

EXPLICIT CONTENT FOR TEENS

a play by Grace Ellis

“Explicit Content for Teens” Characters (13, any gender unless otherwise marked)

Archer: Student director, more or less in charge, wants to read the play no matter what

Barnes: Actor, punk academia aesthetic, saw this play at Oberlin during a college visit, uses strong language throughout

Crane: Tech director, joker with a heart of gold

Dixon: Stage manager, organized perfectionist, older sibling of Estep

Estep: Stage crew (presumably), younger sibling of Dixon, terrible tattletale but vulnerable

Fitch: Actor, overly apologetic and insecure

Goddard: Soccer player-turned-actor, ignorant but an enthusiastic team player, uses crutches because of an injury

Hooper (F): Actor, senior year!!! Nostalgic, fair-minded, and a little entitled

Ignatz: Paint crew chief, eccentric, spends the whole conversation sketching

Jones (F): Singer, a know-it-all but ultimately quite naïve, will sing a song at the end of the show while the votes are being counted

Kimble: Actor but purely for fun, practical science nerd, good at making connections, lawful good

Lyons: Actor but not today, cramming for a pre-calc test tomorrow that they *cannot* afford to fail

Mrs. Krause (F): School board VP, exasperated and wearied, played by an adult actor

“Fool’s Gold”

The Characters

Ruth, the evening’s gracious host, Hank’s wife

Hank, Ruth’s husband

Susan, Lou’s wife

Lou, Susan’s husband

Nell, Bill’s wife

Bill, Nell’s husband

Marge, wife of the unseen Davey

Ginny, single

The action takes place in Ruth and Hank’s well-furnished living room and in their kitchen.

This play can be performed in any space: an auditorium, a rehearsal room, a cafeteria, the moon, wherever. As with many things in this play, there's no wrong answer. I suggest (and I do mean "suggest" and not "demand") that the space feel naturalistic and not set-like. I also suggest that the house lights stay on except for the Fool's Gold portions, during which I suggest that the show become more traditionally theatrical.

As the audience filters in, they hear upbeat Glenn Miller-style jazz songs. When it's time to begin, one last song plays: a version of "Ain't We Got Fun" with loud and obvious bleeps over totally normal, non-curse words.

There is an easel on stage with a blank piece of foam board on it. There is something on the other side of the board, but it's not visible to the audience yet.

Shortly before the song ends, MRS. KRAUSE enters confidently and carrying a clipboard and a stack of paper ballots.

MRS. KRAUSE

All right, all right, that's enough of that music, please, if we could just turn that off.

The music abruptly ends.

MRS. KRAUSE (CONT.)

Thank you. Good evening, everyone. My name is Marilyn Krause, vice president of the school board. Our school board president, Mr. Michael Greene, wasn't feeling well and will not be joining us tonight.

She accidentally drops the ballots.

MRS. KRAUSE (CONT.)

Shoot! I mean, crap.

She bends down and picks up the ballots.

MRS. KRAUSE (CONT.)

I'm sorry, it's been an extremely stressful day. As I'm sure many of you can imagine. Lots of phone calls. And Mike being sick, some might say conveniently.

She composes herself.

MRS. KRAUSE (CONT.)

Anyway! Back to business. Tonight's meeting is going to work a little differently from the way some of you are used to these meetings working.

Maybe she refers to an agenda on her clipboard.

MRS. KRAUSE (CONT.)

Just to run down the agenda before we begin: We're going to take roll here in a second, and then I know a lot of parents, a lot of community members, teachers, want to make some comments. Yes, I know you've got a lot to say about this. So we'll jump right into our main topic this evening, which is, of course, the drama club's latest play.

Mrs. Krause turns around the foam board, revealing the high school's poster for the play.

MRS. KRAUSE (CONT.)

"Fool's Gold" by Rosemary Flynn, directed by Ms. Sullivan over at the high school.

She clears her throat and shuffles the ballots around uncomfortably.

MRS. KRAUSE (CONT.)

At the end of that comment period, we are all going to vote. Uh huh, that's right! **You** are going to vote on whether or not the drama club will be allowed to perform their, let's call it, controversial show. We're going to hand out the ballots now, but please do not vote until the end, after everyone has had a chance to say their piece. As I told many of you on the phone earlier, your voice matters. Your vote tonight will have consequences.

