

INDOOR/OUTDOOR

By Kenny Finkle

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A STUDY GUIDE

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THE AUTHOR. A graduate of the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU and of the program in playwriting at Columbia University, Kenny Finkle is the recipient of fellowships and prizes from the New York Foundation for the Arts and from the University of Illinois. As Broadwayworld.com tells us, he

is the author of 'Alive and Well', which had its world premiere this year [2010] at [The Old Globe](#) in San Diego. His play 'Indoor/Outdoor' was produced off-Broadway by [Daryl Roth](#), [Margo Lion](#), and [Hal Luftig](#). 'Penelope, of Ithaca', produced by the Hangar Theatre in July, was the recipient of a New York State Council on the Arts grant. His work has been seen at [Playwrights Horizons](#), [Williamstown Theatre Festival](#), Portland Stage and the [Atlantic Theatre Company](#), among others. He has received commissions from [Ford's Theatre](#), Virginia Stage Company and Theatreworks USA.

The author's biographical note informs us that his most successful work thus far, *Indoor/Outdoor*, was first produced at the Hangar Theater in Ithaca, New York in the summer of 2004. From there it moved to the D R 2 Theater, an Off-Broadway venue in New York City, where it opened in February, 2006. Since then it has enjoyed numerous productions at theaters throughout the United States.

He has told an interviewer that "I just need my theatre to be passionate, true, daring and as lean as possible without losing the juicy parts." *Indoor/Outdoor*, with its small number of characters, spare physical setting, and love-sick felines, certainly meets Mr. Finkle's criteria of leanness and passion.

THE SETTING. The action of the play moves freely from place to place—animal shelter, human habitation, vet’s office, the great outdoors—lightly sketching out the way-stations in the life-journey of its main character, the cat Samantha. The title clearly emphasizes the prime importance of the environment—indoors vs. outdoors— in shaping plot and determining character in this play. Paradoxically, however, the rapidly shifting scenes require that scenery and furniture—the visual cues that establish the environment— be kept to a minimum. Thus, the location, important as it is to the action, can only be suggested rather than portrayed in thick, naturalistic detail. Whether we are indoors or outdoors is to be established by the characters’ behavior in a largely imaginary physical world.

The time of a play’s action is also an important element in its setting, since different historical periods require different habits and conventions regarding costume, language, and moral perspectives. With its many references to contemporary popular culture, the script of *Indoor/Outdoor* clearly implies that we are in the present moment as the action unfolds.

THE PLOT. Act One begins with Samantha—a cat—introducing herself to the audience and informing us that the play that is to follow will be her “memoirs.” We learn that she is currently living with a human named Shuman, and then we witness, in rapid succession, scenes showing her birth, her consignment to an animal shelter, her failure to bond with potential human masters, and finally her success in luring Shuman into adopting her.

With this relationship established, the action moves into Shuman’s home, a seemingly alluring place that, “sits deep in a forest and from every window in every room all you can see are trees and sky and grass.” Shuman, it turns out, “works from home doing web design,” so he and Samantha are in constant contact both day and night. Shuman likes music, and plays “British pop songs from the eighties” to which he and Samantha dance.

For a while all seems to be going well in their relationship, even though it sometimes takes a disturbingly equivocal tone, as if we were watching a developing love affair between a man and a woman. Eventually, though, Samantha decides Shuman doesn’t really understand her, which leads to frantically bizarre cat-behavior on her part, which in turn leads Shuman to schedule an appointment with a veterinarian. At the office he discovers that the doctor is out, but that Matilda, the “front desk girl,” is only too eager to take his place.

It turns out that she is so skilled in dealing with animals that she can actually understand—and speak—the language of cats. She persuades Shuman to leave his cat with her overnight. During their time alone together she reveals her own psychological problems while also analyzing Samantha’s. When Shuman returns to reclaim his pet, Matilda proudly informs him that the cat’s problems are essentially mental and that she is “really smart.”

With these insights ringing in his ears, Shuman returns home with Samantha, but unfortunately, despite Matilda’s ministrations, their relationship continues to encounter difficulties. First Shuman rejects Samantha’s gift of a captured mouse, disrespecting her identity as a predator. Then he disrupts her attempt to talk to Matilda on the telephone. And most seriously, he disrupts a tender moment between Samantha and her new “boyfriend,” the street-cat, Oscar.

