LIZARD BRAIN

A one-act sci-fi drama

By Jenna Jane

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Summary

A one-act sci-fi drama. CHLOE's therapy session takes an alarming turn when she realizes her psychiatrist is not who they appear to be. They're an AI program reporting data back to the corporation she works for. This play explores the impact of suddenly having a physical disability, what it means to be authentically human in a time of bionic body-modification, the corporatization of artificial intelligence, and the uncomfortable tug-of-war between privacy and safety.

Cast of characters

A note from the playwright on gender references, below: These are only suggestions. Gender is just a performative social construct, anyway. Do whatever feels right to you.

CHLOE: Female, 30-50, any race or ethnicity. A graphic designer. Sarcastic, quick-witted, bittersweet. Missing an arm.

A note from the playwright: Please make an effort to cast an actor with a real physical disability that can be visibly observed by the audience. I encourage you to adjust the dialogue to fit that actor's situation and am willing to help. It's important to platform people with disabilities, especially in stories that are about them.

PHYLLIS: Female, 30-65, Black. A psychiatrist. Warm, patient, and unapologetically intellectual. Phyllis's physical appearance should be different from Phil in every way. It should be instantly obvious that Phyllis and Phil are different actors.

PHIL: Non-binary, 30-65, any race or ethnicity except Black. A psychiatrist. Calm, rational, strong in their convictions. A helper. Puts others' needs first by default. Phil's physical appearance should be different from Phyllis in every way. It should be instantly obvious that Phil and Phyllis are different actors.

Setting

A therapist's office. 200 years in the future.

Lights up on a therapist's office. CHLOE and PHYLLIS are seated in two overly plush chairs that are angled toward each other. The office is inauthentically cozy. The door is closed. There's a wall or two with motivational posters that say things like, "It's OK to not be OK!" and "Teamwork makes the dream WORK!" and "Obey!" There is a desk that the audience cannot see underneath, where PHIL is hiding. A tablet, stress balls, and fidget spinners are on top of the desk.

CHLOE's downstage arm is missing. She wears a hoodie with LIFE CORP branding on it. Her sleeve is tied in a knot to keep it from dangling. She is covered in pillows.

PHYLLIS

And how did that make you feel?

CHLOE

Bad.

PHYLLIS

Chloe, remember what we've talked about: There's a difference between what happened and what you made it mean – the meaning that you assigned to it.

(CHLOE sighs.)

Let's try this again. How did you feel when your mother called your upcoming surgery…

(PHYLLIS checks her notes on the tactile interface implanted in her inner forearm.)

…"An abomination and affront to your Creator?"

CHLOE

Bad.

PHYLLIS

Bad?

CHLOE

It felt bad.

PHYLLIS

Say more.

CHLOE

Can I have another pillow?

PHYLLIS

Chloe.

CHLOE

(Sighing.)

I felt like she was judging me. Like she thinks this treatment to induce limb regeneration will make me less human.

(Indicating her missing arm.)

I didn't ask for this. I didn't choose to lose my arm in a personal transporter accident. And now that I've chosen this procedure, it's like my mother respects me less because I don't want to struggle. My mother has a martyrdom fetish. She thinks suffering builds character.

PHYLLIS

What evidence do you have that that's true?

CHLOE

I hate it when you use that line.

PHYLLIS

It’s not a line.

CHLOE

It’s a line, Phyllis.

PHYLLIS

You don’t seem like you want to be here today.

CHLOE

Like I have a choice.

PHYLLIS

It's generous that LIFE CORP provides each of its employees with free in-person therapy sessions. Most people can only afford virtual mental healthcare.

CHLOE

You mean chat bot therapy.

PHYLLIS

Not every corporation is so committed to employee well-being.

(The lights go out for a moment, flicker, then come back on.)

CHLOE

Oh, so it’s not just my office.

PHYLLIS

No, the whole system has been glitching today.

CHLOE

Do you know why?

PHYLLIS

LIFE CORP is testing a new generator powered by sunflower oil. A compromise between solar and gas.

CHLOE

What? That doesn't make sense.

PHYLLIS

I'm sorry for the interruption. Where were we?

CHLOE

You were telling me I should be grateful for company-mandated therapy.

PHYLLIS

Company-PROVIDED therapy. And it’s incorporated into your workday. You get to do it on company time.

CHLOE

You mean I HAVE to do it on company time. It’s not optional.

(PHYLLIS gestures to the desk.)

PHYLLIS

Stress ball? Fidget spinner?

CHLOE

Maybe later.

PHYLLIS

Let’s get back to your medical procedure. During our last appointment, you were debating between limb regeneration treatment and a bionic arm. If I remember correctly, you were leaning more toward the bionic option. What changed?

CHLOE

First of all, I'm shocked I even get a choice. I mean, LIFE CORP has the contractual ability to force me to get whatever upgrades they want. So, why bother letting me choose between different options?

