

THE NOT-SO SHAWE HALL PLAYGROUP

CAST: LYNNE
 JACKIE
 ANN
 ESTHER
 MAUREEN
 CATH

Table and chairs on stage, two at back, one at the front. Two chairs at each table. Lynne enters holding newspaper and sits down. Esther enter holding tray with 6 cups, teapot and a plate of biscuits. Lynne starts reading, Esther puts down tray, others enter chatting. Jackie is eating a biscuit.

MAUREEN – (sees tray) Oh a nice cup of tea and a biscuit just what I need. I didn't have time for breakfast this morning.

LYNNE – (seeing Ann reaching for a cup) Oh Ann do you think you could get the toys out of the shed before you have your tea this morning only yesterday you were a bit behind.

ANN – (sarcastically) Oh yes, of course, anything you say. You all just sit there nice and comfy and have your tea and I'll go clambering around in the shed. I don't mind really. I prefer my tea lukewarm. How come getting the bloomin' toys out of the bloomin' shed is my bloomin' job every bloomin' morning? Why can't we take it in turns?

LYNNE – Well because er... well it's tradition. You get the toys out, Esther makes the tea and.....

ANN – And the rest of you sit around and drink it!

JACKIE – Well you can't expect me to do anything. I only started last week. I don't know what needs doing.

CATH – And will you be staying all morning today? Only I don't think you've put in a full 4 hours since you started.

JACKIE – Well that’s hardly my fault. The first morning I tripped over some toys that Ann hadn’t put away (Ann looks indignant) and twisted my ankle and then yesterday that kid sneezed all over me and I had to go home and take some medication.

ANN – Yes, why did you have to do that? Are you allergic to children? Only if you are perhaps you’re in the wrong job.

JACKIE (getting flustered) No I’m not allergic to children or anything else for that matter. I just have to be careful. Dr. Basley says I’m very delicately balanced.

MAUREEN – Do you think that’s because you’re tall?

JACKIE – (annoyed) Being tall has got nothing to do with it. (everyone, except Lynne, laughs)

LYNNE – Ladies please. Ann will you kindly get in the shed otherwise you’ll be late again. (Ann flounces off) Now Esther perhaps you could pour the tea before it gets cold. I’m parched. These are the new biscuits aren’t they.

ESTHER – Oh yes. I got them out of the tin myself.

JACKIE – Why what was wrong with the old biscuits?

LYNNE – Well nothing really until Jamie Larkin picked his nose.

JACKIE – Who’s Jamie Larkin and what’s his nose got to do with it?

LYNNE – Jamie Larkin’s one of the kids. Scruffy little git with long hair. Got an answer for everything. He picked his nose yesterday and wiped the entire contents over our plate of biscuits.

CATH – You missed it because you'd been sneezed over and gone home.

JACKIE – What did you do?

LYNNE – I told him if he did it again he'd get a good hiding.

JACKIE – No I mean about the biscuits?

LYNNE – Oh Esther opened a new packet.

JACKIE – (looking at her biscuit) No I mean about the old biscuits? What did you do with the old biscuits.

LYNNE – Eh? Oh I don't know. They're probably still on the side on the plate.

JACKIE – (stands up and drops biscuit on the plate) Oh my god(puts hand over mouth) Oh I think I'm going to be sick. I'll have to go. I need to take some medication. (runs out)

MAUREEN – What was that all about?

CATH – I think the biscuit she was eating had had the Jamie Larkin treatment.

LYNNE – That was your fault Esther You should have put them in the bin. (Esther looks indignant) I don't know, we're a man down again. People don't realise when they go rushing off to take medication just how much pressure they put on the rest of us. We'll be rushed off our feet all morning. (turns over another page of the newspaper) It's a lot of responsibility running a playgroup.

ANN – (enters with armful of toys and drops them at side of stage) What's going on? Have I missed something? Where's Jackie?

MAUREEN – She's gone home.

ANN – Blimey that was quicker than usual. She usually manages to stay until after tea. Do you think she's cut out for this job?

LYNNE – Well I'll give her another week and see how things develop. I don't know it's a lot of responsibility running a playgroup and for very little reward.

CATH – Yes I think you may have mentioned that before. I must admit I feel really sorry for you. Is that your Mercedes parked at the front door?

LYYNE – (indignantly) No of course not. It's my husbands'. He's taken my car into the garage to be serviced.

MAUREEN – What sort of car is yours then?

LYNNE – Well it's a Jaguar. But it's only an ordinary one. Not top of the range or anything.

CATH – Oh shame. Well mine's top of the range. A top of the range clapped out old banger. Perhaps I need to put in for a rise.

LYNNE – (looking uncomfortable) Now, now that's enough idle chit-chat. Let's all get back to work.