Samantha becomes so enraged at this interference in her personal life that she does something unprecedented: she bites Shuman.

From there, things go steeply downhill. Now in love with Oscar, Samantha is determined to abandon her life as an indoor cat and join her lover in his romantic and adventurous existence as a brave outdoor cat. Unfortunately for her plans, Shuman keeps her imprisoned in his maddeningly dull house. Samantha has to figure out a way to provoke Shuman into getting rid of her. She must force him to expel her into the outdoors. Finally she hits on a solution: next time she needs to use her litter-box, she will relieve herself on Shuman's computer instead. Since Shuman makes his living doing web designs, this will be a major act of aggression, demonstrating her complete alienation from her human keeper.

Her act of desecration has the desired result; a horrified and disgusted Shuman expels Samantha, telling her, "I'm throwing you out into the forest so you can get attacked and killed and eaten by wild animals. So, goodbye!" At which point, he opens the door to the outside world only to find Matilda standing on his front steps. She has sensed trouble, and has come to help, an intervention that brings the first act to a close.

Matilda then presides over a lengthy human/cat session of emotional therapy in an attempt to reconcile pet and owner. But things go off the rails. Matilda shows sympathy for Shuman; as a result, Samantha grows hostile toward Matilda; Matilda begins to lose her grasp of cat language; and to top it all off, Oscar comes hurtling into the living room from a skylight in the ceiling. After a tense confrontation among all parties, Oscar and Samantha simply march out of the house, beginning what they assume will be their idyllic lives as outdoor cats.

We watch as the amorous felines encounter one natural beauty after another, marveling at grass, trees, clouds, sun, river, and, most ecstatically, the beach. A litter box as big as the Ritz! Everything seems perfect until Oscar announces that it's time for them to head off to Alaska. Rattled by this drastic proposition, Samantha demurs, stating her desire to "make a house here." Oscar is contemptuous of such domestic designs, asserting that the whole world is their home. Disagreement leads to further disagreement, until they realize that their paths must diverge, his heading to Alaska, hers leading back home to Shuman.

She returns to his house, sits watching him through the window, notes his growing closeness to Matilda, and finally decides that this scene of domestic bliss is where she really wants to spend the rest of her life. She presents herself at the door, an overjoyed Shuman accepts her "unconditionally," and Samantha ends her outdoor adventure by returning to the indoor comforts of home. In fact, it is through Samantha that Shuman finally finds the gumption to kiss Matilda, moving their relationship to its obvious final destination, marriage. We then fast forward through the years that follow, seeing Matilda's career as a cat-therapist flourish, meeting their son, Abbott, and observing their matrimonial wrangles over child-rearing and money. Samantha spends the rest of her life with Shuman and his family, an indoor cat who once had her fling in the outdoors.

THE CHARACTERS. The author tells us in the script that he likes,

to think of the play and the characters as being written in primary colors. There is very little subtext. Characters say what they feel or are unable to say what they feel but are completely transparent in it. They are earnest, they are pure, they do not comment on the action or themselves.

In other words, the playwright has attempted to create characters without any sub-textual mystery, whose behavior demands no subtle interpretation or analysis. We know exactly what they want and why they want it, and so do they, and they tell us about it with no reservations.

Samantha wants to be taken home from the animal shelter. When Shuman obliges, she begins to explore the comforts of domestic life, but, as is the way with cats, she wants to operate on her own terms. Anyone who has ever held a door open while a cat is deciding between in or out, knows that feline choices are wayward, arbitrary, and self-centered. And this is certainly the case with Samantha. At one moment she wants nothing more passionately than to be taken in by a kindly human. But finding herself in Shuman's house, she soon develops a powerful case of dissatisfaction. In fact, just as Shuman declares his unconditional love for her, Samantha begins to detect irritating flaws in her human master:

. . . it was at this exact moment that I noticed Shuman had a crumb of food on his upper lip. . . . and it's driving me crazy!. . . (*To audience*) And for the first time I realized that maybe Shuman didn't always understand me.

