



THE COLUMNIST

BY DAVID AUBURN



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THE COLUMNIST received its Broadway premiere at the Samuel J. Friedman Theater, opening on April 25, 2012, presented by the Manhattan Theater Club (Lynne Meadow, Artistic Director; Barry Grove, Executive Producer). It was directed by Daniel Sullivan; the set design was by John Lee Beatty; the costume design was by Jess Goldstein; the lighting design was by Kenneth Posner; the music and sound design were by John Gromada; the projections were by Rocco DiSanti; the hair and wig design were by Charles G. LaPointe; the production stage manager was Jane Grey; the general manager was Florie Seery; and the production manager was Joshua Helman. The cast was as follows:

JOSEPH ALSOP		John Lithgow
SUSAN MARY ALSOP		Margaret Colin
STEWART ALSOP		Boyd Gaines
HALBERSTAM		Stephen Kunken
PHILIP		Marc Bonan
ABIGAIL		Grace Gummer
ANDREI		Brian J. Smith

CHARACTERS

JOE ALSOP
YOUNG MAN (ANDREI)
STEWART ALSOP
SUSAN MARY ALSOP
ABIGAIL
HALBERSTAM
PHILIP

PLACE

Various locations.

TIME

Over the span of two decades.

THE COLUMNIST

ACT ONE

1.

A hotel room. Moscow, 1954.

Joe, late 40s, in bed. A young man, Russian, mid-20s, getting dressed.

JOE. Come back to bed.

YOUNG MAN. I have to go. *(Beat. Joe watches him dress.)*

JOE. I've never had a Communist before.

YOUNG MAN. Can you tell the difference?

JOE. I'm not sure. I'd need to go again to give you a definitive answer.

YOUNG MAN. I'm giving a tour at four o'clock.

JOE. Where?

YOUNG MAN. Red Square.

JOE. That's down the block. We have plenty of time.

YOUNG MAN. This is my afternoon break. My boss does not like it when I'm gone so long.

JOE. Your "boss"?

YOUNG MAN. Is it the wrong word? For someone who tells you what to do?

JOE. It's the right word. I thought you were all comrades here.

YOUNG MAN. We are, yes. But he tells me what to do.

JOE. What if I told you to come back to bed?

YOUNG MAN. You are not my comrade.

JOE. No, I'm your superior. I'm older than you and American and I have more money. Now do as I say.

YOUNG MAN. Go to hell. (*Joe chuckles, lights a cigarette.*)

JOE. Your English is extremely good, you know that?

YOUNG MAN. I was sent to government language schools. I do tours in French and German also.

JOE. Do you have a family?

YOUNG MAN. A sister.

JOE. What does she do?

YOUNG MAN. She's a laundress.

JOE. Doesn't have your talent for languages.

YOUNG MAN. She was a great athlete.

JOE. Really? What sort?

YOUNG MAN. Skiing. She tried out for the national team. As a girl. She was nearly chosen.

JOE. Good for her.

YOUNG MAN. We had interviews with the sports officials. Quite an exciting time. They took us to dinner, breakfasts in hotels with other athletes and their families. Eggs, sausages, fresh tomatoes, coffee with cream, thick white bread. Then she had a disappointing race, and ...

JOE. What happened?

YOUNG MAN. Well, the meals stopped. We had been given a new refrigerator. Men came and took it away. They didn't even bring the old one back. We had to use the neighbor's from across the hall for five months — they let us have one shelf. Finally, finally we got another refrigerator, an old one, worse than the one we started with.

JOE. No, I meant what happened at the race?

YOUNG MAN. What do you mean, what happened?

JOE. Well, did she fall on the course, or —

YOUNG MAN. No, she didn't fall. She ran a good course. She just came a bit short of the required time. is all. She was nervous. How would you feel?

JOE. That's awful. (*Beat.*)

YOUNG MAN. What is your job?

JOE. I'm a journalist.

YOUNG MAN. That's why you ask me so many questions.

JOE. I suppose so.

YOUNG MAN. Are you from New York?

JOE. Washington.

YOUNG MAN. Which is your newspaper?

JOE. Oh, I'm in hundreds.

YOUNG MAN. Hundreds?

JOE. Well. 190 at last count. I have a syndicated column. With my brother.

YOUNG MAN. How many newspapers do you have in America?

JOE. I don't know. Thousands, I suppose.

YOUNG MAN. No.

JOE. Easily. Every major city has five or six. Morning, afternoon, evening. Even the smallest town has its own weekly. It's one of our great strengths.

YOUNG MAN. You write one thing, one "column," it goes into one hundred ninety newspapers.

JOE. Yes.

YOUNG MAN. And each of them pays you.

JOE. Yes.

YOUNG MAN. Are you rich?

JOE. Yes, by your standards.

YOUNG MAN. I'm beginning to think I should stay after all.

JOE. I won't pay you. That would tip things over into the sordid.

YOUNG MAN. I was joking. Don't insult me.

JOE. Sorry. (*Beat.*)

YOUNG MAN. So what are you writing about here?

JOE. The menace you pose to us.

YOUNG MAN. Me?

JOE. You seem very nice. No, you collectively.

