

PRIMING THE PUMP

by

JEAN KLEIN

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PRIMING THE PUMP

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The first professional production of Priming the Pump was in 2023 at Zeiders American Dream Theater Fringe Festival in Virginia Beach, VA.

Cast

Burt Solomon. Cliff Hoffman

Grace Truman. Christa Jones Vogt

James Truman Brian Cebrian

Bodyguard Pinkie Chappell

Bodyguard 2 Bill Armstrong

Director: Lou Stalsworth

Set Design/Costuming: Kate Pinner

PERFORMANCE NOTES: Dialogue that ends with a dash— is meant to be interrupted. Dialogue that ends with an ellipses . . . is meant to be drawn out.

CHARACTERS:

Burt Solomon: host of the show

Grace Truman: a guest in her 40s or 50s

James, her husband

Bodyguards (2)

THE SET:

The set of a talk show: Fight for Life!.

Three chairs are center stage, positioned for conversation. The bodyguards are positioned either upstage or down. Near them are 2 small stack tables that hold the cards they will hold up to rev up the crowd during the show. The front of one placard reads: Fight for Life; the back reads Begin to Win. The front of the other placard reads Grope for Hope; the back reads Stage the Rage.

At Rise:

The lights rise on two Bodyguards holding placards that read: Fight for Life side of the placard.

Burt Solomon enters wearing a sleazy and/or ill-fitting suit. He looks out over the audience. He sometimes addresses one of the Guards, but they never turn toward him. Their focus is on the audience and revving them up.

BURT: (to guards) How's the crowd today?

(Guards grunt.)

Yeah, I see. Not exactly packing them in these days. You gotta get them excited!

(They turn and stare.)

Okay, okay. But I can only do so much, you know. But if we don't boost our ratings, we're all going to be out of a job—

(Guards turn quickly to audience and hold up signs.)

GUARDS: Fight for Life! Fight for Life!)

(Burt steps forward. His face lights up.)

BURT: How's everyone doing today. Wow! Look at the size of this crowd. Standing room only!

(If it's a small crowd, Guards give each other a look)

I'll bet we're smashing a record here today! And what are we here to do?

GUARDS: (holding up placards) Fight for Life! Fight for Life!

SOLOMON: Isn't that what you folks are here for? To watch some poor losers learn to Fight for their Life. Aren't you tired of those fat cats taking half of every dime you earn. Revving up their Tesslas behind your Chevy Volt? And how do we Fight for life? We Begin to Win!!!! Whatever it takes, we . . .

(Burt points at the Guards who hold up the Begin to Win placard. The Guards hold the placards up.)

Guards: Fight for Life! Begin to Win!

BURT: Let's hear it!

(BODYGUARDS now eagerly hold up sequentially FIGHT FOR LIFE / BEGIN TO WIN signs and chant and encourage the audience to do so. (If they are reluctant, BURT can chime in with: "I said, let's hear it, folks, or BODYGUARDS can encourage people in the front row to chant or applaud.)

(Burt encourages the audience to participate, then applauds and holds up his hands to quiet the crowd—or to silence the Guards if the audience doesn't respond.)

BURT: We have a real treat for you today, folks. A lady down on her luck, but we're going to turn that frown upside down . . . Let's welcome Grace Truman to our stage! Here she is.

(Grace enters and crosses somewhat hesitantly.)

Over here, Grace, you can sit right here.

GRACE: I can't see ... the lights—

BURT: You'll get used to them. That's why I'm here. Just follow me.

(He takes her by the hand.)

You might even get some Likes on Facebook!

(turns to audience)

And all you fans can Like us on our Facebook page at www.FightFor--

GRACE: I don't have Facebook. James doesn't like me to talk to—[anybody he doesn't]

BURT: James? That's the hubby, I guess? We'll get to him later. Now, how would you like Burt to help you?

GRACE: Who's Burt?

BURT: What? (pause) Who's Burt? You gotta be kidding . . .

(He sees that she doesn't know him.)

Uh—that's me. Burt Solomon? The host of the show? Monday through Friday? One pm Eastern Standard Time?

(shouts off-stge.)

You sign somebody up who doesn't know who I am? And tells a live audience?

(to Grace)

How could you not know who I am?

GRACE: I'm sorry. I don't watch television—Except for the 700 Club . . . that used to be Pat Robertson, you know -

BURT: I don't think you heard about us from him!

GRACE: Oh, no. It wasn't from him—and I would never watch a show like this—I wouldn't want Mr. Robertson, may he rest in peace, to think I—

BURT: (trying to regain control of this dialogue) Then, how did you find us, Grace?

GRACE: Oh, I'm sorry, James always tells me I go on and on—I know I should be listening to him, but I don't see anybody but the children all day and—

BURT: How you found us? You were going to tell us—

GRACE: Yes, of course. Your producers sent a flier in the mail looking for participants— James—my husband—always gets the mail. He likes to open it first . . . He must have dropped the flier outside-- But when I saw the words on the envelope—

BURT: Fight For Life—

GRACE: Grope for Hope—

BURT: Begin to Win—

GRACE: In big, black, bold letters—

(Burt turns toward the audience, waving his hands at them as if conducting an orchestra.)

BURT:(loudly, to audience) Let me hear you say it!

GRACE: (upset) What are you doing?

