

REPAIRMEN

a short play in one scene

with production notes and commentary



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This play premiered as
a staged reading at
the University of Chicago
2007 New Work Week Festival
directed by
Jordan Phillips

From the Author: The footnotes and commentary included here are what may be considered dramatic heresy. It is no business of the playwright to micromanage characters; directors and actors do that. And it is no business of mine poking my voice into this narrative. To answer the first claim: the production notes are included to give the reader a sense of how the play was staged in a way the text alone cannot. They represent the collaboration between the director and myself, which made this script considerably better than it was, as well as the wonderful efforts of the director and the cast, who each left their marks on the characters. I am indebted to them, and this is a gesture of thanks. If you want a clean read, please look to the other page with naked text. If, afterward, you would like to see how our humble production ran, or want to get the full sense right from the start, this is included for you. The notes are directorial and philosophical—they are by no means final words and shouldn't be taken as such. Feel free to have issues and confront them however you like.

Now to answer the claim of my personal notes. I care greatly for this play, and I hope it generates post-read/view discussion and thought. I think it can accomplish this on its own, but I want to say my own piece too. As I hope you'll see, I don't want to force your thinking by saying "this is the way this should be read." I just want to provide another voice. How can I justify this? Simple. If you don't like, keep to the other side of the page. These notes represent the combined viewpoints of the author and the director—such things are never final.



(Black curtain in backdrop. There is a large motivational banner at the top of the stage that reads "Life is Work." Sounds of shouts and machinery are heard. GEORGE stands in center by a refrigerator that he is repairing. RILEY stands off at side, lost in thought. They are both wearing dirty workmen's overalls and boots and have smudges on their hands and faces.¹ GEORGE is sanguine and simple, cheerful, but not a buffoon; RILEY is suspicious, not bright, but troubled by something he can't put his finger on.)²

GEORGE

Hammer.

(No response.)

I said hammer.

(Still no response.)

HAMMER!

(RILEY absent-mindedly hands him a hammer from toolbox.)

What's wrong with you, Rye? You've been like this all day. Why can't you focus?

RILEY *(Lament)*

What are we doing, George?³

GEORGE

We're doing what we're told, Rye. C'mon, let's get back to work. Hold this flashlight right here.

(RILEY does not pick up flashlight out of his hand. He walks to far right of stage.)

RILEY

I know we're doing what we're told, but what's that?

(Faces audience and sweeps hands outward.)

What's all this?

¹The actors may also wear blacks/grays if desired, to match with the black stage. The only bright and noticeable colors should come from the banner, the tools, and Proteus's costume. Extreme minimalism should govern set design; the banner, tools, and sounds should come off as very real and firm, while the costumes and black stage should meld into misty, uncertain darkness.

²The characters, while written here as male, are not gender-specific. In the original production, the part of George was played by a woman. Riley need not be male either. If there are gender differences, the relationship should be kept strictly platonic. In earlier drafts, George was Helga; "she" became a "he" to lessen the confusion of a potential romantic atmosphere which would only cloud the play.

³This opening line should mark the first of four stages Riley transitions through in the play (puzzlement/inquisition). Each stage should come off as realistic and believable. Riley goes overboard, and this should not be ignored—he is to be made fun of. But underneath his laughable, adolescent moans lie real feeling. He should be relatable. Each emotion, each attitude towards existence, is genuine. Transitions by any means should not be considered as "pulling the wool from his eyes" towards some greater truth.

GEORGE (*Annoyed*)

Manager tells us to repair this fridge, we repair this fridge. Before he told us to repair that car, we repaired that car. You liked that job enough—this ain't any different.

RILEY

Repairs? That's it?

GEORGE (*Proudly*)

Yup, that's it.

RILEY

So that's it. Things break. We stick on some bubble gum and dental floss, kick the tires, and call it good as new? Till they break again?

GEORGE

So? It's a good life—you get your wages, right? You get to occupy your time—you talk like you've got something better to do. What else do you want?

RILEY

How would I know?

GEORGE

(Drops tools and walks to RILEY.)

Whaddya mean?

RILEY

I mean how would I know if there's something better to do?

GEORGE

You see what's out there.

