

# DO NOT PRESS THE BUTTON

*A Two-Person Dramatic Comedy Scene for Student Actors*

Suggested Ages: 11–16

Approx. Time: 7–9 minutes

Difficulty: Beginner/Intermediate

Characters: 2, gender-flexible

Genre: Dramatic Comedy / Absurdist Theatre

Setting: An otherwise empty room

Props: One chair, one large button, and a sign reading DO NOT PRESS THE BUTTON

Skills Practiced: Physical acting, object focus, comic timing, escalating conflict, listening, reacting, subtext, character objectives, pauses, and changing objectives.

Performance Permission: Free to perform at schools, churches, homeschool groups, camps, drama programs, and similar organizations. No performance royalty or permission request required.

## Characters

**ALEX** — Cautious, practical, and generally comfortable following rules. Alex believes rules usually exist for a reason - even when that reason is not immediately obvious.

**JORDAN** — Curious, imaginative, and increasingly fascinated by anything they are told not to investigate. Jordan does not necessarily want to break rules. Jordan just wants to know why they are rules.

Both roles may be played by actors of any gender. Character names may be changed.

## Performance Notes

The button should feel increasingly important even though it never changes. Much of the humor and suspense comes from the actors' focus, distance from the button, pauses, physical reactions, and attempts not to look at it.

Do not play Alex as simply fearful or Jordan as simply reckless. Both characters have reasonable arguments. The deeper conflict works best when the audience can understand both points of view.

The setting is intentionally unexplained. The script never reveals who placed the button in the room, why the warning exists, what the button does, or whether anything would happen if it were pressed.

## The Scene

*An almost completely empty room. There is one chair. And there is a BUTTON. It should be large enough to be clearly visible to the audience. Beside it - or directly above it - is a sign: DO NOT PRESS THE BUTTON.*

