

SEASON PLANNING
A short play
by
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The chair's office. Department of Theater, University of Western Washington. The Junior Professor white/male, sits across the desk from his department chair (probably a woman), like a student called into the principal's office.

CHAIR

You have to remember these students have just been through a pandemic...

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

But that's why I thought...

CHAIR

Three people trapped in a room?! Talk about re-traumatizing.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Are they actually refusing to audition?

CHAIR

There's a petition.

The Chair waves a sheaf of paper around.

CHAIR

Over 200 students have signed it.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Two hundred students have read *No Exit*?

CHAIR

They found it very problematic.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

I mean they don't have to come see it...

CHAIR

I'm not sure this is the year to take that attitude.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Because of the pandemic?

CHAIR

Because of your tenure review. It seems there's a lesbian character...?

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

That's good, right?

CHAIR

Who makes unwanted sexual advances. Which may be traumatic for victims of sexual harassment.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Inez doesn't *force* herself on the other woman. Estelle just isn't attracted to her...

CHAIR

So the only lesbian in the play is found undesirable? What kind of message is that sending to our queer students?

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

It's not like Inez represents *all* lesbians...

CHAIR

But she's the only lesbian in the play. (*reading the petition*) Our students also feel "the play perpetuates the patriarchy and archaic notions of womanhood..."

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Well, it was written in 1944...

CHAIR

"Given the gender stereotyping we don't need a play like this anymore."

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Who are they to decide what plays are "needed?" They're twenty years old!

CHAIR

We have to be careful about privileging our age. The students *might* consider doing the play if there were content warnings for the audience...

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

What are we warning them *about*?

CHAIR

And a required panel immediately after the performance.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

If you *require* an audience to stay they're not an audience anymore. They're hostages!

CHAIR

Surely you have other play ideas...

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

I've thought about doing *Oedipus*...

CHAIR

Can you imagine how triggering that would be for an incest survivor?

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

It was *unintentional* incest...

CHAIR

And there's a suicide!

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Offstage...

CHAIR

Not to mention Sophocles was a slaveowner.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Do we *know* that?

CHAIR

It was an accepted practice in Ancient Greece.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

But that doesn't necessarily mean that...

CHAIR

Did he use his platform to argue *against* slavery?

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

I'm not sure it would have done much good...

CHAIR

So he was tacitly endorsing it. *I'd* like to see you do something with a strong female lead.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

There's *Diary of Anne Frank*...

CHAIR

More people locked in a room?!

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

But that's kind of what plays *are*...

CHAIR

And you're not Jewish, are you?

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

No.

CHAIR

Then I don't think that's your story to tell. Anyway, I'm not sure we have enough Jewish students to cast the show...

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Would the actors *have* to be Jewish?

CHAIR

If we did *Fences* wouldn't the actors have to be black?

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

But you don't *know* whether somebody is Jewish.

CHAIR

And what about a black student who presents as white? Could she be cast in *Fences*?

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

If she were a good actor.

CHAIR

Why *don't* we do *Fences*?

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Because we only have two black actors and one of them is graduating.

CHAIR

We're never going to attract students of color if we keep doing plays by white males.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

There's *Dutchman*...

CHAIR

Isn't the whole thing set in a subway car?

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

But that compression is germane to the story...

CHAIR

That compression is what our students have been struggling with for the past year! They don't want anything mentally taxing!

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

But shouldn't we be *challenging* our students?

CHAIR

As long as we challenge them in ways that allow them to feel safe.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

It is a very good play...

CHAIR

Regrettably Amiri Baraka is a notorious anti-Semite.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

What if I did a comedy?

CHAIR

It depends on what's being made fun of. Or *who's* being made fun of.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

I think a good comedy is making fun of *us*...

CHAIR

Us who?

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

All of us. Human beings.

CHAIR

You see how you're centering your white male experience?

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

I'm talking about something light-hearted. Like *Private Lives* by Noel Coward.

CHAIR

Have you read the play recently?

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

I saw it at Stratford a few years ago...

CHAIR

They *hit* each other!

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Amanda and Elyot do have a stormy relationship...

CHAIR

It's mutual abuse! We no longer laugh at that.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

I did.

CHAIR

A few *years* ago.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

What do the students want to do? Do they have any ideas?

CHAIR

That's not their job, Christopher. Their job is to hold us accountable.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Do *you* have any recommendations?

CHAIR

I had thought of *Almost Maine*.

The junior professor's heart sinks.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Didn't we just do that?

CHAIR

It is a crowd-pleaser. Much more palatable than a play about Hell. Hell as some kind of eternal quarantine.

The junior professor is reluctant.

CHAIR (CONT.)

We do want to signal to the administration that you're sensitive to student concerns.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

Fine.

CHAIR

Fingers crossed it meets with the students' approval.

The Junior professor wanly crosses his fingers.

CHAIR

Thanks for coming in, Christopher.

He crosses to the door and tries the doorknob. He yanks but the door is locked. He does a dramatic, slow-motion turn towards her. Perhaps a spotlight? The Chair stands slowly as they simultaneously realize they're trapped.

JUNIOR PROFESSOR

“So this is hell. I'd never have believed it. There's no need for red-hot pokers. HELL IS-- OTHER PEOPLE!”

BLACKOUT