

# The Predicament

By David Radcliff

*This drama highlights the problem and complexity of child exploitation in the world by comparing the experiences of two young women whose lives intersect in a moment of decision. The drama calls for nine actors, some or all of whom can be youth.*

Stage is set with two centers of action, each with independent lighting (in the absence of lighting, curtains could be used to cover each scene when the other is being used, or the actors could simply abandon their set while the other one is active). One set has a small portable table with tablecloth, with four chairs and table service. Other props could simulate a contemporary American kitchen. Whatever items used would need to be quickly moved aside after the first scene. The second center of action features a board on the ground held up by two bricks. The only other props for this scene are a well-worn cook pot and a few plates and sets of chopsticks. The family in the first setting is dressed in typical end-of-the-workday attire. The characters in the second are dressed in well-worn clothing, perhaps baggy shorts and shirt and sandals for the male and some kind of wrap-around dress for the woman. The young girl could be wearing longer baggy pants and a loose blouse. Their dress should suggest typical clothing for a poor family of Southeast Asia.

## Scene I

[The play opens with the American family preparing for dinner. Mom and dad talk about the day while putting food on the table (quiche and salad). The parents can be played by adults or by youth dressed for the part. Lighting goes up on this scenario.]

**Dad:** And to make things worse, the coffee maker went out, so we had to send out for coffee, for heaven's sake! And then the copier was on the blink--well, it was just one of those days.

**Mom:** I'm sorry to hear about it, dear. I suppose I had a pretty good day compared to that. The Clemmons wanted to take a second look at that house over on Walnut. They say it's a little out of their range, but then they saw that big swingset in the back. It would be great for their children. If I could just make this sale, we'd be all set for remodeling this kitchen. [Looking up] Why would anyone want to put up a border featuring chickens in bonnets!?

**Dad:** [Affectionately and moving toward her] Well, you're certainly no old hen to me, honey.

**Mom:** Thank you, dear. [brief pause] Yes, this will look like a whole new kitchen when I get through with it. Any word on the situation at the office?

**Dad:** Well, they sent out a memo today. I brought a copy of it home. Here it is; "Due to increased outsourcing potential utilizing off-site resources, management will continue to explore various means of right-sizing the labor force at Commonwealth Industries."

**Mom:** Translation, please.

**Dad:** They can hire cheaper labor overseas and there are going to be cuts at the plant.

**Mom:** Surely they won't cut your job!

**Dad:** I don't think they will; especially if the union agrees to a reduction in benefits.

**Mom:** We'll find a way to manage, no matter what they do. Will you call the children for supper?

**Dad:** [off to side] Kids, time for *ze suppere* (fake French accent)!

**Mom:** I love it when you speak French, honey.  
[Teenage daughter and younger sibling (brother or sister, 10-12 years old) arrive.]

**Jamie** (younger brother or sister): What's for supper, Mom?

**Mom:** Quiche and salad.

**Jamie:** *Leftovers!* (as in "yuk")

**Mom:** [as she continues setting the table] Jamie, it's been several days since we had this quiche, and it's all I had time for today.

**Jamie:** If we keep eating quiche, you'll have us all speaking French!

**Dad:** Just be thankful we've got food on the table, Jamie.

**Jamie:** Oh, brother, here we go again... "Think of all the hungry children in China..."

**Andrea** (teenage daughter): Jamie, it wouldn't hurt you to think a little more about others once in a while. We just had a session on poverty and hunger last week in youth group. Did you know that over a billion people in the world live on less than a dollar a day?

**Jamie:** Hey, I wish someone would give me a dollar a day! It would sure beat my weekly allowance!

**Andrea:** (with some condescension) I don't think you quite understand.

**Dad:** [sitting down at the table] If we can dispense with the discussion of global economics, maybe we can work in some time for supper. [after they all are seated] Andrea, would you have the blessing?

**Andrea:** Dear Lord, we thank you that we have food to eat, especially this delicious quiche [she and Jamie open their eyes long enough to exchange looks], and help us to be more thoughtful of others. Be with us everyday. In Jesus' name, amen.

**Mom:** So, what's going on this evening?

**Andrea:** I'm going to the mall with Tracy. Coach says we all have to have our new shoes by the first game this Saturday.

