

A New One

A Comedy

by

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A New One

Characters

Any gender

Number 37	Age 30-60, committee chair, hyper-focused on the agenda
Number 12	Age 60+, dirty old man or woman
Number 44	Age 30-60, enthusiastic, loves the committee's mission
Intern	Age 20-30, curious, almost pesky

Setting

A conference room with a table and four chairs.

Time

The present

Synopsis

In this comic ten-minute play, a committee charged with approving expressions for public circulation deliberates over "I ripped him a new one." The play shows the ridiculousness of the phrase and also provides a fantastical answer to the perennial question, "Where do figurative expressions come from?"

A New OneAt Rise:

Characters 37 and 44, seated, are studying papers at a conference table. 12, also seated, quietly snoozes. A fourth chair is empty.

(INTERN confidently enters from left, a hand outstretched for a handshake; 37 smiles to see INTERN and rises.)

INTERN  
(to 37)

Hi. I'm Marie/Mike.

(37 and 44 cringe. 12 awakens.)

37

We never use names here.

(shaking Intern's hand)

I'm 37. These fine people are 44 and 12. You can tell from the low number that 12 has been on the job for some time. You'll be "Intern."

INTERN

Really? That's kind of generic.

37

You'll be assigned your very own number next week.

INTERN  
(to 44 and 12, gently mocking)

Ooh. A number. I'm on pins and needles.

12

(perking up, to 44)

Do you remember when we approved of that one?

44

What one?

12

"Pins and needles."

44

Before my time. Sorry.

12

(fondly musing)

"Pins and needles."

(37 gestures to the empty chair for Intern and they sit down.)

INTERN

I haven't really been told what my duties will be.

37

You'll get the hang of it.

12

(to 44)

Were you here for that one?

44

Again, before my time.

12

(chuckling)

There was quite a debate.

37

(taking charge)

As there might well be today. Let's go to work. 44, I understand that you have an expression that you're quite excited about. The floor is yours.

12

"The floor." That one was--

37

Let's stay focused now. 44, what have you got for us?

44

I think you're going to like it. It's new. It's fresh. It's got style. Here it is: "I ripped him a new one."

(Long pause as the three others ponder the phrase. They exchange puzzled looks.)

44

"I ripped him a new one."

37

We heard you. Give us a chance to think about it.

(to Intern)

I should explain, Intern. The important question, the *only* question really, is can the proposed language be understood? That's our job. Before we approve an expression for circulation, it must pass this test: can it be understood?

INTERN

"I ripped him a new one"?

44

It sounds good coming from you. I like it.

12

*I might* like it once I understand it.

INTERN  
(tentative)

If I may . . .

37

Yes?

INTERN

If we do give it our approval, how does it get introduced?

37

We have a network of volunteers. They ease the expression into conversations.

INTERN

Who are they? And isn't it awkward for them to just . . . throw these things out there?

37

Not at all. It's thrilling for them. They're on the front lines. As for who they are, we don't know! They use pseudonyms. We use numbers for the same reason. The entire process is anonymous—from approval to introduction to popularization. After all, where these expressions come from is a mystery, isn't it?

(to 44)

But their meaning *cannot* be a mystery. Can you give us another sentence, 44?

44

Yes. This one should help. It'll probably make it *too* easy. Here it is: "Shelly was so mad at Frank that she ripped him a new one."

(Another pause of puzzled looks. Intern suddenly looks inspired.)

INTERN

(to 37 as if 37 is "Frank")

"Grr, you make me so mad, Frank."

(Intern seizes one of 37's sheets of paper, rips it in half, and extends one of the halves to 37.)

INTERN (CONT.)

Here's "a new one" for you.

12

She's good.

(37 frowns over the torn sheet of paper and tries to piece the two halves together.)

INTERN  
(to 44)

Is that it?

44

Not quite, not quite. You're almost there.

(Pause)

Actually not really. What's not clear about it, everyone? What part of it don't you understand?  
"Shelly was so mad at Frank that she ripped him a new one."

37

Obviously we don't know what "new one" refers to.

44

Exactly! There you go! It's hiding something. What is it hiding?

37

We don't know!

44

Think about it. What kinds of things do we hide? What is it impolite to mention?

12

(grinning)

Do you want me to list them? I'll be happy to do that.

37

(growing irritated)

No.

44

"Shelly was so mad at Frank that she ripped him—"

37

(now testy)

Mere repetition is not going to get us there.

INTERN

Let's think about it. What "new" thing could you give to someone if you were mad at them? A new name? An insulting name?

44

Good, Intern. Very good. But no.

(The three others frown in thought.)

44 (CONT.)

