

Death and the Modern Apple

A short play
(Est. running time: 25 minutes)

By John Schoneboom

Synopsis: A mysterious apple salesman plumbs
the depths of a young couple's subconscious desires.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

MAN, a young man

WOMAN, a young woman

SALESMAN, a mysterious salesman

SALESMAN'S FATHER, the salesman's father

SCENE 1

WOMAN wanders uncertainly around a bare stage among numerous suspicious looking sacks containing god knows what.

MAN stands watching her, smiling.

WOMAN picks up one of the bags and dares to peek inside. She is repelled, and drops the bag. It lands with a squishy thud. She wanders more, finally peers into another bag. Again, she is horrified.

She ventures to look into a third bag, with the same result. She sits down, defeated, demoralized.

WOMAN

It's really nice to see you again.

MAN

You mean it?

WOMAN

Of course, we could have gone somewhere else.

MAN

Oh. You don't like it here?

WOMAN

Here in the Valley of Bags of Death?

MAN

Yeah.

WOMAN

I don't like it that much.

MAN

I'm such an idiot. Why did I bring you here?

(The man has a look into one of the bags and cheers up immensely.)

MAN (cont'd) (CONT'D)

Hey! This one's not bad! Have a look!

(With great trepidation, she agrees to have a peek. She is repelled, and shudders.)

MAN (cont'd) (CONT'D)

Not my lucky day, is it.

WOMAN

It doesn't matter.

MAN

I think it does matter. We should have just gone out to dinner like normal people. I'm kicking myself here. Valley of Bags of Death -- what was I thinking?

WOMAN

That's kind of sweet.

MAN

I guess I just thought, oh, I don't know.

WOMAN

What?

MAN

No, you'd think it was silly.

WOMAN

No, really, tell me.

MAN

It's just that, I've always been kind of skinny, and...

WOMAN

Yes?

MAN

I thought the Bags of Death would lend me some gravitas.

(He hangs his head. The woman goes up to him and puts her arm around him.)

WOMAN

Oh, you big silly. You don't need any Bags of Death.

MAN

I don't?

WOMAN

Of course not. You have plenty of gravitas just the way you are.

MAN

No bags?

WOMAN

No bags.

MAN

You are one special lady. (Pause.) I guess you must think this is a pretty weird dream date.

(She looks around at all the bags and shrugs.)

WOMAN

I don't know. I guess it's not that bad once you get used to the idea.

MAN

The idea of...

WOMAN

The Bags.

MAN

Right. The Bags of...

WOMAN

The Bags of Death.

MAN

Right.

WOMAN

I'm actually a little hungry.

(MAN hesitantly looks into one of the unexplored bags. He reaches in and pulls out a shiny apple. He hands it to WOMAN.)

MAN

Bon appetit!

SCENE 2

MAN and WOMAN sit in their apartment, both of them reading. A bowl of apples sits on a table between them.

There is up to a minute of silence.

WOMAN

It says here that reading silently can be a sign of deep hostility.

MAN

You should talk.

WOMAN

No, you should talk. That's the whole point.

MAN

Both of us are reading silently but I'm the one to blame, is that it?

WOMAN

I think we both know who's more silent.

MAN

I think reading silently can be a sign of having a lovely time reading together silently as a couple. I thought we were having a lovely time. You want to read into it, you go right ahead. Nothing's ever simple, is it?

(More silence.)

OK I was hostile but I'm not any more and I apologize for being a jackass.

WOMAN

It doesn't really say that.

MAN

What?

WOMAN

Here, in this book. It says nothing about reading silently.

MAN

There's nothing wrong with that kind of lie. It was an ice-breaker. Well done.

(There is a KNOCK at the door.)

WOMAN

Who is it?

SALESMAN

Salesman.

MAN

Come on in.

(Enter SALESMAN.)

WOMAN

What are you selling?

SALESMAN

Apples!

(Everyone looks at the bowl of apples on the table.)

WOMAN

They better be good.

SALESMAN

Oh they are, believe me. Let me ask you a question. Have you ever eaten an apple?

WOMAN

Yes.

MAN

Many times.

