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FIT OR FAINT?

A play in one act

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Preamble

*Fit or Faint?* is the latest in a series of short plays dealing with a relationship developing over 30 years (*Squatting In A Goldmine*, 1988; *A Selection of Ordinary Household Sounds*, 1991; *Cover/Recovery*, 1996; *Horizon*, 2008). All the plays utilise the trope of the Jungian trickster/catalyst, who “triggers structural, and ultimately, transformational, change…by introducing disorder” (*Bassil-Morozow, p.20*). In each case there is also a concomitant movement from realism, through heightened realism, to a kind of absurd. The catalyst characters are respectively a vagrant neighbour squatter, a dead fox, an insurance salesman, and an internet financial guru (Mark Beast). In *Fit or Faint* the couple (Marlon and Phizi) are moving from middle to early old age. The trickster/catalyst is Vince, a single-response paramedic. In the previous plays in the series (and in most trickster literature) the trickster/catalyst is “left untouched” at the play’s end; in *Fit or Faint* Vince’s own unsatisfactory life becomes part of the dramatic equation, and provokes the extreme interventions he recommends. Marlon and Phizi are forced to confront their desires, weaknesses, and mortality, but as ever, manage to forge some kind of resolution, albeit frail and delusional, to their multitude of problems.

*Works cited*


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Fit or Faint?

Setting
The action takes place at 4am in the ensuite bathroom of PHIZI and MARLON’s semi.

Characters
PHIZI: female, a young and attractive 62
MARLON: her husband, male, an old and repulsive 63
VINCE: male, 37, paramedic and visionary
Act 1

Scene 1

Four a.m. An ensuite bathroom. The set is minimal, and includes a lavatory pedestal and emblematic bed.

Darkness.

PHIZI
Help me, help me, help me

Pause, then lights up

PHIZI is having a fit – or is it just a faint? MARLON is struggling to keep her upright while speaking on a mobile phone. The result is a slightly absurd dance.

MARLON
I’m trying, for God’s sake. Yes she’s breathing. Can’t you hear her? I can’t find her pulse. Sorry I can’t hear myself think where’s the ambulance? You said five minutes, she is still breathing in out in out can’t you hear it, no I don’t know the difference, fit or faint, she’s foaming, she’s rasping, she’s going, I think she’s going, yes, she would be trembling if I let go of her what recovery position? What’s that? Describe it, please, ok, on her side.

MARLON struggles to get her towards the recovery position

PHIZI
(Suddenly breathing even noisier with open mouth and spittle)

MARLON
What, sorry, shut up, can’t you, I’m talking to the lady sorry she’s not cooperating.

PHIZI
(Half waking, screams, one, two, three times)

MARLON wrestles her to sit on the lavatory
MARLON
Ok darling, all right, don’t worry, it’s only me, you’re just having a fit or a faint, nothing to worry about [into phone] did you hear that? Is that normal? No she’s not, she’s sitting on the bog where’s the ambulance?

Heavy knocking on the front door some distance away. MARLON makes to go, PHIZI threatens to fall, he steadies her, he tries to go the other way, she threatens to fall, he grabs her again etc.

MARLON
(Shouts)
Come in, come in, come in you silly sod… I can’t let him in, cos I’ve got to hold her upright? Tell him to break the front door down. I’ll pay for it, hasn’t he got a pile driver? Why the hell not?

Heavy knocking on the front door some distance away

MARLON
What is the point of the fucking health service if they can’t break a simple fucking door down?

Heavy knocking on the front door some distance away.

PHIZI
Don’t break the door

MARLON
Oh thank God

PHIZI
Do you have to swear?

MARLON
Oh sweet Jesus yes, I do have to swear, just sit there.

He thrusts the mobile into her hand, or tries to.

MARLON (CONT’D)
Just hold the sodding thing and talk to the nice lady she woke up keep her talking

Heavy knocking on the front door. MARLON makes to go, she drops the phone, he catches it like a juggler, tries to make her hold it again, she won’t/can’t, like passive resistance, floppy and uncooperative.

Heavy knocking on the front door some distance away.
VINCE
(From distance)
If you won’t let me in, I’m going.