Think of the body. What new thing could you give to the body?

37

(without conviction, reluctant)

Well, if Shelly is really mad at Fred, she might punch him--

INTERN

I thought his name was Frank.

37

Whatever! Let me think. You punch someone and he gets a new . . . a black eye? But that's just a bruise. An ear? Does a cauliflower ear look like a new one?

44

You're on the right track, 37, but lower down. Think lower down.

12

(grinning lewdly)

I'll be happy to list the possibilities.

44

I can name it, but you'll have to pardon my French.

12

(Memory Lane again)

There was a good debate over that one too.

44

Wait. You don't have to pardon my French after all. I can put it this way: It's lower down, and everyone has one at birth.

INTERN

A navel?

44

Good, Intern. But lower. And . . . opposite side. The rear domain.

(It dawns on them simultaneously. At first, relief all around to have the answer. But then new looks of confusion.)

37

I'm not sure how this . . . could come to pass.

INTERN

"Rip"?

12

I like it. At least I think I do. But why a new one of those?

37

Maybe because it's something you wouldn't want?

INTERN

"Rip"?

37

I'm suddenly wondering about "new." Does it mean an additional one, or does it mean a replacement?

(A long moment of silent thought. 44 makes as if to speak.)

37

(quickly)

No, no, 44. As the originator please don't help us more than you already have. The test is can we get there ourselves.

(to the others)

So, is it an additional one or a replacement for the original? When all is said and done, when the dust clears, is there one of them or two?

INTERN

I see it as an additional one, a second one. Not a replacement.

37

Why?

INTERN

Because something new is usually good, an improvement. But this "new one" is a product of anger, so it's not good. But where does it get installed? To the side of the original one? Above? Below?

12

Good question, Intern.

INTERN

Is it connected to the digestive system or is it only superficial?

37

(head shaking firmly)

There are just too many questions. I can't see us approving this one. It's a can of worms.

12

(brightens)

"Can of worms."

37

(flaring, to 12)

I swear, if you reminisce one more time I'm going to rip you a new one.

44

See how easily it rolls off the tongue?

37

(thrown)

I must say . . . it came to me quite naturally.

44

It sounded good on you.

12

(to 37)

It's effective. You scared me. I felt your anger.

44

(acting as if angry)

"If you vote against this expression, I'll rip you a new one!"

INTERN

"The next person who calls me 'Intern' will discover that I've ripped them a new one!"

(37, more relaxed now, laughs)

12

(to 37)

"If you raise your voice against me again, I'll rip you *two* new ones."

44

No, no, 12. Let's not gild the lily.

37

Well now. I'm feeling much better about this. I think we're just about ready to take a vote. But I do have a question, 44. The expression is unusual for you. It's quite different from your other contributions.

44

Well, actually I have a little confession to make.

37

Oh?

44

I got it from someone else.

(37 and 12 are stunned.)

37

(sternly)

You know this is a violation of a central tenet of the committee. Everything must originate here, within these walls.

44

I thought maybe just this once.

12

Where did you hear it?

44

From a nurse.

INTERN

A nurse?

44

My cousin was hospitalized after a motorcycle accident. The nurse was in the room when I visited him, and she said it about him.

INTERN

Did he do something to make her mad?

44

I didn't see it. It must have been before I got there. She seemed tired too. It was the end of her shift. My cousin asked her to fix the tube for the IV in his arm because it kept coming loose and flapping around. She asked me to hold the tube against his arm with my thumb while she took off the old adhesive tape. It surprised me when she said, "I'm going to rip him a new one."

(Frowns all around.)

37

Hold on. What did she do next?

44

She took out a roll of adhesive tape and . . . oh my god.

INTERN

And she ripped him a new one. She ripped him a new piece of tape.

(General disappointment.)

44

(sheepish)

Sorry.

12

Don't worry about it, 44. A simple misinterpretation.

37

(disappointed but rallying, slaps the table)

So much for that. I for one am actually relieved to get this information. It explains our utter confusion. The expression is rejected. It never would have made it out in the world anyway.

(Nods all around.)

INTERN

And yet . . .

37

Yes?

INTERN

We all took to it, didn't we? It served its purpose. We were mad, or we pretended to be mad—

44

—and we used it to express how we felt. We used it naturally. Happily.

INTERN

Joyfully!

(Long pause as they all consider it.)

12

Nah.

(Group relief.)

37

You're right, 12. It's just too weird.

44

Sorry, everyone.

37

No worries, 44. All is well. But you certainly took us on a wild goose chase.

(12 brightens and is about to speak. 37 swiftly points a finger, freezing 12.)

37

Don't!

CURTAIN