

STANDARDIZED TESTING

A one-act comedy by
Matthew Onufrak

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

PROCTOR, 52, male, a frustrated, beaten-down teacher who is irrationally annoyed by teenagers.

CHRIS, 16, female, a paranoid, anxious loner with poor test-taking skills.

ROBIN, 16, male, an unworldly, clumsy Tom Sawyer-wannabe who lacks the charisma to pull off a convincing con.

ALEX, 16, male, a surprisingly wise and perceptive athlete prone to jealousy and constantly questioning his own intelligence.

SAM, 16, female, a self-important, posh genius with a very narrow view of the world.

CASTING NOTE

Despite having recommended genders, all five of the roles in this play can be played by any gender. Pronouns may be changed accordingly, but all names are gender-neutral.

PRODUCTION NOTE

This play relies heavily on lighting changes that serve as transitions between dialogue. They are critical to the pace and flow of the story. This play is written with spotlights—one on each of the actors—in mind, but the same effect could be achieved with any similar lighting technique. If virtual, it could even be achieved by simply turning on and off the cameras of the speaking actor. Regardless, it is recommended that the lighting designer makes a separate chart or list of these lighting changes to ensure the pace is maintained.

If a character mentions "this school" in the dialogue, feel free to change that to be the name of your school, if desired.

(A metal folding chair sits at the front of the room, facing the audience. A large, leather-bound book sits face up on the chair. Behind it, in the second row, are four desks, with a student sitting at each. In the dark, a man, PROCTOR, walks on stage holding a manila folder and stands behind the metal folding chair. An easel with a large pad of notebook paper is to the right. The top page is blank.)

(Lights up on Proctor. He stares forward with a glazed expression before letting out a sigh. He turns around. Lights up on the four desks behind him, occupied by four teenagers. On the far left, CHRIS sits at attention, anxiously tapping her pencil and scanning the room. Her desk is a disorganized mess of pencils and scrap paper. To her right sits ROBIN, slouched over with a grin on his face. He occasionally adjusts his posture to appear more relaxed, while glancing at the other students to see if they're watching him. His desk contains four pencils strewn about, and a single piece of scrap paper, turned over. To his right is SAM, who sits with perfect posture. She sits perfectly still, making direct eye contact with the Proctor. Her desk is neatly organized and contains three pencils and three pieces of scrap paper. To her right is ALEX, who looks disinterested and dejected. He seems to have no interest in the other students. His desk is empty, save for one remarkably short pencil.)

PROCTOR: Welcome to the Deliberating Equalization and Standardization Program of Analytical Investigation Reevaluation, or the DESPAIR, if you will. This test will measure your speed, attentiveness, readiness, skillfulness, diligence, willful ignorance, and gardening aptitude. These scores will then be sent to the Federal Analysis of Information League—FAIL—to synthesize them into three separate scores. These three separate scores will be sent to three randomly chosen agencies, where they will be broken down into eight separate scores. These eight separate scores will be sent to a private testing organization in Montana, where they will be

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combined into two scores. One of these scores—chosen at random—will be torn up, and the remaining score will be sent to your family and every school, job, or organization you apply to. College, career, retirement age—this test will make or break your life.

(Proctor begins walking past the four desks, taking tests out of his folder and placing them on each as he passes them by.)

You will have one hour, forty-three minutes, and sixteen-and-a-half seconds to complete the test. The test contains three sections: modern political philosophy, pseudorandomness as applied to computer science principles, and reading. Please complete each section using a number two pencil. Please fill in your answer bubble completely and leave no stray marks. Please do not leave your seat during the test. Please do not speak loudly during the test. Please do not think loudly during the test. Please do not breathe in an irregular pattern during the test. And please, please do not tap your pencil against your desk!

(At this, he stares directly at Chris. Chris abruptly stops and looks away.)

Let us begin.

(Proctor takes a silver stopwatch from his pocket. In one swift motion, Proctor starts the watch, sits in his metal folding chair, and cracks open his book. The lights slowly fade out. After a few seconds of the students working in darkness, lights up on Chris. She is clearly distressed, attempting to hold in her nervous ticks as her eyes dart around the room.)

CHRIS: I should really go up there and apologize... No, I shouldn't—I can't! He said I can't leave my seat... But I need to make sure he knows I wasn't doing that thing with my pencil on purpose! ...No, I need to focus.

(Chris sits up straight and attempts to focus. She manages this for a few seconds, before her head slowly lowers into her hands.)

I should have said something when he addressed me. Maybe I could say something after the test—but what would I say...? No—focus, Chris. Focus. It's like Mom always says: if you ever lose focus on the test, you're already a failure.

