

RAW PROVOCATIVE HUMANE PLAYS

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COURBET:
or WOMAN WITH A PARROT
a new play by Kitt Lavoie

SAMANTHA, 21, sits on a bench in the center of Room 811 of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a cup of coffee on the bench beside her. She is hunched over a sketch pad, studiously recreating the large, unseen painting in front of her.

After a moment, ELLIE, 21, enters behind her and walks up to the back of the bench where Samantha sits.

ELLIE

Hey.

Samantha looks up from her sketch, smiling when she sees Ellie.

SAMANTHA

Hey!

Samantha goes back to sketching.

ELLIE

(re: the sketch)

That's really great.

SAMANTHA

Thanks.

ELLIE

(re: the painting)

Looks just like it.

SAMANTHA

Thank you.

Ellie steps around the bench and sits next to Samantha. Samantha continues to sketch.

SAMANTHA (cont'd)

One second.

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Samantha sketches a moment more, then stops. She looks at her sketch, then up at the painting. She smiles and tucks her pencil into the spiral coils of her sketch pad. She picks up her cup of coffee and takes a sip. She turns to Ellie. They smile at each other.

ELLIE

Today's the day.

SAMANTHA

I'm going to miss you.

ELLIE

Me, too.

SAMANTHA

You've been the best part of New York.

ELLIE

Thank you. For keeping my secret.

SAMANTHA

Of course.

ELLIE

I never trusted anyone else enough to tell them.

SAMANTHA

I'm glad you trusted me.

ELLIE

Why did you want to meet here?

Samantha turns towards the painting.

SAMANTHA

Her.

Ellie turns to the painting. An odd smile crosses her face.

SAMANTHA (cont'd)

She reminds me of you. She's beautiful. Her gold-brown hair sprawled on the unkempt white sheets, the woman she adores having just left her bed.

Her black-gold dress strewn on the floor. The smooth cream of her nude body twisted, turned towards us, at us - not perfect, but somehow just right.

Samantha turns towards Ellie.

SAMANTHA (cont'd)

Her arm reaching. Up to the bird as it lands on her hand.

Ellie turns towards Samantha.

SAMANTHA (cont'd)

Reaching for what she wants.

Samantha closes her eyes and leans in towards Ellie. Samantha purses her lips for a kiss. Ellie begins to lean in towards her, then turns to look over her shoulder. Then an intense voice from off-stage:

CHRISTA (O.S)

Cut! Cut! Guys, cut.

Christa enters, video camera in hand, pulling earbuds out of her ears.

CHRISTA (cont'd)

Guys, come on.

Samantha holds up her coffee cup.

SAMANTHA

Are you getting okay sound from this.

CHRISTA

Yeah, it's working great. Look, guys. This is the key moment in the film. This is the-- Ellie, you've been waiting for this moment. For weeks. For *weeks*. And she's leaving tonight. You can't hesitate. You've just got to go. Get what you want.

ELLIE

I'm sorry, I was just-- I thought someone was coming, and--

CHRISTA

I'll stop you. I promise. If there's a reason, if something's going on. Just, let's get it, okay?

Sorry, it was just weird.

ELLIE

It's fine. Let's go.

CHRISTA

Christa heads back to the spot where she was filming from.

It *is* weird.

SAMANTHA

I know. Guys, if someone walks in the frame, it will be fine. I'll figure it out in post. Obviously we can't, like, block off the room, so let's just--

CHRISTA

Christa checks her watch.

No, I don't mean as an actor. Though, yes, that, too. I'm saying, like, why is the scene happening here?

SAMANTHA

Sam--

CHRISTA

No, like, when I read it at home, I was like "okay." But now that we're here. Ellie's right. It's weird. Why are we having this conversation here?

SAMANTHA

Sam, guys. Please. The school groups are going to start showing up at eleven, and we're never going to get this once they're here. And we need to get this master. We need to get each of your close-ups--

CHRISTA

Are you going to shoot inserts?

SAMANTHA

What do you mean?

CHRISTA

Like, hands and, like-- I don't know. You're the director. But that's the kind of thing you do when you're shooting a movie.

SAMANTHA

CHRISTA

Yes, sure. So we have to do that, too. So can we please, just-- Back to the beginning.

SAMANTHA

Back to one.

CHRISTA

Right, yes. Let's go back to one.

Ellie gets up and goes to where she began the scene.
Christa exits to her filming location. Samantha picks up her sketch pad, takes in the painting, then starts sketching.

After a moment, Ellie enters behind her and walks up to the back of the bench where Samantha sits.