MARLON struggles with renewed fluster to off load the phone, PHIZI flops.

Heavy knocking on the front door.

VINCE
(From distance)
I’ll count to ten. One, two, three, four …

MARLON tries to force the phone into PHIZI’s mouth, she resists force feeding.

VINCE (CONT’D)
… five six seven …

PHIZI
I don’t want it—

MARLON
You stupid cow he’s going to leave us.

PHIZI
Take it with you, you moron.

A lightbulb moment for MARLON. He grabs the phone and runs from the room. PHIZI remains seated on the throne, swaying, unsteady, staring around with slow, uncomprehending, hardly seeing eyes.

VINCE
… Eight nine ten, going ready or not.

MARLON
(Off)
No come back

VINCE
(Off)
Bugger.

MARLON
(Off)
She’s upstairs.

VINCE
(Off)
There’s nowhere to park

MARLON
Tell me about it. In here.
VINCE
One more second I was off.

MARLON
(on phone)
Thanks, your bloke, he’s here now, thank you very much for your help, ok, thanks, sorry about the language, signing off now.

VINCE
Is this the patient?

MARLON, for want of a better option, stuffs the phone down the front of his pyjamas, supports PHIZI by the shoulders.

MARLON
What do you think, fit or faint? What’s the difference?

VINCE has a huge backpack, and he has trouble in the confined space trying to put it down, organise himself, get stuff out. This persists throughout.

VINCE
Hello darling, what’s your name?

MARLON
Phyllis.

VINCE
Not you, sir, I’m talking to the patient.

MARLON
She’s delirious.

VINCE
Being married to you I expect.

PHIZI
I’m fine.

MARLON
No she’s not.

VINCE
My name’s Vince, I’m your paramedic tonight, and it’s my job to ascertain your levels of consciousness and comprehension.

MARLON
Good luck with that.
VINCE
Let go of her, please.

MARLON
She’ll fall over.

VINCE
I also have to ascertain if she’s self-supporting.

MARLON
(Carefully letting go and stepping aside)
No way. She’s high maintenance.

PHIZI
No I’m not.

VINCE is setting up the blood pressure apparatus.

VINCE
What’s your name, darling?

PHIZI
Phizi.

VINCE
That’s a funny name.

MARLON
No it’s not, it’s short for Phyllis, what bloody business is it of yours?

PHIZI
They call me Phizi because I’m always up for it and doing things.

MARLON
I bet you are, what day of the week is it?

PHIZI
I try to do things most days.

MARLON
No, now, today, you silly cow.

VINCE
What day is it today?

PHIZI
Well, yesterday there was no East Enders.
MARLON
That narrows it down.

PHIZI
Or maybe I just missed it

VINCE
Just tell me what day it is love

PHIZI
I don’t really enjoy it any more

MARLON
And the dog

PHIZI
They keep changing the times

VINCE
Do you remember what happened?

PHIZI
Someone thought they killed someone but they came back to life

VINCE
No, what happened tonight, to you?

PHIZI
Who are you?

VINCE
I’m Vince, I’m your paramedic tonight, I was called to come and see you, by the way, sir, did you use 999 or 111?

MARLON
999
VINCE
Right

MARLON
I thought you were talking to her, not me

VINCE
You know you can call 111, then they can decide whether it’s an emergency or not

PHIZI
It’s Friday

VINCE
That’s right, well done

MARLON
It was an emergency. Is

VINCE
We’re on black alert at the hospital

MARLON
She was having a fit

VINCE
Or a faint

PHIZI
I wasn’t

VINCE
Was she twitching?

MARLON
Yes

PHIZI
No I wasn’t
MARLON
How the hell do you know?

PHIZI
You always exaggerate

VINCE
Can you do an impersonation?

MARLON
What of?

VINCE
Her, it is your wife

MARLON
Yes

VINCE
Thought so of your wife having the so called fit

MARLON throws his head back, lolls his tongue, and breathes like a wounded buffalo.

PHIZI
It was nothing like that

VINCE
How about her arms and legs?

MARLON
What about her arms and legs?

VINCE
You said twitching but I’m not seeing any twitching

MARLON twitches his arms and legs.

