



BOB: A LIFE IN FIVE ACTS

BY PETER SINN NACHTRIEB



DRAMATISTS
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Originally commissioned and developed by South Coast Repertory.

BOB was developed with the support of Playwrights Foundation, San Francisco,
(Amy L. Mueller, Artistic Director).

World premiere in the 2011 Humana Festival of New American Plays
at ACTORS THEATRE LOUISVILLE.

For Bob

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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THANKS TO: Sean Daniels for his creative brilliance and evangelism; Ken Prestininzi for once again being able to see into my brain; John Glore, Kelly Miller, Megan Monaghan, Sherri Butler-Hyner and everybody at SCR for birthing this play; Marc Masterson, Sarah Lunnie and everybody at ATL; Madeleine Oldham; Emily Schooltz and Ars Nova; Jonathan Spector, Amy Mueller, Lisa Steindler and the Z Space Studio, The National Theatre Conference, the Resident Playwrights of the Playwrights Foundation, Buck Busfield, Jerry Montoya and everyone at B Street Theatre, New Dramatists, Mark Orsini and Bruce Ostler and Bret Adams Ltd.

Kasey Mahaffy, Rob Nagle, Larry Bates, Angela Goethals, Blake Lindsley, Danny Wolohan, Arwen Anderson, Delia MacDougall, Nick Pelczar, Liam Vincent, Lance Gardner, Sally Dana, Matt Dellapina, Brett Robinson, David Turner, Jackie Viscusi, Joey DeChello, Ryan Barrentine, Brigitte Davidovici, Lauren T. Mack, Dhyanah Dahl, Kevin Tomlinson, Tyler Hastings, the Theatre Departments at FSU and UNLV, Jason Aaron Goldberg.

A special shout out to the fearless and wonderful souls that are Jeff Binder, Aysan Celik, Polly Lee, Danny Scheie, and Lou Sumrall. And to the Nachtrieb Family and Mark Marino for their love and awesomeness.

BOB: A LIFE IN FIVE ACTS received its world premiere at the Humana Festival at Actors Theatre of Louisville (Marc Masterson, Artistic Director) in Louisville, Kentucky, in March 2011. It was directed by Sean Daniels; the set design was by Michael B. Raiford; the costume design was by Lorraine Venberg; the lighting design was by Brian J. Lillenthal; the props design was by Joe Cunningham; the sound design was by Matt Callahan; and the production stage manager was Paul Mills Holmes. The cast was as follows:

BOB..... Jeffrey Binder
CHORUS ONE Aysan Celik
CHORUS TWO Lou Sumrall
CHORUS THREE..... Polly Lee
CHORUS FOUR..... Danny Scheie

CHARACTERS

BOB — from infant to old man. If handsome, unconventionally so. If not handsome, his personality adds something charismatic. Energy, optimism, open, active. American, of any or many cultural backgrounds.

THE CHORUS — Two women (Chorus One and Chorus Three) and two men (Chorus Two and Chorus Four). The chorus is, ideally, of unspecified but diverse cultural backgrounds. American. The Chorus will play themselves as well as every character in the play, aside from Bob. (See end of play for a possible breakdown of roles for each chorus member.) The Chorus is dispassionate but eloquent. The characters they assume are vivid, bright, sharp, and distinct. Even if they only have one line, there is pathos, history, and pain.

PLACE

All over the United States of America, interiors and exteriors. Plus one scene in Mexico. The play often changes rapidly from location to location and the shifts are quick. The speed of the changes is important and part of the ride of the play. My hunch is that the stagecraft in the play is exposed for being what it is.

TIME

From the birth to the death of Bob.

THE ACTS

ACT ONE — How Bob was born, abandoned, raised by a fast-food employee, discovers his dream, and almost dies.

ACT TWO — How Bob does not die, comes of age at a rest stop, pursues his dream, falls in love and has his heart broken.

ACT THREE — How Bob pursues his dream across America, gets chased out of many towns, meets an important man, and turns his back on everything he believed.

