

Rental Box

James Walsh

CHARACTERS

MARI, female in her early thirties

DALE, male in his early twenties

TIM, male in his late thirties

LYDIA, female in her late thirties

VOICE

GERALD / RENTAL BOX

SETTING: Classic Cinema Selections, VendCo. Headquarters

(The scene is set in the Classic Cinema Selection, a faltering, independent movie rental store. On the left half of the stage is a single COUNTER with a register and boxes of typical concessions (candy, popcorn, etc.). A few less than standard items are on the countertop. Feel free to get creative with your choices. Nothing is too ridiculous. MARI stands behind the counter waiting for the TIM to approach the counter. He does so cautiously, only handing Mari the movies after great hesitation.)

MARI: Hey Tim. Find anything good today?

TIM: Mari, I'm not in the mood. Just check me out.

MARI: I see you grabbed Ghostbusters 2? Well Tim, nothing goes better with a good Supernatural Comedy than three tubes of green, red and blue candy ooze and two candy bars for just three dollars more.

TIM: Mari, I'm a diabetic.

MARI: Oh I'm sorry Tim, I didn't know that.

TIM: You did. I told you three weeks ago to mark it on the account. Do-Not-Sell-Sweets. I even had you show me the computer screen.

(Mari ignores Tim and lifts up the other movie)

MARI: What about this? Ghost? You have something special planned with Claudia tonight?

TIM: That's really none of your business---

MARI: Why not supplement the experience with a little mood lighting? Some scented candles? Arouse her with Cinnamon, Cherry, Apple Pie, Passion Fruit or Forbidden Love? Just five dollars more.

TIM: No.

MARI: Come on Tim, everyone needs a little help sometimes. These candles are basically ambrosia studded nose candy. You couldn't stop her from jumping your bone if you tried—

TIM: Stop! Just rent me the damn movies.

MARI: Alright, alright. Just trying to pass on some great savings...

TIM: I don't save any money if I don't want the crap.

MARI: Oh! I see from your rental history you've rented Labyrinth six times this past year. We just got in a shipment of the 22nd anniversary edition, complete with a scale bust of David Bowie's "package" and it can be yours for—

TIM: You know what? Fuck. You. I don't want these anymore. When they finish installing that Rental Box, you'll never see me in this shit heap again. It'll never ask me to buy candy or candles or sculptures of bulging man mounds. It'll ask me for my money and be done with it.

MARI: Rental Box? What's a Rental Box? Tim, wait! Wait.

(Before she can stop him, Tim steps off stage. She goes over to the center stage, squinting out an implied window at GREGORY, a uniformed man, installing a giant red vending machine. The Rental Box will double as a suit, so it is best to make it light-weight and capable of housing a human.)

MARI: Dale. Get over here.

DALE: (offstage) Busy.

MARI: I doubt you've ever kept busy in your...oh...You better not be masturbating on company time!

(A sigh can be heard from offstage and momentarily, DALE emerges. He is dressed similar to

MARI but cares much less. His shirt is not tucked in and there are numerous condiment stains on his collar.)

DALE: Mood killer. What do you want?

MARI: Gross, Dale. We don't even have an Adult Section. I can't even imagine what you'd...yank it to?

DALE: Don't need those skins flicks. Have you seen the cover to Flashdance? Eh?

(He lifts it up to show Mari how alluring the photograph is. After seeing she is unimpressed, he sets it down on the table. She shakes her head as she speaks.)

MARI: Sometimes you make me want to puke.

DALE: Hey, I've got to keep the old piece warmed up. Never know when I'm going to use it.

MARI: That doesn't even make any sense. Look, never mind that, I need you to, well first wash your hands, and then go check out that vending machine across the street.

DALE: What? That Rental Box being installed by WorldFresh Market?

MARI: Yeah. Can you check it out for me?

DALE: You keeping me on the clock?

MARI: Only if you're quick---

DALE: Nope.

MARI: Fine but you better be under an hour.

DALE: Can't make any promises.

(Dale walks offstage but before Mari can stop him, LYDIA steps up to the front counter.)

MARI: Damnit Dale! Wash those hands! (to Lydia) Oh hi Lydia. I'm sorry. How can I help you?

LYDIA: Hello Mari. I was looking for a copy of Flashdance. I was just telling my daughter how I loved it when I was her age. She got all excited and screamed that she just has to see it now, today. What a darling. Do you have a copy?

(Mari looks down at the DVD on the counter. She tries to casually shift it out of sight.)