ANN – WORK!! There's only me and Esther done anything up to now.

LYNNE – Ann. I won't tell you again. Get back in your shed and Esther clear away the tea things. I think we've all finished.

ANN – Oh good for you. I haven't even started yet.

ESTHER – Oh sorry Ann, I forgot about you. The tea's all gone and Maureen's just finished the biscuits.

ANN – Well that's charming that is. Talk about out of sight out of mind (flounces off again)

LYNNE – (pulling her head out of the paper) Oh Esther (who is busy collecting cups) when you've finished washing up do you think you could peel the children's oranges. There's 36 to do before elevensies so you'd better get a move on.

ESTHER – I've told you before I can't do oranges. They bring me out in a rash. (exits with tray)

LYNNE – Oh really, Maureen you'll have to do them.

MAUREEN – (holds up finger with a plaster round it) I can't do them. I've got a cut finger. Health and Safety would have a field day.

LYNNE – Honestly this place is full of demics. Cath are you fit and well enough to peel a few oranges without keeling over.

CATH – Oh I suppose so. I thought we weren't going to give them oranges again. Too labour intensive.

LYNNE – Yes I know but they were on the bargain basement stand. They run out of code today. I've got to watch my overheads you know.

MAUREEN – She's saving up for a new car. Top of the range.

CATH – Why can't they have bananas? They're much easier to peel.

LYNNE – I can't afford bananas. Have you seen the price of them? Besides bananas seem to give some of them wind.

ESTHER – (coming back in) Oh no don't give them bananas. I used up all the air freshener last time.

LYNNE – Yes thank you Esther. Suffice to say that being stuck in a room with 36 children all with wind is not an experience I wish to repeat anytime soon.

CATH – Right I get the picture. Bring on the oranges.

ANN – (entering with more toys that she chucks in the corner) There that's it. If you want any more you can get them yourself. (flops on a chair)

MAUREEN – Some of these toys are a bit ancient t aren't they? Do you think it's time we had some new ones?

LYNNE – Do you think I'm made of money?

MAUREEN – Oh sorry I forgot. You're saving up for a new car.

CATH – Top of the range.

LYNNE – Will you two be quiet. I'm not saving up for a new car or anything else for that matter. Really I don't know where you get these ideas from.

ESTHER – What are we going to do with the children today Lynne?

ANN – (as Lynne is about to speak) Won't we be doing what we always do. Let them run round mad all morning and then just before their parents arrive sit them on the mat and read them a story.

LYNNE – (looking huffy) I hope you are not implying that our mornings here are not properly structured. It's a lot of

responsibility running a playgroup. (puts her head back in the paper)

MAUREEN – Yes we can see it is.

CATH – Will you be reading the story today Lynne? Only when it was time yesterday you seemed to have gone missing.

ESTHER – No she hadn't. She was in the store room with the electrician. (to Lynne) I didn't like to disturb you because the door was locked.

LYNNE – (looking extremely flustered) It wasn't locked. The very idea. It was stuck.

ANN – It must have been stuck fast. You were in there half an hour.

LYNNE – I don't know what you are implying. We had a lot to discuss. We had to do somewhere quiet. You can't think with all these damn kids charging about.

MAUREEN – Somehow I never thought of you as the sort of woman who locks herself in cupboards with tradesmen.

CATH – I'll look at that electrician in a new light, if you'll pardon the pun, from now on.

LYNNE – It was not a cupboard! It was the store room. He was just showing me where to find his junction box.

ANN – Oh is that what you call it nowadays. (everyone laughs except Lynne and Esther)

LYNNE – Ladies that's enough now.

CATH – Well will you be reading the story later?

LYNNE – No I don't think so. Maureen can do it. I trust your cut finger won't hamper you in any way?

MAUREEN – Oh no it'll be fine.

ANN – And what will you be doing Lynne or have you got a man coming round?

LYNNE – No I haven't. I shall sit quietly in the office doing my OFSTED report. It's a lot of responsibility running a playgroup. It's not all building Lego and singing "The Wheels on the Bus". I'm sure you'll manage perfectly well without me.

ANN – Oh I'm sure we will. We usually do.

ESTHER – (to Lynne) Just give me a shout when you're ready and I'll bring you in a nice cup of tea.

ANN – Will you bring me one too? I was in the shed when you were swigging the first one, remember?

LYNNE – Is your shed empty?

ANN – Nearly. There's only a few mixed up jigsaws and some broken dolls.

LYNNE – Oh bring the dolls in. The girls like to play nurses.

ANN – NURSES! It'll need more than a nurse to make some of them better. One of them's got no head.

LYNNE – Oh they won't mind that. At that age you think a plaster and a dose of Calpol cures everything.

ESTHER – We could do with some new stuff though Lynne. We seem to have less and less each week.

