

Insolence and Abhorrence

By Camille Atebe

Settings

An artist's studio and a living room. These can be box sets or done more minimally.

Characters

Amos Fleuredin: 60's, charming, intelligent, incredibly talented writer and painter.

Sybil Fleuredin: 50's. His wife. Also intelligent, beautiful, lawyer and mother of two.

Sienna Fleuredin: late teens. Amos and Sybil's daughter. Devoted to her parents.

St John Fleuredin: 20's. Amos and Sybil's son. A quiet and pensive bureaucrat.

Daphne Oliphant: 30's. Amos's daughter. Shakespearean scholar.

Victor Oliphant: 30's. Daphne's husband. A big fan of Amos.

Azra Keen: mid teens. Amos's daughter.

Charlize Keen: Late 30's. Editor.

Note: It is possible, and may be preferable, to have Azra and Sienna played by the same actress.

Act 1

Scene 1

Amos's studio. Immaculate, it is his workspace and hideaway. There is an easel with a half-finished painting in one area, a neat cart full of painting paraphernalia beside it. A stack of finished canvasses sits nearby. There is a bed, a desk with a computer, and a comfortable sofa. All look well used, but tidy. Amos himself lounges on the sofa, a book in hand. He is not reading, however, but gazing off into space pensively, pausing from time to time to look at the clock. It becomes clear that he is expecting someone. Charlize enters. She is in her late thirties, not visually extraordinary, but very quick with a gentle, open demeanour. She carries a large box of books and two hot drinks.

Charlize: Amos. I'm so sorry I'm late.

Amos: Charlize! Darling. Long line at the coffee shop? (*He takes a coffee, but offers no help with the box. She doesn't mind*)

Charlize: No, just running late in general. And the elevator was full. Foolishly, I decided that it would be easier to walk up ten flights of stairs than to stand waiting for the next elevator.

Amos: Exercise. Never a bad thing. Thank you so much for this. I'm sluggish as hell right now. And even though I have talked about getting a coffee maker in here for twenty years I've never gotten around to it.

Charlize: You make terrible coffee, that's why.

Amos: Are those for the reception tonight?

Charlize: Yes, freshly printed and ready to be signed. Urgh. This coffee's cold.

Amos: Don't be so picky. It's fine. We'll need more than this. There are hundreds already RSVPed, right? And how many is this? Twenty?

Charlize: Thirty five. Not everyone buys a book.

Amos: At least 50% buy.

Charlize: God, this coffee is horrible. How can you drink it? I'm your editor, Amos, not your publicist. If you need more books, talk to Henry. He's the one who told me to bring a box.

Amos: Henry's mathematically illiterate. Anything he asks for, you have to multiply by five. He chronically understates.

Charlize: I'll call the warehouse and see if they can send some more over.

Amos: Get them sent right to the bookstore. I can't carry ten boxes of books.

Charlize pulls out her phone and dials, drifting toward the back of the room as she talks. Henry pulls out a book and rolls it around in his hands with pride. Daphne enters, a sleeping baby wrapped to her chest.

Amos: Daphne!

Daphne: Amos. Sorry, are you busy?

Amos: No, no. Just getting ready for the reception tonight. You know Charlize, my editor?

Daphne: No.

She and Charlize exchange perfunctory waves, and Charlize retreats further with her phone call.

Amos: I'll introduce you after she gets off the phone. Now to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?

Daphne: You called me, three days ago? You asked me to come by this afternoon.

Amos: Oh, right! Of course, sorry! Don't know where my brain is these days.

Daphne: You have a reception tonight?

Amos: Well, a lecture, book launch, reading, general party, you know.

Daphne: (Picking up a book) "Portrait of the Young Man as an Artist".

Amos: My Memoir.

Daphne: Right. Joyceian in tone, or just a titular homage?

Amos: It's all very tongue in cheek, sweetheart. Very.... Lighthearted. With a wink and a nod to the greats from whom I have taken inspiration.

Daphne: You did your own portrait for the cover art.

Amos: I always do my own cover art. It's one of the perks of being both painter and writer.

Daphne: It's very nice.

Amos: Oh God! Damned with faint praise!

Daphne: Your ego doesn't need any more stroking. You know exactly how good it is.

Charlize finishes on the phone and comes forward, picking up her coat.

Charlize: It's a bit of a mess at the warehouse. I'm going to grab a cab and get them delivered myself. *(She kisses Amos, territorially)* I'll see you tonight.