RILEY

And what's out there? I dunno. Do you? How would we?

GEORGE

Well on weekends we go to the bar and play darts.

RILEY (*Angrily*)

Forget darts!

GEORGE

I remember...

(He labors to catch a slippery memory that might as well be a dream.)

I remember being younger. I think I used to go to school. Eh, forget it—it's too hazy. Anyway what's that matter—we're here now and we've got work to do.

RILEY

(Ignores the last sentence.)

And what'd you do in school?

GEORGE

I think they told me about pretty places—fields with flowers.

RILEY

Ever seen these fields?⁴

GEORGE

No...

RILEY

Pretty flowers?

(GEORGE shrugs.)

RILEY

(Trying to pierce the cloud of apathy.)

Haven't you wondered?

GEORGE

I dunno what you mean, Rye.

RILEY *(Frustrated)*

What's outside the job?

GEORGE

(Laughing this off.)

But life is work, Rye.

RILEY

What happened next?

GEORGE

Next?

RILEY

After school.

⁴Riley isn't smart per se, but he's not dumb either. Here, as elsewhere, he may best be seen as an inquisitor of existence, in a desperate hands-on-hips attempt to get life to "explain itself." His drive should not be underestimated.

GEORGE

I think my mom made me a sandwich...

RILEY

I mean after you finished school!

GEORGE

I came to work here and met you.

RILEY

That's it?

GEORGE

What else do you want?

RILEY (*Genuinely puzzled*)

I...don't know.

(*Pause.*)

Wait, didn't you just ask that?

GEORGE (*Stops*)

Hmn, I dunno.

(*Pause.*)

Eh, there's not much to remember.

RILEY

How long have we been working together?

GEORGE

I dunno. A long time, Rye.

RILEY

And you never wonder?

GEORGE

Aw, don't worry about what's out there, Rye. It's all the same thing—people building and fixing things. It's just as fine here as anywhere else. You live well enough here.

(*RILEY folds his arms, disbelief.*)

GEORGE

C'mon, you get paid.

RILEY (*Quip*)

Panem et circenses.

GEORGE (*Befuddled*)

What's that?

RILEY

(*Again genuinely confused.*)

I don't know.

GEORGE

Well Mr. Smarty Pants "I'm too good for darts." You talk like you've got something better to do.

RILEY (*Quixotic*)

Didn't you just say that?

(*GEORGE shrugs. Walks back to refrigerator.*)

GEORGE

Okay, enough talk time. You like to talk, Rye, but if you talk, nothing gets done. Can't repair something by talking about it, you know. Now hold this flashlight while I get the wrench.

(*Rummages in toolbox.*)

RILEY

But I don't get it. They break.

GEORGE

So?

RILEY

And break again. Look at that spare parts pile—it keeps growing because more stuff can't be fixed.

(*Beat.*)

George, what happens when we break?

GEORGE

(*Working on fridge.*)

Our department doesn't handle broken people. That might be the next floor.

RILEY

But what happens?

GEORGE

(*Still working, distracted, not really answering.*)

We hope we get picked up and fixed.

MANAGER



IM JUST THE GUY IN
CHARGE. WHY SHOULD I
KNOW ANYTHING?

RILEY

And if we don't?

(Watches GEORGE work.)

(A long silence. GEORGE returns to his work. He looks up after a few moments.)

GEORGE

Say, what were we talking about?

RILEY

Broken people.

GEORGE

(With happy energy.)

We were? Funny. I don't feel broken. I feel good; I'm able to work.

(Sweet.)

Plus if I broke I'm sure you'd repair me.⁵

RILEY

But I don't know how to repair people.

GEORGE

I think they offer night courses.

(The MANAGER enters, carrying a clipboard, wearing a white collar shirt with khakis. Stupid look on his face. Stupid look all over him, for that matter.)⁶

MANAGER

How are you two boys doing this fine morning?

GEORGE

Doing great sir, just great.

(RILEY doesn't look at MANAGER.)

Oh, don't mind him—he's just feeling a little spacey today.

MANAGER

What's wrong...

(Looks at clipboard, as if seeking answer.)

...buddy?

