

# The Play Is the Thang

By Elaine Maikovska

## CAST:

AL MINTON: Male in his early sixties, a writer for various TV game and quiz shows

BEN APPLGATE: Male in his early forties, also a writer who has developed several successful game and quiz shows

DIMITRI RENEE: Male in his twenties, a very buff and very handsome unemployed actor who works as a waiter

## SETTING:

Morning in the beachfront restaurant of a Santa Monica hotel

*(At curtain rise, two men are seated in a minimal, chic Santa Monica café, part of Hotel Shangri-La. They both have laptops out and are discussing a quiz show concept that is in development with a major TV network)*

AL: We're dead if we don't get it over to them by Friday. We have exactly three days.

BEN: Cool it, dude. I've got just the thang. *(He stands up, does a little, soft shoe tap dance)*

AL: Ben, stop screwing around. For God's sake.

BEN: Jeez, relax. Don't be so huffy. We got this. You know how all the networks are reliving the past, digging it up and retooling it, like *Mad Men*, *Pan Am*, even *Playboy*.

AL: *Playboy*? They pulled the plug on it after six shows.

BEN: Okay. Forget *Playboy*. Mutant territory. Pricked too many feminists.

AL: And fair warning to us, it had no story line. No creativity.

BEN: That's the thang. Mine has beaucoup creativity.

AL: Alright already. Give it to me. So what's *your* high and mighty creative concept?

*(DIMITRI enters, comes up to their table. He speaks very distinctly, as though on stage)*

DIMITRI: What can I get for you on this glorious SoCal morning?

AL: I'd like a latte, triple caff, bacon and eggs, over easy, and an English muffin, just jam, hold the butter.

DIMITRI: *(Writes it down and nods)* And you sir?

BEN: Give me the same, but double butter, hold the jam.

*(DIMITRI writes it down, takes their menus, and smiles winsomely, as though posing for a camera shot)*

DIMITRI: Thank you. Your drinks will be right up. *(He exits to place the order)*

BEN: Damn, nice bod.

AL: Let's keep our eyes on the prize. Remember, deadlines, deadlines, not dead us.

BEN: Right, Al. As I was saying, our main audience is all those boomers who just love to relive their days of glory, ahem, their imagined days of imagined glory, but anyway, now that they have one foot in the grave, so to speak, you know their yen for reliving the past . . . Nostalgia is big, way big: *Mad Men, Pan Am*—

AL: Would you please get to the point, for once in your life—just this once? We're really short on time.

BEN: So you remember the quiz show *What's My Line?*

AL: Who the hell over fifty doesn't? Okay, except for the Alzheimer's.

BEN: That show lasted seventeen years with a panel of four celebs, among them Arlene Francis, Dorothy Kilgallen, Bennett Cerf.

AL: Right, the MC was what's his name, on the tip of my tongue . . . uh . . .

BEN: John Daly.

AL: That's right.

BEN: So the premise was the panel had to guess what the line of work was for each contestant.

AL: Right. That was a fun show. I remember one where a prim and proper spinster type was the contestant. Her job was setting pins up for the local Hollywood Bowling Alley. It was hysterical. She stumped them something fierce. *(He chuckles to himself with the remembrance—in a kind of reverie)*

BEN: Okay, Al, so we use the same format exactly, but instead of *What's My Line?* we update it a bit, give the show a new premise and call it . . . *What's My Crime?*

AL: *(Thinking)* So wait . . . *What's My "Crime"?* . . . So criminals, a guessing game? Convicted frickin felons . . . air . . . on NATIONAL TV???? And the public is supposed to guess the CRIME???????

BEN: Exactly right. It's GENIUS. Isn't it?

*(AL reacts with a look expressive that his partner has gone off the deep end)*

BEN: Listen to me. I know the business. Didn't I frame *Minute to Win It*, and *Fear Factor*?

AL: You're jumping off the deep end, straight into quicksand with this, but okay, I'll give you the exact five minutes the studio gives. *(He looks down at his watch)* At exactly 10:40 my ears will shut.

BEN: Hear me out: Besides the nostalgia, people these days are mega voyeurs. They like to watch stuff that they would never get a chance to see up close and personal—like *Cops*, or the prison reality show on MSNBC, or *Dog the Bounty Hunter*. And what about *Hoarders*? And don't forget when Primetime filmed online sex offenders undercover up in NorCal and caught them going after minors. People love to tap into society's psychoneuroses so they don't have to look at their own. The ratings went sky-high.