Amos: Until then.

She exits, and Daphne looks pointedly from Charlize's retreating back to Amos.

Amos: So, what was it I asked you here for?

Daphne: Not to meet your newest conquest?

Amos: Don't be unkind, Daphne, it doesn't suit you. No, I remember now. I have something for you.

Daphne: Really?

Amos: An opportunity.

Daphne: An opportunity?

Amos: To invest in something that will change the world.

Daphne: Alright. I see. You're strapped for cash to do one of your projects, and Sybil won't cough it up, so now you're tapping the rest of the family.

Amos: Daphne, sweetheart, don't be so cynical. You know my projects always turn out well. They always make money. Why shouldn't I want my family to be a part of that? Why should complete strangers benefit from my work, when I have children to support?

Daphne: Leaving aside the fact that you have never supported your children, the point is not the success of your projects. It's the whereabouts of the money afterwards. On paper you make buckets of it, but it has never once trickled down to the people- no, the family members- who invest in you, not once. You don't ask strangers to invest because they would demand some sort of accountability from you.

Amos: Daphne.

Daphne: Don't, Amos. Just don't. Did you get Charlize to invest in your "project"?

Amos: She did, actually, yes.

Daphne: Well, between Sienna, St John and Charlize, I'm sure you'll get enough. And you always manage to sweet talk Sybil out of a little capital in the end, so you'll be okay. Good-bye, Amos. *(She begins to leave, turning at the door)* And if you go anywhere near Victor with this, I'll cut your goddamned ears off.

She exits firmly, and Amos reflects a moment. Only a moment, though, then he shrugs and returns to his box of books. The phone rings.

Amos: Hello..... Guiliana! How are you, my dear? Is Germany treating you well, or are you dying to come home away from the bratwurst and beer? Then I will miss you desperately, but I may be convinced to forgive you if you bring me a Beckmann or a Klee.... What do you mean, you can't afford it? You do love me, don't you *(he laughs)*.... Yes, the reception is tonight. It's a beautiful memoir, Guiliana, and it would have been more beautiful if you'd allowed me to put you in it..... I saw her today, just now, actually. She just left..... Yes, she had it bundled to her front.... Well, I don't know, I didn't look at it, it was asleep.... Darling, if you want to know what your grandchild looks like you should come home and see him yourself.....*(laughs)* Well, I imagine it looks like every other baby. To quote Wodehouse, "like a cross between a miniature prizefighter and a poached egg".... Okay, maybe it's not an exact quote, but its close enough..... yes, yes, I'm sure he's adorable, but as a man, I have no interest in him until he's able to form sentences and deal with his own excrement.....*(laughs)* Yes, I'm a boor and a chauvinist, and you love me regardless..... It is? Oh. Shit. It completely slipped my mind.... I'll make it up to her... Somehow, Guiliana, I'll make it up to her. ...Sorry darling, there's someone at the door. It's like Grand Central Station here today. We'll talk later. Bye bye....

He hangs up and flops on the couch, picking up his book. He admires the cover for a time, then cracks it open. He is immediately engrossed, and does not notice the door open quietly. St John (pronounced Sinjin) slips in and goes to the filing cabinet next to the desk. As he opens the drawer and looks for a file, Amos notices him there.

Amos: St John. Sneaking around as usual, I see.

St John: Hi Dad. Just looking for something.

Amos: Perhaps I could help you? It is my filing cabinet, in my studio, after all.

St John: I've been working on your taxes, and I'm missing a lot of receipts, invoices...

Amos: *(Tosses him his wallet)* Look in there. There's probably a receipt or two. Invoices, though...

St John: Dad, I told you, you have to invoice. It doesn't have to be fancy... if you would at least keep a copy of the receipts that you give out...

Amos: I'm not great with that...

St John: Do you ever issue receipts?

Amos: Well, no. I do occasionally invoice, but I don't issue receipts.

St John: You really need a PA.

Amos: Your mother won't let me have a PA.

St John: A PA can be male. Doesn't have to be a woman.

Amos: Not as fun, though, if it isn't. Anyway, I can't afford one.

St John: If you had a PA, you could get everything sorted out, and I think you'd find you'd have a lot more money

Amos: I have you, what more do I need?

St John: I have a job, Dad.

Amos: You're coming to the reception tonight, aren't you?

St John: I guess.