*ALEX and JORDAN enter. They stop. They see the button. Silence.*

**JORDAN:** Huh.

**ALEX:** No.

**JORDAN:** I didn't say anything.

**ALEX:** You said "huh."

**JORDAN:** That's not anything.

**ALEX:** Your "huh" is something.

**JORDAN:** I have several different "huhs."

**ALEX:** That was your dangerous one.

**JORDAN:** I don't have a dangerous "huh."

**ALEX:** You absolutely have a dangerous "huh."

*JORDAN approaches the button.*

**ALEX:** Jordan.

**JORDAN:** I'm looking at it.

**ALEX:** Look from there.

**JORDAN:** I can't see it from there.

**ALEX:** You can see the sign.

**JORDAN:** Yes. "Do not press the button."

**ALEX:** Great. Mystery solved.

**JORDAN:** What mystery?

**ALEX:** The mystery of whether we should press the button.

**JORDAN:** That's not the mystery.

**ALEX:** There is no mystery.

**JORDAN:** Of course there's a mystery.

*JORDAN gestures toward the button.*

**JORDAN:** Why is there a button?

**ALEX:** I don't know.

**JORDAN:** Exactly.

**ALEX:** That's not an answer.

**JORDAN:** Exactly!

**ALEX:** Stop saying exactly.

**JORDAN:** Why put a button in an empty room if nobody is supposed to press it?

**ALEX:** Maybe because we're not supposed to press it.

**JORDAN:** That doesn't answer anything.

**ALEX:** It answers the important part.

*JORDAN studies the button from another angle.*

**ALEX:** What are you doing?

**JORDAN:** Observing.

**ALEX:** You don't need to observe it.

**JORDAN:** You can't tell someone not to observe something.

**ALEX:** Fine. Observe it without getting closer.

*JORDAN crouches beside the button.*

**ALEX:** Jordan.

**JORDAN:** I'm not touching it.

**ALEX:** Good.

*JORDAN leans closer.*

**ALEX:** Jordan.

**JORDAN:** Still not touching it.

*JORDAN puts an ear near the button.*

**ALEX:** Are you listening to it?

**JORDAN:** Maybe.

**ALEX:** Buttons don't make sounds.

**JORDAN:** You don't know that.

**ALEX:** I know what a button is.

**JORDAN:** Do you know what this button is?

*Beat.*

**ALEX:** A button we aren't pressing.

*JORDAN sniffs it.*

**ALEX:** Did you just smell the button?

**JORDAN:** No.

**ALEX:** I watched you smell it.

**JORDAN:** I was breathing near it.

**ALEX:** With your nose.

**JORDAN:** That's usually how I do it.

*ALEX takes JORDAN by the shoulders and gently moves them away from the button.*

**ALEX:** Sit.

**JORDAN:** Why?

**ALEX:** Because there is a chair.

**JORDAN:** There's also a button.

**ALEX:** The chair doesn't have a warning sign.

**JORDAN:** Which is suspicious.

**ALEX:** Sit down.

*JORDAN sits. Beat.*

**JORDAN:** What do you think it does?

**ALEX:** Nothing.

**JORDAN:** Then why can't we press it?

**ALEX:** Fine. Something.

**JORDAN:** What?

**ALEX:** I don't know.

**JORDAN:** Maybe it opens the door.

**ALEX:** We came through the door.

**JORDAN:** Maybe it opens a different door.

**ALEX:** There isn't another door.

**JORDAN:** Maybe that's because we haven't pressed the button.

*ALEX stares at JORDAN.*

**JORDAN:** Maybe it turns on the lights.

**ALEX:** The lights are on.

**JORDAN:** Different lights.

**ALEX:** What different lights?

**JORDAN:** Better lights.

**ALEX:** These lights are fine.

**JORDAN:** You don't know what you're missing.

**ALEX:** Neither do you!

**JORDAN:** Exactly.

**ALEX:** Stop saying exactly!

*JORDAN rises.*

**JORDAN:** Maybe it's an emergency button.

**ALEX:** Then the sign wouldn't say not to press it.

**JORDAN:** Unless there's an emergency.

**ALEX:** Is there an emergency?

**JORDAN:** Not yet.

**ALEX:** Sit down.

**JORDAN:** What if pressing it prevents an emergency?

**ALEX:** Sit.

**JORDAN:** What if not pressing it causes one?

**ALEX:** SIT.

*JORDAN sits. Silence.*

**JORDAN:** What if this is a test?

*ALEX closes their eyes.*

**ALEX:** Of course.

**JORDAN:** Think about it.

**ALEX:** I don't want to.

**JORDAN:** Someone puts two people in a room—

**ALEX:** Nobody put us in here.

**JORDAN:** —with a mysterious button—

**ALEX:** It's not mysterious.

**JORDAN:** —and a sign telling them not to press it. What are they testing?

**ALEX:** Whether we can follow extremely simple instructions.

**JORDAN:** Or whether we can think for ourselves.

**ALEX:** That's convenient.

**JORDAN:** What?

**ALEX:** The test just happens to require you to do the exact thing you already want to do.

**JORDAN:** Maybe I want to do it because I'm good at tests.

**ALEX:** You got a sixty-eight on the last one.

**JORDAN:** It was poorly designed.

**ALEX:** You didn't study.

**JORDAN:** Also poorly designed.

*JORDAN gets up again.*

**ALEX:** Where are you going?

**JORDAN:** I'm stretching my legs.

**ALEX:** Toward the button?

**JORDAN:** That's where my legs wanted to stretch.

**ALEX:** Stretch the other way.

*JORDAN turns and stretches awkwardly away from the button.*

**JORDAN:** This feels unnatural.

**ALEX:** You'll survive.

*JORDAN suddenly notices something.*

**JORDAN:** Wait.

**ALEX:** What?

**JORDAN:** It says, "Do not PRESS the button."

**ALEX:** Yes.

**JORDAN:** It doesn't say, "Do not TOUCH the button."

**ALEX:** No.

**JORDAN:** So technically—

**ALEX:** No.

**JORDAN:** I haven't finished.

**ALEX:** You have.

**JORDAN:** I could touch it without pressing it.

**ALEX:** You are not touching the button.

**JORDAN:** Why?

**ALEX:** Because touching becomes pushing, pushing becomes pressing, and pressing becomes whatever happens after you press a giant button underneath a sign that says DO NOT PRESS THE BUTTON!

