"COMPROMISED"

A play in two acts

By Mike Bencivenga

First 15 Pages

Mike Bencivenga
E-Mail: imshmenge@aol.com
DG Member #98288
Phone: 917-797-7654

CHARACTERS:

BRIAN MULCAHY (60) - A celebrated journalist for The New York Times
TERRI MULCAHY (47) - Brian's wife and a hospital administrator
ALAN CLAY PARKER (32) - An unemployed playwright from a good family
LISA HOROWITZ - PARKER (30) - Alan's wife and a real estate agent

PLACE:

New York City, the fifth floor apartment of a building in the West 70s

TIME:

Act One - The fall of 2011
Act Two - Two years later

STAGE SETTING:

Brian and Terri Mulcahy's apartment is old and spacious. They occupy half of the top floor of a building that dates back to the 1940s. A door at stage right leads in from the fifth floor landing stairwell. A kitchen area, upstage, has windows facing out onto Columbus Avenue. To the left of the kitchen is a small office area complete with a a dinosauric computer tower and monitor. On the desk is a huge, bulging Rolodex with business cards and news clippings sticking out of it. There is a three drawer, wooden filing cabinet in the corner. Downstage from this area is a sunken living room with a very broken-in sofa and an easy chair separated by a coffee table. Stationed throughout the apartment are humidifiers to keep the air moist and comfortable.

PRODUCTION HISTORY:

COMPROMISED had two staged readings in 2019 in New York and LA. It was one of five plays presented as part of The Gulfshore Playhouse's 2022 New Works Festival in Naples, Florida.

AWARDS:

FINALIST - Gulfshore Playhouse New Works Festival 2022.
WINNER - Best Play Award in 2020 from Playwrights-First in NYC.
SEMI-FINALIST for the 2020 Eugene O’Neill Prize for drama.

ACT I

LIGHTS UP. It's night in the fifth floor walk-up apartment. The sounds of the city drift up from the street below. As two people make their way up the stairs we can hear them quarreling.

BRIAN (O.S.)
I don't see why you have to be so damned sociable.

TERRI (O.S.)
One of us has to. Otherwise we'd never do anything or see anyone.

BRIAN (O.S.)
Sounds wonderful. Let's do that.

The door opens and TERRI MULCAHY (47) enters and flips on the lights. She removes her coat as she awaits her straggling husband.

TERRI
We already do that. Six nights out of seven. Tonight was a startling departure.
(looking out at him)
You all right?

BRIAN MULCAHY (60) staggers in the door, struggling to catch his breath. He holds onto the door jam, weakened from the climb.

BRIAN
Views. We had to have views.

TERRI
If we never go anywhere we might as well have a view.

Brian walks in as she closes the door. Terri keeps a watchful eye on him as she moves around the apartment, turning on a series of humidifiers all around. Brian drops in a chair.

BRIAN
We had a terrific view until they built that damned twenty story eyesore across the street. Before that you could see all the way to Jersey. I miss that.

TERRI

I thought you hated New Jersey.

BRIAN

I do. But I like to look at it. From a distance. From a distance it's fine.

TERRI

Don't get too comfortable. Come on. Help me straighten up.

BRIAN

You straighten up. You invited them.

TERRI

(moving about)

We both did. When we heard that girl at the party freaking out about her car I said you could help. And I distinctly heard you snarl 'okay.'

BRIAN

(snarling)

Okay.

(getting out of the chair)

I just don't like'em is all.

TERRI

She seemed nice. A little unhinged, but sweet.

BRIAN

Not her. She's fine. I meant her husband, the literary genius. Going on and on all night, saying Tennessee Williams said this and Shakespeare said that. As if he had coffee with them last Tuesday.

(breathless, moving to her)

What do you want me to do?

TERRI

I'll put something out. You go straighten up the bedroom.

BRIAN

Why should I straighten up the bedroom? Are we going to sleep with these people?

TERRI

No.

BRIAN
Good. I'm not up to an orgy. I'd need a nap first.

TERRI
(going to the refrigerator)
Just go tidy it up.

BRIAN
Why?

TERRI
Because I might want to show them the apartment.

BRIAN
Here's an idea. Don't show them the apartment.