Amos: You guess! St John, my son, my only son and heir...

St John: You have a number of heirs...

Amos: My son. You have to be there. Your sister is coming, your mother; you have to be there.

St John: I'll come for a bit. It's not really my thing.

Amos: No, but it's my thing. Come for me.

St John: Yeah, of course.

Amos: Any receipts in there?

St John: No. Just... oh, Dad. *(His face is a study of embarrassment and impressed reverence)*

Amos: Always be prepared, son. At least I have them in there. You should be concerned if I didn't.

St John: It's such a cliché. (*Muttering*) condoms in the wallet.

Amos: What's in yours St John? A slide rule and a picture of your cat?

St John's face hardens, and he returns to the filing cabinet.

Amos: Listen, St John, I'm sorry. I do appreciate you sorting out my taxes for me.... Do I have enough to go to Germany for a month or two?

St John: ...What?

Amos: I think I'd like to go to Germany. Paint a bit, write a bit. I'm thinking of a novel next. Something dark, something that pushes some buttons, you know, the story of a girl pulled deep into the German Neo-Nazi movement, struggling to reconcile the views of her friends with the dark secret she holds about her own past and parentage...

St John: But you don't like Germany.

Amos: Since when? I need to travel. I've got to go somewhere, do something different. Get my head out of my own... space. A memoir is mind-bogglingly introspective. Now that it's done, I just want to go and do something completely different.

St John: What about that commission from the *Institucion de...*

Amos: Well, Germany is very close to Spain. I could work on both.

St John: Sienna and I have both given you money...

Amos: So why not get plenty of bang for the buck? Two projects for the price of one. Which reminds me... I need you to look over that Spanish contract for me.

St John: I'm not your manager... Shouldn't Henry....

Amos: Henry doesn't speak Spanish.

St John: I don't think I know it well enough to advise on a legal document. Why don't you ask for it in English?

Amos: I suppose they would do that, wouldn't they? You see, St John, you're invaluable.

St John: You're welcome. Dad....

Amos: Oh, one more tiny thing- I have my suit awaiting me at the cleaners, and I don't know if I can get there in time- I have a lot to do. Could you pick it up for me?

St John: I... sure. Glenridge Cleaners?

Amos: That's the one. Just drop it at the house. I'll see you tonight?

St John: Sure. *(He goes to the door, clearly outmanoeuvred)* Eight o'clock, right?

Amos: Right.

Amos sees him out and locks the door after him. He then goes to his easel, ponders his painting a moment, then picks up a pad of paper and a jar of pencils. He sits at the desk and begins to draw. The lights fade to black.

Scene 2

The studio, six months later. It is late afternoon, and the studio is awash with the autumnal light. Azra sits in a corner, almost hidden, flipping through a stack of Amos's sketchbooks. She sighs, and rips out the occasional page. She has a pencil tucked behind her ear, with which she carefully makes minute alterations to the ripped-out pages. She has the computer on, with music playing quietly. After some time, the door opens and Sybil enters. Azra quickly slides all the papers under the couch.

Sybil: Hello.

Azra: Hi. Mrs. Fleuredin?

Sybil: Yes. And you are?

Azra: Azra Keen. We met at the book launch for Amos' memoir? My mom is Amos' editor.

Sybil: Azra. Yes. What are you doing here?

Azra: Just... hanging out. I don't really have any space to myself, and I knew Amos was away.... I took the key from my mom's office. I didn't think anyone would come here.

Sybil: That's trespassing, young lady.

Azra: I'm sorry. I wasn't... I just... Amos is kind of a hero of mine and I thought it would be cool to hang out in his studio.

Sybil: That doesn't make it okay.

Azra: I know. I'm sorry.

Sybil: You're using his computer?

Azra: Just to play music.

Sybil: I should call your mother.

Azra: No! Please, please don't. I swear I won't do it again. Please don't tell her. Please.

Sybil: *(Goes to the computer)* She's the one whose trust you've really betrayed. Taking her key.... Why does she have a key to Amos' studio?

Azra: She's his editor.

Sybil: So?

Azra: I dunno. She's his editor. Maybe she needs to get in here sometimes? I dunno. *(She flops down onto the bed).*

Sybil: *(To herself)* I'll bet she needs to get in here.

Azra: What?

Sybil: Why are you still here? You should be going home.

Azra: I don't really want to. I really like it here.

