



THE MUSCLES IN OUR TOES

BY **STEPHEN BELBER**



DRAMATISTS
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THE MUSCLES IN OUR TOES was originally produced by Jennifer Chambers and Kristen Lee Kelly at the El Portal Theater in Hollywood, California, opening on May 30, 2009. It was directed by Jennifer Chambers; the set design was by Donna Marquet; the lighting design was by Brandon Baruch; the sound design was by John Zalewski; and the production stage manager was Jacob Holt. The cast was as follows:

LESDaniel Milder
 REG.....Michael Benyaer
 PHIL.....Bill Tangradi
 DANTE.....Al Espinosa
 CARRIE Kristen Lee Kelly
 JIMKeith Ewell

THE MUSCLES IN OUR TOES was originally produced in New York City by Labyrinth Theater Company (Mimi O’Donnell, Artistic Director; Danny Feldman, Managing Director), at the Bank Street Theater, in June 2014. It was directed by Anne Kauffman; the set design was by Lee Savage; the lighting design was by Japhy Weideman; the sound design was by Jessica Paz; and the production manager was Peter L. Smith. The cast was as follows:

LES Bill Dawes
 REG..... Amir Arison
 PHIL..... Matthew Maher
 DANTE.....Mather Zickel
 CARRIEJeanine Serralles
 JIMSamuel Ray Gates

CHARACTERS

LES

REG

PHIL

DANTE

CARRIE

JIM

THE MUSCLES IN OUR TOES

Lights up; night; a high school music room. Sound of music, mostly from the '80s, heard from far off. In this room is a piano, friendly fluorescent lights, a large mirror on one of the walls with a dancers' barre running along it. At the piano sits a guy named Les; he's fairly amiable, white, a bit pasty, perhaps a bit drunk, wearing a hat proclaiming "CLASS OF '89!" He has a mustache that's fairly ugly. He intermittently sips from a gin and tonic. A small video camera sits on the floor — aimed at him as he doinks on the piano and sings a slightly-off note, mumbled rendition of one of the '80s hits, such as the Honeydrippers' "Sea of Love." He stops — turns to the camera and speaks:*

LES. Hey Elise. Les Elkins here, at the reunion. Actually up in the choir room. Just wanted to do a little shout-out for you, let you know I'm thinking of you in this time of need and absentia. We hope he gets home soon and that nothing important gets chopped off. (*Clears his throat and begins a more upbeat rendition of a classic "coming home" song, like "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree"** — *As he sings, the door opens and another guy enters; the new guy is Reg, of seemingly Middle Eastern heritage and a demeanor shy and mild-mannered, although he's definitely not beyond shouting. He stands holding a gin and tonic. Les sees him and puts a finger to his mouth, pointing at the camera, singing — He finishes with a little piano flourish, then goes to the camera, shuts it off, and turns to Reg.*) Hey, man.

REG. Hey.

LES. How's it going down there?

REG. It's bullshit but it's life.

LES. Totally. (*They do a soul shake . . .*)

* See Special Note on Songs and Recordings on copyright page.

REG. What are you doing up here?
LES. I'm thinking about Jim. Just thinkin' about Jim.
REG. Me too.
LES. And I'm like, "Do people down there even care?"
REG. Hard to say.
LES. They make an announcement, do a moment of silence, then boom — they crank up the tunes.
REG. Fucking *Howard Jones*.
LES. I fucking hate that guy.
REG. I actually kinda like him.
LES. Yeah me too. You look great, Reg. How's Rache?
REG. She hates reunions so she didn't come.
LES. She still a great dancer?
REG. She is —
LES. Great foxtrot.
REG. She wins a lotta prizes. What's up with the camera?
LES. I had it for downstairs. Thought it might be fun but all I got was Randy Schuyler reciting legislation. He's a *state senator*.
REG. Oh yeah?
LES. He wrote a fucking corn law.
REG. What kind of corn law?
LES. A law banning corn.
REG. No more corn?
LES. No more corn! So I came up here to do a little video shout-out for Jim's wife in her time of need and absentia.
REG. Gotcha.
LES. How long did it take you to get here?
REG. Six hours, twenty-two minutes. Came in on 78, then Hunter Pass —
LES. Hunter *Falls* Pass —
REG. Hunter *Falls* Pass — then just left right left.
LES. Nice.
REG. So, like, are people *doing* anything about Jim?
LES. *Nothing!* State Department doesn't even recognize him as *kidnapped*. They say his status is "unconfirmed."
REG. He's been missing for three months! —
LES. *I know* — CNN did a two-minute segment! —
REG. I *saw* it! —
LES. It was *good!* —
REG. But still no one cares?

LES. They care and then they *stop* caring. You know? They care and they stop, care and stop, Reg; stop and care. (*They both finish their drinks.*)

REG. Jen still here?

LES. She went home early. That was our deal, she said she'd go to my 25th for exactly one hour. She's got no interest in my life before eighteen. None. Couldn't give a fart. And why should she? High school is everything and nothing — and to try and bring a foreigner into that — I'm speaking metaphorically — it's way too confusing.

REG. But she's good?

LES. She's great.

REG. And the kids?

LES. Kids are phenomenal. Growing every day.

REG. Good.

LES. Paul? — Little Paul? — He's fourteen now —

REG. Get the hell out —

LES. Kid's fucking taller than *me* —

REG. He must be tall —

LES. He's tall, exactly, that's my point! And get this, the kid comes home drunk the other night, shit-faced, *puke-dappled*, babblin' away —

REG. I love it —

LES. It's awful —

REG. Exactly —

LES. — He comes home drunk as a skunk and he goes into his brother's room —

REG. Shelly? —

LES. Yeah — he goes into shy Shelly's room, walks up to the kid, and sticks his two middle fingers in the kid's *face* and says, "Smell this."