AL: Okay, so folks get their jollies off of that stuff, but you have one major problem I can see right off the bat, knucklehead. What guy or gal is gonna want to admit he's a bank robber or a terrorist on primetime national TV? Did that thought ever cross your mind?

BEN: No problem, my friend. Got it covered. We make them a deal. If they stump the panel, then they get off with probation, no in-house jail time. Just wear a GPS leg-iron and report weekly.

AL: You're gonna put psychopaths on probation?

BEN: No, no, no. We do all the regular screening, just like on *The Bachelor*. Only photogenic types. Only the suitable for TV get in. Relax. We weed out the psychos. Every contestant must swear to lead a normal, crime-free life or they get thrown back in the

slammer, el pronto. Get it? It's got all these good things going for it: voyeur appeal, nostalgia, and the bottom line, the real kicker—economic appeal. The state spends \$106,000 a year to lock up an inmate, to house these criminals. With two stumpers a week, we'd save California almost ten million a year. And that's just the first year. Gavin Newsom might even push for it. See, it's GENIUS. I'm telling you.

AL: *(Thinking)* The way you put it, Ben, it could have legs. But what do we do about the PC factor? You know, "political correctness"? *(He gestures quote marks with his hands)* You big dummy. The victims, won't they raise a stink?

BEN: I got that covered. Money, money, money. The felons pay them off. You know, make restitution.

AL: You think that criminals are gonna have bills falling out their asses?

BEN: The station will pay them off, just like on any of those judge shows: *Judge Judy, Judge Joe Brown, Judge Hatchett*. You know, any of those twenty shows out there. They'll more than make up for it in advertising. Just like they do on all those courtroom dramas.

AL: It just sounds too weird.

*(DIMITRI returns with their lattes. He puts them down)*

DIMITRI: On the other hand, it does have a fascinating quality to it. I couldn't help overhearing. The premise has a certain *je ne sais quoi*, you know. It's kind of indescribable. *(sic)*

*(BEN smiles)*

BEN: I knew I liked you.

DIMITRI: *(He smiles at BEN and speaks in a very articulate, careful way, as if a voice-over actor auditioning for a part)* Well, I think it's edgy, interesting, fresh. I'm also a big fan of your work, Mr. Applegate. I love *Minute to Win It* and *Fear Factor*.

BEN: Thank you.

*(DIMITRI leaves and goes over to the bar area but remains within earshot of AL and BEN)*

BEN: See? I told you it was killer.

AL: So one kiss-ass waiter in L.A. will maybe watch the show—though I think he'd rather just hear you swoon over his looks. And besides, the guessing would be too easy. There aren't that many crimes. Not enough drama.

BEN: I've got you there. Look at these folks. A little PowerPoint. What are their crimes?

*(BEN engages his computer to project photos)*

*Photo #1 shows a college coed in a cheerleading outfit)*

AL: I don't know. Prostitution maybe.

BEN: Bank embezzling at her local bank when she worked there summers.

*(Photo #2 shows a Sikh wearing a traditional turban)*

AL: Okay. He's a terrorist.

BEN: Driving his taxi with one taillight out.

*(Photo#3 shows a buff man dressed in a business suit)*

AL: This one is easy. It's white collar, something like insider trading.

BEN: Nope. He's the prostitute.

AL: Okay, you're making your point. Guessing could be tricky . . . interesting. It has to be. We need the tension. It might just work. But still . . .

BEN: Yea! You're getting on board. It will be very exciting. There are a million crimes to explore. Sodomy is still on the books in some places, you know, along with adultery. In L.A. zoot suits are still banned, and it's illegal to lick frogs. Plus, think about it. There are a million ways to kill someone, if you want to, you know—guns, bow and arrow, poison, throw them out of a plane, string 'em up with their dog leash till their eyes bulge out.  
*(Puts his hands around his throat and makes a funny face and gurgling noises. This should be a funny scene with gestures)*

AL: Okay, okay, enough. It's turning into mad, mad Ben. I think we have to draw the line somewhere. No murderers allowed.

BEN: We'll talk. It's not any worse than watching tarantulas crawling over someone's face.

AL: You are perverse. I say no murderers. Absolutely no murderers.

BEN: Even manslaughter?

AL: Even that.

BEN: Okey dokey—to start maybe. I'll give you that.

*(Just then DIMITRI rushes forward, gun in hand)*

DIMITRI: Okay, you guys, *up stick 'em* . . . I mean, ***stick up 'em***. Oh shit. I'm just so nervous. You know what I mean. This is a robbery. *(Deep breathing)* Stick 'em up. There, I got it. Put your watches, jewelry, and wallets on the table and turn around.