⁵This may serve to illustrate that George isn't a cold, complacent moron, but has amicable feelings for Riley. Depending on how much credit you want to give him, you may even say that Riley means a great deal to him, he just doesn't make a big deal out of it. I'm still not sure how I feel about George.

⁶While Riley and George may be open to interpretation, the Manager is just as much of a buffoon as he sounds. Both the clueless middle manager we love to hate and the representative of authority, which while brimming with power lacks answers, meaning, and comfort, his slapstick and dumb twang made his stance clear in the original production.

RILEY

You're the man in charge, so maybe you can tell me something. Where do you get your orders from?

MANAGER (*Confused*)

Whaddya mean?

RILEY

I mean how do you run this factory?

MANAGER

Huh? Broken stuff comes in, I assign it to a team, you guys fix it, and set it outside.

RILEY (*Incredulous*)

That's it?

MANAGER

You expect something more complicated?

RILEY (*Pressing*)

They come? From where?

MANAGER (*Shrugs*)

No idea.

RILEY (*With force*)

Don't we deserve an explanation?

(*The MANAGER shrugs.*)

RILEY

Don't you have a boss?

MANAGER (*Shrugs*)

Not so far as I'm aware.

RILEY (*Exasperated*)

What do you mean? How can you not know? Weren't you hired by someone? Didn't you have to do an interview? You're supposed to lead us—can't you tell me anything?

MANAGER (*Overwhelmed*)

Hey, look...why so many questions? I'm just the boss—I dunno anything.

GEORGE (*Intervening*)

So what'd you come to see us for, boss?

MANAGER

(Scratches his head.)

To do what bosses do. Don't know what that is exactly...but that doesn't matter. We're here now and you boys have a job to do and I have a job to do and if we all don't get working these things won't get repaired.

RILEY

And then what?

MANAGER

(Vaguely threatening, but not malicious.)

What "and then what"? They stay broken.

RILEY

And what happens then? What changes?

MANAGER

(More pointed threat.)

Well for one thing, "we" don't get our wages.

RILEY

So that's it?

MANAGER

(Has had enough of this.)

Look...I don't what to tell ya, Rye. Just get back to work.

GEORGE

Say, what do we have after this fridge?

MANAGER

(Looks at his clipboard.)

Gee...says here you got a car to fix.

GEORGE *(Interested)*

You don't say! What kind?

MANAGER

92 Honda Civic. Red with leather interior.

RILEY

Didn't we just repair a car like that last week?

MANAGER

(Shrugs stupidly.)

I'm just the guy in charge. Why should I know anything?

RILEY (*Realization*)

We've had that car last week and a bunch of times before! We keep repairing the same things over and over! I'm sure we've had this fridge before too!

(The MANAGER shrugs.)

(In the following conversation, RILEY's comments go unheard.)

GEORGE

You know, fixing cars is my favorite. They're real complicated—force me to focus. Working on one of those—

(Whistles.)

—the hours fly by.

MANAGER

I know what you mean. There's nothing better than losing yourself in your work.

RILEY

(On his own.)

The same things keep coming back.⁷

MANAGER

I remember one time I had to do some filing. It was last week, I think, or last year. I don't remember.

(RILEY talks to himself throughout this exchange.)

RILEY

They don't get fixed.

MANAGER

I had to move some reverse-alphabetized files from one folder into another folder and alphabetize them.

RILEY

They never get fixed.

MANAGER

You'd think that'd be as easy as flipping them around, but in picking up

⁷The transition into this second stage, despair, should contain the bulk of Riley's overacting. While we should understand and relate to his emotion, it should feel the most remote. My reasoning for this is mainly philosophical. I don't care much for feelings of existential despair, and I have serious doubts over the extent to which people confronting these issues in real life actually feel them. They may feel a Camus-like sense of absurdity or a Kafkaesque inclination towards meaningless inferiority, but neither of these are despair proper. We are an adaptable people, one of our great strengths, and I feel it is always possible to move past despair, which is generally the first step of healing.

all the files I tripped and dropped them on the floor. They got all out of order.

RILEY

Why don't we stop fixing them?

MANAGER

I had to spend the rest of the day fixing them. And I'll tell you, that was the best thing that happened to me that day—damn that was a good day!