SALESMAN

Wrong. I mean I hate to contradict you. That's bad salesmanship, right? Contradicting the customer? It's insane, am I right? Walk right into the home of a potential customer and start contradicting some of their most dearly held beliefs. I mean, who am I to come in here and tell you you've never eaten an apple when you know full well you've had apples probably a thousand times in your life?

(MORE)

SALESMAN (CONT'D)

You know what they look like, you know the crunch they make when you bite them, you know that tart sensation when it hits your taste buds. Am I right? I'm nuts and you know your apples. Come on, if I'm wrong, tell me, am I right?

(The man and woman look at each other, shrug, nod.)

MAN

You're right.

SALESMAN

Wrong. Let me tell you something about apples you've probably never heard. Apple growers have standards, OK, international European standards, and that means their apples have to be a certain size, color, and shape. They also have to have a certain freedom from skin blemishes. Are you with me?

WOMAN

Yes.

SALESMAN

Fantastic. So what's missing?

MAN

I don't follow you.

SALESMAN

Exactly.

MAN

What do you mean?

SALESMAN

Not a damn thing apart from smell and flavor. No standards for smell and flavor, arguably the two most important features of all. Not a single European standard. It's left entirely to the market, which might make you feel good or it might make you feel vulnerable because technically they could sell you plastic apples that meet the official regulations. Size, color, shape, blemishes? Bingo. Apple? Not so much. How do you know those apples are even real?

(The salesman gestures at the bowl.)

WOMAN

We've eaten some of them.

SALESMAN

Bingo. Let me ask you a question. Are smell and flavor important to you as an apple consumer?

WOMAN

Yes.

SALESMAN

You're damn right they are. Now I'll tell you something else. Are you listening? Two things: sugars and malic acid. I'm talking ratio here. Sweetness to tartness and oh baby jesus is there ever a range of possibilities. No offense. You're decent folks. A lot of people don't realize that acidity determines how quickly your fruit will brown once you've exposed it but do you know what else you can do?

WOMAN

Lemon juice.

SALESMAN

Bingo. Vitamin C. Antioxidant, slows down the enzymes. Do you want to talk texture? Is texture important to an apple?

MAN

I would say so.

SALESMAN

You're goddamn right it is, no offense. And did you know that the texture of apples depends on the way the plant tissue ruptures when the flesh is broken by eating? It's not nice to think of apples as having flesh, particularly if you're vegetarian, but this is an industry term. I don't mean to throw a lot of jargon at you and I don't mean to offend you.

WOMAN

We're not offended. We're vegetarians, well, I am, although I eat bacon, and we don't believe in God.

SALESMAN

I'll be danged, that's good information. A salesman can't have too much information. No such thing. My father once told me that information is the lifeblood of sales. He didn't believe in God either. I do, I'm a believer. I'm devout as all hell. You would have liked my father. Let me tell you a little story about my father from when I was little. Do you mind?

Man and Woman help the Salesman move the table off to the side of the stage. Man and Woman re-take their seats there, in shadow.

The Salesman stays there with them. He rolls up his trouser legs as far as he can. He pulls a lollipop out of his pocket and starts licking it.

Enter SALESMAN'S FATHER carrying a basketful of apples. He has no shirt on, only trousers. He puts the basket down and starts stuffing apples into his pockets.

He walks around suggestively, making his trousers sway and roll with the weight of the apples inside. He rolls his hips around.

He is in a state of ecstasy, pure physical pleasure.

SALESMAN'S FATHER

Oh yes. Oh yes. Feel it, oh yeah, feel that. The dignity of man. The dignity of man!

(He takes his trousers off and stands in his underpants only. He begins to stuff apples into his underpants, tilting his hips back and forward to make the apples roll around.)

SALESMAN'S FATHER (cont'd) (CONT'D)

Firm and fruity, rooty tooty! Oh yes! Oh yes!

(The SALESMAN now steps forward from the shadows towards his father, as if he has just entered the room and is shocked by the scene. The Salesman stands aghast. His father sees him and stops dead, absolutely mortified, frozen in his tracks.)

SALESMAN

Dad!