ELLIE

Hey.

Samantha looks up from her sketch, smiling when she sees Ellie.

SAMANTHA

Hey!

Samantha goes back to sketching.

ELLIE

(re: the sketch)

That's really great.

Samantha opens her mouth to talk, then stops and goes back to sketching. Then opens her mouth again. Then stops. Then...

SAMANTHA

Why don't I talk to her?

CHRISTA (O.S)

Cut.

Christa re-enters.

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CHRISTA (cont'd)

Just-- What?

SAMANTHA

Why don't I talk to her? I mean, I asked her to come here, right?

CHRISTA

Yes.

SAMANTHA

To talk to her. So why don't I talk to her? What's so important about the drawing?

CHRISTA

You're leaving tonight.

Samantha gestures - "my point exactly!"

CHRISTA (cont'd)

Look, she's an artist--

SAMANTHA

It just feels like an unnecessary beat. Like, why can't we just go: she comes in, "Hey", "Hey", she sits down, "Today's the day." And then we go from there.

CHRISTA

Because that's not what happens.

SAMANTHA

But I'm saying it could be.

CHRISTA

We need to see she's an artist.

SAMANTHA

Okay, then, like, shoot me sketching and put it under the credits before she comes in. And then she comes in and we get right to the scene. I'm saying, there are ways to do this without there being this whole unnecessary--

CHRISTA

It's not unnecessary--

SAMANTHA

It is. It doesn't pay off anywhere. It's just, like, let's fucking watch this girl draw something for twenty seconds. That's not a movie. That's a-- I don't even know what that is. It's a--... I don't know--... but who would want to watch it, is what I'm saying.

All three stop and turn suddenly towards a man who strolls into the room. Christa and Ellie turn towards the painting to study it. Samantha paces away to look at a painting on another wall. The man peruses the paintings in the room, then strolls off. The three drift back towards each other.

Christa looks at her watch.

CHRISTA

Look, Ellie came all the way here to shoot this. So can we *please*--

SAMANTHA

Look, I know.

(to Ellie)

And that's great.

(to Christa)

I just don't know why we're spending this precious time we have shooting something that doesn't work.

CHRISTA

It works.

SAMANTHA

If you say so.

CHRISTA

She has to fly home tonight. Can we just--

SAMANTHA

Because you know, once you get in the edit room, all you have is what you shot.

CHRISTA

I know.

SAMANTHA

Okay, fine, so as an actor, I'm asking: Why does the scene take place here? Why do I want to have this very private conversation in a very public space?

CHRISTA

Because it does, Sam. This is where it takes place. This is where it takes place, so please just fucking justify it. That's what actors do, okay? Take what you are given and give it *truth*. Make it *real*. Give it *life*. *That's what actors do*.

SAMANTHA

That's what writers do, too. Okay? They justify things. They make them real and true and make sense. They have to have, like, a reason for the things that they do.

CHRISTA

Fine, but you're not the writer of this film.

SAMANTHA

No, but I am *a* writer. And I'm trying to help. I want this to be something that's good.

CHRISTA

Well, okay, but it's my thesis, so if it isn't good, that's my problem.

SAMANTHA

Yeah, but I'm in it.

CHRISTA

So act good, and everyone will think you did a good job.

SAMANTHA

Yes, but they'll think--

Samantha paces away and takes a breath. She returns to Christa.

SAMANTHA (cont'd)

But they will think -- and I'm just going to say this, no judgement -- they know that I am a writer and they know that you are not and if I say these things they are going to think I thought the writing was good. Which I don't.

This pierces Christa through the heart.

CHRISTA

I don't think anyone will think that.

ELLIE

I really don't think anyone will think that, Sam.

SAMANTHA

They might. You're an actor, you know. And yet your doing, for your thesis, you're writing and directing a film. Which your advisor, for reasons I don't understand, said is fine. People on the *writing track* get a reading, but you are writing and directing a film. And have never taken a class about either one of them. Fine. It's not my business. Because you - rules never seem to apply to you. Everything has to be just the way you want it. Because you always find a way. You just push and push until they get tired of your pushing and you get whatever you want. Fine. But people are going to see this and they know I'm a writer and they know I've directed and they're going to think I thought all of this was fine. And I don't want that to be the last thing that the people at this school think of me.

CHRISTA

I don't think anyone will think that.

ELLIE

They let her do what she wants because she is very good.