LYNNE – I think some of the kids take stuff home. That Megan and Amber's dad has a second-hand shop and some of the things in the toy section look very familiar.

ESTHER – Oh you can't say that. It's not politically correct. You have to be careful what you say these days.

LYNNE – I'm not making any accusations. It was just a general observation. Oh well I suppose we'd better gird our loins for the onslaught. Doors open in 7 minutes.

MAUREEN – Is that Jamie Larkin coming? Has everything edible been put away?

ESTHER – Have you heard anything more about the (looks around) er.. hairdressing incident?

CATH – The hairdressing incident? What's that about?

ESTHER – Oh didn't you know about it? It must have been on your day off.

CATH – Well come on tell me. You've not been locked up in a cupboard with a hairdresser have you?

LYNNE – (looks affronted) No I haven't. I haven't been locked in a cupboard with anyone. How many more times do I have to tell you?

MAUREEN – One of the kids found a pair of scissors that someone had left out. Nobody knows who but I did see Jackie with a pair earlier. Course we couldn't ask her cos by the time it happened she'd already gone home with some medical emergency or other.

ESTHER – That was the day Ann shut the shed door on her finger and she had to go and put it in a splint. She says her bones are very delicate (Ann looks annoyed)

CATH – Yes but what happened?

ESTHER – This kid decided that one of the girls' fringes needed a bit of a trim.

CATH – (laughing) Oh dear. It wasn't Jamie Larkin again was it?

ANN – No this time it was his partner in crime Stanley Oram.

CATH – Oh I know him. Still if it was just her fringe.

ANN – Only it wasn't.

CATH – Not just her fringe?

MAUREEN – No.

CATH – What then?

ESTHER – All over.

CATH – All over?

MAUREEN – He cut big chunks out of it all over. This kid's hair was her Mothers' pride and joy. It was down to her waist!

CATH – Oh my god!

ANN – She had to go to the hairdressers to have it sorted out didn't she Lynne? And playgroup had to pay didn't they Lynne?

LYNNE – Yes alright, can we just drop it now?

CATH – Which kid was it? Not that I wouldn't recognise her when she arrives.

ESTHER – It was Desdemona Sidebottom.

CATH – (laughing) DESDEMONA.....SIDEBOTTOM? I don't think I've come across her. I'd have remembered with a name like that

ANN – All the Sidebottom's have funny names. We had the twins first Tarquin and Tabitha and then their brother Galahad and now Desdemona.

CATH – Are they all very posh these Sidebottoms?

LYNNE (forcefully) No, no they're not. Anything but. She's a single parent living in one of the council flats behind the gas works. She's just got delusions of grandeur. Not one of them has the same father.

ANN – Not even the twins?

LYNNE – (looking daggers) You know what I mean.

CATH – Still I bet she was upset and not without good reason.

ESTHER – I think she threatened to sue at one point didn't she Lynne?

LYNNE – (airily) Oh it may have been mentioned. Now can we please get on?

CATH – So how come she didn't?

ESTHER – Lynne offered to waive her fees for the rest of the year.

ANN – Hush money.

LYNNE – Well hardly. Cath must be the only person in Urmston not to have heard about it.

CATH – Yes I suppose people are bound to ask questions when you're walking round with a kid who looks like Kojak. (all laugh except Lynne)

MAUREEN – We didn't tell her the name of the kid who'd done it but we did say that he must have brought the scissors with him.

CATH - (looks at Lynne) Perhaps you'll have to be more careful in the future.

LYNNE – Don't look at me. I can't do everything around here. It's a lot of responsibility running a playgroup.

ANN – Yes you may have mentioned that before.

ESTHER – I think I'd better open the door. I can hear voices outside. (exits)

LYNNE –(rises reluctantly to her feet – looks towards the side curtain) Good morning everyone, good morning Mrs.. er Miss.. Sidebottom. Oh I see you're pushing a pram. I didn't realise you'd had a happy eventagain. What have you called this one? John. John? Well that is unusual. Well no it's not unusual it's quite ordinary really which is unusual for you. Oh and here's little Desdemona. I see the hairdresser has made a good job of what was left of your hair. No don't cry dear. It suits you. Really. It's not everyone who can get away with the Sinead O'Connor look. Oh hush now dear. Look you've set Mummy off. Now you mustn't worry about her Mrs.....er Miss Sidebottom, we'll take good care of her. She's in safe hands here. No I don't think the little boy responsible will be here today. I think the family have gone on holiday. And I did hear they are thinking of moving. Now run along Mummy you can rely on us. We take our duties very seriously here. As I was saying to my colleagues earlier (ALL STAND UP AND SAY TOGETHER) IT'S A LOT OF RESPONSIBILITY RUNNING A PLAYGROUP!

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