One misunderstanding leads to another as Samantha becomes ever more arbitrarily dissatisfied with poor Shuman, erupting into a feline snit when he ignores her distress over a television documentary.

Samantha then discovers her innate loathing of mice and her instinctual need to hunt them down remorselessly, turning on a dime from a purring lap-kitty into a ferocious predator: "It felt so good! I mean really, really good! I felt like a wild tigress. And I never wanted to feel any different!"

But change stalks her the way she stalks mice, and she undergoes another life-altering reversal when she discovers Oscar, the sexy outdoor cat who turns her into a swooning devotee. Uncharacteristically speechless in their first encounters, she can't express her love to Oscar, but she can communicate it to us: "I wanted to give myself over to Oscar. I wanted to speak to Oscar." Yet, like the cat in the doorway, she can't quite make up her mind: "But I lived with Shuman. I loved Shuman. Or maybe I didn't. I didn't know anymore. I didn't feel like I knew anything anymore." Then, having opted to follow Oscar into the outdoors, she again turns on a dime, refusing his proposal of a trek to Alaska, and choosing instead to return to home and hearth.

So Samantha's character swings back and forth between contrasting moods and emotions like a pendulum or a see-saw. But far from making her character hopelessly incoherent, her

oscillations themselves become a principle of unity. In his seminal essay on play-making, *The Poetics*, Aristotle posits as one of the four elements of dramatic character the quality of “consistency.” However, he notes, if “the subject of the imitation . . . be inconsistent . . . he must be consistently inconsistent,” which suggests he might have been thinking of a cat like Samantha.

In fact, the title of the play, *Indoor/Outdoor*, itself mirrors this principle of consistent inconsistency in Samantha’s character. The title doesn’t propose a final choice between the two options; instead, it recognizes a state of ongoing tension between two general principles of feline existence: in versus out. Like the cat who hesitates on the doorstep, Samantha does eventually make a decision, choosing initially to hit the road. But, just as predictably—in her consistently inconsistent way—she changes her mind, and ends up scratching on the screen, asking to be let back in. In the end, she settles down to domesticity. But in her final moments, she achieves a vision of fulfillment reconciling inside and outside in a final synthesis: “Maybe life is just this. . . . This brief moment we have together where we’re inside each other and outside ourselves and we can all just let go.”

Shuman, Samantha tells us, “is very sensitive and cries over almost anything.” Also, again from Samantha, we learn that, “A big thing to Shuman is music. He loves it. He plays it in the house all the time. . . . One of Shuman’s favorite things to do is put on music really loud and sing and dance to it.” So Shuman, in the spirit of the playwright’s general note about characterization, lets everyone see and know his feelings. When he’s not crying--or working on designing web sites--he’s dancing up a storm, letting it all hang out, albeit only in the presence of his cat. For which (whom?) he expresses an almost disturbingly passionate attachment: “She’s never been away from the house for the night and I don’t want her to be lonely and sad and . . . I just love her so much and I don’t want to lose her and--” At this point in his declaration of affection, Matilda cuts Shuman off, presumably before he says something even more embarrassing.

But if Samantha can be fickle and inconsistent, so can Shuman. When Samantha falls for Oscar and demands her freedom, Shuman, feeling the bitter sting of her rejection, lashes out at her: “I’ve had it! I hate you Samantha! I hate you. You’ve destroyed everything in this house! You’ve practically destroyed me! I’m throwing you out.”

When Matilda intervenes to try to settle the rift between cat and human, she decides that Shuman is the main obstacle to her success: “You’re selfish! You’re over emotional and yet somehow insensitive! You’re a complete mess.” In other words, like Samantha, Shuman--both over emotional and insensitive--embodies inconsistency. However, what is intrinsic to the nature of a cat turns a human being into “a mess.”

In that same encounter, cat and master square off in an explosion of hostility:

SAMANTHA: I feel like your crying isn’t real. I feel like you’re a fake. I feel like you have no backbone. I feel like you live in fear. I feel like you are a miserable lonely person. . . .
SHUMAN: I feel disgusted by you.

In Samantha's eyes at this moment, the salient features of Shuman's character add up to nothing more than personal inadequacy. Which is only to say that, depending on the angle of observation, tears can seem either like admirable sensitivity or contemptible weakness.