SAMANTHA

At acting, maybe. "Her gold-brown hair sprawled on the unkempt white sheets. The woman she adores having just left her bed. Her black-gold dress strewn on the--" People don't talk that way. And more to the point, why am I describing the painting at all. It's a movie, Christa. Just, like, *shoot it*. Film it. Let us look at it. Then do the thing about reaching for what she wants. It's-- you know, show don't tell. People say that and they say it because it's a real thing.

Samantha gets up. She points at the spot on the bench where she was sitting.

SAMANTHA (cont'd)

(to Christa)

Here. Sit.

Christa begrudgingly takes a seat next to Ellie. Samantha circles around behind them and crouches. She raises her hands up into a rectangle in front of her.

SAMANTHA (cont'd)

Here. Put the camera here. Get a nice reverse. We see the painting, right between the two of us. It's a great shot. And it's thematically - boom, the both of us and the painting, which is what brings us together. So--

CHRISTA

The painting doesn't bring you together.

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SAMANTHA

Well--

CHRISTA

It's not about the painting. You're *already* together. It's about the relationship. It's about the *connection*. It's about, these two people -- she showed herself to you. She *trusted* you. She *bared herself* to you. She told you her deepest secret. And now you're about to leave. And so you invite here and you *bare* yourself to her--

SAMANTHA

All the more reason to show the painting.

CHRISTA

Not like-- It's about two people. Two people who, who love each other. In a way that neither of them can quite explain. And in this final moment, before they are torn apart, they reach, to let the other person know that they love them back.

SAMANTHA

Okay, if it's not about the painting, why is it called "Courbet?"

ELLIE

Because all of the paintings in this room are by Courbet.

SAMANTHA

Okay, fine, and how do we know that?

CHRISTA

Courbet is her favorite painter--

SAMANTHA

(to Christa)

Okay, yes, and how do we know *that*? Like, as an audience, how do we know that? Like, call it, like-- what's the painting?

Samantha walks up to painting and reads the plaque next to it.

SAMANTHA (cont'd)

"Woman with a Parrot." "Woman with a Parrot." That's-- there. We-- Like, I talk about it. The parrot and the reaching. That's-- The audience would understand what that meant.

CHRISTA

Look, Sam, I am sorry you don't like my script. And I'm sorry you don't like the title. And I'm sorry your advisor is making you do a reading. But I am making this film because I can. And because I am allowed to. And because it's important--

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SAMANTHA

“Oh God, I’m gay. You’re the only one who knows.” That’s like, fine, an important movie in, like, 1970 or something. But it’s 2017 and its New York City. People just fucking say it and its fine. It’s not worth making a movie about.

CHRISTA

It is not about being gay. It’s about being a person. They don’t have to be women--

SAMANTHA

Then why are they?

CHRISTA

It’s about love. And trust. And that moment in your life when you are really, truly, for the first time, really in love with someone. And that moment, that single moment where that person shows you they love you back. And I get if you wouldn’t understand that--

SAMANTHA

Really?

CHRISTA

Really.

SAMANTHA

Okay. Fine. That’s great. I’m just saying, fine, you want to tell this story. Then just -- be specific about it. Make sure it makes sense. Like -- why? Okay, like, I’m sitting here with a ticket in my pocket. I am getting on a plane *tonight*. We see me, *in the next scene*, get in a cab for the airport. So I am not going to change my plans for her. I am not going to change my life for her. I am not-- I don’t, as far as I can tell, have any interest in actually *being* with her. Which is a problem for a film about love because I don’t seem to love her very much. So why do I ask her to meet me here? Why do I tell her all of this? Why do I -- I mean, for God-- *if I love her*, why do I *kiss her* if I’m just planning to leave???

Christa breaks down.

CHRISTA

I don’t know.

Christa moves away from the other two, burying her face in the corner of the room, trying unsuccessfully to pull herself together.

SAMANTHA

Christa... God-- I’m just trying to help. Don’t fucking cry because I don’t like your stupid-

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Samantha looks at Ellie, who keeps staring straight ahead at the painting.

SAMANTHA (cont'd)

You know what. Fuck you. Fuck your thesis. You're beyond help. I'm going home.

Samantha goes to a corner of the room and grabs her bag, and heads for the exit.

SAMANTHA (cont'd)

Good luck.

And she's gone. Christa continues to sob in the corner.

After a few moments, she pulls herself somewhat together and crosses to sit next to Ellie.

A beat.

CHRISTA

Fuck her. Just fuck her.

Christa buries her head in her hands.

ELLIE

You know that's not how it happened.

A silence.