Sybil: And I really like the Louvre, but they won't let me waltz in at all hours and stay the night.

Azra: I wasn't going to stay the night. I just wanted somewhere quiet to work.

Sybil turns from the computer and looks Azra up and down. She notices the pencil tucked behind her ear.

Sybil: Work? Are you also a writer, or a painter?

Azra: Neither, yet. I'm working on my drawing. Someday I hope to be able to paint like Amos.

Sybil: Do you mind my asking why the hell he's your hero?

Azra: Yes. Why the hell's he your husband?

Sybil: To bad your mother never taught *you* to edit.

Azra: Why would you ask me something like that? Why shouldn't he be my hero?

Sybil: He's....

Azra: He's an amazing artist, a ridiculously good writer... my mom says her job is so easy when she works with him. She says brilliance just runs straight out of him onto the page. She says she can't improve on perfection. She just checks for spelling errors and publishes. And for him to be able to do that- award winning literature that just flows from him on a regular basis- as well as being able to paint with such raw and blinding emotion, it's just... it's... I don't even know how to describe how amazing it is. He has such a gift, and he just... shares it. With everyone and anyone.

Sybil: That he does.

Azra: So what's your problem? Why are you so bitter?

Sybil: Bitter? Am I coming across as bitter?

Azra: Well, you're coming across as somewhat bitchy.

Sybil: Forgive me. I came into my husband's studio to find a phone number that I can reach him at, only to find an obsessed teenage fan squatting here. I'm not exactly feeling happy and charitable right now.

Azra: Well, don't take it out on me.

Sybil: You need to leave. Right now. Or I will call both the police and your mother.

She turns back to the computer, shutting it off, then rifling through the drawers, looking for an address book. Azra slides off the bed and moves to the couch, from which she retrieves her backpack. She is glancing between the couch (where she has stashed the sketches) and Sybil (who is keeping half an eye on her) when Victor enters.

Victor: Oh, hi. Is Amos in?

Sybil: Amos is in Germany. Or Spain. Can I help you?

Victor: Um, I don't know. How long is he away for?

Sybil: Hard to say. He's been there a month now, who knows when he'll be back. You are...?

Victor: Victor Oliphant. His daughter Daphne's husband.

Azra: (*Sotto Voce*) Ooooooh!

Sybil: Really? How interesting. I'm Sybil. I'm his wife.

Victor: Oh. Ah. I see. Hello.

Sybil: Perhaps you could help me. I'm looking for a phone number. Your wife's mother's number. Amos is most likely staying with her in Germany, and I need to get a hold of him.

Victor: Oh. I ...I ... I, uh, I don't have that number on me.

Sybil: Perhaps you could ask your wife to send it my way.

Victor: I will... yes. I will do that.

Azra snickers, and Sybil shoots a hard glare at her.

Azra: This is ripe stuff, you have to admit.

Sybil: Very heroic behaviour on Amos' part, wouldn't you say?

Azra: Hey, he's an artist.

Sybil: He's a two-timing jackass.

Victor: I should go.

Sybil: No, no, you came here for something. Of the three of us, let's see if one of us can leave with what we came here for.

Victor: I just wanted to talk to Amos. I was thinking of writing an article about him.

Sybil: How nice.

Victor: But if he's not here... I'll let Daphne know you want the number. But she may not have it. She's not really in touch with her mother much.

Sybil: Well, tell her I'd appreciate the number. I really need to contact Amos.

Azra: Is everything okay?

Sybil: What do you care?

Azra: Excuuuse me.

Sybil: Go home.

Azra grabs her bag, and, defiantly, reaches under the couch for the sketches. Sybil isn't paying attention, but Victor notices her folding the drawings into her bag.

Victor: Hey, what are you doing?

Azra: Nothing.

Victor: Those sketches aren't...

Azra: They're mine.

Victor: Why were they under the couch?

Sybil: Give them here.

Azra: I'm leaving. I don't have to put up with this.

Sybil swiftly intercepts the fleeing Azra and relieves her of her backpack. Before Azra can do anything she has the sketches out of the bag and unfurled.

Sybil: Well, at least she has a good eye. You've got some nerve, kid.

Victor: I should go.

Sybil: Hold on a moment. I want to talk to you. *(to Azra)* Give me the keys.

Azra: I have to give them back to my mom.

Sybil: I'll give them back to your mom.

Azra: Hah, right. No, please. I promise I'll take them straight back to her office.