If you believe that the contents of this play are appropriate for high school children, then the play will be performed as scheduled. But if you believe that this material is not appropriate, then the drama club will not be allowed to continue with this show. The show will not be performed.

At this, ARCHER peeks their head in the back door and looks around. Mrs. Krause continues to address the audience and does not acknowledge the students at any point, and the students do not acknowledge her.

ARCHER

All right, the coast is clear.

Archer enters cautiously, followed by DIXON, ESTEP, CRANE, FITCH, IGNATZ, and KIMBLE. The school day has just ended, and they're all carrying their bags, coats, and whatever else they're planning to take home later. As the students enter, they make themselves at home around the stage.

Also of note: Ignatz has a drawing pad that they sketch in throughout the show, always listening even if it looks like they aren't. Kimble is carrying a poster board from a science class presentation.

MRS. KRAUSE

I myself have not read the play in question, but I, uh, look forward to a lively conversation about it.

DIXON

Are we the only ones here so far?

ARCHER

Not everyone was invited to this.

ESTEP

I don't think this is a good idea.

MRS. KRAUSE

That's what art is all about, right? A conversation? So let's talk it out.

DIXON

Don't be a baby.

ESTEP

I'm telling mom you called me a baby.

DIXON

(to Archer) You see what I'm dealing with?

ARCHER

I'm gonna go turn on the lights.

CRANE

I got it, it's my job.

Crane exits to turn on the stage lights.

MRS. KRAUSE

Remember that we're all here because we care about our kids. So let's put on our listening ears and do our best to stay as civil as possible, as Mr. Greene likes to say when he's not pretending to be sick. Well, it's his loss, anyway.

Mrs. Krause smiles forcefully. GODDARD enters cautiously, on CRUTCHES.

GODDARD

Is this the theater meeting?

DIXON

Yes?

KIMBLE

(waving happily) Over here!

Goddard crutches over and sits near Kimble.

MRS. KRAUSE

The fate of the drama club is in your hands. Together, I know we'll do everything we can to shape and protect the innocent minds of our children.

BARNES, HOOPER, and LYONS slam open the door.

BARNES

What's up, bitches!

Estep is scandalized at Barnes' language.

Mrs. Krause refers to her clipboard and exits as she says:

MRS. KRAUSE

All right, let's go ahead and get started.

Crane turns the lights up. The poster on the easel becomes a part of the students' scene. It can be moved around and referred to as needed.

BARNES

All right, gang. Let's do this.

LYONS

Agreed, I have a pre-calc test tomorrow and I won't be allowed to do the show if I fail, so let's get going.

HOOPER

Can I read the lead part?

ARCHER

Hold on, not everyone is here yet.

LYONS

Like if it were English, that'd be no problem for me, but it's math, so I'll be over here studying, but I'm still listening. I'm still involved.

ARCHER

That's fine.

HOOPER

Can I read the lead, though?

ARCHER

Let's give everyone else a second to get here.

Dixon reaches into their bag and pulls out a COPY OF THE PLAY, Fool's Gold, from the public library.

DIXON

There are two female leads.

ESTEP

Where did you get that?? I thought they made it so you couldn't get it from the school library?? That's bad.

DIXON

It's from the public library. You were with me when I got it, dingus.

Estep crosses their arms.

ESTEP

I'm telling mom. I'm serious.

DIXON

Oh my god, please chill out. It's just a boring play, I don't get what the big deal is.

HOOPER

Will someone just tell me who has the most lines so I know who I want to be? It's my senior year! It's my turn. I gotta make it count.

Barnes produces a PLAYBILL from the Oberlin production from their bag. It's preserved in a plastic sleeve, since it's an object of great value.

BARNES

When I saw it at Oberlin, it seemed like both leads were about the same. But you could see who was credited first.

Hooper snatches the playbill.

BARNES (CONT.)

Careful!

HOOPER

Sorry, sorry. Precious memories.

Hooper gingerly removes the playbill from the sleeve and flips through it.

JONES saunters in. She has a disposable CUP OF HOT WATER. She is saccharine when she says:

JONES

Hello, friends!

HOOPER

(to Jones) How much do you know about this play?