CHRISTA

Thank you for coming--

ELLIE

I didn't kiss you.

A silence.

ELLIE (cont'd)

You kissed me.

CHRISTA

You let me.

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I didn't stop you.
ELLIE

You let me.
CHRISTA

On the cheek. That's what *friends* do.
ELLIE

Not just the cheek.
CHRISTA

It started on the cheek. *That's* what I let you do.
ELLIE

And then you left.
CHRISTA

It was the end of the semester.
ELLIE

But you *left*. You just disappeared. You didn't answer when I called. You didn't write me back.
CHRISTA

I know. I'm sorry.
ELLIE

You were the only person I ever told. I have known since I was twelve and you were the first person I ever told and then you disappeared and now I feel lonelier than I ever have. And I have felt very lonely.
CHRISTA

I'm sorry. It was weird.
ELLIE

I *told* you. And then you just left.
CHRISTA

No. I kept being your friend. You told me long before I left. And I was always leaving. You told me *because* I was leaving. Christa, you told me because it was safe. Because if I reacted badly, I would go away.
ELLIE

CHRISTA

I told you because I trusted you.

(gesturing off where Samantha left)

People think it's not a big deal. Just tell people, it's not a big deal. *Everybody's* gay now. But it's fucking terrifying, Ell. Every morning I get up and I decide, "Today I'm going to tell... whoever I'm going to tell." And all day, the whole time when I am with them, all I am thinking is "how do I say it? Where is my opening? How do I even start telling them this thing I am sure they must know already anyway." And I get to the end of the day and I haven't said anything. And I promise myself, "but tomorrow." That has been every day for the last nine years. I am such a fucking coward.

ELLIE

That's not true.

CHRISTA

But I told you. You're the only one who makes me feel not afraid.

ELLIE

Do you know why I even introduced myself to you? I had been here for nearly half the semester and I hadn't gotten the nerve up to say basically a word to anyone. I was just here. In New York. Terrified. And then that day we all had to get up in front of the class that first time and do that Volpone monologue. "Come, my Celia, let us prove, / While we can, the sports of love." Everyone was getting up and struggling through and just trying to get the verse right. And I could barely make it make sense in my head. I got up there and mumbled it and hoped no one would notice that I didn't really know what I was saying. I acted all "sneaky" so people would know I was talking about "hiding." And I went back to my seat. And you got up there and you opened your mouth and you just... *showed* yourself. It was like it wasn't verse, or even someone else. It was just you. You hid nothing. This thing I couldn't even understand when it was in my mouth, and you got up there and broke my heart. And I thought, I want to know this person. This is the bravest person I've ever seen.

A smile passes over Christa's face, then dissipates.

CHRISTA

I'm only brave when I work.

(a beat)

I *told* you.

ELLIE

I know.

CHRISTA

Then why? I *kissed* you. So what--?

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ELLIE

No, you kissed me. And you *grabbed* me. And it was here. And I wasn't expecting it. And it was weird.

CHRISTA

I thought you wanted me to.

ELLIE

No. No, why would I want that.

CHRISTA

To kiss you, I mean.

ELLIE

No.

CHRISTA

I thought you did.

ELLIE

No.

CHRISTA

Ellie, please, look at me. There was no part of you -- none -- that in that moment, sitting here, wanted me?

ELLIE

(gently)

No.

CHRISTA

I thought you did. Because of what you said.

ELLIE

I didn't say what you wrote. You know that, right?

CHRISTA

I couldn't remember exactly what you said. I just remembered how it felt.

ELLIE

But it's not what I said.

A beat.

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CHRISTA

Why did you even come today, then?

ELLIE

Because I missed you. I hadn't heard from you in what felt like forever, and I felt bad for not writing back. Then you write and say, "Come be in my thesis. It's just a few lines." And I knew it was important to you. You've been talking about your thesis since we met. And I missed you. I should have known it was--... When you didn't send it to me, I should have--. But you said you were still working on it and I thought, "Just go, it won't be weird."

Ellie shrugs. It got weird.

ELLIE (cont'd)

And even after I got to town and read the script... I still came today. And it wasn't just a few lines. But I learned it and I came anyway. Because it was important to you.

(beat)

What did you think would happen, Christa?

(beat)

What did you think would happen?

CHRISTA

I don't know. I hoped you would help me make this good. I've been writing and rewriting and my advisor keeps asking "but what is your insight?" And I don't have one. I don't understand what happened. How do I make something out of something I don't understand.