PHIZI
He can’t dance.
MARLON
I’m not dancing I’m twitching

VINCE
What actually happened before that?

PHIZI
He thinks I had an affair

MARLON
She got up, came in here, then she called out for help

PHIZI
You are such a liar

MARLON
I came in, she was trying to clear the gunge out of the shower plug, help me,
she goes, and then when she stands up her head goes back, she starts
galumphing

VINCE
Cleaning the ensuite at 3am, love?

PHIZI
I came to be sick but then I saw the hair, all matted and greasy

MARLON
And I called for help

VINCE
999

MARLON
Yes nine bloody nine why keep going on about it?

VINCE
Eighty over fifty that is a bit low
MARLON
I told you so

PHIZI
You’re a very nice young man

VINCE
Let me be the judge of that san fairy ann, better get you into the recovery posture

VINCE goes to help her up. PHIZI suddenly, violently and uncontrollably pukes clear brown bile all over him.

VINCE (CONT’D)
Steady on love I know you like me

MARLON panics, reaching for this towel, that towel.

PHIZI
Not my best one

VINCE
Ok, ok, no need to panic, only a bit of puke, that’s what we’re paid for, never enough they say

MARLON
(Going)
I’ll get some kitchen roll

VINCE
Alone at last

PHIZI
I don’t know why he called you
VINCE

Cos you’re not very well

PHIZI

Do you want me on the floor?

VINCE

Not just now

PHIZI

I’ll get on the floor if you like

VINCE

Let me put these clips on

VINCE has the adhesive heart monitor electrodes. PHIZI goes to strip her top off.

VINCE

No need for that god help us.

PHIZI

It’s just a bug

VINCE

It may well be, my petal, but now your loving husband, now he’s called me, the thing is, it’s official, and I’ve got to fill in all the paperwork. If I don’t come in, then I don’t have to fill it in, but now I’m in, I’m committed.

PHIZI

I’m so sorry
VINCE

No worries, we’re used to time wasters

PHIZI

I just felt a bit sick

VINCE

There. Breathe normal

MARLON arrives with kitchen roll, onto his knees frantic wiping.

MARLON

Super absorbent

PHIZI

Leave it, I’ll do that, you’ll make it worse

MARLON

I can dance, just not like her like some gypsy whore in some old 50s film

VINCE

Heart 60 that’s as near normal as dammit slight irregularity

PHIZI

Did I have a fit?

VINCE

You’re fit all right, if I was twenty years older and desperate, but you haven’t had one
MARLON

So she’s going to live?

PHIZI

Maybe he poisoned me

VINCE

Let’s get you off the bog, and a bit more comfie

MARLON goes to help PHIZI up.

VINCE

Let her do it herself, please

PHIZI moves very slowly to the bed, and sits down.

MARLON doesn’t know what to do with the soiled kitchen roll.

VINCE

Legs up

PHIZI adopts recovery position, with VINCE’s assistance.

MARLON stuffs the soiled paper into VINCE’s rucksack. VINCE turns and MARLON jumps aside. VINCE eyes him suspiciously, reaches into rucksack, pulls out a large form.

MARLON

She’s got previous.

PHIZI

I’ve always had a thing about fainting.

VINCE sits on lavatory, distastefully filling big form.

VINCE

Age?

PHIZI

Sixty one.

MARLON

She’s sixty two.
PHIZI
No I am not.

MARLON
It was your bloody birthday yesterday.

PHIZI
Oh God yes.

VINCE
Many happy returns.

PHIZI
It was a horrible day.

MARLON
We had a bit of a row.

VINCE
Medical history?

MARLON
She fell off a ladder.

PHIZI
That was years ago.

VINCE
Any history of heart?

PHIZI
No.

MARLON
She’s hard as nails.

VINCE
Liver?

PHIZI
No.

VINCE
Cholesterol?

PHIZI
Yes.

VINCE
Medication for that?
PHIZI
Yes.

MARLON
But she doesn’t take it.

PHIZI
I do when I remember.

VINCE
Epilepsy?

PHIZI
Don’t think so. Migraine I have, and hysterectomy.

MARLON
And the gall bladder.

PHIZI
And my arm.

VINCE
Slow down.

