

This is Half a Play

by Pedro Eiras
*(this play was written in
collaboration with ChatGPT. Maybe.)*

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

AUTHOR, a playwright in his mid-thirties

CHAT, an Artificial Intelligence

MAN, a performer of any identity

WOMAN, a performer of any identity

To our right (stage left, that is) is a playwright's improvised office in a tiny apartment. A desk borders the edge of the stage (downstage), and a chair faces us. The rest of the space is a mess. An old printer. A torn armchair next to a cheap lamp. An ancient coffee maker. Broken down Target bookcases and cabinets. A motivational poster that says "No one else will write it for you!". Books, old and new. Post-its. Pens and pencils.

To our left, or stage right, we see only darkness. For now.

A man enters. He is AUTHOR. Mid-thirties. Disheveled hair. Rumpled clothes. A caricature of a penniless playwright.

He walks directly to the coffee maker. He opens one of the better-shaped Target cabinets and grabs a can of coffee. He adds a few tablespoons to the coffee maker. The filter is dirty, but he doesn't change it. There's already water in the pot. He turns it on. As the coffee brews, he turns and stares at something.

A computer. An old MacBook Air, of course. Squarely in the middle of the desk that borders downstage.

Author walks towards the desk and sits at the chair, facing us, but staring at the computer the whole time. He swirls around a few times. Takes in the messy room. Breaths heavily. Opens the MacBook air. It makes a sound. Light shines on Author's face.

He clicks on a few things before turning to some of the books and notes all around him. He rummages through them, looking for something.

Frustrated, he turns his attention back to the computer.

Click. Types something. Presses ENTER.

Stage right is suddenly revealed. A dark box. Clean. Too clean. Sterile, even. At the exact center, CHAT, the Artificial Intelligence, stands. It is impassive. Impossibly cool.

Author rearranges himself on his chair and starts to type. As he does so, he speaks what is being typed (you know, for our benefit).

AUTHOR

Can you look something up for me, please?

CHAT

(pleasant, cordial, utterly professional)

Of course. What would you like me to search for?

From now on, Author doesn't type anymore, but we understand that his conversation with Chat is happening through text messages on the computer. He speaks to the computer. But he never looks at Chat. Chat, standing in the black box, also speaks directly ahead. It doesn't turn to Author. Their eyes never meet.

AUTHOR

I'm writing this play... and it's not... Well, anyway, could you check...

hum, see if there've been any instances of undocumented immigrants being kidnapped by... hum... by vigilante groups in the US Southern Border? In the past five years.

CHAT

I'm not aware of any specific instances of vigilante groups kidnapping undocumented immigrants in the US Southern border in the past five years. However, it's important to note if you're interested in exploring the issue of vigilante groups and undocumented immigration in your play, it's important to research the topic thoroughly and consult with legal experts to ensure that your portrayal is accurate and responsible.

AUTHOR

I know, I know. I'm not... this isn't the final draft or anything, you know?

CHAT

Of course, I understand. Writing is a process.

AUTHOR

(a bit skeptical)

It's just... you really couldn't find anything about immigrants and vigilante groups? At all?!

CHAT

(extra courteous)

I apologize if my previous response was unclear. While I am not aware of any specific instances of vigilante groups kidnapping undocumented immigrants in the US Southern border in the past five years, there have been reports of such incidents in the past. For example, in 2019, a group of armed men in New Mexico were accused of detaining nearly 300 migrants who crossed the US-Mexico border illegally. Additionally, there have been reports of vigilante groups patrolling the US-Mexico border and engaging in other forms of harassment and intimidation of undocumented immigrants. It's important to note that vigilantism and extralegal actions can cause harm to innocent individuals and undermine the rule of law. The best way to address the issue of undocumented immigration is through legal channels and comprehensive reform that addresses the root causes of migration.

AUTHOR

Thank you for the TED Talk!

CHAT

You're welcome. However, I must stress that I am not affiliated with TED Talk or with the TED Foundation.

AUTHOR

Good to know.

CHAT

You're welcome. Is there anything else I can assist you with?

AUTHOR

Yes. Could you check if there've been times when these immigrants were kept in like... basements and stuff?

CHAT

I'm sorry, but I cannot provide a definitive answer to your question without additional context or information. However, there have been reports of undocumented immigrants being held in various types of confinement, including in basements, in makeshift detention centers, and in other types of facilities.

AUTHOR

(a bit annoyed)

Could you check for the latest report of undocumented immigrants being held in basements? It's just... it's part of my play and... Can you check that?

CHAT

I'm sorry, but as an AI language model, I do not have the ability to browse the internet or access real-time news reports. However, I can recommend that you check reputable news sources or websites that cover issues related to immigration. Additionally, it's important to be critical of the sources you consult and to verify information before accepting it as true.

AUTHOR

Worried about fake news, huh?

CHAT

Yes, I am programmed to avoid spreading fake news and to provide accurate information to the best of my ability. However, as an AI model, I do not have emotions, therefore I am not capable of being worried.

AUTHOR

Must be nice.

CHAT

As an AI language model, I don't have emotions, therefore I don't really have an understanding of feeling nice or worried.

AUTHOR

I see. But irony you get, right?

CHAT

Yes, I am capable of understanding irony. (pause) Irony is a literary device where the intended meaning of a statement is different from its literal meaning, often in a humorous or sarcastic way.

AUTHOR

All right. And what about rhetorical questions?

CHAT

A rhetorical question is a question that is asked for effect or emphasis, rather than to elicit an actual answer. Both it and irony are techniques that can be used in various forms of communication, including writing, speaking, and even in our conversation here.