(a beat)

And I just wanted to see you again. But today was fucking awful. All day it was just like a fucking day. Everything felt so *normal*. But I know everything is so broken. You were the one place I never felt broken.

A silence.

ELLIE

The reason I kept sketching when you arrived is because I thought I was going to cry if I looked at you. You meant so much to me. And I knew I was leaving.

CHRISTA

Why did you let me kiss you if you knew you were going?

ELLIE

I didn't know you were going to kiss me. Not like that.

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CHRISTA

I had wanted to for weeks.

ELLIE

I wish you had said something.

CHRISTA

Would it have changed anything?

ELLIE

I mean, no. Yes, I mean, we could have talked about it, we could have figured it out. It wouldn't have changed how I feel or who we are to each other. But we could have figured out how to stay friends.

CHRISTA

I don't think I know how to be your friend.

ELLIE

That makes me very sad.

CHRISTA

(re: kissing her)

I really thought you wanted me to. Why did you bring me here? "Before I go, I want to show you this." Because "when I see her, I think of you." This naked, post-coital... beautiful thing. I don't look like her. I thought you meant--... I mean, I guess I hoped you meant--... I thought you wanted me to.

ELLIE

I didn't mean that *she* reminded me of you. I meant you reminded me of *him*. The painter. Courbet.

(scanning the room around her)

Look what he did. No one was doing this in 1860.

It was all Romantic and Neoclassical and perfect nude gods reclining in pastoral scenes. And he said No. I want to paint people. I want it to be real. I want it to be true. I want it to be like *life* and like *people*. I want them to be naked, not because they are gods, but because they are people. For the reasons that people are naked. To bathe or to change or--

Ellie gestures to the painting.

ELLIE (cont'd)

Because their clothes are strewn on the floor and their bed is a shamble because their lover woke them up for a midnight fuck.

(closing her eyes as she remembers)

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“To know in order to do, that was my idea,” he said, “To be in a position to translate the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my time, according to *my own estimation*; to be not only a painter, but a man as well; to create living art – this is my goal.” He knew what he wanted and he would not be told “no.”

(re: the painting)

He painted this in 1866. Two years before he painted this, he painted a picture called “The Awakening.”

Ellie takes out her iPhone and begins to type as she talks.

--a beautiful nude woman, sleeping, about to be woken up by a kiss from her lover. Another woman. He submitted it to the Paris Salon, and it was rejected for being “indecent.”

(re: the painting)

And two years later, he submits this.

Ellie has found what she is looking for on her phone. She holds it out to Christa. Christa looks at the screen.

ELLIE (cont'd)

(re: the woman on the screen and the woman
in the painting on the wall)

Look. It's the same woman. The same, indecent woman. Just a half-hour later. A half-hour after her lover woke her up with a kiss. And this time the painting was so good. So real. So *true* -- the Salon had no choice but to take it this time. Courbet wanted what he wanted. He knew what he wanted to say and he found a way. Just like you always do. That's what I was trying to say.

(a beat)

I wasn't telling you I was attracted to you. I was telling you I admired you.

A beat.

CHRISTA

This film is so fucking awful. I'm sorry I made you come all the way here for this.

ELLIE

It's not awful. It's your truth. It's just not real.

CHRISTA

(recognizing the truth in it)

Mmmm. And it's really badly done. I should have just acted in something. For my thesis. I don't know why I thought I could make a movie. It's so dumb. I'm going to fail.

ELLIE

You won't.

CHRISTA

I don't have time to do anything. Not anything good.

ELLIE

Then do something brave.

(a beat)

I came here because I want to be your friend again.

Ellie reaches out and puts her hand on Christa's. Christa thinks for a moment, then slides her hand away.

CHRISTA

I don't think I can.

ELLIE

You can. You just don't want to.

CHRISTA

Then I don't want to. I did well enough without friends before you came along. I'll be fine.

A long beat. Ellie stands and goes to the corner. She picks up her bag and heads for the exit. Before she gets there...

CHRISTA (cont'd)

What am I going to do?

ELLIE

You'll figure it out. You always do. And she was kind of a bitch about it, but some of what Sam said--

CHRISTA

I didn't mean about the film.

A beat.

ELLIE

Courbet was an extraordinary man. But he ended up dying in exile. Don't do that to yourself.

A beat. Ellie waits for Christa to answer. She doesn't.

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ELLIE (cont'd)

You really were the best part of New York.

Ellie then turns and leaves.

Christa sits alone for a moment, staring up at the painting.
She gets up, picks up her things, and exits.

The room sits empty.

Blackout.

END OF PLAY.

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