MARI: I'll have to check our system. I'm not sure if it was returned in the...best condition.

LYDIA: Will it play?

MARI: Yes...

LYDIA: Well I'll take it then. Our DVD player isn't finicky. Is that it right there?

(Mari looks at the disc and takes a noticeable gulp. Her conscience is conflicted but one side eventually wins out.)

MARI: (pause) Yes.

LYDIA: Oh great!

MARI: (pause) You know, for just five dollars more you can get two sodas for your daughter and yourself and commemorative leg warmers licensed by the filmmaker.

LYDIA: Oh that sounds nice---

(Dale reenters the store at a run, almost knocking Lydia over. He tries to catch his breath.)

DALE : Mari, you won't believe this.

MARI: Wait one second.

(Dale looks down at the DVD.)

DALE: Flashdance? Very good choice. Jennifer Beals? The scene where she dumps all that cold, sexy water on herself? Ohhhhhh yeah.

LYDIA: ...Yeah, that sure left an impression.

DALE: Sure made an impression on my c---

MARI: That'll be \$7.50.

(Lydia hands her money over to Mari, trying to avoid eye contact with Dale. He leers at her, occasionally licking his lips. Focusing on the transaction, Mari tries to restrain herself from hitting Dale.)

MARI: Have a nice day...and come back soon.

LYDIA: Yeah. Sure.

(Lydia leaves, keeping her eyes on Dale to make certain he doesn't follow.)

MARI: You little prick! You almost lost me the sale.

DALE: It doesn't matter. Not after what I'm going to tell you about the Rental Box.

MARI: What?

DALE: That thing was...fucking awesome. It wasn't ready yet but it's going to be fantastic. The technician, the guy from VendCo Enterprises, explained the whole thing to me. You insert your credit card, make your selection and the device only charges you one dollar per day. One mother fucking dollar. Plus it doesn't hassle you with all the extra candy, soda, and piñata bullshit that you make me sell. It just ejects a thin little case holding the movie and you leave. He gave me an early copy of Wanted and called me champ. (pause) Thank you. This has been the best day of my life.

(Mari takes the whole thing as a joke.)

MARI: You're being sarcastic, right?

DALE: Well, I had to pay with my credit card. That fucker.

MARI: Who is going to want to use that? It's so impersonal. It's never going to last.

DALE: You shittin' me? That beautiful box is going to sink us. We'll be bleeding out faster than an oil tanker on the Pacific Ocean, leaving little nautical animal pricks coated in our sweet, sweet oily wake. You'll see. Oh you will see.

(Lights fade on the two.)

SCENE II

(DALE sits behind the counter throwing a TENNIS BALL into the air. MOVIES lay stacked around but the mess doesn't bother him. MARI, looking disheveled and exhausted, walks in through the front door, holding her coat up to shield herself from Dale.)

DALE: It's a sad, cold day in Hell when I get here before you.

MARI: Yeah, yeah.

DALE: You just missed a rush too. Twenty people came in not even ten minutes ago, demanding The Happening. Pretty much pandemonium. Women were pulling hair, men were punching children and a little old lady woman with false teeth promised she wasn't afraid to cut no bitch. You would have been proud though. I stood on the countertop and told them they would be better off going to the Rental Box and save themselves a dollar fifty. They practically disappeared after that.

MARI: Shut up. I hate that stupid machine.

DALE: What did I tell you?

MARI: Something about oily goo?

DALE: Close enough. I said we were going to bleed out and (pause) we are. We barely made 500 dollars since they put that thing in a week ago. Who called it? This guy.

MARI: I never would have been worthy competition but it has us by the throat. It's on my mind so much I can't even sleep. The thing haunts my dreams.

(The lights dim. Dale freezes and Mari walks center stage. The stage goes black. A VOICE comes from the ether, a heavy baritone meant for the movies.)

VOICE: In a world where the movie rental business is rushing down the tubes faster than stool at a Chili Cookoff, there is (beat) RENTAL BOX.

(Light explodes onto the stage, revealing Mari again, this time holding a spear, appearing more exhausted than before. She addresses the audience directly.)

MARI: Each night it returns. You'd figure it could find someone else to haunt. (addressing the voice.) Ever hear of redundancy?

VOICE: Just when you thought it was safe to raise your meager prices...RENTAL BOX.

MARI: He doesn't listen, he never does. Please. Leave me alone.