JONES

Well hello to you, too. I know it's called Fool's Gold, and that's it.

HOOPER

Perfect. I'm going to play Ruth in the read-through.

JONES

That's no fair, what if I wanted to play Ruth? Who has the most lines?

BARNES

I think you should both read the play before you start fighting over who's gonna play what. You never know what you're signing up for.

As she talks, Jones produces a TEA BAG and puts it into the hot water.

JONES

That's fine, actually. I have to rest my voice for tonight, so I really shouldn't talk very much. Really, I should be on vocal rest. For tonight.

A beat. Everyone knows better than to take the bait, except for:

ESTEP

What's tonight?

Everyone else rolls their eyes.

JONES

WELL, as many of you may recall, I recently won the American Legacy contest hosted at the American Legion. So of course the school board has asked me to recreate my song performance at the meeting tonight. The judges gave me a superior rating, so. It was a superior performance.

ARCHER

Wait, you're going to sing a song at the school board meeting?

HOOPER

I want to sing at the school board meeting!

JONES

Yeah, it's like, an honor.

DIXON

(to Archer) What are you thinking?

ARCHER

Nothing, it's just going to be a really interesting meeting. Makes this a little more-

DIXON

Complicated?

ARCHER

Yeah, just a little. *(to Jones)* What song-

CRANE

(entering from the light booth area) Well looky looky what I found in the booth.
Contraband.

They enter holding an ACTOR'S EDITION OF THE
PLAY SCRIPT behind their back.

IGNATZ

Ooo what is it? Drugs? Nudie mags? A Ouiji board? Just say no to summoning demons,
good buddy.

CRANE

Worse, good buddy. A PLAY! It's a scandal, it's a outrage.

Fitch takes a step toward them to try to take the book.

FITCH

Sorry, that definitely shouldn't be here. Sully could get in a lot of trouble if people knew
she left that laying around.

Fitch reaches out to grab the script, but Crane tosses it
over to Ignatz. They jockey the book back and forth as
Fitch continues to try and take it.

As this is happening:

LYONS

(to Jones) Hey, can you come help me with this?

JONES

Yeah, of course!

Jones quietly helps Lyons with their homework for a bit.

Ignatz opens the script to a random page and reads very
dramatically, preferably in a broad Southern accent for no
particular reason.

IGNATZ

"How can you say that, Hank. You know I could never lie to you. It's not in my nature."

BARNES

HA. Bullshit.

ARCHER

Everybody calm down. Anyone could have left that upstairs. Besides, Sully took a personal day ahead of the meeting tonight.

IGNATZ

Copy that, chief. Now. Who's ready to corrupt their own young and impressionable minds this fine afternoon?

Barnes laughs loudly. Estep and Fitch both look nervous. Crane's hand shoots up into the air. Ignatz also raises their hand, and they high five. Goddard also raises their hand.

IGNATZ

This kid knows what I'm talking about.

GODDARD

Oh, no, actually. I have a question. Do we have to have our monologue memorized, or can I read off my phone?

ARCHER

What?

GODDARD

Yeah, uh, I'm not sure I had enough time to really memorize the whole thing, but I can try?

ARCHER

Are you talking about auditions? Those are on hold for now, they're not today. I'm sorry.

GODDARD

I thought- dang. That's my bad. I'm new to all this. Normally I'd be playing soccer in the fall, but uh, now I can't, obviously. So I'm new to all this, I don't get how it works yet. But I'm trying. I am trying.

KIMBLE

Sorry, I didn't mean to lead you astray.

GODDARD

All good, all good. Happy to be here. Go theater! Good luck at all this, everyone.

JONES

Oh no, in the theatre, saying "good luck" is bad luck. We say "break a leg."

GODDARD

Uh, right. Please continue, maestro.

ARCHER

Right, so, I guess I should explain what we're doing here. This is my first time student directing, I'm still getting used to, you know, being in charge. So the people at the school board meeting are going to vote tonight to decide if we're allowed to put on the fall play that our director, Ms. Sullivan, picked out for us. As the student director, I think it's important that we make a statement at the meeting one way or another.

LYONS

Even though it doesn't matter what we think because we don't get to vote.

ARCHER

Of course it matters what we think. Don't you have to study?

