

## THE CHOPIN PLAYOFFS

by Israel Horovitz

Fern - Stanley - Irving

**The Play:** This is play number three in a trilogy by Mr. Horovitz based on stories by Morley Torgov. At the heart of the play is a piano contest between Irving Yanover and Stanley Rosen, two sixteen-year-old boys living in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Canada in 1947. More precisely, the "playoffs" occur between the Rosen and Yanover families for their position in the Jewish community, between the two boys in their private struggles to each win the heart of Fern Fipps, a very Protestant girl (much to the horror of the two very Jewish families), and between Fern and the boys as she attempts to make the right decision and please everyone. The play snaps and crackles with these individual playoffs as the boys battle, the parents battle, the boys battle with the parents, and Fern becomes the ultimate judge on the entire proceedings. Added to the mix of children and parents, Horovitz weaves two brilliant characters: Ardenshensky, an old Jew, and Uncle Goldberg, Irving's old Jewish uncle (both roles played by the same actor). Here the wisdom of age and a sense of the struggle between the old world and the new offers a balance and much fun. As Fern promises her heart to the winner of the playoffs, the play serves almost as a boxing ring (Horovitz even calls for a prizefight bell to ring the transitions between scenes). The play concludes with lessons for everyone. Young and old alike question the decisions made in youth that will effect one's life forever.

**The Scene:** Not only have Irving and Stanley been preparing for the piano playoffs, they have been struggling to win the affection of Fern Fipps. Fern has demonstrated earlier in the play that she likes each of the boys very much and it is a difficult decision to choose between them. The boys are aggressive in their attempts to discredit each other. This is the first time we see all three of them together, due to a mistake on Fern's part about who the date tonight was to be with.

**Special Note:** Mr. Horovitz cautions actors to avoid any stereotypical behavior with the characters in this play. In addition, Yiddish or Eastern European accents—"or stereotypically 'Jewish' intonation" should be avoided.

## SCENE 1

### THE CHOPIN PLAYOFFS

**IRVING**

**FERN**

**STANLEY**

*Irving is alone a moment. Fern calls across stage to Irving who will move to school lockers (probably imagined), open his locker and remove books, as he smiles at Fern, vaguely interested, heroically aloof.)*

**Fern:** I'm really sorry about the confusion on Saturday night...

**Irving:** Oh, hey, don't even think about it.

**Fern:** I'm sorry, Irving. I really am. I really thought it was for next week that we'd agreed.

**Irving:** Hey, really, don't worry.

**Fern:** I don't want to miss out.

**Irving:** (amazed.) In what sense?

**Fern:** I want to make sure that we get to go out next Saturday night. I don't want to miss out.

**Irving:** (Smiles as little as he can.) Oh... well... sure, we can do that. I'll have to break a thing... but sure... we can. (New attitude here.) So... Fern... How's Rosen? Good dancer? (They stop a moment)

**Fern:** Stanley Rosen? Good dancer? Yes. Stanley's a *good* dancer, but not a *great* dancer...

**Irving:** Oh, sure, I understand. It must have been a little, I dunno... embarrassing for you, dancing with him all last night...

**Fern:** One makes do, Irving.

**Irving:** Oh, yes, Fern, one does... (pauses; smiles and then looks at Fern seriously.) Uh, Fern, is there anything about Rosen that you think is, I dunno, particularly *horrible*? From your particular point of view, I mean...

**Fern:** From my particular point of view? He fights. That's horrible. I hate that.

**Irving:** Mmmm, yuh... Anything else?

**Fern:** (Pauses; confidentially.) Horrible? No... oh, well, he has a little dandruff. I wouldn't call it *horrible*, but it's a definite imperfection....

**Irving:** Dandruff, huh? Poor Rosen, huh? Poor guy.

**Fern:** Isn't it wonderful news about the contest? About the scholarship and all. It's such a fabulous chance for us... for you I mean... with your talent. Do you think you could win it?

**Irving:** The contest? Me? Win it? Positive. Sure. I can win it. I'm the best musician around, right?

**Fern:** You shouldn't be immodest, Irving. It's immature. It's also unattractive.

**Irving:** I'm just looking at the facts, coldly, Fern, as though I weren't me... immodesty is, well, different. My view is cold, clinical, flatly realistic... I'm simply the best musician in the "Soo"...

**Fern:** What about Stanley? (Stanley walks, behind Irving; faces Fern obliquely, puts fingers behind Irving's head, discreetly, forming horns of a beast.)

**Irving:** Rosen? What about him?

**Fern:** (nervously.) Well, he uh, he, uh.... Stanley plays, uh, pretty well, too... He's with us!!! Hello, Stanley. (Irving spins about; faces Stanley.)

**Irving:** Rosen.

**Stanley:** (nods.) Yanover. Fern.

**Fern:** (Trying to ease the unbearable tension.) Are you trying out for the contest, too, Stanley?

Stanley: Does a bear pee in the woods?