ACT FOUR — How Bob has a turn of luck, becomes a new man, achieves a false dream, meets an important woman and is redeemed.

ACT FIVE — The rest.

INTERLUDES

There are short interludes in between each act, each performed by a chorus member. I call them “dances” in the play but they could be any sort of brief performance with no words.

An intermission is perhaps best placed between Acts Three and Four.

MUSIC

Yes. Underscoring. Maybe a live musician. Maybe the Chorus plays music.

MOOD

Epic, cinematic, a whirlwind, a ride.

BOB: A LIFE IN FIVE ACTS

ACT ONE

The Chorus enters.

ALL CHORUS. Bob. A life in five acts.

CHORUS ONE. Act One.

CHORUS TWO. How Bob is born, abandoned, raised by a fast-food employee, discovers his dream, and almost dies. (*A sterile fast-food restaurant bathroom. Chorus Three assumes the character of Helen. She is sweating, crying, breathing heavy, legs wide.*)

CHORUS ONE. It is said that Bob was born on Valentine's Day in the bathroom of a White Castle Restaurant in Louisville, Kentucky. It is said that Bob's birth mother, whose name was Helen, was feeling particularly lonely and depressed on this holiday and felt that only a certain cuisine would soothe her ache.

CHORUS TWO. It is said that Helen was unaware of the Valentine's Day tradition of the usually more subdued restaurant to adorn their tables with candles and cloths and other romantic miscellany and that the restaurant would be packed with couples flaunting their couplehood.

CHORUS FOUR. Nor was Helen aware of how severe her physiological reaction would be to witnessing this vast scene of public love until, after eating much faster than she intended, she rushed into the bathroom, pushed to urinate and her wombic fluids erupted onto the bathroom floor. (*Wombic fluids erupt out of Helen.*)

CHORUS ONE. Nor was she aware how quickly labor could be sometimes until five minutes after her water broke, Bob would

emerge quickly and fiercely from her magic chamber. (*A pop. Baby Bob flies out of Helen, umbilical cord attached.*)

CHORUS TWO. Nor did she expect the emotional response she would have to this birth ... a progression from joy to relief to memories to regret to fear to terror to anger to hatred to wanting absolutely nothing to do with what had just emerged. (*Helen pulls out a knife.*)

CHORUS FOUR. She did remember the small sign posted outside the restaurant below the “Meal Deal” poster: the blue outline of a house, silhouette of an infant sitting in large comforting hands, “Safe Place” written in multiple languages below. At that moment, Helen made a decision that would ultimately affect thousands of lives. (*Helen takes the umbilical cord, cuts it with the knife.*)

CHORUS TWO. It is said that this was the only advice Helen could think to give her newborn son.

HELEN. Good luck. (*Helen runs off.*)

CHORUS FOUR. This is what Bob did when he was alone. (*Bob assesses the situation.*)

BOB. BWAHHH! (*Jeanine, a White Castle employee, enters the bathroom.*)

JEANINE. Oh my.

CHORUS THREE. Her name was Jeanine. This is how Jeanine saved Bob. (*Lights Shift. By the counter. Jeanine, holding Bob, reads corporate instructions on a piece of paper.*)

JEANINE. (*Reading.*) Step one: Retrieve baby/child and take him/her/it to a neutral yet safe space behind the service counter. (*Jeanine moves.*) Do not stand near fryers. (*Jeanine moves again.*)

Step two: Determine if parent or guardian is still on the property. (*Jeanine takes counter microphone.*) Attention Valentine’s Day guests. We hope you are all enjoying your romantic meals. If there is anyone in the restaurant who may have left a personal item in the bathroom, would you please come to the counter at this time? (*Jeanine waits.*)

Step three: Should no one claim baby/child, immediately phone the police, Child Protective Services, and the corporate legal crisis line. Under no circumstances should you look into the baby’s eyes and fall in love with it. Do not fall in love with the baby. (*Jeanine lowers the paper. Jeanine tries to not look at Bob. Jeanine looks at Bob. Jeanine falls in love with Bob.*)