Happily, Shuman overcomes the worst of these failings, making particular strides in getting past the loneliness that has led him to overdependence on his cat. He discovers his love for Matilda, another labile soul, and, like Samantha, learns to reconcile the contradictory facets of his nature.

The first important fact about herself that **Matilda** reveals is her abject neediness. Counseling Samantha that she is too dependent on Shuman, Matilda offers her own experience with "that guy Anthony" as a lesson in the perils of amorous obsession: "He loved me more when I stopped dressing like him, calling him ten times a day and peering into his windows with my high tech binoculars." Given her failures with human relationships, her dream of learning the language of cats makes perfect sense. Communicating with felines offers an enticing substitute for her botched attempts to talk to people.

Repairing the relationship between Shuman and Samantha allows her the possibility of killing with one stone the two birds fluttering inside her soul: her inability to talk to people and her longing to communicate with cats. But her attempt to mediate between the estranged pair ends disastrously. Samantha turns on Matilda and bites her; cat and owner end declaring their mutual antipathy; and Samantha ends up running off with Oscar. Whereupon, Matilda has a dire vision of her life spinning into irretrievable failure: "Sometimes I think that I'm going to die alone and no one will know me and I'll be found in a spider web of my own macramé and it'll take them four days to dig me out of it." Her neediness returns with a vengeance and with it a devastating panic about the black hole that awaits her.

On the other hand--and these ever-mutating characters deploy many emotional hands--Matilda declares that "I feel sometimes like a lonely hunter . . . Looking for another meal . . . in a forest dense and dangerous."

Whether seeing herself smothered in macramé or stalking through the forest, Matilda views her life through a lens of melodramatic exaggeration. But eventually the self-dramatization plays itself out, and Matilda, like Samantha, becomes domesticated, refashioning her lonely hunter self into a wife, mother, and professional cat therapist, in the process overcoming her existential panic and learning to communicate fully with both people and cats.

THE THEMES. From Aesop in antiquity, to La Fontaine in the seventeenth century, to George Orwell and Walt Disney in the modern world, people have been telling each other stories about animals who act and talk like people. No doubt this is because animals are always surprising us with their almost-human characteristics: the dog's loyalty; the cow's majestic composure; the eagle's fierce pride. And, conversely, people often strike us as being uncomfortably close in behavior to the beasts. Why else do we describe our fellow human beings as "bovine," "porcine," and "reptilian?"

Indoor/Outdoor participates in this tradition, telling us a story about an archetypal human dilemma--choosing between the familiar and the unknown, the comfortable and the adventurous--as if it were a problem faced by a cat. Of course, cats don't consciously wrestle with choices of this sort; but when you look at a house-cat gazing intently out a window it certainly seems as if they do.

One of the ways we learn about the world is by noting resemblances between things seemingly unlike each other. This sort of recognition is what underlies metaphorical thinking. The French call "potatoes" "pommes de terre"--apples of the earth. Is a potato really like an apple? Well, yes and no. No, in that an apple grows on a tree, has a red shiny skin, and is tart and sweet. None of these is potato-like. But apples **are** like potatoes in that both are versatile sources of food, edibles that can be prepared in many different and delicious ways. So the metaphor "pommes de terre" invites us to make an instructive comparison between the two. In doing so we add a new twist to our understanding of the world, and in such mental adventures, human beings take delight.

The delight offered by *Indoor/Outdoor* is in the extended opportunity it gives us to consider the ways we are like cats, and vice-versa. In doing so, it helps us to see ourselves from a new and enlightening angle—which is one of the prime objectives of a work of art.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. What stories can you think of that treat animals as if they were human?
2. Why does Samantha grow restless in Shuman's house?
3. Why does Shuman seem to need Samantha's affection so badly?
4. Why is Samantha so powerfully attracted to Oscar?
5. Why does Samantha decline to go with Oscar to Alaska?
6. Why does Matilda want to be able to converse with cats?
7. What characteristics of cats have you observed in people?
8. What characteristics of people have you observed in cats?
9. What is happening to Samantha at the end of the play?
10. What does Samantha learn from her adventure with Oscar?