# A Neutral Script

by Chris Thomson

EXTRACT

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# A Neutral Script

## *six scenes for seven characters with very few given circumstances*

**A NEUTRAL SCRIPT** is a map or a template for performance. It is a starting point from which a small group of between three and seven actors can make any interpretation they wish. There is no 'answer' or single correct interpretation for this script and, whilst some interpretations may have similarities, it is highly unlikely that any two performances will be the same.

To make an interpretation of this script, a performing group will need to consider a lot of questions. ***S***

***Some important starting points are these:***

**WHO?**
Who are the characters? What are their names, ages, gender? What relationships, if any, exist between the characters? Who are the characters that appear in scenes where the choice is open? Who is FIVE speaking with in Scene Two, and why do we only hear one side of the conversation?

**WHAT?**
What are the physical objects referred to in the script? What is ONE looking for in Scene One? What is in the package in Scene Three? Is it the same package in Scene Six, or is it a different one?

**WHEN?**
When is this performance set? Contemporary? Historical? Futuristic? What time of the day is it in each scene? Over what period of time do the six scenes take place? Do the scenes run chronologically, or does the play include 'flashbacks' or 'out-of-sequence' scenes?

**WHERE?**
Where is each scene set? Are these interior or exterior scenes? When a character enters, where were before they came onto the stage? When a character exits, where do they go when they leave the stage? When characters meet in a scene, were they expecting to meet, or do they meet by chance or accident?

**HOW?**
How is the script to be interpreted stylistically? Will it be naturalistic, abstract, absurd, musical, comic, tragic. melodramatic, operatic, Brechtian, epic or something entirely different?

**WHY?**
Why do the characters say what they say and do what they do? What are the circumstances that drive each character through each scene and the performance as a whole? What are the needs, desires, fears, hopes and motivations beneath the words that each character speaks?

Obviously, there will be a lot of other questions to consider, such as stagecraft, set and costume design, lighting, sound, projection and other elements that will be necessary to incorporate into the interpretation of the Neutral Script.

Each interpretation of **A Neutral Script** will bring a whole new set of answers to these and other questions. Each interpretation will also create problems for the staging and direction of the performance. Not all lines will fit or make sense. The story might not easily flow in the chosen direction. It is important to find ways of making sense of the script according to each interpretation, and not to give up when something doesn't fit easily the first time. There will always be a way to make sense of the script by looking more carefully at the circumstances that can be imagined around each moment and each character.

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# INTERPRETATION:

Each different performing group should feel entirely free of script-based preconceptions when they approach the task of making an interpretation of **A Neutral Script**. However, some common rules and guidelines do apply. *They include the following:*

- Use only the lines that are written, except where optional lines are indicated.
- Use silences or pauses as often as you like. Silences or pauses can be used to break up the flow of lines as written in the script.
- In some places, characters will be required to make non-verbal responses. In addition to these, characters may use gestures, facial expressions, body language and other non-verbal responses as often as they like.
- When a line ends with a question mark, that line must be spoken as a question. Where a line doesn't end with a question mark, you may decide to make that line a question if you want to.
- Whilst there are no instructions for the use of *direct address to the audience* in this script, it may suit the group's interpretation to use that style at some points in the performance.
- Music can be used throughout the performance if required.

# STAGE DIRECTIONS:

**A Neutral Script** includes a number of stage directions, choices and options to be determined by each group. *Some of these include:*

- **A Sound Is Heard:** This stage direction can be interpreted to be a live sound effect, a recorded sound effect, live or recorded music or a sound that occurs as a result of action on or off stage (such as a character knocking on a door or couching or stomping their foot). Each time this stage direction comes up, a new choice must be made as to which kind of sound is best for this moment in the performance. A sound must be heard whenever this stage direction appears. However, additional sounds may be used at other times throughout the performance if it suits the interpretation.
- Entrances & Exits: **If a character *enters* or *exits* a scene, they must come onto or go off stage. If a character *appears* in a scene, they could either enter, or be revealed to have been on stage all the time. If there is no stage direction given, the choice is open to interpretation.**

