

# DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

BY  
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DRAMATISTS  
PLAY SERVICE  
INC.

DEATH OF THE AUTHOR  
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DEATH OF THE AUTHOR was originally produced by Geffen Playhouse (Randall Arney, Artistic Director; Ken Novice, Managing Director; Behnaz Ataes, General Manager; Regina Miller, Chief Development Office) in Los Angeles, California, in 2014. It was directed by Bart DeLorenzo, the scenic designer was Takeshi Kata, the costume designer was Christina Haatainen Jones, the lighting designer was Lap Chi Chu, the composer and sound designer was John Ballinger, and the production stage manager was Jessica R. Aguilar. The cast was as follows:

JEFF ..... David Clayton Rogers  
BRADLEY ..... Austin Butler  
J. TRUMBULL SYKES ..... Orson Bean  
SARAH ..... Lyndon Smith

## CHARACTERS

JEFF, 30s. Adjunct Professor of English. Midwestern liberal from a working-class family. Tweedy vibe of the perpetual grad student. In his head. Hard worker.

BRADLEY, 21. Double major in Poli-Sci and Math. Exudes privilege, but not a slacker. Earnest. Conservative, preppy good looks.

J. TRUMBULL SYKES, 65. Celebrity Scholar. Arch, encyclopedic. Languidly plummytoned. Chalk on the elbows.

SARAH, 21. Double major in English and Philosophy. Exudes charm, even sweetness, but definitely not a pushover. Ambitious. Clever. Pretty.

## SETTING

One of the finest universities in the country.

## TIME

The present—at the end of school year.

## NOTE

// indicates overlapping dialogue

# DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

## Scene 1

*Jeff is grading papers in his less-than-commodious office.  
Bradley enters.*

BRADLEY. Knock, knock.

JEFF. Bradley, come in. You found it OK?

BRADLEY. The basement's a little confusing, actually. Wow, harsh, no windows.

JEFF. Used to be a supply closet. And I'm *lucky*: They make most of the new instructors share cubicles.

BRADLEY. (*Sniffs.*) Smells good, though.

JEFF. I burn incense. It gets damp down here.

BRADLEY. I thought people only burnt incense to cover the smell of marijuana.

JEFF. Please, don't start rumors. I need to keep this job. Come in, I don't bite.

*Bradley sits.*

BRADLEY. At least you get to be in this awesome building.

JEFF. Oh right, you're not in English, remind me, you're...?

BRADLEY. Double major. Poli-Sci—for my parents that means pre-law, basically—and math. We do all that left-brain stuff on the other side of campus.

JEFF. Well, if your car's in our right-brain parking lot, you should see the secretary about a pass, because they *will* ticket you.

BRADLEY. No, I'm good. I rode my bike. I haven't stepped foot in a car in four years.

JEFF. Four years! You must have no carbon footprint, good for you.

*Bradley shrugs.*

Not even as a passenger? Cabs to the airport for Spring Break?

BRADLEY. Nope. Stayed here. Bicycled to the train station when I needed the city. You should see my calves.

*Pause.*

So, your class was, like...awesome. Wrong word, maybe, but...

JEFF. No. Good word. Thank you. (*Awkward smile.*) OK, well, uh... let me say first, thank you for coming on such short notice. As was stated in the email, this is just the first meeting we'll be having. This procedure was established by the English department in accordance with Arts and Sciences.

BRADLEY. OK?

JEFF. Maybe it's different in your department, but here, the process begins with just the instructor and student. We meet to make sure that we are in agreement about what it was in your paper that *excited* my, um... (*Stops. Sighs.*) I'm new at this.

BRADLEY. You're doing fine.

JEFF. You know what? Let's do this. Let's look at something together. This is an excerpt from Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author." (*Points to his screen.*) I should tell you that this was easily available online, I just called it up, and the whole PDF is right there. Anyway, read what's on the screen, and I'll ask you to then look at the first few sentences on page two of your paper and, you know, when you're done, let's talk.

*Bradley looks at the screen, skims it. Looks at his paper, skims that. Maybe even laughs a bit. Jeff just watches him while he reads both.*

BRADLEY. I see.

JEFF. You do?

BRADLEY. I do.

JEFF. Well, good. *Good.* As I say, that's really what this meeting's about.

BRADLEY. That I see what you see?

JEFF. That's right.

BRADLEY. I do. (*Puzzled.*) And you didn't like it?

JEFF. It's not a question of liking it. (*Tries a joke.*) I liked it when

Roland Barthes wrote it. (*Tries another tack.*) Maybe it was an accident.

BRADLEY. An accident.

JEFF. I'm asking. Maybe you weren't paying proper attention...

BRADLEY. Wait...

JEFF. ...or you were just going too fast, or...

BRADLEY. (*Suddenly seems alarmed.*) Wait, what are you...?

JEFF. ...maybe you were distracted. Accidents happen.

*Bradley holds his head.*

The point is that accident or not: you're responsible. *You* are responsible. OK? So I have to hear you say that you take responsibility, because unless you...

*Bradley suddenly stands, holds his chest. He grabs on to the chair for stability.*

Bradley?

*No reply.*

Are you OK?

