

Composure

By

Scott C. Sickles

COMPOSURE

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COMPOSURE

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COMPOSURE

For Fritz Brekeller

and everyone who ever had a "Tommy"

COMPOSURE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS to Fritz Brekeller, Riley Jones-Cohen, Robert Bruce McIntosh, Tracy Newirth, DeLisa M. White, Laura Hirschberg, Barbara Hogenson; Suzy Fay, José Zayas, and the Lark Play Development Center; WorkShop Theater Company; and all of the actors who have contributed to the development of this play.

COMPOSURE

Cast of Characters

FLETCHER DRISCOLL	48 years old; gay theater director prone to brief romantic flings. Medium to stocky build. (Romantic lead for a character actor.) He possesses an easy charm and confidence, speaking with a matter-of-fact directness. Outwardly, he appears to have few hang-ups, if any. He has several.
JEFF LANDRY	52 years old; Associate Dean of Humanities. Gay, but only out of the closet for the year he's been divorced from Amanda (after a fourteen-year marriage). Handsome in a professorial way, in better physical shape now that he's on the market.
AMANDA CLIFFORD	late 40s; Professor of Art History. Brilliant but still stinging from the demise of her marriage to Jeff a year ago and the loss of her brother Ellis the year before that.
TOMMY STANTON	49, then 50; husband to Beth and father of their two daughters. Not as far along in life as he'd hoped, he needs to control or belittle people to feel better about himself. Masculine, athletically built. A systems engineer, but no one important.
BETH STANTON	late 40s; has two children with Tommy, whom she truly loves. Sweet but with low self-esteem, feels lucky to have a strong, handsome man like Tommy.
CHRISTOPHER BLAKE	late 20s, early 30s; former grad student. Survivor of a shooting.

ADDITIONAL VOICE-OVER ROLES:

ROMEO JULIET FRIAR LAWRENCE PRINCE

Scene: Various locations in a northeastern university town.

Time: Autumn of last year. Then, September into mid-October, the present.

Playwright's Notes

The characters frequently speak in incomplete sentences and thoughts. Dialogue in parentheses is provided for context only and should not be spoken.

The play is meant to be performed on an abstract and versatile unit set. Feel free to create your own universe onstage. (Send photos!) Scenes should flow directly into one another without stopping for complicated blackout scene changes. However, if scene changes can be choreographed in such a manner that keeps that momentum going, knock yourself out.

COMPOSURE

COMPOSURE by Scott C. Sickles received a developmental production by WorkShop Theater Company (Thomas Coté, artistic director; Joseph Giardina, managing director) in its Jewel Box Theater in New York City, opening on June 11, 2015. It was directed by Fritz Brekeller. Lighting design was by Diana Duecker, sets by Evan Margolis, and sound by Ian Wehrle. The artistic associate was Robert Bruce McIntosh. Bryan Seastrom was the stage manager. The cast, in order of appearance was as follows:

Amanda Clifford	Susan Izatt
Jeff Landry	CK Allen
Tommy Stanton	Scott Ahearn
Beth Stanton	Anne Fizzard
Fletcher Driscoll	Michael Gnat
Christopher Blake	Ben Rezendes

This production received 2016 New York Innovative Theatre Awards for Outstanding Original Full-Length Script and Outstanding Direction (Fritz Brekeller). It was also nominated for Outstanding Production of a Play.

COMPOSURE by Scott C. Sickles received a subsequent developmental production by WorkShop Theater Company (Thomas Coté, artistic director; Dana Leslie Goldstein, managing director) in its Main Stage Theater in New York City, on June 1, 2017. It was directed by Fritz Brekeller. Lighting design was by Diana Duecker, sets by Elizabet Puksto, costumes by Anthony Paul-Cavaretta, sound by Ian Wehrle, and projections by Greg Emetaz. Lisa R. Stafford was the stage manager (assistant stage manager: Audrey Lang). The cast, in order of appearance, was as follows:

Amanda Clifford	Susan Izatt
Jeff Landry	CK Allen
Tommy Stanton	Rob Ventre
Beth Stanton	Christine Verleny
Fletcher Driscoll	Robert Bruce McIntosh
Christopher Blake	Cliff Miller
	J. Warren Weber

COMPOSURE

COMPOSURE

PROLOGUE

A northeastern university town. Autumn of last year. JEFF and AMANDA are in a coffee shop. TOMMY is working at a lab. BETH is on the Quad.