VOICE: One man---

MARI: Woman---

VOICE: Must face harrowing odds in a feeble attempt to stop the machines' sinister plot. Ultimately she will fail, falling at the foot of this obelisk to rental achievement, this paragon of pay per day vending splendor. You will ask for quarter and receive none from the gut-wrenching, thrill ride that is...RENTAL BOX.

(The sound of thunder cracks in the background. As the voice rambles, Mari addresses the audience.)

MARI: Surprising? Not really. Big budget action flick trailers really go well with the world of elephantine corporations, companies with the capital to crush the competition outright. There's no heart or passion behind their craft, just a quest for the ever loving dollar. How many CEOs have raised a business from scratch? Some I suppose but how many had to take out several mortgages to fund an endeavor they have dreamed of their whole lives? How many of them have loved and nurtured their businesses, bringing it to a certain level of success, the kind they never dreamed of? And how many of them watched it all go down like a flaming wreck because of a stupid box--

VOICE: RENTAL BOX.

MARI: Yeah, good job.

(The RENTAL BOX appears from the sidelines. A human's head (either Lydia or Gerald) out from the top and grins obliviously. It freak dances under a downpour of dollar bills.)

MARI: Rental Box. Abomination to video. You give it a dollar and before long, your soul.

(Mari addresses the vending machine. While she delivers her speech, the machine tries to pull off The Worm, failing miserably.)

MARI: Where is the challenge, the human interaction...the fucking selection? 100 copies of Superhero Movie, 450 of Saw IV and Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants 2 but no Casablanca, No Monty Python's Holy Grail, not even Star Wars unless you want the fucking Clone Wars. I don't get it! Why are they drawn to you like moths to a zapper's hum? I have to find a way around you, a way to give my store a little breathing room. It depends upon it. It needs me to put this nightmare to an end.

(Mari rests her foot upon its "neck," like a warrior prepared to deliver the final blow. She moves to stab the Rental Box in the throat. The lights go black.)

VOICE: Homicide. Coming soon to a vending machine near you.

(The lights come back up and everything is back to normal. The Rental Box is nowhere to be seen.)

MARI: Something needs to be done about that monster. Maybe I'll pay a little visit to VendCo Enterprises. Ask them to move it. Out of professional courtesy

DALE: Doubt that'll work. Our world operates by the kill or be killed principle and seems like they're the ones hold the axe.

(Dale makes a swinging motion and the lights fade.)

SCENE III

(The scene opens up in the sterile lobby of VendCo Enterprises which occupies the right side of the stage. A steel countertop is positioned in the center, where a lone, bored figure sits. GERALD sits reading People Magazine or some other periodical drivel. To his right, is a machine similar to the Rental Box, only it has been painted silver. Mari enters with uncertainty, looking upwards to

imply the grandeur of the headquarters.)

MARI: Excuse me. I was wondering if I could talk to someone, uh, your manager or someone else of importance.

GERALD: Here at VendoCo the customer is most important, so why don't you try talking to yourself.

MARI: Ha, funny. No really though, I need to speak to one of your superiors. I'm running a competing movie store and I just wanted to have a chat with a member of management. Just friendly conversation between rivals.

GERALD: Okay, sure thing. Try that box over there. It's like an intercom system. Just go up to it, speak your peace and you should get your response.

MARI: Well thanks.

(Mari walks over to the box and sits before it, she looks back over to Gerald, who smiles and nods reassuringly. Mari speaks.)

MARI: Hello? Hi. Uh, one of your machines, the Rental Box, has been placed down the corner from my movie rental store and I figured, since your device is pretty portable compared to my store front, that you could maybe move it...elsewhere, you know, so both businesses can survive.

(There is a moment of silence. Gerald takes this cue and begins to speak out of the side of his mouth in a robotic voice.)

GERALD: Certainly. While we are at it, why not move out of the region and permit our competitors to sit on their lazy butts because they fear free market competition.

(Gerald stops the robotic voice.)

GERALD: Look Miss Thang, it's time you grew up. If you don't have the stones to survive in the rental business, either grab some stones or get the hell out.

MARI: What?

GERALD: Look lady, I'm just an intern and even I see this more clearly than you. You're in a fight you can't win. They have resources you can't even imagine. Even if you resorted to something desperate, it'll be to little avail. Accept the machine. Right now, I'm just a tiny little intern cog in this behemoth but my lousy position can get me places. Sure I'm underpaid for now, but soon I'll be on the fast track to my fortune. VendCo is the future, taking movies beyond the corner shop and into vending machines and digital arenas. Your way is the past. Get used to that. The sooner you do, the less you'll be wasting your time.