(The Salesman's Father turns to look straight out at the audience, in shock. He freezes that way for a few moments, then quietly puts his clothes back on, puts his apples back into the basket, and leaves.)

(EXIT Salesman's Father.)

(The Salesman returns to Man and Woman, and they help him restore the table to where it was before.)

WOMAN

Wow.

MAN

Golly.

SALESMAN

Right? Can you kind of get a sense of that? I'm glad we're on the same page. Where was I?

MAN

Flesh.

SALESMAN

Exactly. It's when you bite it, see, it's the chemistry of the cell walls of the flesh of the fruit. I'm going to say that again: the flesh of the fruit. I'm not here to talk about your sexuality, that's not the way I do business. But I would be less than honest here if I told you there wasn't an erotic element to that phrase, the flesh of the fruit. I feel something when I say that, a kind of a tingle in my loins. Do you feel it? Either of you? Of course you do. The thing to understand is that the tissues that rupture across the cell wall, in other words causing cell breakage, well those are your crunchy apples. On the other hand when you get a rupture across the middle lamella, which is the pectin layer, the cement, if you will, holding adjoining cells together, well then you get a clean cell separation, which sounds nice but that's when you get your soft, mealy apple. Anybody here like soft mealy apples?

WOMAN

No!

MAN

Not I!

SALESMAN

I didn't think so. I didn't think so at all. Now, are you two ready to eat the most delicious apples you've ever had in your life? Apples so delicious that they're like apples from a magical planet, another era, a better time, a place that exists not even in your own childhood, but only in memories of your childhood, false, enhanced memories. It would be no exaggeration to say that these would be romanticized apples. I'm not here to criticize the apples you already have, I don't cover that angle, see, and that's all entirely up to you but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't judging you silently for having them. I'm not here to lie to you. I didn't burst into the sanctity of your own home to come in here and lie to you, to look you both in the eye and tell you falsely that I thought the apples you already had were among the best in the business. It's not that I'm some saint but I'd be doing you a disservice and if I do you a disservice I do me a disservice, that's the way I look at it and that's the way my father looked at it before me. I call that enlightened self-interest. Familiar with the term?

MAN

Yes.

SALESMAN

I know you are, I can see it in your eyes. We are on the same page and as a salesman I find that exciting. I'm excited and I'm tingling. I'm not talking about my loins any more, that's beyond the scope, that's no way to peel an egg. A man's got to sleep at night, that's job number one, am I right?

MAN

Yes.

SALESMAN

You bet it is. Now, what am I bid for these apples? I can sell you apples by the gross. I can sell you apples by the ton.

WOMAN

We don't actually need any apples though.

SALESMAN

That's what you say now.

MAN

She's right though.

WOMAN

Really sorry.

SALESMAN

Not a problem, not a problem in the least. I didn't come in here to push my apples down anybody's throat. I make my wares available, I do a little talking, and then believe you me it is entirely one hundred percent up to you and if I myself were God I wouldn't have it any other way. Think I need to sell things? I don't. That's the beauty of it. That's why I love being a salesman. Good day to you both.

(The salesman leaves. There is a pause as the couple resumes their silent reading.)

WOMAN

You know, I almost kind of wish we had bought some apples from that man.

MAN

I know. Me too.

WOMAN

It's so stupid only to buy apples that you need.

MAN

We're a couple of prize chumps here babe.

WOMAN

What a couple of lunkheads.

MAN

What a pair of dopes.

SCENE 3

MAN and WOMAN sit in their apartment, both of them reading in silence. A single apple sits on a table between them.

WOMAN

So. What are you reading?

MAN

Oh, fascinating book. Fascinating.

WOMAN

Yeah? What's it about?

MAN

It's all about how we all think of the country as a basically good representative democracy flawed by bureaucratic absurdities and a few bad apples when actually it's a ruthless wealth-siphoning network comprising elite financial interests, intelligence agencies, organized crime, and the military-industrial complex, and we never see it for what it is because we're constantly propagandized by the complicit self-censoring media. What we think of as the real world is totally fake, it's a smokescreen erected by people so much greedier and more ambitious than we are that we're unable even to believe they exist.

