

CHARACTERS

Chris, 50s

You want Chris at your party. She will talk to people she doesn't know, find things to say to fill silences and generate laughter. Part of this is because Chris is at home in crowds, holding court, being the centre of attention. Without Chris in her life, Annie would be better behaved, her life less fun. The two of them are like naughty schoolgirls. Ideal car — who cares, as long as it's a cabriolet. Ideal holiday — Algarve.

Annie, 50s

Annie will join in mischief but is at heart more conformist and less confrontational than Chris. After Chris has put a waiter's back up in the restaurant, Annie will go in and pour calm. The mischievousness Chris elicits saves Annie from being a saint. She has enough edge to be interesting, and enough salt not to be too sweet. Ideal car — who cares, as long as it's reliable. Ideal holiday — walking in English countryside.

Together these two are greater than the sum of their parts. They would be lesser humans had they not met each other Each is spiritual mustard to the other's meat.

Cora, around 40

Cora's past is the most eclectic, her horizons broadened by having gone to college. This caused a tectonic shift with her more parochial parents. She came back to them pregnant and tail-between-legs, but Cora has too much native resilience to be downtrodden. She is the joker in the pack, but never plays the fool. Her wit is deadpan. It raises laughter in others, but rarely in herself. Her relationship with her daughter is more akin to that between Chris and Annie. Cora doesn't need to sing like a diva but must be able to sing well enough to start the show with Jerusalem and sing the snatches of other songs required. The piano keyboard can be marked up to enable her to play basic chords should she not be a player. Ideal car — who cares, as long as the sound system is loud. Ideal holiday — New York.

Jessie, late 60s/70s

Get on the right side of Jessie as a teacher and she'll be the teacher you remember for life. Get on the wrong side and you will regret every waking hour. A lover of life, Jessie doesn't bother with cosmetics — her elixir of life is bravery. Jessie goes on rollercoasters. Her husband has been with her a long time and is rarely surprised by her actions. Jessie bothers about grammar and will correct stallholders regarding their abuse of the apostrophe "s". Ideal car — strange-looking European thing which is no longer manufactured. Ideal holiday — walking in Switzerland or Angkor Wat.

Celia, age anything 35-50

The fact that Celia is in the **WI** is the greatest justification of its existence. A woman more at home in a department store than a church hall, she may be slightly younger than Chris or the same age, but she always feels like she's drifted in from another world. Which she has. She is particularly enamoured of Jessie, and despite the fact Jessie has very little time for most Celia of this world, there is a rebelliousness in Celia to which Jessie responds. It's what sets Celia apart from the vapid materialism of her peer group and made her defect. Ideal car — Porsche, which she has. Ideal holiday — Maldives, where she often goes.

Ruth, 40s

Ruth's journey is from the false self-confidence of the emotionally abused to the genuine self confidence of the woman happy in her own skin. Ruth is eager to please but not a rag doll, and despite being Marie's right-hand woman she is desperate to be the cartilage in the spine of the WI and keep everyone happy. She has spine herself — if she was too wet, no-one would want her around. But they do, and they feel protective of her because they sense there is something better in Ruth than her life is letting out. They are proved right. Ideal car — at the start, whatever Eddie wants; at the end, whatever she wants. Ideal holiday — at the start wherever Eddie is, at the end wherever he isn't. **The Rabbit Costume:** Ruth made this last night. It should be a cocktail of good intention and not enough time.

Marie, 50s

Marie has gradually built the current 'Marie' around herself over the years as a defence mechanism. She went to her Oz, Cheshire, and found Oz didn't want her. She came back scorched. The WI is a trophy to her, which justifies her entire existence. There is a lingering part of Marie that would love to be on that calendar. Ideal car — something German and well-valeted. Ideal holiday — a quasi-academic tour of somewhere in Persia advertised in a Sunday Supplement which she could then interminably bang on about.

John, Annie's husband, 50s

John is a human sunflower. Not a saint. Not a hero. Just the kind of man you'd want in your car when crossing America. When he dies it feels like someone somewhere turned a light off.

Rod, Chris's husband, 50s

You have to be a certain kind of guy to stick with Chris and Rod loves it. He can give back what he gets, and has a deadpan humour which has always made Chris laugh. He drinks a lot but never so much as to have a problem. He would work every hour to make his shop a success. And John was his mate, even though the relationship was originally channelled through their wives.

Lawrence, late 20s

Hesitant without being nerdy, Lawrence is a shy young man with enough wit to make a joke and enough spirit to turn up at the WI hall in the first place. When he arranges the shots he is close to female nudity but sees only the photo.

Lady Cravenshire, 60s

Lady Cravenshire really doesn't mean to be so patronizing. But the WI girls seem from another world. The world of her estate workers. **Dress:** when she makes an entrance, she must make an entrance. Largely white or cream to outplay the others, with a bigger hat than Marie. She is not a tweed-wearer. She must glide in like a galleon.

Elaine, 20s

Elaine really doesn't mean to be so patronizing. But Jessie seems from another world. The world of her gran. **Dress:** her clinical whites slice through like a knife. You feel you could cut yourself on that dress.

Liam, late 20s

Liam would like to be directing other things than photoshoots for washing powders. He's not so unprofessional as to let it show, but we can sense a slight weariness at having to deal with these women. There's a resigned patience to his actions and each smile he makes we feel is professional. For Liam, this photoshoot is a job. And not the job he wanted. **Dress:** Avoid wearing shades inside a building. If you've gone down that route, you've made the weary boy a wideboy.

Accents

The women of the real calendar in truth came from many parts of the country. Actors should resist the pressure to perform any kind of Yorkshire pyrotechnics. Nothing compromises the truth of comedy like a slavish attention to vowel-sounds and diphthongs. It will become a pebble in the shoe. If you can flatten the "a" so that giraffe no longer rhymes with scarf then that will be more than sufficient; but even that should not be championed over the intrinsic rhythm of the line. People travel. Communities are now gloriously multi-instrumental. We've had accents from Glasgow to Texas make the same part their own.

PRODUCTION NOTE

The characters Annie, Chris, Ruth, Jessie, Celia and Cora pose for the "nude" calendar. Per the author, "As in the best traditions of vaudevillian fan dances, the art of the play's nudity lies in what is withheld. The choreography of this sequence is best described as *"Fabulous Concealment"*.