GEORGE

Yeah, I don't what I'd do if I didn't have this job.

RILEY

Wouldn't matter, I guess. Have more free time.

MANAGER

(As if on cue from RILEY's last remark.)

Amen to that. All that time and nothing to occupy me—I'd go crazy!

RILEY

(Exasperated, shaking, desperate to be heard.)

How would you know you, you twat?

GEORGE *(To MANAGER)*

Well that's what this factory's for—to keep us busy.

RILEY

Everything breaks, doesn't it?

MANAGER

I tell you, it's work that keeps a man honest.

GEORGE

We are what we repair.

MANAGER *(Happily)*

Life is work.

GEORGE

(Knowingly making a terrible pun.)

So does that make us career livers?

MANAGER

(Not getting it.)

Nah, I think a liver's something inside you.



PROTEUS

SURPRISE... SHOCK...
LOVELY, MOST LOVELY.

GEORGE

So what are we?

MANAGER

We're repairmen.

RILEY

There's no point in any of it.
(Exasperated, but off-tone.)

All that is soon won't be!

GEORGE

(Suddenly hearing RILEY.)

Be, won't be, not be—who are you now, Shakespeare?

MANAGER

Who's that you said? Shakesberg or something.

GEORGE

Oh, that. No idea where that came from. Dunno what I was talking about.

MANAGER

Funny thing.

GEORGE

What's funny?

RILEY

I don't know, George.
(Kicking the ground.)

Maybe nothing.
(Overdone climax)

A rotting march towards death.⁸

GEORGE *(Annoyed)*

Will you shut up? You're worse than Hamlet!

MANAGER

We're trying to have a serious conversation here.

RILEY

What's serious?

(GEORGE tries to resume conversation but forgets)

⁸This is nothing less than clobbering a horse dead since yesterday. Care should be taken to keep Riley believable, even here, when we are bound to be annoyed at him for his ranting.

where they left off. Holds, trying to remember)

MANAGER

(Again, vaguely threatening.)

Maybe I don't think it's funny.

GEORGE

So now it isn't funny?

(A short silence. The MANAGER hunkers down to think the matter through.)

RILEY

You're all jokes! Practical jokes of the cosmos—just waiting...to die!

(GEORGE and the MANAGER speak in a faux-trance, mocking RILEY.)

MANAGER

Jokes...

GEORGE

Waiting...

MANAGER

Laughs...

GEORGE

(With particular B-movie-style, over-the-top mockery.)

The cosmos...

(They laugh snarkily. RILEY stands, arms crossed.)⁹

MANAGER

(Checks his watch.)

Well boys I gotta go figure out what I came down here for. There's work to be done and if we're not careful, everything'll break down. Feel better, Rye.

(Exits.)

(RILEY doesn't look at GEORGE.)

GEORGE

Well Rye we really do have to get back to work.

⁹Riley is deliberately made to feel cast out here. Whether George and the Manager's attitudes and complacency are "in the know" of the universe, or whether Riley is a Promethean hero are two possibilities meriting genuine consideration. The implications of the positions should be granted their due attention. There is room for both here.

(RILEY doesn't respond.)

C'mon, hold this flashlight for me.

(RILEY sits on the far side of the stage and curls in a ball, pressing his knees to his chest.)

Well fine, even if you don't want to work, I do.

(GEORGE starts to hammer on the refrigerator. His swings become slower and slower until they stop and he stands frozen. The factory noise slowly dies away. The light dies away to a spotlight on RILEY. Light also shines brightly on the banner. RILEY, noticing the pause in swings, peeks up to look, careful to look like he doesn't care. PROTEUS gracefully walks on stage into RILEY's spotlight—the picture of ennui—sighing frequently with a bored air. She dressed in a long flowing blue gown with gold trim.)¹⁰

RILEY

(Leaping up, startled.)

Who the hell are you?

PROTEUS

(Yawning, only half talking to RILEY, half to herself.)

Surprise...shock...lovely, most lovely.

RILEY

What are you doing here? Where'd you come from?

PROTEUS *(Still rambling)*

Certainly enviable.

(RILEY picks up wrench from toolbox and approaches PROTEUS.)