AL: You can't be serious.

DIMITRI: I am dead serious. I'm not acting now. I've studied acting for too many years. Came all the way from Billings. This might be my big chance to get on your show.

AL: But think about it. You can't murder us. We agreed, didn't we, Ben? *(He nudges BEN)* We agreed we would not put any murderers on the show. So you can't really use that gun. Why would we give you our stuff if you can't threaten to kill us?

BEN: *(Gingerly, hesitatingly at first, since he really didn't agree to exclude murderers, but then more convincingly, given the situation)* We did? . . . Oh, right . . . We did agree. No murderers on the show. Absolutely no murderers. Comprenez vous?

DIMITRI: Oh, I didn't exactly hear that exclusion. I could still wound you. Besides, this is a robbery anyhow.

AL: I can't believe this.

DIMITRI: *(Squares his shoulders, clearly getting into the role of robber)* If you don't give me your stuff, someone is going to get hurt. I'm a pretty good shot. I just want one break. That's all I ask for. Just one tiny, little break. Is that too much to ask?

*(AL attempts clumsily to take his watch off and conceal it in his pocket, but DIMITRI sees the move)*

DIMITRI: Oh no. I saw that. The watch. I need it. Put it on the table.

AL: Not my \$40,000 Chanel watch. Sentimental value. A gift from my ex. It's all I got out of the divorce.

DIMITRI: *(The gun pointed directly at one of Al's body parts)* Sorry, I need valuables. Evidence of the robbery. Put your stuff on the table—the watch, your wallets. There will be a lot of competition. I'm feeling it. I can do this. I can get on the show. *(Both put the items on the table. DIMITRI picks up the watch and the two wallets)*

BEN: So how will we find you? Are you turning yourself in, then?

DIMITRI: Call the cops after I leave. I'll be at my apartment, packing as if to flee. *(DIMITRI pauses, clearly visualizing his escape route. He looks up and adds quickly:)* The boss has the address.

BEN: Dang. He really gets into character.

AL: *(Getting very agitated)* Give me that watch back. I want my watch. The DA will keep it as evidence. It'll be years before I ever see it again.

DIMITRI: Just think, national television. This is all I need to get my big break. When they see this face, I'll be getting calls off the hook.

AL: I didn't want to do this, but you're giving me no other choice. *(He pulls out a gun, points it at DIMITRI)*

DIMITRI: *(Startled)* What are you doing?

BEN: I didn't know you had a gun.

AL: Had to. My ex started stalking me at odd hours—threatening to kill me if I didn't give her the watch back.

BEN: Ballsy of her.

AL: So listen, fella. If you want on the show, you can only wound me, 'cause of the “no murderers” exclusion. *(Makes air quotes)* But I . . . I could actually murder you. And get away with it. It's called self-defense. I'm a very good shot. Grew up in Wyoming herding cattle on a ranch.

BEN: No, you didn't. You're from New Jersey.

AL: *(To BEN)* Now is not the time to quibble. *(Looks at DIMITRI)* So it's your move, bud. What's it gonna be?

DIMITRI: *(Throws his gun at the table)* Dammit. Don't tell me I blew another one. This acting business is insane.

AL: *(Picks up the gun)* It's a stage prop. It's a fucking fake gun.

DIMITRI: *(Ashamedly)* I was an extra for one season of *CSI*.

AL: I almost shot you. Are you nuts?

DIMITRI: Just passionate. I love acting. Want to really get into the business.

AL: *(Shaking his head, completely dumbfounded)* Sheesh.

BEN: Wow, I'm glad that's over. You really scared me to death, had us by the balls. Dimitri, you've got a lot of chutzpah there. *(Beat)* Call my office in the morning. Maybe I can find you something. *(He hands DIMITRI his business card)*

DIMITRI: You mean it, Mr. Applegate? Why, it would mean so much to me. Definitely will do . . . Jeez, I'll bet your food is ready. I'll go check. *(He leaves to get the food)*

*(AL and BEN collapse on the table)*

AL: Holy shit! What the hell just happened here, Ben? He had me so nuts. He had me so scared. I can't believe it. I almost killed a man. Me. A killer—all over a goddamned watch?

BEN: You didn't, though. Just another miracle day in L.A. *(Beat)* Fucking actors. They are all so desperate; they'll do anything. Now, where were we? Okay, murderers . . . murderers as contestants. Can I put that back on the table? Are they really that different? Are they, Al?

*(They huddle together as if going over their plans for their show)*

*Curtain falls)*