*Beat.*

**JORDAN:** So you admit something might happen.

**ALEX:** I am going to throw the chair at you.

**JORDAN:** Now that would definitely violate a rule.

*ALEX moves the chair farther from the button.*

**JORDAN:** Do you always do what you're told?

*This lands differently.*

**ALEX:** What?

**JORDAN:** Do you always do what you're told?

**ALEX:** When it makes sense.

**JORDAN:** This doesn't make sense.

**ALEX:** It makes perfect sense. Don't press the button.

**JORDAN:** That's an instruction. Not a reason.

**ALEX:** You don't always need a reason.

**JORDAN:** Why not?

**ALEX:** Because sometimes somebody knows something you don't.

**JORDAN:** Who?

**ALEX:** What?

**JORDAN:** Who knows something we don't?

*JORDAN points to the sign.*

**JORDAN:** Who wrote that?

**ALEX:** I don't know.

**JORDAN:** Why do you trust them?

**ALEX:** I don't trust them.

**JORDAN:** You're obeying them.

**ALEX:** Because the possible consequences are bigger than my need to know!

*Beat. The comedy settles for a moment.*

**JORDAN:** I don't think it's just a need to know.

**ALEX:** Then what is it?

**JORDAN:** What if everybody thought like you?

**ALEX:** There would be fewer exploded buttons.

**JORDAN:** I'm serious.

**ALEX:** So am I.

**JORDAN:** People tell you not to ask questions all the time. Don't ask why. Don't touch that. Don't go there. Don't try that. Don't challenge this. Just accept it.

*Beat.*

**JORDAN:** What if everybody did?

**ALEX:** And what if everybody did what you do?

**JORDAN:** What's that supposed to mean?

**ALEX:** Decide every warning is an invitation.

**JORDAN:** I don't do that.

**ALEX:** You're trying to outsmart a sign.

**JORDAN:** I'm questioning it.

**ALEX:** You're looking for permission to do something you've already decided you want to do.

**JORDAN:** At least I want to know why.

**ALEX:** And what happens when there isn't a why?

**JORDAN:** There's always a why.

**ALEX:** No. Sometimes there isn't. Sometimes you don't get an explanation. Sometimes you don't get to know what happens next. Sometimes you have to decide without knowing everything.

**JORDAN:** That doesn't bother you?

*ALEX looks at the button.*

**ALEX:** Of course it bothers me.

**JORDAN:** Then why haven't you said that?

**ALEX:** Because being bothered by something doesn't mean I have to do something stupid about it.

*Beat.*

**JORDAN:** You think I'm stupid?

**ALEX:** No.

**JORDAN:** You just said—

**ALEX:** I think you're curious. And I think sometimes you're so afraid of not knowing that you'd rather risk a bad answer than have no answer at all.

*Silence. JORDAN looks at the button.*

**JORDAN:** Maybe.

*Beat.*

**JORDAN:** But I think sometimes you're so afraid of getting a bad answer that you'd rather never ask the question.

*Now ALEX looks at the button. Longer silence.*

**ALEX:** Maybe.

*They stand together, looking at it.*

**JORDAN:** So...

**ALEX:** No.

**JORDAN:** I didn't say anything.

**ALEX:** You were about to.

**JORDAN:** You don't know that.

**ALEX:** I know your "so."

**JORDAN:** I have several different "sos."

**ALEX:** That was your dangerous one.

*A small laugh between them. JORDAN backs away from the button.*

**JORDAN:** Fine.

**ALEX:** Fine?

**JORDAN:** Fine. I'm not pressing it.

**ALEX:** Really?

**JORDAN:** Really.

*JORDAN sits. ALEX remains standing. Silence. JORDAN watches ALEX. ALEX looks at the button. Looks away. Looks back.*