WOMAN

Uh huh. Know what I'm reading?

MAN

What?

WOMAN

Silence Is Golden.

MAN

Wow, that's so funny, I was just reading a whole section on the role of silence!

WOMAN

Let's try some, shall we?

MAN

Shall we?

WOMAN

Let's.

(There is a KNOCK at the door.)

MAN

Who is it?

SALESMAN

Salesman!

WOMAN

Come on in.

(Enter the Salesman. Everyone looks at the lone apple on the table.)

MAN

Apples?

SALESMAN

You're darn tootin'. I hope I'm not intruding.

WOMAN

Not at all.

MAN

We're actually kind of glad to see you.

SALESMAN

Well that's good news, that's just what a salesman likes to hear. That's what I call music, music to my ears so you folks are the apple of my eye. Have you been thinking about apples at all lately? I have. Of course that's not unusual for a man in my line of work. A fellow's got to think about his work if he wants to be good at it, he's got to understand it, ponder it, let it roll around his head at all hours. For me, that means thinking about apples. Oh, not just thinking about them, I read about them, and I'll talk about them, oh, I can talk you a blue streak about apples. That's just the way I do business. I'm not going to sell you anything I'm not personally interested in myself. There are fellows out there who would if they could, believe you me, but I believe job number one a man's got to sleep at night. His head has to be calm, he needs that silent inner place, a place of peace. I live and breathe apples, oh, and did I mention? I eat 'em too. Lots of 'em! But don't get me wrong. Let me tell you folks a dirty little personal secret. Are you ready?

WOMAN

Probably not. Go on.

SALESMAN

I refuse to think about apples twenty four hours a day. *Je refuse!* Know why?

WOMAN

Why?

SALESMAN

Work-Life balance! Are you folks familiar with that term?

WOMAN

Yes.

MAN

Very much so. We're on the same page there.

SALESMAN

That's what I like to hear. That is music to a salesman's ears. Now. Let's talk apples. Did you know that fresh apples float on water? Sure, they're twenty-five percent air. That's why you can play dunking for apples, you know, without drowning. In the old days, 1600s, a lot of superstitious people thought apples were witches' fruit because if you threw them in the water they'd float. Oh sure. They didn't like anything that floated in those days. Anything they thought they shouldn't ought to like, they'd pick it right up and throw it in the water. If it floated, no good. No good! They'd fish it out and burn it. That's how apple pie was invented. People never thought of cooking an apple before that, just goes to show you how something good can come out of something bad. Do you folks like apple pie?

MAN

I love apple pie.

WOMAN

I want to say yes but I'm not that big on pie.

SALESMAN

Try it with some vanilla ice cream. You're going to love it. Absolutely love it. By the way I made that whole thing up about witches and superstition, that was just a little embellishment to add color. Apples will float though, that much is true. And for all I know some people might find it worrisome. You never know about people, do you? No, that was just a little story, not to be confused with telling a lie. If I was going to come in here and lie to your face in your own home would I turn right around and tell you about it? By now you wouldn't know what to believe, would you? Am I right?

WOMAN

I trust you.

MAN

I do too. And I'll tell you something else.

SALESMAN

Oh ho! Oh ho! All right, come on now, tell me, I want to hear this!

MAN

I loved that story about the witches' apples and I plan on repeating it.

SALESMAN

Oh ho! You do that! You go on and do that in good health! It won't do anybody any harm.

MAN

I even kind of believe it, still, even now!

SALESMAN

Mark of a good story!

WOMAN

Mark of a sap.

MAN

You should talk! You're the one who believes the world is real!

SALESMAN

Whoa ho here people, whoa ho! Do you know what I hear the beginnings of here? Go on, ask me. Ask me what I hear the beginnings of.

MAN

OK, OK, I'm asking.

SALESMAN

Two words. Domestic. Dispute. You follow me? Domestic dispute. Happens all the time. Do you think the missus and I never argue? Is that what you think? I'd like to tell you you were right but lord knows I'd be lying if I did. No, unfortunately even a trained salesman can be drawn into a common domestic dispute at times. We're trained to handle any kind of cognitive dissonance and that covers a lot of ground, believe you me. And even so, from time to time we look up and what are we? Go ahead, guess. What are we?