(Chris' momentary smile quickly turns into a look of terror.)

Oh god, I've already failed. No! Look at the question in front of you and answer—that's all it takes! This is the biggest test of your life, and that's all it takes. Just because you already got yelled at and you already lost focus, that doesn't mean it's all over...does it? Oh god, it does, doesn't it! This is the biggest test of my life and I can't even answer one question!

(Chris attempts to pause and take a deep breath.)

I want to be a doctor. I like helping people, and it's the best way I know how. But doctors are smart. Doctors are focused and cool-headed and don't get a C-plus in third period science. Doctors do well on tests, especially the most important tests. So I want to be a *Chris*. But I can't.

(As Chris continues, she begins slowly tapping her pencil again nervously, her volume increasing.)

This never would have happened if I had kept my pencil still. Or if I had studied last Tuesday, instead of helping Carson... Mom was right...maybe if I had studied I would be past the first question! Or maybe if I hadn't taken Ceramics as my elective. Dad was right, I should have taken computer science. Or maybe if I hadn't spent my summer volunteering at the homeless shelter. Or maybe if I had chosen more studious friends freshman year. Or maybe if I hadn't picked up that gum off the sidewalk after the eighth grade formal—oh, it always comes back to the gum!

(Lights up on Proctor, who suddenly cuts Chris off.)

PROCTOR: Hey, kid!

(Chris is silent and slowly turns to look at him.)

I didn't know you were interested in becoming the first student to force me to throw out their test. Otherwise, you would have listened when I told you to stop tapping your damn [pathetic] pencil!

(Proctor turns back around and sighs. He looks tired. Lights down on him.)

CHRIS: I should really go up there and apologize... No. No, I shouldn't—I can't! He said I can't leave my seat. But still...

(Lights down on Chris. Lights up on Robin, who is attempting to be sneaky as he copies answers from his scrap paper to his test. He looks at the other students, trying to appear confident.)

ROBIN: Oh, you hate to see that happen to a poor sap like her, don't you? Some people aren't gifted with my charm and charisma. If she were like me, she certainly wouldn't have problems with nerves. She wouldn't even need to worry about the test at all! But not everyone is as talented as me.

(Robin looks up in mock surprise.)

Oh! Sorry, I didn't see you there. I suppose I understand your interest, though—I always thought my life would make an excellent film—or perhaps an exceptional TV mini-series. If I had to describe myself, I would say I'm like a young Tom Sawyer. Current troublemaker and future actor...at least, as long as I pass this test. Which is why I've devised the perfect plan.

(Robin uses air quotations when speaking the words surrounded by quotations.)

You know, you may not be able to tell...but I'm not exactly taking this test, "legitimately." I'm not exactly a "nice guy." One could even say I'm "cheating on the test right now."

(Lights up on Proctor, who looks up from his book on this.)

Luckily, my speech is covert enough that I don't arouse any suspicions—

PROCTOR: Hey! What are you doing over there?!

(Beat.)

ROBIN: ...Huh?

(Proctor turns to stare and point at Robin.)

PROCTOR: What are you doing with that piece of scrap paper?!

(Robin sits straight up and covers the scrap paper.)

ROBIN: What piece of paper?

PROCTOR: The one under your test!

ROBIN: What test?

(Proctor stands up to begin walking towards Robin.)

O-oh! This piece of scrap paper! Oh...oh this is nothing! This is...this is a...recipe! For...for watermelon-flavored ice cream! See it's two cups of milk, one and a half cups of ice, four cups of...watermelon...

(Beat.)

PROCTOR: You have eighty-six minutes.

(Proctor turns around and heads back over to his seat, returning to his book. Robin eventually calms down and returns to his original position.)

ROBIN: Yeah...yeah, there's a certain level of charm, a certain type of personality one needs to breeze through a test like this. I'll let you in on a little secret.

(Robin holds up the test smugly.)

This isn't a watermelon-flavored ice cream recipe at all! That was simply a clever ruse I devised on the spot. The truth is that this humble sheet of paper contains all the answers to the test! How did I acquire such information? Isn't it obvious? Charm and...

(As Robin speaks, he attempts to lean back further in his chair, only to fall out of it. Lights up on the other characters as they all look at him. He quickly gets back up and coughs nervously. Beat. The other characters return to their tests.)

Charisma. Charm and charisma.

(Lights down on Robin. Lights up on Sam. Sam is breezing through the test, bubbling in question after question without looking up. Lights down on Sam. Lights up on Alex, who looks incredibly bored. He makes random marks in each oval without even glancing at the page.)

