long time, probably since the church was built.

WYN: Oh long before then I'm certain. Centuries and centuries ago.

ROBERT: Anyway soon as I got my jacket off instant remedies came to mind. Got down on my hands and knees then suddenly remembered you, see.

WYN: Thank you. Thank you. A poet of the vestibule, he is. Someone reaching into the darkness to find a hod, a plumb line, and the bacon sandwich he'd laid aside, last week.

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ROBERT: (Looking at the walls) No problem. No problem. Now what we got here then?

WYN: I'm looking at bare bricks now aren't I? Over there. And here. And there aren't they?

ROBERT: Like all things in life Wyn there's a story behind it.

WYN: Yes, Robert? Oh Robert it's not going to turn into one of your tall stories is it?

ROBERT: Not in the sense of floor of a house it isn't. No.

WYN: Between ourselves... He's been allowed to make one-or two jokes.

ROBERT: (Putting his arms round her) But bare things are fashionable in my life at the moment, see?

WYN: And so I should keep hoping. And only one.

(They cuddle)

It's lovely. But what about the plaster now? Why's there no plaster on the walls yet?

ROBERT: Who needs such luxuries?

WYN: Well ... It would be nice to have a background to the curtains, wouldn't it?

ROBERT: It would?

WYN: Well we've got to have curtains.

ROBERT: But there's nothing much facing here. I've nothing much to hide in my life. Let it all hang out. It's better. No gossiping, see.

WYN: But some of the brewery workers stay late don't they?

ROBERT: I'm no oil painting I know.

WYN: Well, maybe Robert, but what about me?

ROBERT: Don't make me seem that dull. I'm not that. I've got ideas and I've got solutions. All right then. Plain bricks are not to your taste. Then we can paint them.

WYN: Scrooge Williams is what the neighbours will call us when they get to know what a funny sort of house we've got.

ROBERT: Nowhere to sit.

WYN: No. Not a stick.

ROBERT: I'll make some chairs and a table. It's my hobby.

WYN: Of course I shouldn't have encouraged him at that point, I see it all now. But I was innocent, and I did. And look what it led to!

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- ROBERT: (Pointing at the table) Look at that Wyn. Look at it. In all its pride and majesty. Opus 1.
- WYN: (Studying the table) It's a miracle of home Joinery, Robert -
- ROBERT: - the first of a long line it is -
- WYN: - it will go into all the history books of antiques -
- ROBERT: - combining several sorts of woods in an imbricated surface pattern of scales, roses, ivy garlands -
- WYN: - and your name will be famous ever after. You mark my words.
- ROBERT: -and loveliest of all the convulvula, an erotic weed, a voluptuous white blossom, with its open trumpet flowers, weaving across the top. (Aside) Now if that doesn't get her going.. All right my love now you can see what I'm capable of.
- WYN: It was a masterpiece no doubt. (Aside. Suggestively) And he was good with his hands as I quickly learned ... And we were now quite rich. Into the new materialism.
- ROBERT: (Aside) You know there were some nights when I was so crammed with work, and so full of energy making things in the basement, I hardly saw Wyn at all. As I hammered and sawed I sometimes wondered what she got up to. Was she happy ? Point is she was no good with her hands herself. But she was usually there at breakfast to see me off.
- WYN: But what about the plaster Robert? Can't we get hold of a man?
- ROBERT: That did it. No man was going to darken my doorstep when I wasn't around. Mark my words ...
- WYN: There must be plenty in the book.
- ROBERT: Oh there are plenty in the book, my love. All unknown, unrecommended, and cowboys of one sort of another. But you've got one here, beside you, if you want new-fangled decor.
- WYN: So be it. (Aside) But he had to learn how to do it. And that took time.
- ROBERT: A bit tacky wet, under the window-cill.
- WYN: Oh wonderful.. (Aside) I had waited so long! Wonderful. Marvelous.
- ROBERT: No. I think not. It could do with another skim. See? O maybe two. Yes.
- WYN: (Aside) Oh God send coals of fire down on the head of the perfectionist. Am I never going to have any curtains in this house? Is it always going to look like a mausoleum? Whatever that is? But sounds suitable ... Yes, Robert?
- ROBERT: Another skim or two. And then it has to dry. May as well do the Job properly, or we'll get dry rot. Right?

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WYN: Oh no.

ROBERT: Oh yes. Now look up. Raise your head.

WYN: Why yes? It's lovely Robert.

ROBERT: What we got there is the sky, see? Blue and boundless. Up and through.

WYN: You are right. Unless we're in the wrong house.

ROBERT: No chance of that. This is the only one without a roof.

WYN: What?

ROBERT: Which I took off at the weekend, when you were jaunting out with the choir. But it's got a tarpaulin on it. For the meantime.

WYN: And then?

ROBERT: And then that's coming off. And then we start the reslating, see. Stand easy. I want to tell you something. That I've never told anyone, else see.

WYN: What then?

ROBERT: Many years ago -

WYN: Yes?

ROBERT: When I was in the Boy Scouts see..

WYN: Yes?

ROBERT: We went as a pack to a site in west Wales. It was a mournful old place this one. One night ...

WYN: A pack? Sounds like wolves.

ROBERT: Yes. You must imagine us howling at the moon.

WYN: Really?

ROBERT: They said it was haunted. But we didn't believe it.

WYN: Yes?

ROBERT: But it was. For one night the spirit entered into me -

WYN: What kind of spirit?

ROBERT: Not whisky because I was teetotal. Another kind.

WYN: Something else?