RILEY

You're gonna tell me what the fuck you're doing here or I swear...

PROTEUS

You said you wanted to know what was on the outside, and as soon as you have a chance to find out, you nearly clobber that chance over the head.

¹⁰There are two forms of humor in this play. The first is obvious, the joke lines. The second is more delicate—humor that stems from the situation, but not from the characters. This means that the humor escapes the characters but should be apparent to us. In the original production, the part of Proteus was played by a small, sweet Asian girl. Her posturing as a god and Riley's exuberant will to please were thus easily mocked in this false deus ex machina. The humor of this should be apparent in-and-of-itself—the actors should act normally, not like they're trying to make this funny. For example, when Riley threatens her with the wrench, his stress should look real, but the situation can be mocked by us. This is the same strategy for delivery as how to handle his over-the-top whining.

RILEY

How'd you know that?

PROTEUS

Because I was a fly buzzing above your heads before.

(RILEY stands in confused silence.)

Oh, bah!

(Rustles gown. Bellows.)

I AM PROTEUS.

(Repeats her titles from memory, boredom drips off each line.)

Immortal of the oceans, assuming any form at will, the liquid body that flows from one shape to another, the great never-ending. That without a terminus, unconstrained by any permanent form. I take it upon myself to listen in on you mortals because you're one of the few interesting things around.

RILEY *(Curt)*

So what's out there for me?

PROTEUS

(More humanized now.)

Not much besides what you got, bucko.

RILEY

So I'm—

PROTEUS

Stuck here.

RILEY

(Like hearing bad medical news.)

There's only this!

PROTEUS

That's right.

RILEY

I work until—

PROTEUS

You die.

RILEY

What a waste of time...

PROTEUS

Oh, come now.

RILEY

I'd be more efficient dead. Wouldn't need repairs that way.

PROTEUS

(Trying to reason.)

Don't be silly.

RILEY

Why not?

(PROTEUS stands disapprovingly.)

RILEY

You're lucky then. You can't break.

PROTEUS *(Mumbling)*

Miserable, I know.

RILEY

But you have a point.

PROTEUS

(As if talking about an old divorce.)

Let me tell you. I've lived a thousand times without a tear or scratch, swirling form to form, bound to nothing, victim to nothing. I float above life without fear, immune—

RILEY

You've got it made!

PROTEUS

What happens when you punch a pool of water?

RILEY

(Puzzled at the seeming non sequitur.)

Your hand goes right through.

PROTEUS *(All schoolteacher)*

And what happens to the water?

RILEY

It moves aside.

PROTEUS

Does it feel any pain?

RILEY

No, it's untouched.

(Like a little boy who thinks he gets it—he stands up proud.)

It's strong!

PROTEUS *(Angrily)*

That's what you call strength?

RILEY

(Unsure why his teacher is scorning him so viciously.)

But...it survives.

PROTEUS *(Disgusted)*

By flight! Never to feel a thing, neither pain nor joy! Forever to flee danger, swirl around it—never an ounce of courage—not even the dignity to keep its form and fight. This is immortality!

RILEY

(Not understanding the analogy.)

But it's free. It doesn't have to fight.

PROTEUS

Forget about the water—think about islands instead. Made of rock. If you strike it, it strikes back. The waves erode—but for now it fights! Sure the waves will win—so? Does it stop?

(All the passion of the speech.)

NO. It fights for life, fights for its right to exist, and never stops fighting.

(Spoken like a god.)

Repairman, this is your singular purpose: TO FIGHT FOR THAT WHICH IS DYING, to keep that which you love alive so it can fight another day.

Everything you love is dying—and love means standing up to fight.

(Sits him down, with gentle caress.)

Ya get me, buddy?¹¹

(She saunters out. RILEY stands dumbstruck, touched.)

(All lights fade out.)

¹¹ For all that this speech is not the last word of the play, and as events soon illustrate, not the didactic message of the play, I believe every word of it.

(The normal lights slowly fade back in momentarily. PROTEUS is gone. RILEY is sitting in the same curled up position he was in before PROTEUS's arrival. GEORGE is still frozen. As the lights get brighter, GEORGE starts to move again, first in slow-motion, then accelerating to normal speed to finish his hammer stroke. The factory noise returns. RILEY leaps up. He has lapped up PROTEUS's speech—and now, with a puppy-like excitement, he runs to GEORGE and embraces him.)

