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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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May, S. (2008) *Horizon*, broadcast by BBC radio 4.

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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.

PHIZI

Oh Marlon.

VINCE

That's it. I've had enough.

MARLON

I thought you were used to accidents.

PHIZI

You always have to spoil everything.

VINCE is packing his stuff away, not too tidy.

VINCE

The best thing in life, just walk away.

MARLON

(Brandishes the big form)

You can't, it's official, you've started, so you've got to finish.

VINCE

No I don't.

MARLON

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

VINCE

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.

MARLON

You can't leave us.

PHIZI

(simultaneous with Marlon)

You can't leave us.

VINCE

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

PHIZI

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 sporrán, 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