LYONS

I'm still involved.

ARCHER (CONT.)

So we're going to read the play together and write a statement and then someone will read that statement at the school board meeting-

JONES

Can I read the statement?

HOOPER

No fair, I wanted to read the statement. Can we have auditions to read the statement?

ARCHER

Oh my god, we don't even know what the statement is yet. We have to read the play first. **We have to read the play in order to know how we feel about the play.**

IGNATZ

Every time you guys say "statement," it makes me think of *Legally Blonde*.

CRANE

Oh my god, Elle!

IGNATZ

Can Elle Woods be in the statement?

ARCHER

No. *(pointing to Dixon)* Our stage manager was supposed to email everyone a PDF of the script, so hopefully everyone has it.

GODDARD

(to Kimble) Can you forward that to me?

KIMBLE

Yeah, of course.

Everyone takes out their laptops or phones or tablets or whatever. Dixon will read from the library book. Crane reads from the script they found.

After a second of pulling up the PDF, everyone simultaneously reacts to the fact that the PDF is rotated incorrectly, whether that's physically turning their device or craning their head or whatever makes sense. Crane flips around the physical script to be funny.

HOOPER

Does anyone know how to rotate a PDF?

DIXON

What?

Dixon leans over to see someone's screen.

KIMBLE

I think it's under "tools" and then "rotate."

DIXON

Crap. Sorry, guys. I had to scan it in a hurry. I didn't want to get caught.

ESTEP

Oh no, now everybody will know you aren't literally the most perfect person on the planet!

DIXON

I'm really sorry, you guys.

KIMBLE

Totally fine, it's an easy fix.

DIXON

I do wanna say, too, before we get started, that I read this play, and I don't really get what's so controversial about it. It really seems like a normal play.

BARNES

I could see why some people wouldn't want us to do it. When I saw it at Oberlin, it was, I mean, *I* didn't see anything wrong with it. I loved it! I thought it was great.

(MORE)

BARNES (CONT.)

But yeah, no, I think that some people just don't think we can handle things, as teenagers. But they're wrong.

LYONS

Maybe we should vote right now? To see if we even have to read it today? Like, a vote to see if we support our right to do the show.

BARNES

I agree. I know you guys, we're all friends here. I feel like we're mostly on the same page.

ARCHER

No way. We wouldn't even know what we were voting on. It would be a vote based on what, stuff we read on the internet? Stuff our parents told us? Ms. Sullivan picked this show for a reason.

BARNES

Yeah, she did.

ARCHER

We're going to figure out what that reason is. *(turning to Kimble)* You said you did some research to give us context?

Kimble takes out their phone.

KIMBLE

Yeah, yes. I'm just gonna read a little bit from Wikipedia. *(They clear their throat.)*
 "'Fool's Gold' is a 1951 stage play written by American playwright Rosemary Flynn. The play premiered on Broadway in March 1951, running for 666 performances."

JONES

Spooky. 6-6-6. Cursed.

KIMBLE

"It won the 1951 Pulitzer Prize for Drama but was disqualified from Tony Award contention due to the award committee's fear of violating indecency laws."

JONES

Omg, I was right. It's cursed!

ESTEP

"Indecency laws?"

FITCH

Like laws against inappropriate stuff.

IGNATZ

Sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll.

ESTEP

Oh my gosh!

CRANE

I know, ya gotta watch out for that rock ‘n roll.

KIMBLE

“The play won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Revival of a Play in 2017, directed by Rebecca Frecknall. ‘Fool’s Gold’ is considered by many to be one of the most influential pieces of theater from the mid-century, both in terms of style and content. Activist Gloria Steinem named the play as one of the, quote, ‘first ripples of second wave feminism.’”

HOOPER

Second wave feminism, that’s pretty dated. Aren’t we on like, the fourth wave?

ARCHER

Let’s just assign parts and talk about it after we know what we’re talking about. Don’t worry about the genders for now, it’s just a read through.

As each character is introduced, the actor from Fool’s Gold who will be playing that character comes out and maybe does a little wave or gesture, like the character selection screen in a video game. These actors, unlike the others, are in fully elaborate costumes with obvious stage makeup.

ARCHER (CONT.)