WOMAN

Embroided?

SALESMAN

Bingo. Embroided in a domestic dispute. So what do I do about it? I put it on my list. I study it. I guess I think I know a thing or two about it. Do you mind if I share some reflections?

MAN

Please.

SALESMAN

My reflections are based on observation. For example, I can observe right now a potential trouble spot in your relationship. It's none of my business, I can stop right now.

WOMAN

No no, go on.

SALESMAN

There's only one apple left here on this table. One apple. You see the problem, don't you? One apple, two people. You're going to be faced with an age-old dilemma, and sooner rather than later if I'm any judge of human nature and apple ripeness. One or the other of you is going to want that apple, and you'll be torn between desires, torn between the desire to eat the apple and the desire to leave it for your beloved mate. It's a pretty terrible business. If I'm lying, strike me down, am I right?

(The salesman picks up the apple.
Smells it. Fondles it.)

MAN

I would leave it for her.

WOMAN

I'd just eat it.

SALESMAN

That's no solution, people. Him giving it to you and you eating it? Sure it sounds simple, but I want you to know it's fraught with peril and bursting with potential regrets and resentments. I'm going to do you folks a favor.

(The salesman takes a bite of the apple and then licks all around the rest of it before putting it back down.)

MAN

Well, well, well.

WOMAN

Ewwwwww.

SALESMAN

I'll take my leave now. Thank you both very kindly.

MAN

Hey! Not so fast, we need some more apples!

SALESMAN

No. No, not from me you don't. The moment has passed. The time is wrong. The mood is lost. Let us all take some time for reflection. I'll see you folks soon.

(Exit the Salesman. A pause ensues.)

MAN

There goes the greatest salesman who ever lived.

WOMAN

I have a feeling he'll be back.

MAN

Well, it's not just a feeling. He said he'd be back.

WOMAN

He did not!

MAN

He did so, he said he'd see us soon.

WOMAN

That doesn't mean he's coming back, it could mean we'd see him out and about.

MAN

That's so unlikely!

WOMAN

Let's be silent.

MAN

Fine.

(The couple pick up their books and resume reading.)

SCENE 4

MAN and WOMAN sit in their apartment. The woman is weeping as the man sits indifferently, gazing into a middle distance. There is an empty bowl on a table between them.

WOMAN

(Sobbing)

It's just, we never talk about it any more but it's always there, isn't it? And you've never cared, not the way I have. I never thought I'd be one of those women who had to have babies in order to feel fulfilled. I know it wasn't part of the deal. Part of our deal. It's not like I suddenly want to buy into the whole bourgeois middle class package but my god, I look in the mirror and I see nothing, I feel so empty. It's horrible, I feel so empty. Don't you? Don't you feel it, the nothingness? It's something I want, something I need. I want to have a baby. It's like this taboo subject, well I can't stand it any more, I'm breaking the taboo and I'm saying how I feel, I'm saying what I want, and what I want is a baby. And if it's not going to be with you then that's something we need to face right now.

MAN

Mm hm.

WOMAN

"Mm hm"?

MAN

Sorry? No, yeah, I agree, great, absolutely.

WOMAN

You didn't hear a word of it, did you?

MAN

Of course I did!

WOMAN

Yeah?

MAN

Of course.

WOMAN

All right. What did I say?

MAN

Oh please, I can't believe you'd even...

WOMAN

What did I say?

MAN

You were talking about how you feel.

WOMAN

How I feel.

MAN

Yes, which I think is totally valid. I'm a hundred percent behind you on that, all the way. And something about somebody's baby. Those people, our friends, the ones who had the baby? I can never remember their names. We still need to buy them a present, right?

WOMAN

OK.

MAN

Man, I would kill for an apple right now.

WOMAN

Me too. I would kill.

(There is a KNOCK at the door.)

MAN

Who is it?

SALESMAN

Salesman!

WOMAN

Thank god for that.

MAN

Got any apples?

SALESMAN

You know I do.

MAN

Come on in! Come on in!

(Enter the Salesman.)