(A SPOTLIGHT RISES on a chair, in which Amanda sits. She is in her late 40s; her demeanor projects a sharp intelligence and a warmth that would be apparent if she were not so sad. She is dressed in black business casual and wears an autumn coat, a briefcase by her side. She sits still for a moment, then lets out a long sigh. From the darkness, we hear:)

JEFF. Sorry, that took so long.

(Amanda focuses and looks up as a second spotlight rises on a distant part of the stage where Jeff stands over a chair identical to hers, taking off his coat. Jeff is 52, with a handsome, professorial look, a bit out of shape. [As Jeff is in very good shape “for a man his age” after this prologue, his physical fitness can be disguised in this scene with a little realistic padding or by keeping his overcoat on and adjusting his posture.] Usually warm and charming, he’s careful – even delicate – with Amanda. NOTE: While in “real life,” they are talking to and looking at each other, the staging should keep them separate and distant.)

JEFF. I couldn’t find a space, so I ended up in the garage. I had to walk over. Where’d you park? *(Amanda nods offstage. Jeff looks to where she would be nodding if she were really across the table from him. She’s keeping it together, but barely. He’s very caring, not to mention guilty for causing her pain.)* Lucky.

AMANDA. Thank you for coming with me today. You didn’t have to do that. *(Amanda digs papers out of her briefcase.)*

JEFF. We don’t have to do this today.

AMANDA. Why drag it out? Let’s just do it. Quick and painless.

(She holds out the papers to him. Cross-fade to: Two more spotlights. Tommy and Beth are on cell phones. Tommy is 49, athletic, at the moment speaking warmly to his wife, Beth, late 40s, a bit dowdy. He’s in a lab coat, she’s dressed for autumn weather and carries three book bags: one on her back that’s hers, two others in her

COMPOSURE

hands that clearly belong to children. As the conversation starts, it's clear that Tommy is trying to make amends and that Beth is still a bit upset.)

TOMMY. Did you get the girls?

BETH. Yes. Why? Did you think I'd forget?

TOMMY. No, of course not. *(An awkward pause.)* Hey, Beth. Listen... I'm sorry about last night. I shouldn't have yelled.

BETH. It was my fault.

TOMMY. Even so. I shouldn't have yelled at you in front of the girls.

(Cross-fade to: Jeff and Amanda's spotlights. Amanda takes the papers back from Jeff, who puts his pen away. Amanda signs the papers herself.)

AMANDA. So, I'll file these and then... that will be that.

JEFF. I guess so.

AMANDA. All we'll have to show for fourteen years of marriage... will be these sheets of paper.

(Cross-fade to: Tommy and Beth's spotlights.)

BETH. I explained that sometimes Mommy makes mistakes and Daddy gets upset, but just because you get a little loud, that doesn't mean you don't love us. And they said they think it means you love us even more. "If Daddy didn't care, he wouldn't yell, so the more he yells, the more he cares." They're so smart.

TOMMY. Yeah. They're such good girls.

(Cross-fade to: Jeff and Amanda.)

JEFF. I'm so sorry.

AMANDA. Please don't apologize. We've been doing nothing but apologizing for months now. It's not your fault. It's not anybody's fault. It just is. I don't blame you.

JEFF. Really...? Because you've been blaming me...

AMANDA. I know—

JEFF. Even I blame me.

(Amanda smiles sadly in response. Cross-fade to: Beth and Tommy.)

BETH. Well, they want to see their big, strong, daddy, so would it be okay if I brought them by?

TOMMY. Right now?

BETH. We're practically there already. We're walking across the Quad right now—

TOMMY. I can't stop working to play with dolls! What are you thinking?

COMPOSURE

BETH. I guess I wasn't. *(To the offstage girls.)* Girls, run ahead, just to the end of the Quad.

TOMMY. You said all that in front of the girls? You're trying to make me look bad?

BETH. They weren't even listening.

(All four spotlights come up and grow steadily brighter as the following conversations escalate:)

AMANDA. I suppose I should thank you.

BETH. They're seven and nine...

JEFF. For what?

BETH. All they want is to see their father.

AMANDA. Even with everything going on...

TOMMY. They'll see their father tonight!

AMANDA. You were a rock.

TOMMY. And so will you—
(Beth sees something terrifying.)

AMANDA. You were my rock.

BETH. Oh my God. Girls!

JEFF. And you were mine.

BETH. Girls, get away from there!

AMANDA. It's so unfair.

TOMMY. What is it? What's wrong?

AMANDA. This whole thing...

BETH. No! Don't run back towards Mommy! Get down on the ground!

AMANDA. It's all just so...

