

Theme: Famous Americans

Text: Shirley MacLaine: Understudy to the Leading Actress

I arrived in New York at 18, wide-eyed, optimistic, brave and certain I would crash the world of show business overnight. Early in 1954, Steve, my fiancé, persuaded me to apply for a place in the chorus of a new musical, *Pyjama Game*. The director agreed to take me because whenever I opened my mouth on stage they could hear every breath in the gallery.

The night before the New York opening I was made understudy to the leading actress, Carol Haney. I had never had an understudy rehearsal but as the producer said, "It doesn't really matter. Carol is the one person who would go on with a broken neck."

The show was a hit and Carol the star of the season. Several nights passed. I still hadn't had an understudy rehearsal, but whenever I wasn't on stage I watched Carol from the wings', trying to learn the part [though] (1) I was certain I would never need to know it. I was deeply depressed.

10 (2) Then a producer, who was a friend of mine, rang me up and offered me a job as understudy to his leading dancer.

"Nothing will ever stop Carol Haney going on in *Pyjama Game*, you know that. But our leading lady is off now and then." I thought it over and agreed to accept the offer. Before leaving for the theater I wrote my notice, intending to hand it in that night.

(3) I rushed to the subway. There I discovered that the train had got stuck in its tunnel. I finally arrived at the theater half 15 an hour late.

"Where have you been?" the producer asked anxiously.-"I'm awfully sorry. The subway got stuck, but I'll hurry. Anyway, I don't go on stage till the middle of the first act."

"That's what you think! CAROL BROKE HER LEG THIS AFTERNOON AND YOU'RE ON RIGHT NOW!"

I was carrying my notice in my hand. (4) I stuffed it back into my handbag. The world started turning around me. They 20 took me to Carol's dressing room. I asked someone to ring up Steve. I shook so hard that somebody else had to put the make-up on my face. Luckily Carol's costume fitted me. Now the shoes. Disaster! I found a pair of my own black tennis shoes. They didn't go with the costume, but if the audience was looking at my feet I was in trouble anyway.

The leading actor was walking up and down in the wings learning the words to my songs in case I forgot them. Then the stage manager walked out before the curtain. "Ladies and gentlemen. We are sorry to announce that Miss Carol Haney 25 will not be performing tonight. Her part will be taken by a young lady named Shirley MacLaine. We hope you'll enjoy the show." A terrific boo from the audience. Many people rose and walked out. Chaos.

Steve rushed in. "This is your chance, Shirl. Make the most of it." He gave me a kiss and went out to join the audience.

The curtain went up.

Taking a deep breath, I made it safely to the center of the stage. The audience became quiet. Out there were the most 30 important people in show business. They had come to see Carol Haney, but I was on stage instead. I took another breath and spoke the first line. My voice was far too loud. This line was supposed to get a laugh. It didn't. Just as I began the second sentence, they laughed at the first one. I hadn't waited long enough, hadn't given them time. I slowed down a bit and soon we were in the same rhythm. I felt the audience relax, and I did too. Suddenly the communication that I had longed for all my life was there.

35 Then came the second act. In it two dancers and I had to throw our hats into the air and catch them at the last moment. The orchestra would stop playing and everybody would watch breathlessly. I was frightened. Yet everything went fine up to the trick with our hats. Maybe I would manage it after all. Now - the music stopped. We turned our backs to the audience. Together we let the hats roll from our heads down our arms, threw them high into the air and - then it happened. I dropped my hat. The audience gasped. The hat rolled to the edge of the stage. "Shit!" I muttered to myself.

40 The first three rows gasped again. The word spread through the theater. 'Well ... after all this - what a way to end,' I thought.

(5) I rushed to the footlights, picked up the hat, put it on, shrugged a sort of excuse to the audience and finished the number. I remember little else.

Vocabulary:

39 gasp - draw in the breath sharply, as from shock 42 shrug – raise the shoulders

Reading Time (5')

Assignment 1: Participles (10')

In a more formal biography more participles are likely to be used. Connect the underlined sentences using participles. Use the perfect (active) participle in sentences 4 + 5. Use the past (passive) participle in a sentence that you can make up yourself. When transforming the sentences you should write in the third person rather than the first person. The second sentence would begin like this: Then a producer, who was Shirley's friend

Assignment 2: Key moments and climax in narrative fiction

1. Define (at least 3 to 4) **key moments** in this story and give reasons for your choice. (10)

2. Now focus on the **climax** of this story. Try to explain in your answer why this climax even plays a role in Shirley MacLaine's official biography. (10)

3. Write an **ending** to the story. (10)