ALEX: These other kids don't know how good they have it, do they? Look at them, stressing out, getting yelled at... Do they know what I would give to take a test like they do?! Do they know what I would give to get yelled at like they do?! Instead, I sit here, not taking a test, not getting yelled at, just sitting. Like a loser.

(Alex sighs and leans back in his chair. He stops bothering marking answers.)

It's all stupid. This test, I mean. They say it's your future, but they must think I'm stupid if they're using a line like that on me. My future was decided long before I ever heard about this test. My future was decided the day I picked up a football.

(Alex signals to his letterman's jacket.)

As you can see, I'm not bad. I'm the best quarterback this school has ever seen—I break state records in my sleep. I'm not trying to brag, but sports have always been easy for me.

(Alex slowly deflates as he returns to staring at the test)

I'm not sure if school is easy for me. I know that's a boring answer, but I don't know. When I started getting good at football—like, really good—I noticed my grades got better. Like, before I had low Bs and Cs, but all of a sudden I was acing every class! And at first I thought I was getting smarter, but I started to realize that the work they gave me back wasn't—it wasn't my work. Our school is big on football, but we still have rules. I'm not supposed to be on the team if I'm doing poorly academically. So I guess, to make sure that didn't happen, they started giving me As, no matter what. And it sucks! It's so mor...moron...moroni...stupid! I used to know that word.

(Alex pauses and stares at the test for a few more seconds before giving up and staring at the ceiling.)

I wonder if they've ever considered that I might have dreams beyond high school football. For a while, I wanted to go into project management. I wanted to work at an up-and-coming tech company, like my dad. Not like they care, though. They don't have to deal with me in college. As far as they're concerned, I'm essentially dead as soon as I graduate. Then I'm just another name they can add to their "Athletics Hall of Fame." If I end up a famous athlete, all the better. If I don't, it's no skin off their backs.

(Alex sits back up, staring straight ahead.)

Okay, I know I must sound entitled, complaining about good grades... Let me explain. Last year, I got fed up with all of this and I decided I was going to get a good grade on my own terms. So, I studied. Hard. Like way harder than I've ever studied

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before. And it felt good! For once, when the teacher passed out the test, I felt like I knew what I was doing. When I finished that day, I was sure I aced it. When the teacher gave it back and I saw I got a hundred, I was ecstatic!

(Alex pauses and slowly returns to staring at his paper.)

But then I thought about it...and I realized that I don't know if I did well or not. Even if I had failed that test, it would have been corrected to a hundred anyway. All that work didn't mean anything... Before, at least I knew I was average. Now I don't have any way of knowing how smart I am...and somehow, that feels worse.

(Alex sits silently before dropping his pencil on the ground.)

They don't know how good they have it.

(Lights down on Alex. Lights up on Sam. She finishes writing and sets down her pencil, almost robotically.)

SAM: Done. I just—

(Lights up on all the characters. Proctor slams his hand against the desk and points at Chris angrily yet again.)

PROCTOR: I thought I made it clear—no loud breathing!

(Chris sinks in her seat.)

You keep this up, and you won't be walking out of here with that smug grin!

(Lights down on all characters except Sam. She stares at Chris blankly.)

SAM: Is it really over? Impossible. Is there another page?

(She takes a moment to lift her paper, as if checking.)

No? Then perhaps an essay? Some sort of secret code? No. It appears...it appears I have completed the DESPAIR.

(She puts her pencil down and folds her arms. She sits for a moment, staring. Her expression is stiff. Robotic. Slowly, she raises her hand. Proctor slowly approaches. He slouches next to her desk, visibly annoyed.)

PROCTOR: What?

SAM: Can I have another?

(Beat. Proctor stares in disbelief.)

PROCTOR: What?

(Proctor leaves to return to his desk as soon as Sam opens her mouth. Sam does not notice, in her own world.)

SAM: Another test. The one I just took was far too short, perhaps even defective. You see, I've spent the better part of nine years preparing for the DESPAIR. I know every in and out of it. I've taken practice tests longer than that. I've taken pre-practice tests longer than that. I've taken pre-pre-practice-pre-practice-practice tests longer than—

(Sam realizes Proctor has left.)

Ah. He left. Perhaps to get me another test—no, he's doing a crossword. Then, I suppose that it's done. This must be what success feels like.

(Sam pauses to drink it in.)

I thought I would feel ecstatic. Thrilled, even. All I feel is a minor stomachache and an itch on my lower calf. In any case, it appears I am done. Onto the future, I suppose.

(Lights down on Sam. Lights up on Proctor. He sits in his seat, reading. He looks up.)

PROCTOR: You know, back in my day—

(Lights up on Sam. She quickly stands up.)