TERRI
She's in real estate. She's going to want to see the apartment. She doesn't need to see your underwear on the floor.

BRIAN
Don't think of it as 'underwear on the floor.' Think of it as potpourri.

TERRI
Go.

Brian goes into the bedroom while Terri rummages in the fridge. She finds something.

TERRI
What is this?

BRIAN (O.S.)
What?

TERRI
(holding a plate)
This! What is it?

BRIAN (O.S.)
Where?

TERRI
In the fridge. Under the cellophane.

BRIAN
(appearing in the doorway)
I can't see the refrigerator from the bedroom. What are we talking about?

TERRI
(holding it out)
This.

BRIAN
(stepping closer)
It's flan.

TERRI
What are we doing with flan?

BRIAN
Is there a law against having flan?

He walks back into the bedroom.

TERRI
Where did you get it?

BRIAN (O.S.)
I bought it from the Puerto Rican guy who runs the deli. His wife makes it.

TERRI
Is it good?

BRIAN (O.S.)
It's terrific.

TERRI
I mean, is it still fresh? When did you buy it?

BRIAN (O.S.)
Yesterday. I was going to write you a letter about it but I couldn't find a pen.

TERRI
I'll put it out.

BRIAN (O.S.)
No. Don't put it out.

TERRI
Why?

BRIAN (O.S.)
Because it's mine.

The downstairs door BUZZES. Terri moves to the intercom and shouts into it.

TERRI
(into the intercom)
We're here. Top floor. No elevator. Sorry.

Brian comes in from the bedroom.

BRIAN
You might want to ask 'Who is it?' You could've let in an ax murderer.

TERRI
There are no ax murderers in this neighborhood. Go fix drinks.

BRIAN
Drinks? I'm not fixing drinks. I offered to help them get their car back. That's all.

TERRI
Please, get the bar together.

BRIAN
I don't see any reason for that.

TERRI
The 'reason' is because I asked you. Please don't be like this.

BRIAN
Like what?

TERRI
Like the way you've become. At least for an hour or two.

He grudgingly goes to the bar and organizes it.

BRIAN
You know, I've asked you hundreds of times not to do that.

TERRI
Do what?

BRIAN
Say ‘this’ and ‘that’ when I’m out of sight. I told you how that irritates the crap out of me.

TERRI
I’ll do my best. Anything else?

BRIAN
‘Anything else’ what?

TERRI
Any other rules you want to lay down before our guests get here.

BRIAN
No.

TERRI
Good.
(putting food on a tray)
And since when do you like flan?

BRIAN
I don’t. I think it’s disgusting. Like something that might come out of your body when you’re sick. But if it’s done just right it’s amazing.

TERRI
I had no idea I married a flan snob.

BRIAN
It’s important to have standards. I’m very picky about my flan. Just like you are with your donuts.

TERRI
If you ate as many stale donuts as I have from sidewalk coffee carts you’d be picky too.
(moving to him)
You know who makes great donuts? The Amish. Remember when we visited your aunt and we had those great donuts?

BRIAN
(smiling)
Yeah. Those were <u>some</u> donuts. Perfect sinkers.

TERRI
Just the right consistency. Cake-like with a slight bit of crust. And nothing smeared on them or squirted inside. Those Amish have it down.

BRIAN
The way the Amish make donuts is the way this guy's wife makes flan.

TERRI
It's that good?

BRIAN
Sensational!
(looking at her)
Hey!

TERRI
What?

BRIAN
I'm sorry.

TERRI
For what?

BRIAN
For being like... the way I've been. I'm sorry for that.

TERRI
Thanks.

She kisses him on the cheek and pushes him toward the bar.

TERRI
Go fill the ice bucket and try not to growl at our guests. Okay?

BRIAN
How about this? I'll find Santini's number so we can get rid of them fast.

TERRI
Fine. Do that.

He moves to his desk and starts searching through an enormous Rolodex of contacts. Terri continues to dig through the fridge.

TERRI
Is this any good?

BRIAN

What's 'this?'

TERRI
(holding up a bottle)

This bottle of wine?

BRIAN

I guess. It's still white isn't it?