Oh George, George!¹²

RILEY

What's got you so excited?

GEORGE

A reason to bother!

RILEY

So you're finally going to get to work?

GEORGE

Yes, work—work—dirty, happy hands, warm and wet with soil, grasping the vine of the lives we love so tenderly...

RILEY

Hold this flashlight.

GEORGE

Nourishing...fighting for them...

RILEY *(Continuing)*

Still talking nonsense.

GEORGE

(Sighing to himself.)

(Tries to work on refrigerator.)

It's all up to us, to keep life going, to keep it in repair. To mend love and laughter and sew shut the world's wounds.

RILEY

¹²This happiness is also over-the-top, but of a more acceptable variety than the whining. Plus, Riley's been through a lot in the last ten or so minutes. I'm willing to cut him a break here.

GEORGE

You know this would be a lot easier if you'd give me a hand.

RILEY

Don't you understand? We're Repairmen.

(Is wrapped up in himself.)

We keep life going.

GEORGE

Yup. We oil machines, fill contracts, beat the deadline. I really like fixing cars. Motorcycles, too.

RILEY

Our lives are this fight.

(The MANAGER walks in the background carrying a large stack of papers. He trips, slapstick, falls on his face, and begins to pick up the papers on his knees. He goes unnoticed.)

GEORGE

But not as much as cars. I guess I like all machines.

(The MANAGER tries to get up and slips on some papers left on the ground. He falls hard on his face again and rubs his head.)

RILEY

Because without something to fight for...

GEORGE

Always have.

RILEY

...what's there to live for?

GEORGE

Always came easy.

RILEY

We're templars, paladins—there's nobility in it!

(Pauses, slightly unsure.)

Decency, at least.¹³

¹³This first falter in confidence marks the last transition, to deadened, slightly spiteful resignation. That being said, I think a sense of decency—not honor or glory—but just some simple respectability, is the fuel that drives all the machinery of our lives. Without it, the gears stop in place.

GEORGE (*Adoringly*)

Dishwashers, paper shredders, vacuum cleaners, laptops, desktops, garbage disposals...

(RILEY turns to GEORGE. The joy has melted away. He speaks with genuine, sad sincerity.)

RILEY

So that's how you see it?

GEORGE (*Confused*)

Whaddya mean?

(The MANAGER tries to get up, only to fall again, slap stick. Still goes unnoticed.)

RILEY

That's all there is? Cars and calculators? Beer and darts?

GEORGE

I don't know what else there is to see. Look around you.

(RILEY takes a sweeping look at the factory.)

RILEY (*Resigned*)

You're right.

GEORGE

I am?

RILEY

This is all there is. Engines and computers.

GEORGE (*Helpfully*)

And drills.

RILEY (*Flat resignation*)

These—

(Indicating the objects being fixed in the factory.)

—are what I fix. This is my labor.

(Long pause.)

This is what I'm sworn to fight for?

(Beat.)

Yup. This is it. So this is my life. What I fight and die for.

(Tonelessly repeating the mantra.)

Life is work.

(Considers.)

A crock of shit!

(The factory again.)

These are man's creations. Dead, empty machinations, and nothing beyond the gates. We create death. And their repairs, a living death.

(GEORGE has gone back to working on the refrigerator. RILEY stares off. Several moments.)

GEORGE

Hammer.

(No response.)

I said hammer.

(Still no response.)

HAMMER!

(RILEY absent-mindedly hands him a hammer from toolbox.)

What's wrong with you, Rye? You've been like this all day.¹⁴

BLACKOUT



¹⁴And so the play ends where it began. We leave our seats and continue our lives, while Riley and George live on, perhaps forever condemned to live this play. We go off to work and come home, and then maybe sit down to read or watch the play again. And while Riley circles in his mind, never sure what feels "right" for too long, we cycle through our own. I don't profess to messages or to answers. Where does the "answer," the "right outlook" lie on this carousel? I meekly offer this old verse: Round and round she goes./ Wherever she stops/ Nobody knows.