(BODYGUARDS hold up sign: FIGHT FOR LIFE.)

BODYGUARDS: Fight for life! Begin to Win!!!! Let us HEEEEEAR you!!! Fight for Life!

(They encourage the audience, stepping toward them if they have to and ad-libbing if necessary.)

AUDIENCE: Fight for life! Fight for life!!!

(Grace jumps and shrinks at the sudden noise.)

GRACE: Do they have to be so loud--

BURT: It's our audience. They're rooting for you.

GRACE: It doesn't sound like it to me . . .

BODYGUARDS: (turning placards around) Begin to Win! Begin to Win!

AUDIENCE: Begin to Win! Begin to Win!

BURT: Doesn't that sound wonderful?

GRACE: I don't think you're going to be able to help me—

BURT: You don't! Is that right?

GRACE: I didn't mean—the lights are so bright—and everything is so loud—I thought you might be able to help me, but—

BURT: Quite frankly, you're helping our ratings right now!

(Burt turns her aside and tries to talk so the audience won't hear him.)

Oh, Lord, Grace, we're in the middle of Sweeps and we're not doing so well. We need to get viewers, millions of viewers if we want to stay on the air—

GRACE: Viewers. Millions of—

BURT: That's what we're hoping for—

GRACE: But so many—

BURT: We need them, all the viewers we can get, if we want to keep helping people like you—

GRACE: Millions of . . . People like-- Oh, no, James might see this—I have to go—

(Burt turns toward offstage, talking to the people behind the scenes.)

BURT: Who told me she was perfect for this show! Didn't you hear me? It's Sweeps Week! Send out the next guest. (pause) What? Nobody?

(Turns toward Body Guards)

What am I going to do with her? I don't have anybody else in the wings—What am I going to do?

(Guards turns signs toward Burt)

GUARDS: Fight for life??? Grope for Hope??? Begin to Win?

BURT:(to Guards) Oh, shut up! (to Grace) Stay with me here, Grace. You better have a good story. Details, Gory details. That's what our audience is here for—

(to Guards)

Would you guys get on the stick?

(The Bodyguards turn back toward the audience.)

GUARDS:

Okay, everyone, let's give Burt a hand.

Fight for Life!

Begin to Win!!

(If the audience responds, they can play this for a moment. If they don't, just continue.)

GRACE: I better go . . .

BURT: No, Grace, sit down—Tell Burt all about it—

(She sits, somewhat disoriented.)

GRACE: I don't know why I ever thought – I mean . . . I thought—

BURT: Oh, don't think, please don't think—

GRACE: But when I saw your flier I thought, "Fight for Life. That's what I have to do." (pause) Like Pat Robertson himself was telling me—

BURT: So, someone on a tv show—someone like me—

GRACE: --not like you—

BURT: --was telling you to come to this show—

GRACE: -- Like God meant me to find it and—

(BURT interrupts her. He starts to mock her but then begins to have an epiphany about how he can build the ratings.)

BURT: --like GOD told you?

GRACE: --like Pat Robertson told me for God—

BURT: --I'm sure he knows—

GRACE: --he has over a million viewers—

BURT: --a million—

GRACE: Isn't that what you said you wanted?

BURT: Oh, Grace! That's brilliant! Now, there's what builds an audience!

GRACE: What?

BURT: God! (pause, as she looks at him) Religion! And if they're Christian, they tithe! Ten percent!
(calls off stage)

Sammy!! Make a note of that for next week.

(turns back to Grace)

It's a miracle, Grace. A godddamned miracle. Television in the making! This is gonna save the show. We're gonna turn you into a goddamned miracle--

GRACE (feeling disenfranchised) Look, I'm really glad for you, but I don't have a lot of time. I have to be back home before—

BURT: Oh, no, please, Grace, we can build a whole show planned around you—

GRACE: But I have to get home by the time James does or else—

BURT: I can give you my personal guarantee that you'll be home before he is—

GRACE: I suppose you know just what time that is and what will happen / if I'm not there—

BURT: Now, there's the Grace we want to see. A little fighting back . . . A little spunk.

GRACE: Spunk. That's what my dad called it. I used to have a lot of that, but—[Not anymore.]

BURT: That's what we want to hear about. That's how you Begin to Win! You find the anger—and I'm gonna help you, Grace—Me and Pat—

GRACE: Mr. Robertson's no longer with us—

BURT: But I can feel him blessing us from the great beyond!

(He gestures to the Bodyguards)

Let us hear you!!!!

GUARDS:

Begin to Win!

Fight for Life!

Grope for Hope!

GRACE: Grope for hope! That flier you sent—That's what it said on the outside and it had a picture of a boxing glove—

BURT: That's right—

GRACE: My dad gave me a pair of kids' gloves when I was ten—as a joke.

BURT: You're finding it, Grace—

GRACE: We used to spar in the garage. Mom hated that!

BURT: I'll bet she did!

GRACE: She told me good girls didn't fight.

BURT: But you didn't listen to her—

GRACE: Not then. Not until my dad died a year later. I kept looking for those gloves but I could never find them—

(The pace is getting too slow for Burt)

BURT: Let's get to it, Grace. Feel the burn. I'll bet you wish you'd had those gloves again—

GRACE: Oh, I do—

BURT: So you could hit your husband back the way he hits you—

GRACE: James never hit me—

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