REG. To his kid brother? —

LES. To his kid bro.

REG. How'd you know?

LES. 'Cause I was spying on him.

REG. ... You spy on your kids?

LES. You gotta spy on your kids a *little* bit, Reg, to establish the upper hand. It's Freud. Otherwise they kill you, *metaphorically*. You don't spy on your Winnie?

REG. I haven't yet.

LES. You should, otherwise she'll metaphorically kill you with the upper hand.

REG. Gotcha.

LES. So you wanna know what I did to my little fourteen-year-old pussy hound?

REG. Sure.

LES. I'm telling you this 'cause I'm too jacked up for small talk.

REG. I hear you —

LES. I take him aside and I say, "You're so proud of your fingers, Paul, go show 'em to your mom."

REG. No you didn't.

LES. Reg, I've never seen a kid quake like this, and he wasn't even acting, despite his theatrical background, this was *true* fear.

REG. But did he do it?

LES. No, he started crying and promised me he'd never do that with a girl again.

REG. ... Is that the lesson you wanted to impart?

LES. No, it was a total backfire! I picture my son on a shrink's couch in forty years blaming his metaphorically dead father for having not touched a girl's vagina since age fourteen. (*Reg waits for more.*) I'm sorry I brought that up, it's a stupid story.

REG. (*Honest.*) It's human, Les. It's a *human* story.

LES. I just wish I could *do* something for Jim. You know? I mean, I come here tonight, I see the old crowd, the old school, and we're all just *sitting* here. We went to *high school* with Jim. I mean isn't high school — ?

REG. It's where we're formed.

LES. It's true. I mean, there is a guy we all know — a guy we were *formed* with — with whom we were *formulated* — and he is in serious goddamn danger of getting his *head cut off* any day! And *we're* here talking about fuckin' *corn*!

REG. (*Nods gravely.*) How's *your* work?

LES. It's awesome.

REG. Still doin' the — ?

LES. Fight choreography — yeah.

REG. For theater, film — ?

LES. Both. Just got back from a gig at Cincinnati Rep. They're doing *Othello* set in inner-city Cincy with an Asian woman as the lead, cross-gender, whole nine yards. I had to stage the suffocation with a Cincy Reds oversized foam hand. You know those things?

REG. Do people really call it Cincy?

LES. Oh yeah — but you know those things?

REG. The hands? —

LES. Yeah — the hands. Makes the job a little tricky. I'll certainly say *that*. (*He perhaps plays a couple melancholy piano chords ... and then:*) It's almost funny. Jim was the first guy I met in ninth grade. He was behind me in the lunch line and we're both looking at the Sloppy Joes and he says to me, "That's one Sloppy-looking motherfuckin' Joe." (*Fingers crossed to show tightness.*) A bond, from that moment on ... (*Looking up.*) I'm not a deep guy, Reg.

REG. I know. (*Pause.*) First time I met Jim ... was tryouts for the swim team. I had no idea how much swimming *prowess* the guy had. I mean, there I was, thinking I was hot stuff, and he and I are there, sizing each other up, then we dive in the pool ... and he's gone. The guy was simply gone. (*Beat.*) I was thinking maybe we could start a peace website for Jim. Like a *website* that promotes peace. For people to discuss peaceful ways of doing things.

LES. ... That's a tough one, Reg. (*The door suddenly opens and we see Phil, who's sharp, short, confident, and ultimately heartfelt. He holds a gin and tonic and looks at Les.*)

PHIL. Hey!

LES. Hey, Phil —

PHIL. Hey, Reg — I haven't even seen *you!* —

REG. Hey, Phil.

PHIL. What're you guys doing in the choir room?

LES. Hanging like we used to.

PHIL. *Totally* — (*Goes to Reg and gives him a poignant kiss on the cheek, then turns to Les.*) Hey, Les.

LES. Hey, Phil.

REG. What're you doing here, Phil?

PHIL. I tagged along with Dante.

REG. But it's not your reunion —

PHIL. I know, Reg, I tagged along —

REG. Why?

PHIL. Because I like reunions.

REG. Why?

PHIL. 'Cause I'm a fuckin' *people* person, Reg.

LES. (*Confirming.*) He is.

PHIL. Although now I just wanna smoke a fuckin' e-joint. (*Goes to the chalkboard and writes "EAT ME."*) I used to get high up here before choir class.

REG. So did we.

THE MUSCLES IN OUR TOES

by Stephen Belber

5M, 1W

In this dark comedy, four friends meet at their high school reunion and ponder a plan to free their old friend who's been kidnapped by a radical political group. Absurdity, intensity, and plain ole weirdness ensue when this inebriated, stoned, adolescently arrested, religiously confused group of friends attempts to tackle the task at hand and, at the same time, debate the forces of international terrorism.

"[A]bsurd and often poignant ... Belber's strengths as a playwright are manifold, but his greatest talent may be his attention to detail: the small yet vastly important nuances in character and back stories ... add up to a theatrical landscape that's rich and brimming with intrigue. These aren't just running gags that earn laughs; they're paramount to the success of THE MUSCLES IN OUR TOES."

—Slant Magazine

"Belber's dialogue crackles with barbed, foul-mouthed humor ..."

—The New York Times

"A high school reunion is the perfect place to set a play about growing up, and that's just what dramatist Stephen Belber has done in ... this scathing comedy."

—TheaterMania.com

"Friendships forged in high school can be enduring — and so can wounds inflicted there ... Belber tackles that idea in his spiky and surprising comedy."

—New York Daily News

"If you know the words to most of George Michael's hit songs, or were a member of your high school drama club, you are likely to laugh until your face hurts."

—Los Angeles Times

Also by Stephen Belber
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FAULT LINES
TAPE
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