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- **Optional Lines:** Where the characters are given *optional lines* the text remains open to interpretation and invention. In these cases, it is not necessary to use all the optional lines indicated. When *optional lines* are indicated, characters may use none, one or any amount of lines up to the number indicated in the script. However, an effort should be made to remain consistent with the *neutral* style of language already used in the script, and not to see the *optional lines* as an opportunity to explain or decode the story or circumstances of the play.

- **Optional Characters & Doubling: A Neutral Script** is written to be performed by a group of between three and seven actors. In a performance with any less than seven actors, some choices about how best to *double* the actors will need to be made. At no time does the script require more than three actors to be on stage at once. There are also points in the script where an option is given to choose which characters will appear in a particular scene. These choices should be made in a way that best supports the interpretation.

# A HINT:

Sometimes the temptation is to try and impose a pre-determined story or set of characters onto the text. This can work, but often backfires, or requires a 'heavy-handed' use of the *optional lines*. The best bet is to read the script and allow each performer to respond to it…what style seemed to suit it…what story did it suggest…who did these characters seem to be…? Another approach is to 'suppose' some information and read the script in that context. For instance, suppose ONE and TWO are lovers… suppose THREE is deceiving FOUR…suppose SEVEN is a doctor…suppose it's set in Ancient Rome… suppose it's set in the outback…suppose it's set on a boat…suppose it's set in a space ship…suppose none of these characters are human…suppose there are two separate stories going on…suppose some of the lines are really song-lyrics…suppose none of the optional lines get used…

…and so the list could go on.

Whatever the strategy for interpreting the script, be wary of settling for the first idea. Explore different responses…merge ideas…let the script speak to you and listen to what it has to say.

***NB. The idea for A Neutral Script comes from a very common drama exercise, often conducted with two students who are each given two lines to say. That exercise goes something like:***

***A:*** ***Hello***
***B:*** ***Hello***
***A:*** ***Have you been here long***
***B:*** ***I have to go***

***Early scenes from A Neutral Script were developed in 1999 in Theatre Studies classes with Second Year students at the Australian Ballet School as a way of tackling the idea of improvisation with students struggling to engage with work that was not highly structured (in the way that most of their ballet classes were). The illusion of the script freed them from the impediments and fears that made improvisation so difficult for them, and gave them a framework within which they could imagine, interpret and create anything they liked.***

***This script was subsequently commissioned by HotHouse Theatre Company for use by groups participating in the 2000 Biting Dog Theatre Festival. It was first performed on June 5, 2000 at The Butter Factory Theatre in Albury-Wodonga.***

***A Neutral Script was nominated for an Australian Writers Guild AWGIE as Best Community Theatre in 2001.***

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**SCENE ONE**

ONE enters a space, looks around and waits.

There is a sound.

TWO enters.

ONE:
Hello.

TWO:
Hello.

ONE continues to look around.

TWO:
What are you doing?

ONE:
Looking for something.

TWO:
Can I help?

ONE:
Perhaps.

TWO points to something that is concealed.

TWO:
Is this what you're
looking for?

ONE:
Where was it?

TWO:
Right here.

ONE:

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Oh.

They sit.

They continue to sit.

There is a sound.

TWO stands up, walks across the space, looks at something.

ONE remains seated.

TWO sits down.

TWO:
You been here long?

ONE replies without speaking.

TWO:
I have to leave soon.

ONE:
Where are you going?

TWO:
I have to get back.

ONE:
How is it going?

TWO:
Ok.

TWO offers something to ONE.

TWO:
Do you want this?

ONE replies without speaking.

TWO:
*optional line*

ONE:
*optional line*

TWO:
*optional line*

ONE:
*optional line*

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