PHIZI
They don’t know if that’s because of the fall—

MARLON
She fell off a ladder—

VINCE
You told me that already.

MARLON
Shattered her humerus.

VINCE
When was that?

PHIZI
Two, three years?

MARLON
Ten, we just took delivery of the Skoda.

VINCE
And so you’re retired now?

MARLON
Don’t get her started.
PHIZI
We’re not allowed. I should be, but I can’t.

VINCE
So what work do you do?

PHIZI
Retail.

VINCE
What’s that, a bit of a potter round in some smelly old charity shop?

MARLON
It’s high fashion.

VINCE Looks MARLON up and down.

VINCE
Not catching then?

MARLON
I’m still working full time.

VINCE
But not much fashion sense.

PHIZI
He dresses like a tramp.

MARLON
And she has memory troubles.

PHIZI
That’s a good thing, sometimes.

VINCE
I bet it is. Ok, look straight ahead at my nose, tell me if you can see a finger.

PHIZI
Yes.

VINCE
And now?

PHIZI
Yes.

VINCE
And which one am I wiggling?
PHIZI
That one.

MARLON
She’s cheating.

VINCE
Good girl, ten out of ten. Any children?

MARLON
One girl.

VINCE
I’m asking the lady.

PHIZI
A daughter.

VINCE
I’ve got three, three girls, seven five and two.

PHIZI
I feel a bit blurry.

VINCE
You’ve had a fright.

PHIZI
And I’m feeling a bit chilly.

VINCE
Do you want a hot water bottle?

MARLON
Why, have you got one in your kitbag?

VINCE
[_puts aside the forms, turns on MARLON] Some people really think it’s funny.

PHIZI
He thinks he’s funny.

VINCE
He calls us out, but he hasn’t got a clue what that means, to me, personally, or the health service in general, and then he thinks he can make stupid jokes.

PHIZI
That’s why we’ve got no friends.
MARLON
You’ve got to keep smiling.

VINCE
No you don’t.

PHIZI
They ask you to dinner, he says something stupid they all think he’s a complete twat.

MARLON
It’s such a big sodding bag I thought you might have a hot water bottle in there.

VINCE
It is a big bag.

MARLON
So many pockets, must be difficult to remember where everything is.

PHIZI
Don’t talk rubbish, he’s trained to use it.

VINCE
No love, he’s right, Mr Big Mouth, my bag, it is big, it’s too big, the job’s too big, there’s too many pockets.
(Feeling in the pockets of the bag)
It’s too big for me, I can’t cope, let’s be honest.

PHIZI
You’re doing really good.

VINCE
No I’m not.

MARLON
Why do we always get the nutter?

PHIZI
You’ve made me feel better.

VINCE
The trouble is, I don’t care.

VINCE, crying, fishes out the sick soiled kitchen paper and wipes his face with it, realises, and throws the paper aside, looks to MARLON, realising where paper came from.

MARLON
It was an accident.
Oh Marlon.

That’s it. I’ve had enough.

I thought you were used to accidents.

You always have to spoil everything.

VINCE is packing his stuff away, not too tidy.

The best thing in life, just walk away.

(brandishes the big form)
You can’t, it’s official, you’ve started, so you’ve got to finish.

No I don’t.

You’ll get into trouble, big trouble, I’ll make sure of that.

What you don’t quite grasp is, this is a major turning point in my life, I am throwing up my misguided attempt at a career in the caring professions, and I’m going to have some me time, big time.

You can’t leave us.

(simultaneous with Marlon)
You can’t leave us.

You’ll be all right. Or not. It doesn’t really bother me.

Please, Vince, I respect your life changing decision, but before you throw it all away, please please please tell us what to do.
Vince pauses from packing.

VINCE
Ok. Phizi, You’ve got two obvious choices, haven’t you?

PHIZI
What, tell me, please?

VINCE
You could go into hospital.

PHIZI
I don’t want to go into hospital.

VINCE
Don’t blame you.

MARLON
But she’s had a fit, she needs looking after.

VINCE
Maybe, but to be honest, it’s black alert back at the butchers, and it’s Friday, so you’re looking at a 5 hour wait for A and E, and then it’s only some shit of a young doc who doesn’t know fuck from a fire extinguisher, and he goes home at 11, then it’s the weekend, and you know about the weekend.