**Dad:** How much are they going to cost?

**Andrea:** Well, at Sportcenter we are supposed to get a break due to our whole team buying their shoes there.

**Dad:** Yes...[waiting for more information about the price]

**Andrea:** And we really weren't given a choice about the brand, since they all have to look the same.

**Dad:** Why do I feel like you're avoiding telling me the actual price--you know, the numbers on the little tag.

**Andrea:** O.K., around seventy bucks.

**Dad:** Whew! We'll have to take out a mortgage on the house!

**Andrea:** Dad!

**Dad:** I can remember what a pair of sneakers cost when I was a kid...

**Jamie:** [teasing dad] Yeah, we were just learning about the age of the dinosaurs in history today. [Mom enjoys the joke, but quickly stops laughing when dad gives her a faked angry look.]

**Andrea:** I'll use some of my own money, so you won't be hit too hard.

[knock on the door]

**Andrea:** I guess Tracy's here. Gotta go! Mom, would you save that terrific quiche (looks at Jamie) for when I get home?

**Mom:** Sure, dear. See you later. Be back by eight.

## Scene II

[Lights go up on second scene--somewhere in southeast Asia. As the scene opens, the daughter, a slight girl of thirteen or so, is alone in the one room home. Depending on the talent of the person playing this role, she either begins softly playing the flute, or pretending she is a dancer doing a graceful traditional dance. After thirty seconds or so, the mother enters and watches her daughter silently for a few moments, smiling at the performance. When the girl notices her, she abruptly stops. The mother begins to dish out some kind of food (this can be pantomimed) from a single pot onto a plate on a low table (they will sit on the floor on mats as they eat). Other props perhaps include a lantern, a small altar with incense candles, one well-worn wooden chair, perhaps a scavenged can or other container, and several rolled up mats for sleeping.]

[In a few moments, the father arrives and sits down in silence. The wife passes a plate to him, and after pausing for a brief prayer, he begins to eat, using his fingers or a bit of bread to scoop the food. The daughter sits patiently to the side, weaving together several strands of thread.]

**Mother:** [pausing between sentences; speaks deferentially to her husband] The Chandra boy died last night. He had gotten so, so weak. The bad harvest has affected the whole village, but especially the children. We must give his family a chicken.

**Father:** [sharply, but without anger] How can we!?! You know that we barely have enough for ourselves.

**Mother:** How can we not? It is the right thing to do at a time of mourning. [Father puts his head in his hands.]

**Mother:** [after a few moments] What is the matter, my dear husband?

**Father:** The ox is sick.

[Mother puts her hand to her mouth as she gasps. Daughter looks up from her weaving. Mother sits beside

father, and places her hand lightly on his shoulder. Daughter rises and goes to side of room, as if looking out the window. Light fades out.]

### Scene III

[Scene shifts to shopping mall. Props include a shoe rack of some kind with at least several pairs shoes. Andrea and Tracy are examining one particular pair. A high school-age salesman stands in the background. If possible, he is dressed in an imitation referee's striped shirt.]

**Andrea:** They are cool, aren't they?

**Tracy:** Yeah. I wish the volleyball team had gotten these. Have you seen what our coach picked out? They don't even match our uniforms!

**Andrea:** [looking at the price tag] They are a little more than I thought they would be.

**Tracy:** Well, what do you expect--they're Skywalkers.

**Andrea:** Yeah, and I guess the price went up because Bill Knight, the Skywalker CEO, was having a hard time living off the \$5 billion they say he's got stashed away.

**Tracy:** So, do you have enough money with you?

**Andrea:** Not exactly. Let's see if we can make a deal. [to salesman] Could you help us?

**Salesman:** What can I do for you?

**Andrea:** I was wondering if these shoes may be going on sale any time soon.

**Salesman:** Not that I know of. That's our most popular brand. Let me know if I can assist you. [walks away]

**Tracy:** [when he's out of earshot] He could assist *me* by asking me out this weekend.

**Andrea:** [as Tracy keeps looking at the guy] Excuse me; if I could have your attention for a moment. I don't know what to do. I don't have enough cash.

**Tracy:** Hey! Didn't your parents just get you your own ATM card?

**Andrea:** Yes! I forgot! A!T!M!

**Tracy:** "Any Time Money"! [They exchange high fives and head off for the ATM machine in the mall.]

### Scene IV

[Daughter walks into house carrying water container on her head. Mother is already there, cleaning the cooking pot.]