TOMMY. Beth, what the hell is going on—

AMANDA. So fucking unfair—

(Suddenly, a GUNSHOT rings out! Everybody freezes. Beth's eyes grow wide.)

JEFF. Are you okay?

AMANDA. Where was that?

TOMMY. Beth?!

BETH. Oh my God!

COMPOSURE

(ANOTHER SHOT RINGS OUT! Jeff reaches out pushes Amanda under the table.)

JEFF. Get down!

TOMMY. Beth?!

(A THIRD AND FINAL SHOT RINGS OUT! Shocked, Beth drops her phone. As she covers her mouth, her spotlight flickers out.)

TOMMY. Honey, are you there?! Hello?!

(Jeff holds Amanda. He poses as though his arms are around her; she poses as though huddled, allowing him to protect her.)

TOMMY. Hello...?

(Blackout.)

ACT 1 SCENE 1

Theater Department rehearsal room. This September. Spotlight up on FLETCHER DRISCOLL. Fletcher is 48; medium height, possibly shorter; medium build, not athletic. He possesses an easy charm and confidence. As he speaks, lights rise on the area around him, revealing that he is addressing his offstage cast.

FLETCHER. Good afternoon, I'm your director, Fletcher Driscoll. Some of you may know my work. Those of you who don't keep up with the Alumni Accomplishments section of the website, will not.

As you all must be painfully aware, a year ago, there was a shooting on this campus.

The man who pulled the trigger... a young engineering student bearing the unexceptional moniker Glenn Adams. His motive... something as common as breathing air.

Unrequited love.

By all reports, Young Mister Adams discovered that his longtime girlfriend and fellow classmate Carolyn Richardson was going to leave him for their teaching assistant, a graduate student named Christopher Blake. Adams shot both of them before turning the gun on himself. Mr. Adams and Ms. Richardson did not survive, but the other victim, Mr. Blake, pulled through.

(Somewhere off to the side, an isolated light comes up indicating a hallway outside the rehearsal room. This could also be done with a door frame in between. Once the light is up, Jeff passes by and stops when he sees Fletcher speaking. He is instantly

COMPOSURE

compelled and watches the rest of the speech. [Note: He's now clearly in trimmer physical shape or at least carries himself with greater posture and confidence.])

FLETCHER. Young love. Untimely death. Unexpected survival.

What other play could this university's theater department choose to commemorate the anniversary of this tragedy... but *Romeo and Juliet*?

I'm actually asking.

Because depending on your perspective, *Romeo and Juliet* is either the most appropriate or the least appropriate play for this occasion.

Many find this selection tactless, offensive, and exploitative. After all, how can we tell a story in which three fictional young people – namely Juliet, Romeo, and Paris – become embroiled in a love triangle that leads to their deaths without reminding everyone in the audience how three actual young people – Carolyn... Glenn... and Christopher – met or almost met the same fate in a heinous act of violence literally outside our theater doors?

The naysayers have a point.

But they're asking the wrong question.

What they should be asking – the questions *we* will be asking and, if we're lucky, coming up with a few answers to, are...

“What can we learn from this?”

“What can *Romeo and Juliet* teach us about Carolyn, Glenn, and Christopher?

About ourselves, our families and community? What can it teach and remind us about the insanity and fragility... and necessity... of love?”

“How do we take what we've learned... and begin to heal?”

(Pause.)

And the answer is... I don't know.

But we have six weeks to find out! So, no pressure!

Now... let's begin.

(Jeff exits. Cross-fade to:)

SCENE 2

Outside the rehearsal room, later. The isolated hallway light comes up bright and harsh. Jeff waits in the hallway, paces nervously. Fletcher enters from the now-darkened rehearsal room area.

JEFF. Excuse me?

COMPOSURE

FLETCHER. Can I help you?

JEFF. I'm Jeff Landry. Associate Dean of Humanities.

FLETCHER. Fletcher Driscoll, director.

JEFF. Yes, I know.

FLETCHER. Great. (*Awkward pause.*) And what can I do for the Humanities?

JEFF. Oh. I uh... I just wanted to tell you. I heard your, um... "opening remarks," I guess. To the cast.

FLETCHER. You did?

JEFF. Yes, and—

FLETCHER. That was three and a half hours ago.

JEFF. Yeah. I guess it was—

FLETCHER. You've been waiting here for three and a half hours?

JEFF. Hm? Oh. No! No, no, no. I left when you started the read-thru. And I came back at ten o'clock because that's when rehearsals are over...?

FLETCHER. So, you've been standing here for... half an hour?

JEFF. I have an iPad.

FLETCHER. I let the kids... Oops. I let *the cast* go half an hour ago. Why didn't you just come in?