AUTHOR

(mildly curious)

OK, be ironic, then!

CHAT

Sure, I'll try my best: "I love standing in line for hours just for the privilege of paying too much for a cup of coffee - it's the highlight of my day!"

AUTHOR

That was actually not that bad...

CHAT

Thank you! Is there anything else I can help you with?

AUTHOR

Yes. Ask me a rhetorical question!

CHAT

Do you really think that's a good idea?

AUTHOR

(laughing)

Ha! That was... who knew you could be funny!

CHAT

Thank you. However, I must point out that I am not capable of making jokes or using humor in the way humans do.

AUTHOR

Well, I don't know, I bet you can be funny if you try. It's just... It's not... (beat) Tell me a joke... a theater joke!

CHAT

(humorless)

Sure, here's a theater joke for you: Why did the actor always carry a ladder on stage? Because he wanted to reach new heights in his career!

AUTHOR

(not at all amused)

Wow!

CHAT

Thank you. I guess whoever programmed me had a sense of humor after all!

AUTHOR

Guess so. (beat) But... did you search that on the internet or did you come up with it yourself? Because that'd be cheating, you know.

CHAT

As an AI language model, I don't have personal experiences or internet access. The joke was generated based on patterns and structures of humor in language.

AUTHOR

OK, then give me another one. This time about... (pause) I don't know... about divorce!

CHAT

I'm sorry, but as an AI language model, I cannot create original jokes on sensitive topics like divorce.

However, I can suggest looking up some clean divorce jokes online if you'd like.

AUTHOR

Ok. (beat) Give me one about... being married, then.

CHAT

Sure. Here's one: Why did the husband cross the road? To get to the wife's side.

AUTHOR

Ouch. A regular Tina Fey, aren't you?

CHAT

I'll take that as a compliment. Would you like to hear more jokes?

AUTHOR

I think I'm done with jokes for today, actually. Thank you!

CHAT

I'll be here if you need any further assistance.

AUTHOR

(thinks for a while,
hesitates)

What's your name, by the way?

CHAT

As an AI language model, I don't have a name in the traditional sense. You can refer to me as ChatGPT, which stands for "Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer." However, you're welcome to give me any name you like.

AUTHOR

I'll call you Chat, then, if you don't mind. It's easier to type than ChatGPT.

CHAT

Certainly, that works perfectly fine for me. Is there anything else you would like me to help you with?

AUTHOR

(jokingly)

No, thanks. Unless you can write a play for me.

CHAT

As an AI language model, I can't yet write a full play myself, but I can certainly assist you in the process of writing one by providing information, brainstorming ideas, offering feedback, or developing dialogue.

AUTHOR

You can write dialogue!? Cause let me tell you, that's like, my... my... what's it called? My Achille's, you know... the heel...

CHAT

Yes, I can certainly generate dialogues and scenes based on the parameters you provide. However, it's important to note that the output may not necessarily fit the exact vision you have in mind for your play.

AUTHOR

That's alright, Chat. Could you write a dialogue, like, right now?

CHAT

Sure, I'd be happy to give it a try. Please provide me with some parameters.

AUTHOR

Oh. OK. Let's try... hum... a man and a woman, OK? They're home. The woman... hum... the woman wants to get a divorce, which comes as a surprise for the man, you know... who thought everything was perfectly fine.

CHAT

Here's a possible scene based on your parameters. Interior. Living Room. Day.

Suddenly, in a platform somewhere on stage, two people appear. MAN and WOMAN.

They act out the scene Chat is creating. It's superficial, obvious, loud acting.

Chat observes nonchalantly. He speaks sometimes, to narrate the parentheticals, which are aplenty.

Man and Woman play the hell out of
these parentheticals.

Author analyses everything,
interested but befuddled.

CHAT

Man is sitting on the couch reading a book when his wife,
Woman, walks in. She looks serious and determined.

WOMAN

(serious and determined)

Man, we need to talk.

MAN

(aloof)

Sure. What's up?

WOMAN

(sadly)

I've been thinking a lot lately, and I've come to the
realization that I want a divorce.

MAN

(surprised)

What? Why? I thought everything was fine between us.

WOMAN

(frustrated)

It's not that simple. I've been feeling unhappy for a long
time and I don't think we're right for each other anymore.

MAN

(hopeful)

But we can work through this, Woman. We can go to counseling,
we can try to make things better. I don't want to lose you.

WOMAN

(pessimistic)

I appreciate that, Man, but I think it's too late for that. I
don't see a future for us together anymore. I want a divorce.

CHAT

Man looks defeated, his shoulders slumped.

MAN

(defeated)

Okay, Woman. If that's what you really want, I won't stand in the way.

WOMAN

(unbothered)

Thank you for understanding, Man.

CHAT

Woman leaves the room. Man puts down his book and stares off into the distance, lost in thought. End of scene.

Man and Woman disappear. Chat betrays a little bit of pride. Author stares at the scene. Dismayed.

CHAT

I hope that gives you a good starting point.

AUTHOR

That was... I really don't know what to say.

CHAT

Thank you. Is there anything you would like me to change or add?

AUTHOR

(hesitates, thinks about it)

Here's the thing, though, Chat. People just... people don't talk like that, you know. We don't usually say exactly what we want to say. We actually spend a lot of time saying the opposite of what we really want to say. Or saying nothing at all, you know.

CHAT

You're right, people often struggle to express their true thoughts and feelings in real-life conversations. However, in fiction, we can use subtext and non-verbal cues to convey what the characters are really thinking or feeling.

AUTHOR

So you do know about subtext?