TERRI

And what about that cheese?

BRIAN
(exasperated)

What about that cheese?

TERRI

Is it any good?

BRIAN

It's delightful. Goes great with old white wine. But not with flan. I'm putting the flan back in the fridge. It's much too good for these pests.

TERRI

They're not 'pests.' They're guests.

BRIAN

Exactly! That's why they can't have any. One bite of my flan and we'll never get rid of them.

The doorbell RINGS. Terri puts the tray of food on the coffee table.

TERRI

Leave it there. And no growling.

She affixes her most pleasant smile and opens the door. ALAN CLAY PARKER (32) and his wife LISA HOROWITZ-PARKER (30) step in. They are young, affluent and stressed.

ALAN

Hi.

TERRI

Hello again.

LISA

Thank you so much for offering to help us out.

TERRI

It's our pleasure, really.

ALAN

This has never happened to us before. I mean never.

Lisa takes a look at the apartment and gasps.

LISA

Oh my God! Look at this place. Would you look at it, Alan? It's amazing. But, of course, it would be. I was saying to Andrea at the party that you two are just what I imagine when I think about New York. Charming, funny and smart.

TERRI

That's us.

Brian slinks back to his desk and Rolodex.

LISA

It's so lovely. And simple. Our place is gi-normous. It's so big that when we built it we had zoning issues. But we got around it. It pays to have a good lawyer, am I right? But this is so cozy. You always feel like you're close together. Do you mind if I look around?

Terri shoots Brian a knowing smile.

BRIAN

No. By all means. Be sure to check out the bedroom.

She walks into the bedroom followed by Terri. Brian continues to search his rolodex.

ALAN

You really think you can find the car?

BRIAN

(flipping through the entries)

If it got towed, yeah. I know a guy who's a big mucky-muck at the Port Authority. He's in charge of the whole towing scam. If they have it, he'll know where it is. All I have to do is find his number. It's in here somewhere. You want a drink?

ALAN

I don't drink.

BRIAN

Okay, make me one. Scotch rocks.

Startled, Alan goes to the bar and fills a glass with ice. Brian continues to search as Lisa and Terri come back out of the bedroom.

LISA

(to Terri)

So charming. I'll bet you get great light too.

TERRI

We do. We used to get a lot more before they built that monstrosity across the way.

LISA

Well, you can't stop progress. One man's monstrosity is another man's paradise.

(looking around)

You know what makes it? The cameo frame moulding. So many quaint touches.

She sees Alan by the bar, pouring a drink.

LISA

(sharply)

Babe, what are you doing? You know you're not supposed to drink.

ALAN

I'm making it for him.

Alan shoots her an irritated look as he moves with the drink to Brian.

LISA

Sorry. I didn't mean to snap. This whole car thing has me on edge.

TERRI

Do you want a drink?

LISA

No. I shouldn't. I'll be driving when we get the car. Alan can't drive.

BRIAN
(to Alan)
You never learned to drive?

ALAN
I can drive. It's just--

LISA
He got a DUI and they suspended his license. He's on probation. Two years. So I have to drive him everywhere.

ALAN
I still can't believe we got towed.

LISA
I told you to read the signs.

ALAN
I did. They don't make any God damned sense. In Connecticut there's either 'parking' or 'no parking.' Here its 'alternate side parking' or 'loading but no standing' or 'no parking between eleven and three or after two AM.' What the hell is that?

BRIAN
(sipping his drink)
Rules are rules. But like you say, it pays to have a good lawyer. Right? Heh heh heh.

His derisive laugh causes Terri to shoot him a reproachful, silencing glance.

LISA
Right. My father's a lawyer. Up in Westport. We were going to call him before you offered to help out. Thank God we didn't. He'd kill me if he heard we got towed.
(to Brian)
Could you please call your friend? I really need to find my car. If they didn't tow it, it could be stolen. And if that happened, I'm as good as dead. You know? So call him.

TERRI
(moving to her)
Try to stay calm. It's just a car.

LISA
It's more than 'just a car.' I'm in real estate. Without a car I'm totally cut off--

TERRI
It's not that serious--

LISA
I've got clients who expect to go out. Tomorrow.