YOUNG MAN. And your readers in one hundred ninety newspapers, this is what they want to read? How scary we are?

JOE. We don't give two shits what they want to read. We tell them what they need to know.

YOUNG MAN. You and your brother. Is he here too?

JOE. We never travel together. One of us goes, one of us stays home and writes, we switch off ... now you seem to be asking me all the questions.

YOUNG MAN. Maybe I should be a journalist. If we had more than one newspaper. And journalists. (*Joe laughs.*)

JOE. Tell me something. Why on earth do they have you doing tours? An intelligent young man like you, with your languages ... Why aren't you in, I don't know, the diplomatic corps?

YOUNG MAN. I have wondered this myself, very often. I applied once. I was rejected.

JOE. They don't tell you why?

YOUNG MAN. No. Maybe something to do with my sister, I don't know.

JOE. And you have no appeal in the matter?

YOUNG MAN. Of course not.

JOE. Barbaric country. You'd like America.

YOUNG MAN. I would like to go there. It's impossible, of course.

JOE. Someday, when your Soviet masters give up on this idiotic "experiment" and rejoin the civilized world — assuming of course we haven't already blasted each other into clouds of radioactive vapor — you can come, and I'll show you Washington.

YOUNG MAN. How would you introduce me? To your friends?

JOE. As my linguist.

YOUNG MAN. Are you free in America? More than here?

JOE. Oh my God, yes. Are you joking?

YOUNG MAN. I mean, about this. (*He indicates the two of them, the bed.*)

JOE. Oh. No. With that it's much the same. (*Beat.*)

YOUNG MAN. I'd like to see Washington. And the Grand Canyon.

JOE. Not convenient to one another, unfortunately, but they should both be seen, and in the company of a knowledgeable guide. The Grand Canyon I don't know much about, but nobody knows Washington like me. It's my territory. Everyone knows me, everyone fears me, so if you're with me, you are guaranteed a good table at restaurants.

YOUNG MAN. Why do they fear you?

JOE. I simply have a well-deserved reputation for speaking my mind, loudly. Have you heard of Joe McCarthy?

YOUNG MAN. The fellow who says everyone in America is a communist? We like him.

JOE. Yes, well, he's a contemptible thug and liar and a drunk, and he's causing considerable havoc right now. Everyone's quaking in fear of him. Except Stewart and me. We've been going after McCarthy with all guns blazing. Probably we're the only ones who could get away with it.

YOUNG MAN. I don't care very much about politics.

JOE. My boy, politics is life! Politics is human intercourse at its most sublimely ridiculous and intensely vital. You may as well say you don't care very much for sex.

YOUNG MAN. No, that I like.

JOE. Yes, I've noticed. Can't you spare me half an hour more?

YOUNG MAN. No, I'm sorry. I'm late already. (*Young Man goes into the bathroom.*)

JOE. Have you ever been with an American before?

YOUNG MAN. (*From off.*) No.

JOE. How do you know Atkinson?

YOUNG MAN. Atkinson?

JOE. The PAO.

YOUNG MAN. I'm sorry?

JOE. The Public Affairs Officer. At the Embassy. (*Young Man comes back in.*)

YOUNG MAN. Your Embassy?

JOE. Yes.

YOUNG MAN. I'm sorry, I don't know him.

JOE. But he told me about you.

YOUNG MAN. I don't know what you're talking about.

JOE. He told me that he'd take care of things. He's — well, he's like us, you see. (*Young Man shakes his head.*) I told him I was hoping to find some company and he said he'd help. Peter Atkinson. At the United States Embassy. Quite tall, reddish hair thinning a bit ...

YOUNG MAN. I don't know this man. I met you in the bar.

JOE. You came right up to me. I assumed Peter sent you.

YOUNG MAN. You offered to buy me a drink.

JOE. And you accepted so readily.

YOUNG MAN. Why should I not accept?

JOE. Well, because you're so young, and ... and I'm ... You can't blame me for assuming ...

YOUNG MAN. My God. You thought I was ... *procured* for you?

JOE. Your English really is splendid.

YOUNG MAN. Picked out for you? Like a prostitute? Is this the arrangement you have with your Embassy?

JOE. No, my God no, it's nothing official. Peter's an old friend and he's discreet and knows a man can get lonely in a foreign city. I ask for a warm body, he finds one.

YOUNG MAN. A warm body?

JOE. Oh dear. That doesn't sound right. Look, I'm just a bit confused —

YOUNG MAN. We had a conversation! I thought you were inter-

THE COLUMNIST

by David Auburn

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From the Pulitzer and Tony Award-winning author of *Proof*, a drama about the press and power, sex and betrayal. At the height of the Cold War, Joe Alsop is the nation's most influential journalist, beloved, feared and courted by the Washington world. But as the '60s dawn and America undergoes dizzying change, the intense political dramas Joe is embroiled in become deeply personal as well.

"David Auburn's THE COLUMNIST is about how one's false sense of order can be reshaped by the times, how the personal is political, and how both involve smoke and mirrors ... A rich experience."

—The New Yorker

"Intensely satisfying."

—Bloomberg News

"David Auburn brings intelligence and insight to THE COLUMNIST."

—NY1.com

"Gripping and moving."

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