**Fern:** That is so completely uncouth, Stanley Rosen...

**Irving:** (happily) Very little couth, Rosen... It's true... (looks at watch.)

**Stanley:** Right, Yanover, you ought'a know...

Irving: I ought'a know what, exactly, Rosen? It's a little difficult to follow the twistings and turnings of your unique mind...

**Stanley:** Fat lip is what springs to my unique mind, Yanover...

**Fern:** Is that a threat of violence, Stanley Rosen? Because, if it is, I'm going straight home.

**Irving:** No, you stay, Fern. I'll go! I've got to practice. There's no magic to perfection. It's all in the honing of genius ... (Smiles. To Fern.) I'll call you, usual time, Fern... (Starts off; stops.) Oh, yuh... Playing *pretty* well is not playing *very* well Fern. (To Stanley.) Fern said you play pretty well, Rosen, but, Irving Yanover plays very, very well. This is a hard cold fact of life. I'll call you, Fern. It's always a pleasure, Rosen... (Irving looks at Stanley's shoulder and then looks up at the sky; then back at Stanley again.) Bizarre, huh, snowing at this time of year. Ah, well, that's Canada...

**Stanley:** What's this, Yanover?

**Fern:** It's not snowing, Irving...

**Irving:** Then, what the hell's on Rosen's shoulder?

**Fern:** Irving Yanover! That is *so* cruel! (Irving reaches across and brushes dandruff from Stanley's shoulder. Stanley punches Irving, who staggers backwards and then rushes at Stanley. Fern is horrified.)

Fern: Stop! Stop it, you two, stop!

**Stanley:** Brain-damaged     **Irving:** Turd-faced, no-balled Chihuahua  
Homo-putz!

**Fern:** This is mortifying! Stop it! (The boys now wrestle. Music in:  
Chopin. The same piece is played, out of synch, by two single piano.  
Fern runs off. The lights black out.)

**END SCENE**

## SCENE 2

### THE CHOPIN PLAYOFFS

*(The scene has shifted once again to Capy's Grille. Stanley is, as they say, fit to be tied. The lights widen to include Stanley and Fern, and Irving, who stands at the piano, watching Fern and Stanley. They will "act" that other students fill the imagined other tables and are overhearing Stanley's rage)*

FERN: I...I'm sorry, Stanley, I got confused... I thought I made the date with Irving...

STANLEY: You told me Capy's at three, so, at three I was at Capy's. Now it's five and where am I? Still at Capy's but you're here too, and with who?

IRVING: Whom...you said "who."

STANLEY: If you enjoy life, I wouldn't, Yanover, okay?

FERN: This is a nightmare!

STANLEY: You're telling *me*? You're not the one waiting here for two and a half hours only to watch you walk in the place holding hands with this brain-damaged homo-putz!

IRVING: *(Stepping in)* This really is a nightmare!

STANLEY: You say something, Yanover?

IRVING: Yuh. I did, Rosen. I said that this is a nightmare.

STANLEY: You wanna step outside, Yanover?

FERN: Stanleyyyy!

IRVING: Typical Rosen move: he waits for us for two hours and then right away he wants to step outside. *I* don't want to step outside. I've just been outside. But, listen, Rosen, you wanna step outside, be my guest: step.

STANLEY: Ho. Ho-ho. Ho-ho-ho. It's hard for me to sit still for your rapid-fire, slashing wit, Yanover.

IRVING: You're not sitting, Rosen, you're standing. When your knees are stiff and your *tookis* is perpendicular to the floor, you are standing. When your knees are bent and your *tookis* is parallel to the floor, it is then you are sitting.

*(Stanley will shove Irving. N.B.: Shove = \*)*

STANLEY: Damn! I forgot...*tookis* up: stand\*; *tookis* down: sit\*... this man has a firm grip on the basics\*...what a *thinker*\*...what a great goddam *mind*. *Tookis* up: stand.\* *Tookis* down: sit.\* *Fabulous!*\*

## THE CHOPIN PLAYOFFS

FERN: I'm leaving before the fistfight starts again, thank you...

STANLEY: No, don't leave, Fern, please! I am not fighting! Please stay! This is my only afternoon off! I'm not clear again until Monday! *(To Irving; loud whisper)* If she leaves, Yanover, I will drop out of school and dedicate my life to your death.

IRVING: Any time, any place, any Army you wanna bring with you, pecker-face...

FERN: You both promised me! You promised me!

STANLEY: *(Sudden shift; to Fern)* We're not fighting! *(To Irving)* Are we fighting?

IRVING: Absolutely not.

FERN: Let's sit down together, then, okay?

STANLEY: But you're my date, Fern, dammit! *(Another fierce whisper, to Irving)* If that *tookis* of yours goes down, this foot of mine goes up...if you get my point...you will... *(Stanley twists Irving's flesh, unseen by Fern)*

IRVING: *(To Fern)* I have to go home now, really. I shouldn't stay. I've, uh, got to help my father with inventory...

STANLEY: You have a father? Gosh, I thought you were found under a rock, putz-face...

IRVING: At least I was *found*, shit-for-brains! You've yet to be discovered...like Pluto...and I don't mean the planet, Rosen. I mean Goofy's friend, the dog...