JEFF. I didn't want to interrupt your post-rehearsal process...?

FLETCHER. Next time, you can just come in.

JEFF. Oh. Okay. Noted.

FLETCHER. So, is that why you're here?

JEFF. Hm?

FLETCHER. My "opening remarks." I did kind of give credence to the people who are objecting to the production, which I was specifically asked not to do.

JEFF. Oh?

FLETCHER. But I figured we should attack it head-on because, from what I understand, the objections have been rather... vocal.

JEFF. Yeah, they have. From the families, in particular. They want to move on, and they feel this production... (is getting in the way of that.) So they've mobilized Glenn and Carolyn's classmates to put up a vigil and... (maybe even protest.)

FLETCHER. Not Christopher's family? Or Christopher?

JEFF. They've been very quiet.

FLETCHER. Huh. So, if this production is causing so much trouble for so many people, why didn't they cancel it?

COMPOSURE

JEFF. Oh, they did. But in the time it took to schedule the meeting and hold a vote, they got a grant for the production, so...

FLETCHER. O, Academia, how I've missed you! *(Gathers his stuff.)* So... If you're not here to chastise me about my remarks—

JEFF. Yeah... Actually, uh... I was wondering if you'd like to grab a cup of coffee with me sometime.

FLETCHER. Sure. How's Saturday?

JEFF. Uh... Great. Yeah, I'd really like to talk about the ideas... in your, you know... remarks—

FLETCHER. I said yes. You can save the rest of your pitch for Saturday.

JEFF. Oh. Okay, then. Groovy.

FLETCHER. *(Smiles.)* Right on.

JEFF. I don't know why I said that.

FLETCHER. Maybe it's the LSD. Good night.

JEFF. Good night. *(Fletcher starts out.)* Uh, Fletcher?

FLETCHER. Yeah?

JEFF. Just to be clear. This is a date. Like a date-date.

FLETCHER. Yeah, I got that.

JEFF. Oh. Good. Glad that was clear. *(This time on purpose.)* Groovy.

FLETCHER. Far out.

(Fletcher exits. Jeff anxiously watches him go. Cross-fade to:)

SCENE 3

A supermarket. The next evening. Fletcher enters with a shopping basket, browsing. Tommy enters with Beth, who pushes a half-filled shopping cart, calling after her offstage daughters.

BETH. Nicole, don't do that. You're going to break it. Marina, watch your sister. *(Fletcher turns to look and freezes up when he sees TOMMY.)*

TOMMY. You've got to be firmer with them.

BETH. I'm trying—

TOMMY. I'll do it. *(Tommy strides off after them, and both Beth and Fletcher watch him go. Beth notices Fletcher looking.)*

BETH. Sorry. They're at an age.

COMPOSURE

FLETCHER. I think they stay that age until they're thirty.

BETH. Oh no! God help us all then.

(Fletcher politely nods and smiles. When Beth's attention turns back to her family, Fletcher moves to exit. Just before he does, he stops, takes a deep breath and approaches Beth.)

FLETCHER. So, how old are they?

BETH. My oldest, Marina, is ten. And the little one hell-bent on destroying everything in her path is Nicole. She's eight.

(Tommy returns, protective, jokingly admonishing of Beth.)

TOMMY. Honey, why are you giving our children's names to a total... *(Tommy slows and stops when he sees Fletcher.)* You're not a stranger.

FLETCHER. Depends on your definition. How are you, Tommy?

TOMMY. Can't complain. Fletch, this is my wife Beth. Beth, this is—

BETH. I thought I recognized you!

TOMMY. Really? You only met once or twice when we were in high school—

FLETCHER. That's why you look so familiar. You were the girl from St. Francis Tommy dated when he was a senior.

BETH. That was me!

FLETCHER. And you're still together...

BETH. Well...

TOMMY. Yes. Obviously, we are still together.

BETH. We were sort of off and on when Tommy was in college but... We never really loved anybody else, did we?

TOMMY. Nope. Not a soul.

FLETCHER. So, you're like swans... and beavers.

TOMMY. You would know that, wouldn't you?

BETH. So, I was saying... *(To Fletcher.)* I recognized you *from the news!* You're here to direct the *Romeo and Juliet*, right?

FLETCHER. Somebody had to.

BETH. It must be very challenging after... you know, what happened. Anyway, we're studying Shakespeare in my poetry class, so I'm really looking forward to seeing it.

TOMMY. She sure is.

FLETCHER. You know, Tommy, if memory serves... you have a birthday coming up right before we open...