**Mother:** [as daughter sets water down] I have spoken to your father. We hope to be able to send you to school if we have a better harvest this year. I have been saving money from my sewing and now have almost \$15. [pulls wad of bills from her pocket]. This alone could provide two months of tuition. [moves closer to daughter] I just want for you to have more opportunities than I have had. And you are such a skilled (musician or dancer). You must find a way to develop your skills even more.

[Father enters]

**Father:** Please leave us for a moment, daughter. [she exits] The ox died today.

[Mother sits down, weak in the knees, with her head in her hands.]

**Mother:** What will we do?

**Father:** We must have an ox to work the fields.

**Mother:** Can we not pay to rent one from a neighbor?

**Father:** They will demand too much in return. And besides, then we cannot use the animal whenever we need it. I think we must purchase another one.

**Mother:** But how? We have no money.

**Father:** We have your sewing money. [Mother unconsciously clutches pocket where the money is]. But even that will not be enough. We need another \$30.

**Mother:** But where can we get such money?

**Father:** Our daughter may have to go to the city.

**Mother:** Could you or I not go instead? We could work there for a few months at a time, and then return.

**Father:** You know they will not hire adults when they can get children who will work for a cheaper wage. I see no other way.

**Mother:** O Lord, not this!

### Scene V

[Scene shifts back to the shoe store at the mall]

**Tracy:** Thank you, Lord, for the ATM!

**Andrea:** They are some fine looking shoes. But....I don't know.

**Tracy:** [still admiring the shoes] You'll be a skying, flying, leaping-small-forwards-with-a-single-bound scoring machine.....[realizing what Andrea said] what do you mean "you don't know"?

**Andrea:** Look where they were made.

**Tracy:** I've never heard of that place.

**Andrea:** It's in Southeast Asia. Lots of U.S. companies set up factories there to manufacture products they sell here.

**Tracy:** Wait a minute. How can they buy the materials, pay someone to make them, ship them half-way around the world, and still make a profit?!

**Andrea:** Two forty seven.

**Tracy:** You mean "747"--like air freight?

**Andrea:** No. Two dollars and forty-seven cents. That's how much it costs to manufacture a pair of these, because the materials aren't that expensive and they pay the workers less than two dollars a day. So they can easily afford to sell them for eighty-nine bucks here.

**Tracy:** So, where does the other...(long pause as she calculates in her head)...\$86.53 go.

**Andrea:** [kidding her] Math never was your strong suit.

**Tracy:** Hey, I passed with flying colors. [Andrea scowls and looks skeptical]. O.K., I passed. [Andrea is still skeptical] Alright, I got through by half a point on the final exam.

**Andrea:** At least you understand fractions. Anyway, the rest of the money goes to ship `em and advertise `em--you know that guy with the Lakers gets \$10 million a year to wear them--and the rest is profit.

**Tracy:** Wow.

**Andrea:** And that's not the worst thing.

**Tracy:** I don't think I want to know.

**Andrea:** A lot of the workers in factories like these are kids.

**Tracy:** [hopefully] Teenagers with an afterschool job?

**Andrea:** Kids younger than us who don't go to school at all.

**Tracy:** I'm sure it really doesn't happen that way too often...

**Andrea:** They say that over 250 million children under 15 in the world have to work for a living.

**Tracy:** Where did you learn all this stuff? Have you been watching one of those goofy talk shows?

**Andrea:** Church. We studied it in youth class.

**Tracy:** What's this got to do with religion? We never talk about this stuff at our church.

**Andrea:** You think God wants these kids to be working like this so that we can look cool and some corporation can make billions?

**Tracy:** Well, I guess I never....

**Andrea:** I don't think so!

**Tracy:** [after a moment] So, what about the shoes?

**Andrea:** [with some resignation and frustration] I don't know what to do...

**Tracy:** You know, Andi, it's only one pair of shoes, only \$89. How much difference can that make?

### Scene VI

[Scene shifts back to Southeast Asia. Father and another man are talking in the father's house. The other man could be dressed in a more "Western" way; i.e. with an American style shirt or T-shirt of some kind. He is obviously better off than the father.]

**Father:** I only need \$30 to purchase an ox. I think you are expecting too much in return!

**Agent:** But how else can I be sure that I will get my money back? When is the last time you had \$30? When your son was born, you only killed a few chickens to celebrate--no pork, not even a goat! How can I expect to get this money back from you any other way?

**Father:** But how can I give her over to you?!

**Agent:** Others have done it. In fact, nearly every family in town. Each of them has benefitted from such an arrangement.