(Mari appears crushed but is capable of collecting herself before she goes to leave. The lights fade as she walks out facing the intern who casually returns to the magazine. Lights fade out.)

SCENE IV

(We are once again put inside of the Classic Cinema Selection, where DALE sits behind the counter in the same position as before, tossing the ball in the air. MARI stumbles in completely

distraught, walking past Dale without noticing him.)

DALE: It's a sad cold day in Hell when...It's not any fun if you don't play along.

(Mari disappears through the side of the stage, an assumed office.)

DALE: Come on Mari. Nothing is going to get done if I'm out here by myself. I'm just going to throw this ball around. Listen. Hear that? Doesn't sound like work, does it?

MARI: I don't care anymore.

DALE: Oh come on. You love this place, how could you not care?

(Mari returns.)

MARI: Because it's dead. I put in all this work and effort and my life savings and it's dead. Rental Box stabbed it through the heart and left it hanging against the door.

DALE: Halloween reference?

(Mari nods.)

DALE: Nice. (pause) Maybe certain actions need to be taken. What do desperate times call for?

MARI: Newfound drinking habits?

DALE: No. (pause) They call for violent measures in which we get to beat the shit out of things with blunt objects.

MARI: What do you mean?

DALE: You hate the Rental Box.

MARI: Obviously.

DALE: And I love destruction.

MARI: Yeah.

DALE: (pause) We should kill the Rental Box.

MARI: I don't know about that...

DALE: Mari, you said yourself that Box is killing you. Michael Myers couldn't have done a better job on sex driven, self-preservation blinded teenagers. You've gotta be like Jamie Lee Curtis. What did she do?

MARI: ...Let Donald Pleasence riddle Michael Myers with bullets?

DALE: Well yes but at first she fought back. Are you going to be like Jamie Lee or like her friend, Annie?

MARI: Annie got murdered, right?

DALE: Oh definitely.

MARI: (pause) Jamie Lee?

DALE: That a girl! Now what are we going to do?

MARI: Break that piece of crap!

DALE: I'll grab the weapons. Meet me outside the box at 11:45 and don't be late.

MARI: (pause) It's only 6 o'clock though. You're on the clock until 11:30.

DALE: Doesn't matter. I've got to prepare.

(Dale tries to hop over the counter. If he succeeds, fantastic, if not, he should give a few more feeble attempts and then rush around the counter off stage. As he leaves, lights go out.)

SCENE V

(MARI and DALE emerge in black leotards, their faces covered by masks. Dale is carrying a brown paper grocery bag with equipment inside. Most are bludgeoning weapons. They walk up to the Rental Box. The person inside should have a wide grin, potentially painted on.)

RENTAL BOX: Greetings. Please make your selection.

DALE: It talks. I can't destroy anything that talks. I'm out.

MARI: You get your ass right back here, this was your idea anyway. Plus it's too late now..., it saw us. It knows.

RENTAL BOX: Please make your selection.

MARI: How does a baseball bat sound, bitch?

(Mari reaches inside of the brown paper bag and pulls out a wooden baseball bat. Dale watches with mischievous pleasure as she swings with all her might. It does nothing.)

RENTAL BOX: Invalid selection.

MARI: It's invincible...

(She swings again but receives the same results. Mari stares at it with utter disbelief. She takes off her mask.)

MARI: It's unstoppable. Why? Why God, why? (turning to the Box) I'm sorry. What do you want from me?

(She collapses at the foot of the Rental Box, pounding her fists furiously on its casing.)

DALE: Wait here. I've got a solution.

(Dale runs off stage. Until then, the Rental Box ridicules her.)

RENTAL BOX: You projected your victory, did you not? It was in error. You will lose this altercation even if the male unit returns with a superior method of destruction. Your attempts will fail. Your industry is dying. Concede defeat and go on with your meaningless life.

(Dale returns and the machine becomes quiet and rigid. He holds up the axe for Mari to see, a soothing smile on his face.)

MARI: An axe? Do you just carry that around with you?

DALE: Yep, keep it under the front seat of my car. Kill or be killed, right? (pause) Want to do the honors?

MARI: I can't do it. The machine is right, I'll never win.

DALE: You're not going to win anything crouching. Unless you're going to give that thing head.

MARI: No.

DALE: Sure looks like it. Getting ready to slip those lips around its reproductive conductor?

MARI: Gross, gross, gross.

DALE: Convince me otherwise. Axe this motherfucker.

(Dale tosses the axe to Mari, who catches it one handed. She stands up, filled with a greater sense of confidence.)