Ok so first up is “Ruth, the evening’s gracious host, Hank’s wife.”

Hooper raises her hand. Jones slurps her tea loudly.

JONES

She’s all yours.

ARCHER

Thank goodness. Next up is “Hank, Ruth’s husband.”

KIMBLE

That's it? Not very much information to go on.

DIXON

There's not much else to say. He's like, a classic husband. Supportive, loves his wife, old-timey funny.

Crane's hand rockets into the air.

CRANE

I can do funny.

IGNATZ

Yeah buddy!

They high five again.

ARCHER

Next up is Susan and her husband Lou. No other information.

BARNES

They're like, the sweet older couple. Ridiculously out-of-touch, but like, low-key, they're not gonna change to make someone else happy. Like honestly, respect.

Fitch and Estep raise their hands.

ARCHER

(pointing to Fitch) Why don't you do Lou-

FITCH

Can I be Susan? My mom did this show when she was in high school, and she was Susan.

ARCHER

Sure, then let's do...

Spotting Estep, they look to Dixon.

DIXON

I thought you wanted to do stage crew.

ESTEP

Oh yeah.

IGNATZ

I'll do Lou.

ARCHER

Good enough. Next up are Nell and her husband Bill.

BARNES

They're newly weds. High school sweethearts who just got married. Are they happy about it...

Goddard and Kimble raise their hands, make eye contact with each other, and blush.

LYONS

Hey! No spoilers.

ARCHER

(pointing to Kimble) Nell and *(pointing to Goddard)* Bill. Next is Marge-

BARNES

I want Marge. I love Marge. She's the best one.

ARCHER

Ok. And finally, that leaves... it says "Ginny, single." So no husband.

JONES

I'll play Ginny.

Ignatz is handing Crane a piece of gum.

IGNATZ

Does Ginny have to have red hair?

CRANE

(ala Draco Malfoy) Red hair, hand-me-down robes-

JONES

I can do a British accent. 'ello gov'na, Tuesday, innit.

ARCHER

Not necessary. We don't have a lot of time, so let's go ahead and get started.

Dixon steps forward, temporarily becoming like the stage manager in "Our Town," setting the stage via pointing and suggesting. As they read, a very peppy rendition of "Holiday for Strings" plays, setting the tone.

The actors from Fool's Gold who are not in this scene may wait in the wings or off to the side of the stage, if there isn't room. Hank must begin the scene from off-stage. The members of the drama club more or less freeze in place, essentially handing over the stage.

It is vitally important that this initial scene with Ruth and Hank is played with no subtext whatsoever. It needs to be as sitcom-y as possible, very fluffy and silly. Big smiles, everyone!

DIXON

"Scene: Ruth and Hank's living room, stylishly decorated and neat as a pin, ready for company. A couch, chairs, and a coffee table sit center stage, and a fireplace mantel adorned with family pictures sits stage right.

"There is a small kitchen area stage left with a door separating it from the much larger living room. Most of the kitchen is off-stage, but the portion we can see is full of various finger foods.

"At rise, RUTH flits around the living room, nervously arranging pillows in a tizzy. She picks up a framed picture from the mantel and pauses to look at it.

"A puppy suddenly begins to bark from off stage. Ruth jumps in surprise and drops the picture on the ground. "

HANK

(off-stage, shouting) Sandy! Sit! Sit, Sandy! Quiet! Sandy!

DIXON

"The barking continues incessantly."

RUTH

Hank? Hank, is everything all right?

HANK

(off-stage) What?

RUTH

The guests will be here any minute.

HANK

(off-stage) Tell it to the dog, not to me. Sit! Sit, Sandy!

DIXON

“The sound of a door closing. The barking stops. HANK enters, dabbing his brow with a handkerchief.”

HANK

(chomping on gum) Well that’s that taken care of, I suppose.

RUTH

She hates to be in the basement, Hank. It’s too confined. She ought to be up here with the guests. You know how everyone does love a puppy.

HANK

(still chomping) My darling, that dog is far too poorly behaved at the moment. You wouldn’t want her to spoil your party now, do you?

ARCHER

Hold!

The action briefly freezes.

ARCHER (CONT.)

Are you chewing gum?

CRANE

No! *(Crane and Hank both swallow their gum simultaneously.)* Not anymore!