SALESMAN

Listen, are you familiar with the story of Adam and Eve? I mean stop me if you've heard this one.

MAN

I've heard it.

SALESMAN

Wrong. Tell me the story.

MAN

Eve gives Adam the apple, he eats it, they get kicked out of the Garden of Eden.

SALESMAN

I'm going to be honest with the two of you. I don't know whether that story has done me more harm or more good in my business but it's just not a true story. The story is wrong. Do you follow me? Now some people like apples precisely because they're wired to be excited by what's forbidden and other people find them vaguely off-putting for the same reason. I'm a salesman. There are a thousand reasons not to buy something and only one reason to buy it: because you want it. I could say that the other way around incidentally and it would be just as true. That's the way life is, wouldn't you agree? For any true thing the opposite is just as true every time. But anyhow the story is wrong.

MAN

Well, it's a story, I don't think it's supposed to be taken as literally true.

SALESMAN

That's a clarification. Thank you for that. That moves us forward. But that's not what I mean. Is there a Bible in the house by any chance?

WOMAN

No.

SALESMAN

You're damn right there isn't. You're atheists and I'm not selling Bibles. Find one someday for purely literary purposes. Look it up. No apple. Can you believe that?

MAN

Yeah?

SALESMAN

Let me tell you something, a man's reputation is all he really has apart from the feeling he carries around inside himself. Look at me. Go on. Look at me. Am I going to risk my livelihood going into people's houses and telling them lies about the Bible? Falling from grace is none of my business. Apples, that's my line. I've got to be informed, that's the entire source of my credibility. If you were to touch a Bible with your fingers and open it up to the story of Adam and Eve, you would find the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Does not specify what fruit. Fruit of the tree of knowledge. Why do we think it's an apple? Paint, that's why. Hugo Van Der Goes, 1470. Chose to depict the fruit in question as an apple. Well, it's been an apple ever since.

WOMAN

So. You got any? We're all out. We're in the market.

MAN

We're so ready. Sell us some apples.

SALESMAN

Well, I've got some beauties. It's just...

MAN

What?

SALESMAN

I don't want to sell them.

WOMAN

Sell us the apples.

SALESMAN

Truth is I was wondering if I couldn't interest you in some peaches. World's oldest cultivated fruit. People will tell you all kinds of things are special and they're nothing but hucksters, am I right? I don't do that. Couldn't live with myself. If I tell you something it's because I believe it from the bottom of my heart. So when I tell you these peaches are special, man oh man are they ever.

(MORE)

SALESMAN (CONT'D)

They're sensitive fruits, peaches, so sensitive to the atmosphere, to the soil. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that peaches are really too sensitive to live in our sad ravaged world. That's why it's so hard to find a good one these days. But if you want something rare and magical and did I mention erotic -- good god on earth peaches are an erotic fruit -- well, you're going to want to let your tongue loose on these bad boys.

MAN

Hmmm. They do sound pretty good, but I've just never really been a peach man.

WOMAN

I'm stuck on apples.

MAN

Yeah, apples for me as well I'm afraid.

SALESMAN

I also do have some plums you would swear were skillfully removed from the scrotal sac of a Kentucky Derby race horse.

WOMAN

Apples! Sell! Now!

SALESMAN

These people want apples, by god, and you know what, they're going to have them. I'm not going to lie to you, I was testing you. I'm going to come right out and admit that. I was giving you a little test and I'll tell you why. I don't want to sell you anything you don't really want. It's not good for you and it's not good for me. Now sometimes people just take a personal shine to me, I'm not going to pretend they don't, and they'd buy just about anything only because it was me selling it, and I'll tell you, when I was a younger man I might just about have sealed a deal like that. But you know what I always say.

MAN

Not the way you do business.

WOMAN

A man's got to sleep at night. Am I right?

SALESMAN

Job number one.

(The Salesman produces two apples and tosses one to Woman, one to Man. Woman lustfully fondles hers and Man attacks his with a great big sloppy bite immediately and slurpily chews it all up. He then looks up as if he's had an epiphany.)

MAN

Hey! I know! Let's have babies!

-- END --