



Out of Order

A PLAY BY SCOTT DOUGLAS

This play is written to be performed as “Invisible Theatre” (see description on page 20). It can, of course, be performed as a regular play or as reader’s theatre, but ideally it would be performed in a public place like a university, shopping mall, sports arena, etc. The scene revolves around a drink vending machine which sells bottled water.

Characters:

- an Activist
- a Consumer
- a By-stander

These characters could be male or female. Feel free to change any pronouns in the script accordingly.

[The Activist pretends to be looking for something in her backpack. The By-stander sits some distance off, reading or eating lunch. The Consumer enters, drops some money into the drink vending machine, and buys a bottled water. She unscrews the top, takes a sip, and moves off a distance to enjoy her drink. The By-stander gets up and pulls some change from her pocket. The Activist pulls a paper sign from her backpack and tapes it to the front of the drink machine. The sign reads (in small print) “Our society’s obsession with bottled water is ...” (and in huge letters) “OUT OF ORDER”. The By-stander sees the sign, shrugs, puts her change back in her pocket, and sits back down to continue her reading/lunch. The Consumer notices this, and calls to the Activist.]

Consumer: Hey! Is the machine out of order?

[The Activist nods.]

CONSUMER: I just bought a bottled water there.

Activist: Exactly.

[Pause. The Consumer is perplexed. She approached the Activist.]

CONSUMER: What’s wrong with it?

ACTIVIST: With the drink machine?

CONSUMER: Yeah.

ACTIVIST: Do you really want to know?

CONSUMER: Uh, yeah.

ACTIVIST: It’s a tool of the bottled water industry, contributing to the overproduction of non-biodegradable plastics that end up cluttering landfills and poisoning the environment...

[The Consumer rolls her eyes.]

CONSUMER: So there’s nothing wrong with the drink machine.

ACTIVIST: No, there’s something very wrong with the drink machine.

CONSUMER: *[calling to By-stander]*

The machine works, if you want to buy a drink.

BY-STANDER: *[looking up]* Hmm? Oh, thanks, I’m fine.

CONSUMER: *[to Activist]* You can’t just put “out of order” signs on things that aren’t out of order.

ACTIVIST: I’m just trying to raise awareness.

CONSUMER: About what? Water? Since when is water bad for us?

ACTIVIST: No, water’s great. But when you put it in little plastic bottles and sell it as a consumer luxury ...

CONSUMER: Do you have permission to pull this prank?

ACTIVIST: I’m not hurting anyone.

CONSUMER: *[pointing to the By-stander]* She was going to buy a drink. *[to By-stander]* Right?

BY-STANDER: Well, I was thinking about it, but it’s no big deal.

CONSUMER: And then you tricked her into thinking the machine was out of order.

ACTIVIST: If you actually look at the sign you’ll see that it says our society’s obsession with bottled water is out of order.

CONSUMER: And from a distance it looks like “Out of Order”, so people who might want to buy a drink will think the machine’s out of order and they won’t buy one.

ACTIVIST: I’m OK with that.

CONSUMER: So, what — people should just go thirsty and get dehydrated??

ACTIVIST: There are drinking fountains. There’s water in the taps.

CONSUMER: *[disgusted]* Eeuw!

ACTIVIST: What? You take a cup, put it under a tap, pour water into it and drink.

CONSUMER: Tap water is gross.

ACTIVIST: The water in your bottle is probably tap water. Unless it comes from a glacier or an underground spring, it’s just retreated tap water.

CONSUMER: But bottled water is healthier.

ACTIVIST: Really?

CONSUMER: *[to By-stander]* Bottled water is healthier than tap water, right?

BY-STANDER: Sorry?

[The By-stander moves closer to the Activist and the Consumer.]

CONSUMER: Bottled water is healthier than tap water, right?

BY-STANDER: Um, I don't know.

CONSUMER: *[to a member of the "audience"]* That's true, right? That bottled water is less contaminated with bacteria and chemicals than tap water?

ACTIVIST: Are you saying that the town water is contaminated?

BY-STANDER: The town water is contaminated??

CONSUMER: No! It's just that bottled water is safer.

ACTIVIST: Bottled water companies have to follow the same kind of health regulations as municipal water facilities — no more, no less. But people have this sense that their town or city water isn't safe, and the bottled water companies exploit this fear to sell 138 billion litres of bottled water a year. And as the plastic bottles break down over time they release toxins which can seep into the ground water. You want to talk about contamination? Let's look at the source.

CONSUMER: OK, whatever; I'm not going to argue with you.

ACTIVIST: Why not?

CONSUMER: *[walking away]* It's not worth fighting about.

ACTIVIST: It's worth paying a dollar-fifty for half a cent of water and twenty cents of plastic but it's not worth thinking about it or talking about it??

CONSUMER: *[turning]* It's my money.

ACTIVIST: Not any more. Now it's the machine's money. That's how the corporations make their billions of dollars a year.

CONSUMER: Oh, I get it now. You're anti-business.

ACTIVIST: I'm in favour of people

thinking about their actions and the larger implications — like the trend toward the privatization of water, the impact on the global south, the ...

CONSUMER: Sticking up a fake "out of order" sign is the same as sticking a fake "closed" sign on front of a store.

ACTIVIST: I have a right to free speech ...

CONSUMER: You don't have the right to interfere with business.

ACTIVIST: So, what? The machine has more rights than I do?



CONSUMER:

It probably makes more money than you do.

ACTIVIST: Does that makes it more important? "All hail the machine!"

CONSUMER: You're saying the machine doesn't work, and it does work, so you're a liar. Simple as that.

ACTIVIST: Again, if you look at what the sign actually says ...

BY-STANDER: *[trying to avoid conflict]*

What if — This is just an idea, you know — but what if, instead of an "Out of Order" sign, you had, like, information pamphlets, and people could make up their own minds?

ACTIVIST: I can do pamphlets.

[She pulls a pamphlet from her backpack and gives it to the Consumer.]

CONSUMER: Thanks.

[The Consumer crumples it up and throws it away without looking at it.]

BY-STANDER: *[to Consumer]* OK, you're not helping.

ACTIVIST: See?

CONSUMER: It just ticks me off. People should be able to buy whatever they want, provided they have the money. I like drinking bottled water. It feels healthy. I don't care whether it is or not, it feels healthy. I like the way I look carrying a bottle. Hauling around a mug or a goofy sports bottle isn't cool. I want to drink my water and then toss the bottle in the recycling container, and then it's somebody else's problem. And I don't like being manipulated, I don't like being judged, and I don't like signs that say "Out of Order" when it's not true.

ACTIVIST: You know what? You're right, you're absolutely right. I've been suggesting that the machine doesn't work, and in fact it works perfectly. It's doing exactly what it's supposed to do. It takes people's money and gives them what they want. It has no choice in the matter, and it's not fair to criticize the machine for doing what it was made to do. I apologize to the machine.

[The Activist takes the "Out of Order" sign off of the drink machine and sticks it on the Consumer. She turns and walks away. Pause. The Consumer, annoyed, pulls off the sign and throws it on the floor. She turns and walks away.]

[The By-stander, left alone, pulls out her money and considers buying a drink. She picks up the crumpled pamphlet, reads it over, then leaves it on the ground by the vending machine. She puts her money back in her pocket and leaves.]

[The end.]