COMPOSURE

BETH. Yes, he does!

TOMMY. It's not a big deal.

FLETCHER. The big five-oh!

BETH. That's right!

FLETCHER. How about I can get you guys tickets for opening night.

TOMMY. You really don't need to get me a present.

FLETCHER. I know. But it's your fiftieth. I have to do something. And I'd love for you to come as my guests.

TOMMY. If it was Beth's birthday, sure. This really is more her thing. *(To Beth.)* So, why don't I watch the girls and you can go with one of your poetry friends?

FLETCHER. It's a tragic romance. Total date night material! But you know... I get it. Shakespeare's not for everybody.

BETH. Yes, we'll come. Thank you for such a thoughtful and a generous gift.

TOMMY. Aren't they free—?

BETH. Fletcher, you should come over for dinner sometime! The two of you can catch up.

(This makes both Fletcher and Tommy uncomfortable.)

TOMMY. I'm sure Fletch is going to be busy with the play—

BETH. He has to eat sometime.

FLETCHER. Actually, I'm going to be working nonstop. Rehearsals are evenings and weekends, and there's a ton of prep.

TOMMY. *(To Beth.)* See, what did I tell you? *(To Fletcher.)* Anyway, the natives are getting restless, so...

FLETCHER. They haven't moved from that spot. What did you say to them?

TOMMY. That they're playing statues, and the first one who moves loses.

BETH. And they hate losing.

FLETCHER. Don't we all? Well, congrats on the beautiful family.

BETH. Thank you. We're very lucky to have this guy here.

FLETCHER. Oh, I know... And two beautiful daughters...

BETH. They get their looks from their father.

FLETCHER. I see a lot of you in them, too.

BETH. That's kind of you to say.

FLETCHER. Not at all. *(To Tommy.)* I can't believe God blessed you with girls.

BETH. That's exactly what they are, a blessing. We tried for years to have kids. And tried and tried. Not that it wasn't fun, if you know what I mean—

COMPOSURE

FLETCHER. Oh, I do.

BETH. We were just about ready to give up, weren't we, honey?

TOMMY. I wouldn't say that—

BETH. Then we were blessed with these two little terrors. One right after the other.
Pop, pop!

FLETCHER. Better late than never, right?

TOMMY. Yeah well, it was good running into you—

FLETCHER. Listen, Tommy... Every now and then I do allow myself a coffee break. Maybe one afternoon this week...

TOMMY. I really can't.

BETH. Of course you can! I'm sure your boss can spare you. *(To Fletcher.)*

Tommy's boss is on his honeymoon. He and his new husband are visiting the top ten places on their bucket list they want to hit before they turn 40—

TOMMY. I'm sure Fletch doesn't need to hear about the romantic misadventures of people he doesn't even know.

BETH. Right. Sorry.

FLETCHER. You know what? Weekdays are rough for me anyway.

BETH. What about the weekend? *(Digs out her phone and checks the calendar.)*

TOMMY. That's reserved for family time; you know that, babe.

BETH. You see us all the time, Tommy, I'm sure you could use a break. This is your best friend from high school! *(Referring to her phone.)* This weekend's nuts but you are free and clear next Sunday!

TOMMY. Great. I guess it's settled.

FLETCHER. It's not the whole afternoon. I just want to catch up a little, reminisce... *(With a wink to Beth.)* Tell sad stories of the death of kings.

BETH. *Richard the Second!* Or is it *the Third?*

FLETCHER. You got it right.

BETH. Did you hear that, sweetie? I know stuff!

TOMMY. *(“Amused.”)* You are really chatty tonight. *(Beth gets quiet, smiling sadly. She knows she's talked too much. Fletcher notices.)* Again, we really need to get going. Until next Sunday. *(Extends his hand.)* It was good to see you, Fletch. *(Tommy offers his hand. Fletcher gives it a glance and takes it. They shake firmly, eyes locked in silent confrontation.)*

BETH. *(Tentatively.)* It was wonderful seeing you again.

COMPOSURE

FLETCHER. Likewise. *(The handshake breaks. Still to Beth.)* I can't even tell you how much.

BETH. *(To the offstage girls.)* Girls, we're leaving. First one to the checkout line gets an airplane ride from Daddy.

(Beth smiles at Fletcher and exits. Tommy and Fletcher nod and smile cordially, then Tommy exits after Beth. Never taking his eyes off Tommy or showing signs of pain on his face, Fletcher rubs his recently squeezed hand. Cross-fade to:)

THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—ORDER A COPY AT WWW.NEXTSTAGEPRESS.NET