CHORUS FOUR. This is why Jeanine decided to raise Bob as her own. (*Jeanine driving, Bob in a bundle next to her.*)

JEANINE. I was finishing up my Sunday night dinner at the Bamboo Wok. I don't know how authentic or healthy it is but I like the flavors. I'd been working my way through the menu for about a year. Each week, I would have a new entrée in order of appearance. I'd finally made it to the "Noodles slash Rice" section after several months of Lamb and I felt like I was entering a new era in my life. When the waiter delivered the check and cookie, the fortune inside seemed different. The paper looked shiny, almost gold-
en, the ink darker, more insistent.

FORTUNE COOKIE VOICE (CHORUS TWO). "You will be the mother to a great great man."

JEANINE. The fortunes I usually get are a little more vague than that. But this felt intentional. Like someone was watching me. From inside the cookie.

FORTUNE COOKIE VOICE (CHORUS TWO). "You will be the mother to a great great man."

JEANINE. It made me smile. I thought, "Well, cool, Jeanine, maybe the future isn't only selling tiny burgers and having Asian food once a week." And then my stomach started to twitch, felt like I was gonna be sick. I started sweating, breathing heavy. And I thought, Oh my god, it's happening already. I stood up from my table and shouted "I'm gonna be the mother to a great great man!" Next thing I knew I woke up in a hospital bed. At first I thought I'd conceived my great man immaculate till the nurse told me that I'd almost died at the restaurant. That I had a severe reaction to the gluten in Asian noodles slash rice that messed up my insides so much that I would never be able to make a "great great man" the regular way. I don't really care for fortunes very much anymore. But, funny, you know, there you are. There you are. I must be just a weird noise in your ear. You little moving thing. I will give you food and shelter. I will educate you. I will make sure that becoming President of the United States remains a possibility. Even if it kills me, I will make you a great great man. (*Shift.*)

CHORUS FOUR. This is how Bob got his name. (*Jeanine's house. Bonnie, Jeanine's friend, is there. Jeanine is playing with Bob. Bonnie stares at Jeanine. Bob is examining.*)

BONNIE. You don't look exhausted.

JEANINE. I'm not exhausted, Bonnie.

BONNIE. Trust me. In a few days you will be exhausted for the rest of your life.

JEANINE. He sleeps through the night.

BONNIE. Since when?

JEANINE. Since I got him five days ago.

BONNIE. I read that babies who sleep through the night often have learning disabilities. It was in *Newsweek*.

BOB. Ghshablah.

JEANINE. What should I name him?

BONNIE. You don't have a name for him yet?

JEANINE. It's not like I got to plan ahead for this. (*Bonnie starts to cry.*) Bonnie?

BONNIE. Are you sure you can do this?

JEANINE. I think so.

BONNIE. The choices you make right now will determine a life of joy or a life of pain.

BOB. Ooo.

JEANINE. It's just a name, Bonnie.

BONNIE. THE NAME IS EVERYTHING, JEANINE! First impressions, schoolyard happiness, entire futures depend on the name. I read that in *Newsweek* too. This is a child's future. THINK OF THE FUTURE.

JEANINE. You're getting a little angry, Bonnie.

BONNIE. I was given the wrong name! Someone asks, "What's your name?" and I say "Bonnie" and people think something's wrong with me 'cause I don't seem very "Bonnie-like." I'm suspect from the get-go and that ripples and ripples, a chain reaction against my favor and look at me now. If I wasn't "Bonnie," I'd be a different person. I'd have a better life. I wouldn't want to die. Chester. (*Bonnie does a flourish with her hands. Exits.*)

JEANINE. What do you think? If you could be called anything in the world, what would it be?

BOB. Bwahhhhhhhhhhhhhb. (*Beat.*)

JEANINE. What was that?

BABY BOB. Argh baplbbsstss urggllmmmmmmmm ... bwaahhbb.

JEANINE. Did you just say —

BABY BOB. Bwaahb.