PHIZI
I don’t like it.

MARLON
The weekend’s good.

VINCE
And then there’s the hard plastic chairs in headache inducing hard yellow light, amongst a crowd of self-wounded revellers and violent young women with no knickers.

MARLON
Sounds good to me.

Pause.

VINCE
You really are hopeless, aren’t you Marlon?
PHIZI
He tries his best, but he’s all mouth and no trousers, he is, he hasn’t got a clue, he wouldn’t know what to do, knickers or no knickers, he wouldn’t know which end to put in.

MARLON
I bow to your superior experience in that field.

PHIZI
Women – he’s scared stiff.

MARLON
Take her, please.

VINCE
If you’re so keen, why don’t you take her?

MARLON
I would, believe me, but—

PHIZI
He’s been drinking.

MARLON
No, I don’t want to lose my parking space.

VINCE
Conclusive.

PHIZI
I can walk.

MARLON
No you can’t.

PHIZI
I can walk better than you can dance.

VINCE
So your second choice is, you stay here and contact your GP first thing in the morning, it’s only three hours before they open.

PHIZI
He hasn’t got any sense of rhythm.

MARLON
She only used to go dancing so she could fuck the teacher afterwards.
VINCE
You may have to fight your way past the receptionist on the phone.

PHIZI
At least he made me come.

VINCE
So, are you staying or going?

PHIZI
I’m staying here.

VINCE
I’ll put you down as “refused admittance to hospital”.

MARLON
You refused, not us.

PHIZI
I refused.

VINCE
And you can settle down to the same miserable life together you’ve had for the last thirty years.

MARLON
All right, I’ll take her.

PHIZI
Don’t be ridiculous.

MARLON
I’ll put the bollards out.

VINCE
There is a third way.

PHIZI
I bet you can dance, can’t you?

VINCE
We had to have the cat put down last week.

MARLON
Poor little kiddies must have been upset.
VINCE
Yeah, and I loved him, but he had a stroke, couldn’t move his hind legs, howling he was, take him down the vet, and the vet says, you could pay thousands of pounds, and if you did he might live a bit longer, but he’ll almost certainly be in pain, and he won’t be able to jump up on the fence or catch birds, and then he might need another operation.

PHIZI
More expense.

VINCE
Exactly.

MARLON
So you had him killed off?

PHIZI
Put to sleep.

VINCE
Yes, and it just seems funny, we can make that choice for a cat, but we can’t make it for a person, or a parent, or a spouse.

MARLON
Are your parents still with us?

VINCE
They’re alive, but we don’t see them much. They live just the other side of town. But they’re not interested. We tried it. We said, look, we want a night out, how about you come round and look after the kids. But they’ve always got some excuse.

MARLON
I saw her up the ladder.

PHIZI
Forget the ladder.

MARLON
She was pulling roses back from over next door.

VINCE
Have you ever thought, what’s the point?
MARLON
Just like her, impulsive, goes straight out in the garden, up the ladder, I see her out the window, I was just about to shout, get down, get down, that’s dangerous.

VINCE
Have you ever really thought, if you can’t contribute any more, if you haven’t got nothing left to offer, if you aren’t prepared to do a bit of babysitting.

MARLON
And I thought, no, she’s always telling me what a coward I am, and stupid, and boring. Too careful. Let her. Let her be the daring one, the one who has sex with strangers without protection and tiptoes on the top of a shitty old ladder.

PHIZI
But you think it’s probably just a bug?

VINCE
Why prolong life unnecessarily?

MARLON
Down she comes, crash, screaming and bawling.

VINCE
Why not just do the decent thing?

PHIZI
I would, but he’s got cancer.

MARLON
Why do you have to tell him that?

VINCE
I’m so so sorry—

MARLON
Don’t be

VINCE
I’m not—

PHIZI
It’s bowel—

MARLON
Why not draw him a picture?
VINCE
That explains it.

MARLON
No it doesn’t.

VINCE
Because cancer, my friend, is nature’s way of saying, fuck off, you’re surplus to requirements.

PHIZI
He’s coped very well.