RENTAL BOX: Please make a selection.

(Mari says nothing this time. She simply swings with all her might as all light vanishes. The sound of the axe hacking at the Box can be heard for a few moments after.)

SCENE VI

(Return to the rental store. DALE and MARI walk in disheveled. Both are wearing their camouflage from the night before and Malcolm is carrying something in his hands. He plops it on the counter. It is the Rental Box's guts.)

DALE: (pause) We pretty much just murdered C-3PO...

MARI: Rental Box. We murdered the Rental Box. There's a difference. I doubt Rental Box was fluent in over 6 million forms of communication. (pause) You know I heard it scream before it died.

DALE: Think it was...aware?

(Mari shrugs.)

MARI: Don't know. (pause) I need to go change.
(Mari steps off stage. Gerald walks onto the stage, dressed as a police officer. He speaks into his

shoulder mounted radio, eyes the joint and approaches Dale.)

GERALD: Excuse me, I'm looking to for a Mari Dominguez.

DALE: Wish I could help you officer. Haven't seen her all morning. She mentioned something about hightailing it to Mexico yesterday. I'd start looking there.

GERALD: I doubt that. From the WorldFresh Market surveillance system, we were able to ascertain that around 11:55 last night, Ms. Dominguez and a yet identified accomplice were involved in the blatant destruction of VendCo. Enterprises' property. If you cooperate, I won't have to view your actions as obstruction of justice.

DALE: Fancy talking there but it doesn't look like you have the badge to back it up.

GERALD: I am backed by the office of---

(Dale assumes a childish, condescending voice.)

DALE: The Mini-Mall security? The Rental Cop Detective's Bureau? The Impotent Brotherhood of Wannabe Piglets? Awww. I don't have to tell you shit, Bacon Jr.

(Mari returns from her office.)

MARI: Hello officer. How can I help you?

DALE: You don't have to be polite. He's Mall Security. He doesn't have any jurisdiction in the store.

MARI: Get to work Dale. I mean it.

(Dale leaves begrudgingly but before going, spits on the shirt of the officer. The officer is taken a back but is more concerned with Mari.)

MARI: Intern!

GERALD: Gerald.

MARI: Gerald! What are you doing here?

GERALD: It's my second job. I never thought the two would crossover. You made a bad decision taking out that Rental Box.

MARI: Did I have a choice?

GERALD: (pause) Most definitely.

MARI: I was desperate. Look, everyone jumps for technological convenience without ever considering the consequences. Sure you can get your movies cheap and hassle-free. Netflix and Rental Box make it easy for everybody. Get it from a machine or in the mail and never have to speak to a soul. It's okay for you but independent rental stores disappear first, then the larger chains, erasing thousands of jobs in an eye's blink. People's livelihoods are at stake all because of a stupid box. How long before they replace you with a coin operated secretary or VendoJustice? Tell me that.

GERALD: They already did. That silver box the other day...that was my replacement. Secretarotronic. (pause) Fine. I won't mention this.

MARI: Really?

GERALD: Sure. If anyone asks, I'm telling them the image on the video was damaged by a magnetic pulse or something. You tell people you were in Mexico or whatever that stupid kid said and make sure not to let him talk to anyone. He'll probably ruin this for the both of you.

MARI: Gerald, thank you so much.

GERALD: Whatever.

(Gerald speaks into the walkie talkie, while walking off stage. As he leaves, Tim passes him, looking anxious to be walking within the store again.)

GERALD: Her alibi's solid.

MARI: Tim? I didn't expect to see you back again.

TIM: Me neither. (pause) Look I'm sorry about before. I tried the Rental Box and, I saw that I could keep it out for a while. The whole dollar a day thing hooked me. I kept it for a week and eventually forgot about it and a fee showed up on my credit card a few weeks later. They charged me for the rental, the purchase of the movie and a restocking fee. Plus that voice freaked me out. (pause) Take me back.

MARI: Will you stop complaining whenever I try to sell you something?

TIM: Yes.

MARI: Even candy?

TIM: Sure---

MARI: And maybe buy something from time to time...

TIM: Don't make me regret this.

MARI: Oh you won't regret it Timmy. You love human interaction.

TIM: Yeah yeah. (pause) You know what, I was wondering if you had Westworld. I've been looking for something good with Yul Brynner.

MARI: Go for the Magnificent Seven. A group of courageous gunslingers fend off sinister bandits. How can you go wrong? And you know you can get in addition to that...

(Lights fade.)