SAM: Um, sir? Are you quite certain I cannot have another test? I... Can we truly rule out the possibility that my copy was faulty? Perhaps this is the result of sabotage –

PROCTOR: Look kid, I know who you are. Every teacher in this school knows. You did fine. Stop thinking about the test. Think about something else.

(Lights down on Proctor. Sam slowly sits, nervous.)

SAM: Something else...something other than the test... Well, what's there to think about? I don't have time for anything else, I have to prepare for the DESPAIR – no, no, there I go again. It's just...it's hard to switch your mind off of something so suddenly when it's been somewhere for so long. Let me explain: From what I have witnessed, most children do not view this test as an obstacle. It feels so much larger than life that it barely feels like anything at all. It comes off like folklore. Not something you actually have to complete. It almost makes me laugh.

(Beat.)

Ha.

(Beat.)

See? I almost did it. In my case, it was the opposite. This test has been real, more real than anything else I would bother doing. Let me demonstrate my point further with visual aids.

(Lights up on the easel. Sam walks over to it and rips off the top page. On the next page is a picture of a short, barren timeline. It is titled Timeline of Student Preparation for the Test. It is marked with three events that divide the timeline into thirds. The labels are as follows: Began Studying, Began Studying at an Increased Rate, Completed Studying.)

As you can see, most students are not adequately prepared. They lack what is truly required to complete a test such as this. Then, of course, there is me.

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(Sam rips off the page to reveal an even longer timeline below this one. This one spans every single row on the first page and is heavily detailed with multiple events that led up to Sam taking the test. The production should write strange and outlandish events for this visual gag.)

Hold on — this is only page one.

(Sam proceeds to rip off this page to reveal the same thing below it. After a second, she rips off this page as well, revealing a third page underneath that finally reaches the end of the timeline. These two additional pages should be detailed with events like the first page.)

Yes, I've been preparing for this examination since the second grade. In fact, if you consider time management training preparation, then I've been preparing since preschool.

(Sam walks back to her seat and sits down.)

My parents always desired a grand future for me — and as this test is my future, it seemed proper that all energy was focused into succeeding on it. I've spent every free moment for the past few years locked in my room, completing every practice test known to mankind. I could practically complete this test in my sleep. Honestly, with all the time I've put into it, you could say that passing this test is the only thing I'm good at!

(Beat. Sam realizes what she's just said.)

But of course, that would be an exaggeration! Yes, an exaggeration... I have plenty of useful skills! I participated in a seminar on veterinary training in sixth grade...that I dropped out of halfway through to spend more time studying... Back in fourth grade, I was exceptional on the oboe! No, I didn't spend my entire life studying for a test to become an oboe player. Wait, I've got it! Freshman year, I was the editor on the school newspaper! Which I hated...because it wasn't as much fun as studying.

(Sam pauses, staring off into space.)

I can't think about something else...because I have nothing else to think about. Nothing beyond the DESPAIR.

(Lights down on Sam. Lights up on Proctor. He sits in his seat, reading, slowly turning the pages. We hear Chris begin to tap her pencil again. The lights do not go up on her. Proctor grows visibly annoyed.)

PROCTOR: There she goes again. Look at her – neurotic, self-obsessed, just like every other kid in this school. I can't stand 'em.

(Proctor slowly lowers the book.)

When I was a kid, they wouldn't have let them get away with this. My dad was in the military, and he was big on discipline. If I so much as spoke out of turn, he would drive me four miles down the freeway and have me walk home. Even in the rain. One time there was hail. And you know what? I didn't enjoy it, but I learned something. Respect. It's a lesson these brats ought to be taught. But no, instead they grow up thinking the world revolves around them. Back in my day, my teachers would have whipped my hands with a ruler if I was as entitled as these kids. Now, if I so much as raise my hand at some spoiled brat, I'd end up out of a job on account of my "anger issues." Anger issues. I can't stand it.

(Proctor's expression slowly shifts into a smile.)