*Bradley waits, nods tentatively. Gingerly, he sits.*

BRADLEY. Whoa.

JEFF. What happened?

BRADLEY. That was...

*Feels his heart, it's fine now.*

...a panic attack.

JEFF. Have you had one before?

*Bradley nods his head.*

Are you on medication?

*Bradley shakes head.*

What brings them on?

BRADLEY. Adrenaline. I don't know why I just... Sorry.

JEFF. Take your time.

BRADLEY. I think it started with your email. It was so—what's the word?

JEFF. Cryptic?

BRADLEY. Yeah, yes, and just now, what you said, about an accident?

JEFF. Let me explain the email. There's a formal statement we send in these cases. The professor is not allowed, *legally*, to allude to specifics. I know, the tone is a bit frosty.

BRADLEY. It didn't sound like your voice. In class, you're so...chill.

JEFF. (*Slight laugh.*) It's not my voice; I wouldn't write like that. I'm sorry if it caused anxiety.

BRADLEY. So, wait, the email said that this could involve three meetings?

JEFF. It might.

BRADLEY. But... I don't get it...the semester's over.

JEFF. I know.

BRADLEY. And I'm graduating. And between you and me, I want to put this semester behind me.

JEFF. Was this a rough semester?

BRADLEY. Very. Like, life-changing. My girlfriend and I broke up, after three years.

JEFF. Three years, wow, that's...

BRADLEY. And I had a series of interviews for this job—shit, *this job*, that I'm starting *next week*...

JEFF. OK, well, let's not...

BRADLEY. ...and I had to schedule interviews around my classes, which meant riding my bike to the train station, in a *suit*, which was why I was late a couple times. Which was what I thought maybe you wanted to talk about, because I worked hard on that paper. You don't know me, but ask my advisor, ask anyone...

JEFF. It's OK.

BRADLEY. ...they'll tell you that I'm a really good student.

JEFF. I'm sure you are. It sounds like you were overwhelmed. I wish you'd come to see me. I like to know what's going on with my students.

BRADLEY. So what can I do?

JEFF. Well, right now, nothing. I've given you an incomplete, and for today, I just have to know that you *see* the issue here.

BRADLEY. I think so, yes. You would've liked something more traditional. Like, footnotes, or...

JEFF. Well, yes.

BRADLEY. ...OK, so can I, like, fix this now?

JEFF. No. There's a procedure.



BRADLEY. You mean we have to go through with these meetings?

JEFF. At least one more, yes.

BRADLEY. That's so fucked up!

*Jeff is taken aback.*

Sorry, but I mean, isn't it? For you, too. I'm sure we *both* want to get on with our lives. I'll take any grade you think is fair.

JEFF. You can't receive a grade until we go through the prescribed steps.

BRADLEY. What about my parents?

JEFF. We don't have to involve your parents.

BRADLEY. No, for commencement, they're coming in! We're having a big dinner at their hotel, we're flying my cousin in from Zurich.

JEFF. Calm down.

BRADLEY. But we *do* have to think about that, right? I can't start that job without a degree. This can't happen. Why did you file the incomplete before talking to me?

JEFF. (*Annoyed by that.*) Bradley. Breathe.

*Bradley inhales deeply. Exhales.*

As I say, I'm required to do what I did. OK? The next step is we meet tomorrow with the Chair. He'll go into this in more depth, that email only gives the *Reader's Digest* version.

BRADLEY. *Reader's Digest*?

JEFF. (*Slight laugh.*) Sorry, dating myself—condensed version. The Chair, I'm sure, will go into how this sort of thing jeopardizes the university, and...

BRADLEY. Give me a break!

*Jeff is again taken aback.*

Jeopardizes the university? We have the richest alumni in the country. I handed in one bad paper on postmodernism.

JEFF. Bradley, the value of this institution has nothing to do with acquiring wealth. The university is where you acquire *knowledge*.

BRADLEY. I get that.

JEFF. Which depends on the free expression of *original ideas*. We enter into this trust that they *are* original and not coming to us second-hand or misattributed.

BRADLEY. No, I get it.

# DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

by Steven Drukman

3M, 1W

With a world of knowledge just a smart phone away, is there still such a thing as an original idea? When a young professor suspects a student of plagiarism, his inquiry sparks a chain of events affecting the lives of four people in very real terms. Drukman's beautifully drawn characters must navigate heartbreak, blind ambition, and the cutthroat competition that thrives within these ivy-covered walls. Extending beyond postmodern literature and academic rigors, this smart, funny, and engrossing play becomes a personal battle to decide what is right, what is wrong, and what must be done.

*"A sparkling academic comedy...tantalizing...perfectly accessible. Even if you weren't a graduate student in the late decades of the 20th century...this satire of modern campus life will still sting."*

—Los Angeles Times

*"Drukman cleverly explores ambition, class and postmodernism in the digital age...all while skewering academia and the self-esteem generation."*

—LA Weekly

*"...particularly entertaining and lucid... Reminiscent of David Mamet's Oleanna scored for four characters instead of two, and consequently with more opportunities for harmonic variations... It is by turns clever, agile and, as the climax nears, rife with the anxiety of the suspense attendant to recognizable life troubles."*

—The Hollywood Reporter

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