JEANINE. Bob? Bob. Bob. Bob.

BABY BOB. Bwahb. (*Jeanine looks out — a thought to the future. The Chorus each take alternating lines.*)

CHORUS TWO. Welcome our newest student, Bob.

CHORUS THREE. What a beautiful painting, Bob.

CHORUS FOUR. You were just incredible at recess, Bob.
CHORUS TWO. Bob the way you play hockey, I don't know what to feel.
CHORUS THREE. Kiss me Bob.
CHORUS FOUR. Here, take this special chair, Bob.
CHORUS TWO. Bob you can be anything you want.
CHORUS THREE. Be a historian, Bob.
CHORUS FOUR. Be an artist, Bob.
CHORUS TWO. Cure, Bob. Cure the sick.
CHORUS THREE. Kiss me again Bob.
CHORUS FOUR. Bob, kiss us both at the same time.
CHORUS TWO. I love you Bob.
CHORUS THREE. I love You Bob.
CHORUS FOUR. Bob must be stopped.
JEANINE. Bob. Your name is Bob.
BABY BOB. Bwahb. (*A banging on the door.*)
CONNOR. Open up, Jeanine!
CHORUS FOUR. This is why Jeanine decided to leave town with Bob.
JEANINE. That's the police, Bob. (*A bang.*)
CONNOR. Jeanine!
JEANINE. It's open! Stay quiet, Bob.
BABY BOB. Bwahb.
JEANINE. Stay quiet. (*Jeanine hides Bob in a grocery bag. Connor, a police officer, enters.*)
CONNOR. Jeanine.
JEANINE. Connor.
BABY BOB. Bwahb.
CONNOR. Been a long time.
JEANINE. Seen you around.
CONNOR. It's been a long time. (*The pain of their history is felt.*)
JEANINE. How can I help you, Connor?
CONNOR. You still working at the White Castle?
JEANINE. You know I still work there.
CONNOR. Anything weird happen the last few days?
JEANINE. Something weird happens every day. Our lighting has a way of pushing people over the edge.
CONNOR. We got a call at the station today.
JEANINE. Well, good for you.
CONNOR. Some woman.

BOB: A LIFE IN FIVE ACTS

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3M, 2W

BOB chronicles the highly unusual life of Bob and his lifelong quest to become a “Great Man.” Born and abandoned in the bathroom of a fast food restaurant, Bob energetically embarks on an epic journey across America and encounters inspiring generosity, crushing hardships, blissful happiness, stunning coincidences, wrong turns, lucky breaks, true love and heartbreaking loss. Along the way, Bob meets a myriad of fellow countrymen all struggling to find their own place in the hullabaloo of it all. Will Bob’s real life ever be able to live up to his dream? BOB is a comedic exploration of American mythology and values, the treacherous pursuit of happiness, and discovering what it means to be truly “great.”

“[A] comic amalgam of Brechtian epic theatre and vaudeville.” —**TDF Stages**

“The play’s shockingly optimistic tone is downright subversive when you consider its subject: what it means to be a success in America. How are the new legends made? Slightly unsound of mind and decidedly stout of heart ... Rather than an Arthur Miller-esque indictment of the American Dream, Nachtrieb proposes a more gentle — though no less emotional — revision.” —**The Louisville Courier-Journal**

“There’s exuberance and bounce in Nachtrieb’s voice, and BOB evinces a loving, Ira Glass-y eye for off-kilter Americana.” —**American Theatre Magazine**

“An epic journey of self-invention, a picaresque comedy that sprawls across the American cultural and geographical landscape, taking in rest stops and mansions along the way. Nachtrieb’s sketch-filled script hearkens back to Thurberesque satire, pointed but gentle, and unfailingly optimistic.”

—**The Louisville Eccentric Observer**

Also by Peter Sinn Nachtrieb

BOOM

COLORADO

HUNTER GATHERERS

T.I.C. (TRENCHCOAT IN COMMON)

DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE, INC.

ISBN 978-0-8222-2667-3



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