You know what I do enjoy, though? Standardized testing. I love standardized testing. Really, I do. Every other time of the year, I'm left powerless to teach these pubescent morons a lesson. Standardized testing is the one time I get to kick back and do things my way. I like to think the men that came up with standardized tests understood what it's like to teach a collection of rowdy teenagers for thirty years. Going on forty! I assume that's why they decided to give these brats a taste of the real

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world for a change! To tell them—no, show them that all they are is a number, another cog in the machine. And best of all, it puts their future in the hands of the men and women who deserve it. It gives people like me—the beaten down teachers of America—the chance to ruin their future if they step out of line. The chance to show them that the real world doesn't care about you or your pals! In my early years, I wielded the authority offered to me like a blunt instrument. I would have busted that moron for cheating. I would have told off that jock for dropping his pencil so insufferably loudly. But I've learned that's not how it works. Sure, I've dreamed of throwing out all their tests in one fell swoop. But I can't do that, or else it'll look suspicious, and I'll lose my job. Hell, I don't even have the authority to throw out one test, much less all of them. That's why I have to be smart. I may not be able to have my way with all of them, but I certainly can with one of them. It's like hunting. You spend an hour picking out the weak link, the one you can take out your anger on without them calling you on it. Then you strike, and the other self-obsessed brats watch you do it, too afraid of their own tests getting thrown out to speak up. It's that silence, that palpable moment of fear, that makes it all worth it.

(Beat.)

Just a little longer...just a little more pressure, and I'll get my moment. I can hardly wait.

(Lights down on Proctor. Lights up on Chris.)

CHRIS: My dad used to tell me that if I ever got nervous while taking a test, I should skip the questions I couldn't solve, and put C as a placeholder. My last twenty answers have been C.

(Lights down on Chris. Lights up on Alex.)

ALEX: I wonder if they even know how good they have it. I wonder if they ever take a moment while laboring over a

particularly tough question to think, "Wow, this is great! I sure am glad I can do this!"

(Lights down on Alex. Lights up on Sam.)

SAM: Maybe my future calling shall be as a professional test taker... Those exist, right? Surely the world requires those as studious and deliberate as I am to...take tests.

(Lights down on Sam. Lights up on Robin.)

ROBIN: Okay, I see – you want to know how I pulled it off, hm? Well, I owe much of it to my godlike social intelligence, but I suppose I could explain with a supremely detailed diagram.

(Lights down on Robin. Lights up on Chris.)

CHRIS: Okay...breathe in, breathe out... Focus. Let's start from the beginning. First I have to write...my name... Oh, I forgot how hard the beginning of this test is.

(Lights down on Chris. Lights up on Robin standing in front of the easel. Its current page shows a crudely drawn picture of a boy collecting a piece of paper from a gray box and smiling. It looks as though a small child drew it with crayon.)

ROBIN: Impressed, huh? Well, when you're as suave as I am, you pick up a few other skills.

(Lights down on Robin. Lights up on Sam, who now has Alex looking over her shoulder.)

ALEX: Hey! I'm pretty sure she's already done! Does she know how badly I would love to finish a test early?! Does she have any idea?!

(Lights down on Sam. A moment passes. Lights up on Sam again. Alex is still looking over her shoulder.)

SAM: His breath smells terrible.

(Lights down on Sam. Lights up on Chris.)

CHRIS: Alright, calm down! You aren't an idiot! You're psyching yourself out—this is easy! If you can't do this, you don't deserve a future! All you have to do is write your name...it's easy...so easy...easy...easy...

(Lights down on Chris. Lights up on Robin, who has returned to his seat.)

ROBIN: Oh yeah, it was super easy. Practically child's play. All it takes is charisma. It's like Tom Sawyer once said: "...for charisma is worth more than anything there is in the world; it's what makes great men and good men..." Wait no, that's not right—

(Lights down on Robin. Lights up on Alex, who has returned to his seat.)

ALEX: Kids come up to me all the time, saying "Alex, you're so cool, I can't believe you get straight A's and all the girls in the school want to date you." Well who cares if all the girls in the school want to date you if you can't even fail a test!

(Lights down on Alex. Lights up on Sam.)

SAM: Do statisticians take exams? No, no they create the exams. Is there some sort of reverse-statistician job? Where subjects take surveys all day? There has to be a job like that, right?

(Lights down on Sam. Lights up on Robin.)

ROBIN: Okay... Okay I think it was "...for charm is worth more than..." No, it can't be that, either! Um...wait, I got it: "...for style is worth more than..."

(Lights down on Robin. Lights up on Chris.)

CHRIS: How many t's are in Chris?

(Lights down on Chris. Lights up on Alex standing in front of the easel. In the blackout, Alex has turned to the next page, and

crudely scrawled "I hope you realize some people can't take tests and appreciate what you have." Alex puts down the marker and walks back to his seat as he speaks.)

ALEX: There! That should send a message.

(Lights down on the easel. Lights up on Sam.)

SAM: Underwater explorer! No, that one is just strange...

(Lights down on Sam. Lights up on Chris.)

CHRIS: Okay... Okay maybe if I spell it out on the board. Let me—

(As Chris stands up, lights up on all characters. Proctor stands up from his desk.)

PROCTOR: And what do you think you're doing?!

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