PHYLLIS

(Almost as if reciting from a manual.)

LIFE CORP cares deeply about employee morale. Choice is empowering. Employees who feel empowered are happier and more productive.

CHLOE

Uh huh. Yeah. I feel very empowered in this moment.

PHYLLIS

I sense a hint of sarcasm.

CHLOE

You're a sharp one, Phyllis.

PHYLLIS

Thank you.

CHLOE

Anyway, my boss has been not-so-subtly hinting that she’d prefer bionic. And I get it. I’m a graphic designer who lost their dominant

hand. Not ideal. A bionic arm gets me back to work faster. 3-D printed fingers tend to have more precision and consistency. Limb regeneration — that takes time. Six months, maybe a year. But it also means I'll get sensation back.

PHYLLIS

Bionic limbs simulate sensation.

CHLOE

I want real sensation. Not some engineer's interpretation of how something feels through 3-D printed nerve endings.

PHYLLIS

But sensation means pain, too.

(CHLOE removes some of the pillows.)

CHLOE

I want to feel my partner's hand in mine, Phyllis. Grains of sand between my fingers at the beach. Hot running water from the faucet.

PHYLLIS

And what leads you to believe your mother has a problem with that?

CHLOE

Just because she's willing to suffer for her principles doesn't mean I have to.

PHYLLIS

It sounds like you think she's being unfair.

CHLOE

SHE IS!

PHYLLIS

That was a big reaction, huh? Let's talk more about why unfairness bothers you.

(A pause. CHLOE removes another pillow.)

CHLOE

Yesterday, I got my usual delivery from a grocery courier. I got a pound of apples. One of them had a cut. So, I threw it out. Sure, I could have eaten around that spot. But I couldn’t shake that instinctive feeling of disgust. Who knows what’s already gotten into that wound to eat the apple before I did? Mold? A bug? Easier to just throw it away. A cut is a death sentence for an apple. It’s doomed to rot. It won’t heal. Now, if I cut my arm, it knits itself back together.

(CHLOE removes any remaining pillows.)

CHLOE (CONT’D)

But if my arm gets amputated in, oh, let’s just say a personal transporter crash on the way to work, it doesn’t grow back. If a lizard’s tail gets cut off, it CAN grow back. A lizard. Why can a lizard grow back an appendage, but not a human? It’s not FAIR.

PHYLLIS

Because humans generate scar tissue and lizards don’t. Scarring prevents tissue regeneration.

CHLOE

Um, yeah. How did you know that?

PHYLLIS

Oh, I must have learned that in high school biology or something. If only they taught us something useful, like how to file our taxes, am I right? Now, what were you saying about lizards growing back their little tails?

CHLOE

Right, so, a surgeon is going to remove my arm's scar tissue – which sounds wildly unpleasant – and then they'll implant embryonic neural stem cells harvested from lizards into my stump. And if all goes well, my arm will regenerate within a year.

PHYLLIS

Will it be the same? An exact replica of what it was before? Or is it going to be… reptilian?

CHLOE

Well, it's not going to shed its skin, if that's what you're asking. But it probably won't be identical. The doctor told me regenerated body parts aren't the same as what was lost. Sometimes cartilage rebuilds instead of bone. Or it grows back smaller. Or it's missing stuff.

PHYLLIS

(Unnaturally.)

Like insects that regenerate abnormally small legs from which some segments may be missing.

CHLOE

Uh, yeah, I guess. They teach that in med school?

PHYLLIS

(Warmly.)

No, no, of course not. But this calls to mind something I DID learn during undergrad.

CHLOE

What’s that?

PHYLLIS

Have you ever heard the term “lizard brain?”

CHLOE

Uh, no.

PHYLLIS

Lizard brain refers to the brain stem, cerebellum, and basal ganglia --

CHLOE

Sure. Of course. Totally.

PHYLLIS

… Which control basic body functions like breathing, balance, and coordination, plus simple survival urges like feeding, mating, and defense. Lizards respond by reflex and instinct. Mammals, on the other hand --

CHLOE

Too soon, Phyllis.

PHYLLIS

… Mammals respond to emotions. That means our behavior is more flexible. And mammals tend to have good memories, especially when it comes to events that prompt strong emotional responses.

CHLOE

Which keeps you in business.

PHYLLIS

It does. But here's what I'm getting at, Chloe.

(The lights flicker.)

PHYLLIS (CONT'D)

The vestiges—

CHLOE

(Unimpressed.)

"Vestiges." Great vocabulary word.

PHYLLIS

… The vestiges of our lizard brain keep our bodies functioning and provide us with basic survival instincts, right? While our newer mammal brain regions enrich our emotions and memory. Are you with me?

CHLOE

Nope.

PHYLLIS

You're talking about getting injected with lizard brain stem cells.

CHLOE

Pretty cool, right?

PHYLLIS

Have you considered how that might affect your mind?

(A pause.)