**JORDAN:** Alex.

**ALEX:** What?

**JORDAN:** You're looking at it.

**ALEX:** No, I'm not.

**JORDAN:** You are absolutely looking at it.

**ALEX:** I'm observing.

**JORDAN:** Observe it from over here.

**ALEX:** I can observe it from here.

*ALEX takes one small step toward the button.*

**JORDAN:** What are you doing?

**ALEX:** Nothing.

**JORDAN:** That was my line.

**ALEX:** I'm just thinking.

**JORDAN:** Think over here.

*ALEX takes another step.*

**JORDAN:** Alex.

**ALEX:** You know...

**JORDAN:** No.

**ALEX:** You made one interesting point.

**JORDAN:** I take it back.

**ALEX:** You don't even know which point.

**JORDAN:** All of them. I take back everything I've said since we entered this room.

**ALEX:** What if it is a test?

**JORDAN:** It's a test of whether we can follow extremely simple instructions.

**ALEX:** That's convenient.

**JORDAN:** Yes! Very convenient! Let's enjoy the convenience!

*ALEX approaches the button.*

**JORDAN:** Alex.

**ALEX:** I'm not going to press it.

**JORDAN:** Good.

**ALEX:** I'm just looking.

**JORDAN:** Look with your eyes.

**ALEX:** That's generally how I do it.

**JORDAN:** Don't use my lines against me.

*ALEX leans toward the button.*

**JORDAN:** Alex.

*ALEX slowly raises one hand.*

**JORDAN:** Alex.

**ALEX:** It really doesn't say we can't touch it.

**JORDAN:** ALEX.

*ALEX's finger hovers above the button. JORDAN rushes over.*

**JORDAN:** Wait!

*Both freeze. They stare at the button. Then at each other. Then back at the button.*

**JORDAN:** Do you want to?

*Long pause.*

**ALEX:** Do you?

*Another pause. Their hands slowly move toward the button. Almost there. Almost...*

**BLACKOUT.**

**END**

## Teacher Notes & Acting Exercises

### Make the Button Important

Before performing the entire scene, place the button in the acting space and ask the two performers to stand away from it. Have them experiment with directing the audience's attention toward the button without touching it or speaking about it.

Try several variations: one actor stares at the button while the other deliberately refuses to look; an actor slowly moves closer and then stops; both actors suddenly look at it at the same moment; one actor notices the other looking and immediately becomes concerned. Afterward, ask when the button felt most important. This helps students discover that focus, body position, movement, and reaction can make an unmoving prop dramatically significant.

### Build the Escalation

Identify the stages of the conflict: mild curiosity; early investigation; comic conflict and loophole-seeking; serious conflict about rules and consequences; temporary resolution; role reversal; and final suspense. Rehearse so each stage feels different. The actors should avoid beginning at maximum intensity. If Jordan is already obsessed and Alex is already furious at the opening, the scene has nowhere to grow.

### The Button Without Dialogue

Choose a short portion and perform it without speaking. The actors may move, look at each other, approach or retreat from the button, sit, and react, but they cannot speak. Ask observers what each character seems to want. Then restore the dialogue and repeat the section. Discuss how physical choices support the words instead of merely accompanying them.

### Find the Moment the Scene Changes

Ask students to identify when the scene stops being primarily about the physical button and becomes an argument about something larger. Possible turning points include Jordan asking, “Do you always do what you're told?” or the exchange about fear of not knowing versus fear of receiving a bad answer. There does not need to be one correct answer. Have the actors choose the turning point they believe is most important and make the shift clear without abruptly changing the style of the performance.

### Reverse the Objectives

In the early scene, Jordan's objective may be to get closer to, understand, investigate, or justify pressing the button. Alex's objective is to keep Jordan away from it and prevent an unpredictable consequence. In the final section, those objectives begin to reverse. Rehearse the transition gradually. The comedy is strongest when the audience notices Alex becoming curious slightly before Alex is willing to admit it.

### Experiment With the Final Blackout

Try several versions of the ending: both actors frightened; both excited; one determined and one uncertain; a very long pause; a shorter impulsive ending; hands very close to the button or still several inches away. After each version, ask what the audience believed was about to happen. The dialogue can remain identical while timing and physical choices completely change the ending's meaning.

### Discussion Questions

- Why does Jordan become so interested in the button?
- Is Jordan interested because the button itself is mysterious, or because someone specifically said not to press it?
- Why is Alex willing to follow an instruction without knowing who gave it or why?
- Does following a rule without understanding it necessarily mean someone is afraid or unwilling to think independently?
- Does questioning a rule necessarily mean someone should break it?
- At what point does the argument stop being only about the button?
- What does Alex mean by saying that sometimes people have to decide without knowing everything?
- What does Jordan mean by suggesting that Alex might rather never ask a question than risk getting a bad answer?
- Why does Jordan eventually decide not to press the button?
- Why does Alex become more curious after Jordan gives up?
- Which character changes more during the scene?
- By the end, do Alex and Jordan understand each other better?
- Do you think they press the button after the blackout?
- What do you imagine the button actually does?
- Would you press it? Why or why not?

**Teacher Note:** There does not need to be a correct answer about which character has the better argument - or about what the button does. The unresolved ending can help students explore how uncertainty, curiosity, caution, and audience imagination contribute to drama.

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