STANLEY: This is the goddam limit, homo-head! My foot is heading for your anus, and I don't mean the planet, either!

FERN: *(Starts to sob. Her shoulders shake. She moans, rasps, shouts)* Will you two *stop*...will you two please *stop*...will you two please please *please* stoppppp? *Will you? Will yoooo?*

IRVING: We're not fighting, Fern...

STANLEY: Not at all...

FERN: That's not it! *(Moans; sobs)* Oh, Godddd...

IRVING: We're really not fighting, Fern. Look at us...

STANLEY: There's not reason to cry...

IRVING: I apologize, Fern, I really do... Don't cry...

FERN: *(Crying openly)* I'm not crying...

## THE CHOPIN PLAYOFFS

IRVING: We really weren't going to fight...not in front of you.

STANLEY: Honest to God...not in front of you...

FERN: *(Sobs)* That's not it... That's not why I'm upset...

STANLEY: What's it, then?

IRVING: Why are you upset?

FERN: Because...I can't...tell you apart!

IRVING: You can't tell who apart?

FERN: You and Irving.

IRVING: I *am* Irving.

FERN: *(Sobs)* You *seeee*?

*(Stanley and Irving stare at each other a moment)*

STANLEY: You can't tell me apart from Irving Yanover?

FERN: No, I can't. I really can't. You both play piano, you both crack jokes, you're both depressed all the time, you're both Jewish, you're both skinny, you're both conceited...

IRVING: Rosen has dandruff.

FERN: Oh, my God! That was really *cruel*!

STANLEY: I'll kill you for that!

IRVING: Rosen is round-shouldered.

FERN: So are you. You're much more round-shouldered than he is.

IRVING: I am not!

STANLEY: You are, Yanover!

FERN; You are so!

STANLEY: Practically a hunchback...

IRVING: An hunchback...

STANLEY: How about *an* hit in the head, Yanover?

FERN: *No fighting!*

IRVING: Irving started it. I didn't. Don't blame me.

STANLEY: Don't blame me, either, Fern: blame Rosen!

FERN: *Oh, my God...* I really can't tell you apart: it's true! *It's troooooo...* *(She sobs)* Every night, before I go to sleep, the phone rings and it's one of you...as soon as I hang it up, I know the other one will get mad at me...because the other one has been calling and calling, waiting for the line to stop being busy... *(Pauses)* Just the same, just exactly the same... *(She sobs, again)* You dance the same, you kiss

## THE CHOPIN PLAYOFFS

the same, you both like to hold the same hand, you like the same books, the same movies, the same records, you're both terrible athletes, A+ students, neither of you smokes, nor drinks, both of you crack bad jokes endlessly...and you both talk about Chopin all the time...and ... you both...upset me *so much!* Ooooo! *(She sobs, again)*

STANLEY: Fern Fipps, this is really insulting. It's not insulting for Yanover to be mistaken for me, but I am...insulted deeply. Deeply!

FERN: I knew I made the date with you, Stanley, but I got confused and thought you, Irving, were Stanley...that's why I was late, Stanley.

IRVING: And our date was tomorrow, Fern... I was supposed to practice in Music Hall today, so I can cream Rosen come the playoffs.

STANLEY: Come the playoffs, dear boy, the cream will be Rosen. The *creamed* will be Yanover. *(Stanley threatens to hit Irving)*

FERN: NO FIGHTING! YOU PROMISED! YOU PROMISED ME, BOTH OF YOU!

*(Stanley and Irving face each other, fists ready)*

IRVING AND STANLEY: We're not fighting!

FERN: I can't stand it! *I'm going to end up hating both of you!*

STANLEY: This is your goddam fault, Yanover!

FERN: ...I like being with both of you, but I can't be with both of you...and I can't choose one over the other because I can't tell you apart...

STANLEY: Looookkk, I have a simple solution, Fern...

FERN: *(Sobs again)* What is it?

STANLEY: How about the concert? Maybe the better man should win you in the playoffs, Fern. Let the winner really *win*.

IRVING: Aren't you kinda' making a mistake there, Rosen?

STANLEY: I hardly think so, Yanover...

IRVING: Oh, really?

STANLEY: Oh, really...

FERN: Oh, that's such a good idea, Irving.

STANLEY: Stanley...

FERN: *(To Irving)* Stanley, I mean...

STANLEY: Me, Fern, me...

FERN: Ooooo, my God! The playoffs aren't until the end of June.

## THE CHOPIN PLAYOFFS

It's only May 10! How will I ever *live* till the end of June?

IRVING: Until then, you go out with only me, and after that the winner...Irving.

FERN: Until then I'll go out with you, Irving, one week and you, Stanley, the next week, and then you, Irving, the next week, and so on... *(Seriously)* Please, say "yes"? *Please!*

STANLEY: Yes, I say "yes"...

IRVING: I really hate this. I want you to know that I really and truly hate this... Yes, okay, yes.

FERN: *(Thrilled)* I...am...sooo...relieved!