Sybil: I don't think so.

Victor: She has keys?

Sybil: Her mother has keys. Any guesses why?

Azra: She's his editor.

Sybil: Don't be an innocent. Give me the keys.

Azra: Get out of my way. I'm leaving. That's what you want, right?

Sybil: I want you to give me the keys.

Azra: Get over yourself. I'll give the keys back to my mom, okay?

Victor's phone rings. He looks at it, then answers.

Victor: Hi hon..... nope, I know.... Yes, but.... I'm just..... I'm at your dad's studio.....Daphne? She hung up on me.

Azra tries to grab her bag and escape. Sybil stands her ground.

Sybil: Give me the goddamned keys!

Azra tries to stare her down, but is no match for the older woman. She fishes the keys from her pocket and throws them petulantly at Sybil. Victor is trying to call Daphne back.

Sybil: Now scram.

Azra: What am I going to tell my mom? She's gonna be pissed when she finds the keys gone.

Sybil: You know what? It's not my problem.

Azra snatches her backpack and storms out. Victor has had no luck reaching Daphne.

Victor: You wanted to talk to me?

Sybil: What? Oh, yes.

Victor: What about?

Sybil: Has Amos... Did he borrow money from you?

Victor: No.... Daphne said something about him wanting her to invest in a project. She said no. I tried to convince her to, but... Daphne's not a big fan of Amos's.

Sybil: Smart girl.

Victor: I... would have invested but she's been watching me like a hawk.

Sybil: Do you know what this project was?

Victor: I don't think Daphne asked. I was kind of hoping to ask him about it.

Sybil: Shit.

Victor: What's wrong?

Sybil: I haven't heard from him in weeks. And our credit card bill just came in.

Victor: It's.... ?

Sybil: Ridiculously high. He's living it up in Munich, apparently, with frequent side trips to Tuscany.

Victor: Oh.

Sybil: If I knew he was actually creating something.... But part of me thinks he's just.... I'd just really like to get in touch with him.

Victor: So would I.

Sybil: For your article? I'll tell you all you need to know. Not that he's worth writing about.

Victor: It's not just an article. A biography, actually. But only if I can get full access.

Sybil: That shouldn't be difficult. He never restricts access to himself.

Victor: If you do manage to contact him, do you think you could.... I have to let the publishers know by next week.... I really need this deal.

Sybil: I'll tell you what. I'll talk to you- anything you want to know. And I'm sure your wife would...

Victor: She doesn't like talking about him.

Pause

Sybil: (tossing him Azra's keys) There you go. Unrestricted access. Look on his computer, his files, whatever you need. And when and if he returns, he'll talk to you.

Victor: Thank you. But I do need to know for sure.... Maybe when you talk to him....

Sybil: He'll talk to you.

Victor: Yes, but you see...

Sybil: Listen, sorry, what was your name?

Victor: Victor.

Sybil: Victor. Listen, Victor, I am Amos' wife. If I say he will talk to you, he will talk to you.

Victor: Ok...(still unsure)

Daphne enters with a bang.

Daphne: Victor.

Victor: Daph! What... that was quick.

Daphne: You better not have given him any money. Where is he?

Victor: Germany, apparently.

Daphne: Germany? With... (*she notices Sybil*)

Sybil: Hello Daphne.

Daphne: Sybil. Victor, let's go.

Sybil: The deal stands, Victor.

Daphne: What deal?

Victor: Ummm... I can do the biography.

Daphne: Oh for fu... God, Victor, why? Of all the famous people in this world, why him?

Victor: Daph, he your.... He's... he...

Sybil: He's your father.

Daphne: Biologically.

Victor: It's an amazing book deal, Daph. The advance is...

Daphne: We don't need the money.

Victor: It's not just the money.

Sybil: It's the proximity to greatness.

Victor: He deserves recognition, a chance to...

Daphne: He has recognition. More than he deserves.

Sybil: Let him do it.

Daphne: Oh, I can't stop him, certainly. *(Pause)* Do what you want, Victor. I'll see you at home.

She exits. Victor waffles. Sybil picks up her things, preparing to go.

Sybil: You have the keys. You'll find my number somewhere in here. I hope. Don't forget to ask Daphne for her mother's number.

Victor: She.... you could have... okay, thank you.

She exits. Victor fiddles with the keys. He's ecstatic, but mindful of Daphne's chronic disapproval. He pockets the keys and also exits.