ROBERT: Something very strange. I've never told this to anyone yet.

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- WYN: Well, well, tell me for God's sake.
- ROBERT: As I was lying there in my tent a shadow crossed the threshold in the moonlight. Nothing to be scared of -
- WYN: Robert you're not trying to tell me in the nicest way, some months on from our wedding day, you young boys were promiscuous among yourselves?
- ROBERT: Nothing like that. What would I be doing here standing at the side of you if that had happened? No, something more original ... This spirit whispered in my ear all kinds of strange and old- fangled ways for the repair and upkeep of houses.
- WYN: How wonderful. (Aside) How useful.
- ROBERT: It delegated me with secret powers - which I cannot reveal – which gave me instant communication with, and understanding of bricks and mortar, wood, in all shapes and sizes, and how to identify it, treat it, store it, cut it, polish it, etcetera -
- (The following speeches almost overlapping)
- WYN: (Aside) - again how useful. Oh we can make use of all that.
- ROBERT: - and, the 'mystic qualities of pigments, glues, the capacities of tools to do their best for you, the properties of sunlight, damp and drought, and, also, without stint at all, it gave me access to the code books of the master architects -
- WYN: - architecture, country houses, the National Trust -
- ROBERT: No. Useful things. Plus the knowledge of how to dig wells and where to look for water, the nature of subsidence, rainwater goods, and the unlimited ever evolving world of plastic-
- WYN: It was Merlin.
- ROBERT: Perhaps. Who knows? Anyway it saved me having overdue library books.
- WYN: (Aside) Well, after that there wasn't much more one could say on the matter. He was clearly possessed. It happens to all of us some time or another. (She goes off)
- ROBERT: Funny how I told Wyn all that. Not a word of truth in it. Not a single word. It just grew and grew the longer I went on speaking. Embroidering like. But we all want a bit of freedom, don't we? Anyway you can get too close in a marriage. Depending on each other all the time. Living in each other's pockets. Know what I mean? I had my parent's example before me, and I thought that was a bad one. Not one to choose. Now look here, here's my plan of action. I'm going to have a lot of things on the sideline. Keep me going thirty years at least. First off, the National Do It Yourself Championships. The pinnacle of the DIY year.
- WYN: (Entering) Robert ...

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ROBERT: Yes, my love?

WYN: (Fondling him) I've looked around the house now. And ... can we do it?

ROBERT: Funny how you're always interrupting. Can we do it? Can we do what?

WYN: You know ... In our very own way. In our very own house? Do it! Come on, fair play.

ROBERT: I'm not averse to doing it. But there's nothing to lie on.

WYN: It's simple Robert. You just put your arms around me ... then I begin to feel just a bit groggy ... and before we know where we are..

ROBERT: We're on that creaking floorboard.

WYN: No. Now we're in the maternity ward

ROBERT: (Staring about him) Oh, where?

WYN: By here. Look, all the beds, stretching away. To eternity.

ROBERT: Now you're talking.

WYN: .. Isn't she lovely? Take her. Cuddle her. Aren't you proud to be a father?

ROBERT: It will mean redoing up the back bedroom, of course.

WYN: Well, so what?

ROBERT: (Aside) I hadn't realised it might interfere with my plans, this copulating and giving birth, and weaning..

WYN: Plans? For what?

ROBERT: I have to submit my scheme. Our fortress in Lilac Street. Got to submit, see. Look here, The National Do It Yourself Championship comes off in July, and I must get in the entry form.

WYN: Give it a rest one year, my lovely. Give it a rest, you'll go back all the stronger ...

ROBERT: (Aside) ... is what she said, at the time. But once you've started, once the spirit's got you going, you don't give up, do you? Give up! That's not in my nature. You don't stop. You Just keep marching along. (He goes off)

WYN: Robert? Robert! (She goes off)

ROBERT: (He comes back. Aside) She's always shouting at me. She started a number of years ago. Maybe she thinks I'm deaf. I don't know. (He goes off)

WYN: (Off) Robert! Answer me! Answer me, wherever you are.

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ROBERT: (He comes on. Aside) Sh ... Don't let on to her. I'm really in the basement, but she's gone up to the attic. Sh ... Connive together.

WYN: (Off) Robert!

ROBERT: (Aside) It's not that I dislike her mind. In fact I'm very fond of her, Makes very good shortbread. In fact if I didn't work so hard I'd get fat.

WYN: (Off) Robert!

ROBERT: (Calling) What you doing up there, dear? I'm reading the paper in the kitchen, see ...

WYN: (Coming back) Oh I'm getting so winded going up and down these stairs.

ROBERT: Want me to make the treads a bit more shallow do you ? I'd like to do that. And that carpet's worried me for ages. That's a very good idea, Wyn. I'll just go down to Potter's and see what they've got in stair treads. What d'yer want - half inch, or one inch thickness, do you think? (He is about to go off)

WYN: Stop! Stop!

ROBERT: (Almost gone off) Won't be a second.

WYN: No. I've some very important news.

ROBERT: Not the roof's leaking?

WYN; Nothing like it.

ROBERT: Gwyneth kicked the window-sill?

WYN: Nothing like it. Robert, there's another one on the way ... after Gwyneth..

ROBERT: (Aside) Time someone sorted her out. Can't keep up with this. ...Another one on the way after Gwyneth, you say? Why, this is wonderful news. Is it to be Poetic Pink or Balmoral Blue in wall-coverings? (Aside) What's the world coming to? Where's it going? How does all this get started?

WYN: ... Robert, dear I'm over here. Over here.