VINCE
You think you’re special, just because you’ve got a great fat mollusc of a tumour eating you from the inside out and you’re incontinent with blood and shit and mucous, you think that makes you special and everybody has to be nice to you.

MARLON shrinks, head in hands.

PHIZI
He says he’s mentally strong, but look at him.

VINCE
Chemo?

PHIZI
Yes, he’s had plenty of that.

VINCE
Then uses it as an excuse, oh dear, not feeling too good, better have a lie down.

PHIZI
That’s right. And really it’s just cos he doesn’t want to talk to me.

MARLON
What is the third way?

VINCE swishes out a large syringe.

VINCE
This is the third way.

PHIZI
That’s a big one.
VINCE
It’s painless, relatively speaking, it’s quite quick, and it doesn’t make a mess.

PHIZI
I’m game.

MARLON
We’ll just do the GP thing.

VINCE
GP very busy too.

MARLON
Don’t touch her.

VINCE
You can’t stop me, you sick old cancerous waste of space.

MARLON
You are not going to stick that thing in my wife!

PHIZI
Do be quiet. I’d rather die than have you making a fuss.

MARLON
You’re enjoying it aren’t you?

PHIZI
I’m just sick of it, sick of myself, sick of you.

VINCE
It’s a lovely feeling, my needle, it slides in so smooth, just a little prick.

MARLON
What of it? Does that make me less of a human being?

VINCE
My needle makes you all warm and comforted.

MARLON
We’re not finished.

PHIZI
Let him stick me, I want him to.

VINCE
That’s my good girl.
MARLON stands between VINCE and PHIZI, and every move VINCE makes, MARLON blocks him – another dance-like interlude a bit like Kabaddi.

VINCE
Marlon, what’s the point? She wants me. She hates you.

MARLON
If I can’t have her, nobody will.

VINCE
Then die.

VINCE stabs MARLON in the stomach with the big syringe. There is an explosion of thick brown faecal matter, blinding VINCE, who falls to his knees.

PHIZI
You silly sod, you burst his stoma bag.

MARLON dances round VINCE, chanting and crowing.

MARLON
Little did you know I have magic powers, little did you know the power of ileostomy, little did you know the secrets of the shit sporran, seven and seven and seventy times seven.

VINCE
[Crawling blindly]
I’ll put the forms on the side here.

PHIZI
Don’t leave me.

VINCE
I’ve got another call.

PHIZI
Take me with you.

VINCE
Marlon needs you.

PHIZI
He won’t mind.

VINCE
I can’t.

PHIZI
We could do things together.
VINCE
Look love, you’re a raddled old hag, your husband’s a mad cunt, and I’ve got another four hours to do on this shift.

PHIZI
We could dance a tango as the sun rises over Rio.

VINCE
Maybe some other time.

VINCE is gone dragging his big bag.

Pause.

MARLON
Well, at least that’s put my mind at rest.

PHIZI
Just a bug, then.

MARLON
Just a bug. I’ll sleep in the other room.

PHIZI
Wait—

MARLON
What?

PHIZI
He left his needle. Shame to waste it. We could have a go. Do it together. You never say anything, do you?

MARLON
I’m game.

PHIZI, dancing to silent music, moves towards MARLON. They join hands round the needle.

PHIZI
You first?

MARLON’s mobile rings. He finds it down the front of his pyjamas, answers.

MARLON
We’re busy.

PHIZI
Who is it?
MARLON
No, I don’t want to do a bloody survey.

PHIZI
What survey?

MARLON
It’s the 999 woman.

PHIZI
Let me say hello.

MARLON
No you can’t she’s automated.

PHIZI
I want to.

MARLON
Shut up, I can’t hear myself think.

PHIZI snatches the phone and listens.

PHIZI
Manner and effectiveness of the paramedic? One to ten when ten is very good? I’d say nine, Marlon?

MARLON
Seven.

PHIZI
But he was lovely, and so helpful.

MARLON
Let’s make it ten, then.

PHIZI
Are you sure?

MARLON
Yes.

PHIZI
Thank you. Thank you so much. You are a wonderful husband.

MARLON
Let’s go back to bed, shall we?

PHIZI
Where did you put the medicine?
THE END