**Father:** [sharply] But have the children benefitted?!

**Agent:** Certainly the children gain valuable experience, and they are able to go to the city--this is every child's dream.

**Father:** I suspect it will be more of a nightmare. [slight pause] You know I have no choice but to deal with you. I beg you for mercy.

**Agent:** Mercy is a luxury I cannot afford. I will be by in the morning. Be ready.

**Father:** [with resignation] I will be ready.

### Scene VII

[Scene shifts back to shoe store]

**Salesman:** [walking over to girls] So, what do you think of the shoes?

**Tracy:** You don't want to know!

**Andrea:** [to salesman] I haven't quite made up my mind.

**Tracy:** [trying to make him think they're on the verge of a decision] It's really nothing. It's just that we're not completely sure if this is what we really want. It'll just take us a few more minutes, I'm sure. [giving Andrea a "look"]

**Andrea:** [matter-of-factly] Actually, it's a moral issue.

**Salesman:** [with an attitude of "what planet are you from"] Oookaaay. Just let me know when you resolve your...moral dilemma about this shoe purchase. [he walks away shaking his head]

**Tracy:** Now, look what you've done! He'll never ask me out after this! He thinks we're crazy!

**Andrea:** [with some resignation] Well, maybe I am. Maybe this isn't such a big deal. It's just that now that I know this stuff, life's gotten so...complicated. The things we do affect people all the way around the world. My choices making a difference in some other young person's life. Some of us having so much when others have so little. It drives me crazy. Why can't I just enjoy the simple pleasures of life--like buying a new pair of basketball shoes!?! Why does everything have to be so...hard!

### Scene VIII

[Scene opens with mother and daughter talking alone]

**Mother:** He says there will be a good job for you. You will be an entertainer. I told him you were very talented, and could make someone a lot of money. And that you were a good girl. [reaches into pocket] Here, take this money. It's not much, but it will be a little cushion for you. [daughter reaches out to mother, placing her head on her shoulder] Don't worry child. Things will work out for you. I have so many dreams for you. I am sure they will find a way to be fulfilled. You know that your father and I would not do this if we did not have to. But...we must have a new ox if we are to survive.

### Scene IX

[back at the shoe store]

**Tracy:** Andy, for goodness sake, it's only a pair of shoes. [slight pause] O.K., as your trusted friend who tries to help even when I don't have a clue why you do what you do, let me make a suggestion. You've got until Saturday until your first game, right? Let's go home and think about it, then we can come back when you've come to your senses...I mean, when you've made up your mind. Alright?

**Andrea:** Good idea, Trace. Where would I be without you. Come on, I'll buy you an ice cream. Kind of a consolation prize for me ruining your date with Mr. Shoe Salesman.

**Tracy:** [looking back over her shoulder as they depart] I'm not sure I could go out with a guy in a striped shirt anyway. (Or "who wears shorts like those," or "who's obviously not concerned for the moral dimensions of athletic shoe sales.")

### Scene X

[Scene in Southeast Asia is rearranged by removing most of the props.] Daughter and agent arriving at the room; daughter carries a small bag of belongings. The room is very sparsely decorated, with a sleeping mat on the floor and one well-worn chair.

**Agent:** This is where you'll be staying. You will need to get up early for breakfast, then report for work after that.

[If daughter plays the flute, she pulls it out of her bag; if she is a dancer, she pulls out oriental fan or brightly colored clothing.]

**Agent:** [looking at this item] You won't be needing that right away. For now you'll be working in the factory downstairs. [noting her surprise and disappointment] Don't be upset with me! This is actually a good job. I could have sent you to the brothel, where you wouldn't have a room to yourself, if you know what I mean. It actually would have made me more money in the short run, but sometimes the girls there don't last as long. So, do what you are told here. They beat the ones who don't obey. Work hard. Stay out of trouble. And you will be able to pay this debt off in just a few years. And don't think of running away--you'd hate to see the ox taken away



from your parents when they need it so badly. Well, you'd better get to sleep--your day will begin early.

[Agent leaves the room. Daughter sits motionless for a few moments. Then she takes out her fan or flute, either beginning a mournful dance that ends up with her bent to the floor, or playing a tune that symbolizes her sadness and loneliness. Either one should last less than a minute. Five seconds after she concludes, lights go out.]

*At this point, if the cast is interested and has researched the issue of child exploitation, there could be a time of dialogue with members of the audience.*

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