TERRI
Can't you call a cab or a livery service?

LISA
Absolutely not. When you're an agent your car is your office. It's part of your persona. Losing your car is like having your legs chopped off.

TERRI
Please stop saying that.

LISA
Why?

BRIAN
Because my wife's works in trauma care. She's surrounded by people who've actually had their legs chopped off. And their hands. And feet. So--

LISA
(to Terri)
Oh my God. I'm so sorry.

TERRI
It's okay.

LISA
No. It was horribly insensitive. I apologize. I'm such a wreck. This is the first time I've been back in New York in, like, ten years. I grew up in Connecticut but I always dreamed about living here. Seduced by the whole 'Sex In The City,' 'Breakfast At Tiffanys' glamour of it. I was so excited when I was accepted to Columbia. My father was too. He wanted me to be a lawyer like him. But when I got here, I--
(getting very upset)
I was here for orientation, just moving into my dorm room, when it happened.

TERRI
When what happened?

LISA
(getting hysterical)
The attack! On 911. The planes! The buildings crashing down! All around me. It was so horrible. I had hoped I could handle being here again, but I-- I--

Concerned, Terri tries to comfort her.

TERRI
Lisa, that kind of thing can be hard to process. You should get some help.

LISA
(still upset)
I did. I'm still in therapy now. Every time I think I'm getting past it, the anniversary comes around. They ring the bells and they read the names and I start crying and crying.

ALAN
(uncomfortable)
Lisa--

LISA
And it comes back. Like it was yesterday.
(tearful, to Terri)
I lost two friends that day. They were suite mates I'd just met. They were down there, sightseeing. One minute we were all together. Then they were gone. Gone!

Lisa cries. Alan moves to help quiet her.

ALAN
Babe, it's okay. We'll be leaving soon. Then I'll take you home.

TERRI
Yes. I'm certain Brian will help you find your car.

Brian flips through the ridiculous Rolodex. Lisa pulls herself relatively together.

LISA
Thank you so much. Both of you. I'm so sorry to make a spectacle of this. But I can't help it. This city does it to me.

BRIAN
(while searching)
New York isn't a place for the faint of heart. Or the overly optimistic. The next time you think about coming I suggest you stay home.

Terri shoots him a silencing look. Brian goes back to riffling through the Rolodex.

LISA
I need a cigarette. Okay if I smoke?

TERRI

No it's not. Sorry.

Lisa nods, feeling chastised.

LISA

All right. That's fine. I get it.

TERRI

Get what?

LISA

You're still upset by what I said about the handicapped people and for how I've been acting. I don't blame you for not letting me smoke.

TERRI

That's not it. Brian has breathing issues. If you want to smoke just go up on the roof. That's where I go.

LISA

(smiling)

You smoke?

TERRI

Every chance I get.

LISA

Wonderful. Join me?

TERRI

Sure.

Terri leads the way out. Lisa follows.

LISA

(to Alan)

Stay on the car thing, babe. The minute you hear anything call me.

They go out the front door to the roof stairs. As soon as they're gone Alan sighs.

ALAN

I might have that drink after all.

BRIAN

Help yourself.

Alan pours himself a scotch rocks.

ALAN

Great party tonight. How do you know Dr. Harwin?

BRIAN

I don't. Terri knows him. I was just along for the ride.

ALAN

He told me you won a Pulitzer. Where do you keep it?

BRIAN

What? The medal? The paper got it. All I got was a big fat check. And a title. One that follows you wherever you go. Like 'Burgermeister' or 'Dog Catcher.'

ALAN

You're being too modest. That's a tremendous achievement. It's what every writer wants. To do something important. You know what Tom Stoppard said about writing.

BRIAN

(irritated)

No. What?

ALAN

He said, "Words are sacred. If you get the right ones in the right order you can nudge the world a little." That's what you did.

BRIAN

(searching the Rolodex)

I guess.

Alan sips his drink and watches him flip away.

ALAN

Would you mind telling me, what is that?

BRIAN

(flipping)

My pre-historic version of Google. It's a collection of everybody I've met and what they do. Not very organized I'm afraid. I forget whether I have Santini under his name or under 'cars' or 'corruption.'