LYONS

Let’s keep it moving, people!

The scene starts up again.

RUTH

You know how everyone does love a puppy.

HANK

My darling, that dog is far too poorly behaved at the moment. You wouldn’t want her to spoil your party now, do you?

RUTH

But Hank-

HANK

She’s in good hands, Ruth. I never met a dog I couldn’t train, never. Why, you’ll see. Another month or two, and sweet little Sandy will be the belle of the ball.

RUTH

Either that or she'll be vicious enough to take out a whole battalion of Krauts.

She makes him a drink.

HANK

(laughing) She is a strong-willed thing, isn't she. I would've loved to train her during the war. But no no, none of that. She'll be sweet as pie. She'll have to be, once we start our family.

RUTH

Hank, do you think tonight will go well?

HANK

You've hosted parties before, why should tonight be any different?

RUTH

I was reading this pamphlet, you know, it tells you what one must do at these types of things. It was more complicated than I expected. And I haven't seen the girls in so long now. Weeks! And my dress is all wrong, and my hair's so flat, and I haven't beaten the rugs in ages.

HANK

You'll be wonderful. You haven't got a thing to worry about. I've always known you to throw a swell party.

RUTH

Really? You mean it?

HANK

Sure I mean it! Who's on the guest list?

RUTH

Nell and Bill.

HANK

Well there you are! Tonight will be swell. Those two are always a hit, and now they can tell us all about their big honeymoon. Who else?

RUTH

Susan and Lou.

HANK

Sue 'n Lou! The old blowhard.

RUTH

I don't think Susan likes to be called Sue.

HANK

Then she shouldn't have married a man named Lou. What about Dave?

RUTH

He's got a shift, but Marge will be here.

HANK

Damn. When did Dave move to third shift?

RUTH

Marge said a few weeks ago. She said he makes ten more cents an hour working nights.

HANK

Ten cents! If I could work third shift for ten more cents an hour, my friends would never see me again either. *(He takes a drink.)* Is Ginny coming?

RUTH

Ginny?

HANK

Sure, Ginny.

RUTH

I suppose she is.

HANK

That's awfully neighborly of you to invite her.

RUTH

She's our friend.

HANK

I suppose she is.

RUTH

I've always known Ginny to be there for me, to take care of me when I'm feeling down.

HANK

Well, I'm glad you have such a close girlfriend.

RUTH

Besides, with Davey on shift, we needed an even number for our party games.

HANK

Say, has Ginny ever considered going out with Willy?

RUTH

Willy the welder? “Wowzer” Willy?

HANK

Sure, I think they’d be swell together!

RUTH

I’m not so sure about that.

HANK

I’ll talk to him tomorrow over lunch. What a match! Why didn’t I think of it before.

RUTH

I can picture it now: “Gee, Ginny, you’d want to go out with lil old me? Wow wow wowzer!”

HANK

Willy is our friend.

During Dixon’s line, Ruth and Hank sort of fade into the background again.

DIXON

The puppy begins to bark again. Ok so like, do you guys see what I mean? It’s just like, normal!

BARNES

What-

IGNATZ

It seems kinda easy. Like, we did a living room set last year, and now I have to paint another living room set? I dunno.

GODDARD

I think it’s fun.

HOOPER

I agree, I think it’s fun. I like it so far. I like my character.

Audience Talkback Questions

Provided by PEN America

1. When deciding on the outcome of the play, audience members each received one vote per person. In many cases where educational censorship is involved, however, the banning attempt is brought by one or a few community members and the decision is either made by school boards, or even individual administrators. Should one person have influence over the whole process? Who should be deciding whether materials are or are not appropriate for school settings?
2. Changing the content of a play is one of the ways controversial aspects in art is addressed. Is it ever appropriate to change the content of play based on the times and current community standards? Should inflammatory language be changed?
3. In the play you all just participated in, the audience voting doesn't know the ending of "Fool's Gold." Here, you were unable to make your decision with the full work of art known to you. Can you make an informed decision without knowing the full context? Can a work be banned for a single word, or a scene taken alone, without the benefit of the full work?
4. Are there any recent examples of censorship or book bans in your area? What are some ways you can get involved in this ongoing conversation?