

AIRLINE HIGHWAY

BY LISA
D'AMOUR



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

AIRLINE HIGHWAY
Copyright © 2019, Lisa D'Amour

All Rights Reserved

AIRLINE HIGHWAY is fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America, and of all countries covered by the International Copyright Union (including the Dominion of Canada and the rest of the British Commonwealth), and of all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention, the Universal Copyright Convention, the Berne Convention, and of all countries with which the United States has reciprocal copyright relations. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), or stored in any retrieval system in any way (electronic or mechanical) without written permission of the publisher.

The English language stock and amateur stage performance rights in the United States, its territories, possessions and Canada for AIRLINE HIGHWAY are controlled exclusively by Dramatists Play Service, 440 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. **No professional or nonprofessional performance of the Play may be given without obtaining in advance the written permission of Dramatists Play Service and paying the requisite fee.**

All other rights, including without limitation motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television, video or sound recording, and the rights of translation into foreign languages are strictly reserved.

Inquiries concerning all other rights should be addressed to Creative Artists Agency, 405 Lexington Avenue, 19th Floor, New York, NY 10174. Attn: George Lane.

NOTE ON BILLING

Anyone receiving permission to produce AIRLINE HIGHWAY is required to give credit to the Author as sole and exclusive Author of the Play on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the Play and in all instances in which the title of the Play appears, including printed or digital materials for advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the Play and/or a production thereof. Please see your production license for font size and typeface requirements.

Be advised that there may be additional credits required in all programs and promotional material. Such language will be listed under the "Additional Billing" section of production licenses. It is the licensee's responsibility to ensure any and all required billing is included in the requisite places, per the terms of the license.

SPECIAL NOTE ON SONGS/RECORDINGS

Dramatists Play Service neither holds the rights to nor grants permission to use any songs or recordings mentioned in the Play. Permission for performances of copyrighted songs, arrangements or recordings mentioned in this Play is not included in our license agreement. The permission of the copyright owner(s) must be obtained for any such use. For any songs and/or recordings mentioned in the Play, other songs, arrangements, or recordings may be substituted provided permission from the copyright owner(s) of such songs, arrangements or recordings is obtained; or songs, arrangements or recordings in the public domain may be substituted.

*For Daniel Kerwick,
Who scribbled poems by the river, and who taught me how to
take it to the streets,*

*And Martha Lavey,
Who made space for my play with such grace.*

AIRLINE HIGHWAY received its world premiere on December 14, 2014, at Steppenwolf Theatre (Martha Lavey, Artistic Director; David Hawkanson, Executive Director) in Chicago, Illinois. It was directed by Joe Mantello, the scenic design was by Scott Pask, the costume design was by David Zinn, the lighting design was by Japhy Weideman, the original music and sound design was by Fitz Patton, and the production stage manager was Malcolm Ewen.

The cast of the Steppenwolf production was as follows:

KRISTA Caroline Neff
BAIT BOY Stephen Louis Grush
ZOE Carolyn Braver
WAYNE Scott Jaeck
FRANCIS Gordon Joseph Weiss
TANYA Kate Buddeke
TERRY Tim Edward Rhoze
SISSY NA NA K. Todd Freeman
MISS RUBY Judith Roberts
ENSEMBLE Robert Breuler, Chris Daley,
Terry Hamilton, Toni Martin,
Brenann Stacker, and Jacqueline Williams

The production moved to Manhattan Theatre Club's Samuel J. Friedman Theatre for a Broadway run in April 2015, and was stage managed by Diane DiVita. For the Broadway run, the cast changed as follows:

BAIT BOY Joe Tippett
FRANCIS Ken Marks
TANYA Julie White
ENSEMBLE Todd d'Amour, Shannon Eagen,
Venida Evans, Joe Forbrich,
Lisa Hendrix, and Sekou Laidlow

AIRLINE HIGHWAY was commissioned and developed by Steppenwolf Theatre with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

CHARACTERS

KRISTA

White, early 30s, a stripper at Babe's on Bourbon Street. A gentle soul that turns rabid when she feels like she is being threatened or when she gets too close to someone. Always looking for people to take care of her, then pushes them away once they do. Grew up in a small town in north Mississippi before moving to Mobile, Alabama, and then Slidell, Louisiana.

BAIT BOY

White, or African-American, or a mix, mid-30s—in his past he has been a bartender, a bouncer, a barker outside strip joints, a karaoke wrangler, a waiter, and a street musician (keyboard), all in the Quarter. Long romantic history with Krista. Currently living “the straight life” in Atlanta with an older woman in her early 50s. Has worked hard these past few years to “pass” as an educated suburban guy.

ZOE

White, 16. Bait Boy's stepdaughter. She's a junior at the magnet high school in Atlanta—honors track. Learns fast, too fast—her book smarts run ahead of her emotional maturity. She does not realize how little she has lived.

WAYNE

White, probably mid – late 50s, although he could be older. Manager of the Hummingbird Hotel—he lives in a small apartment above the front office. Of old-school, working-class, Irish-German-NOLA descent. Potbelly. The sweetest man on Airline Highway, too sweet, actually, way too happy to just be hanging out with interesting people, which is why he has not become anything other than the manager of the Hummingbird Hotel. Divorced some time ago. No kids.

FRANCIS

White, or African-American, or a mix, early 60s. The mind/creativity/energy of a 30-year-old, but the grizzly beard, worn face, and watery eyes of a much older, lifelong (happy) social drinker. A true poet, child of the Beats, he's been scribbling out poems for years, with deep

roots in the New Orleans poetry scene. A man about town, at all the right parties, a little too old for certain scenes, but he's always there, always on the move, always taking it all in.

TANYA

White, 62. She's an old-school hooker, been in business for many years, in and out of it, sometimes bartending, a bit of exotic dancing in the early days, not working at all for the one year ten years ago when she was married to the rich banker from California. Tried for a while to start her own business giving in-home facials, lost a lot of money on that one. So for the past few years, she has been back at it, working out of the Hummingbird, servicing quite a few regular, mature clients. She can handle alcohol but she CAN turn into a crazy person when it comes to pain pills.

TERRY

African-American, age flexible, he could really be anywhere from 45–55. Originally from the country, New Iberia, Louisiana, but he has been in NOLA for quite some time—mostly to get away from the crowd he ran with in the country, which were up to no good. He is a handyman and has the bad habit of ingratiating himself to people with money in order to get work from them. He cycles back to the Hummingbird every couple of months, after working for different people there and then screwing up. He has carried a torch for Krista for a few years now, and you know, maybe they did fool around a little once, at sunrise, at the end of one of the Hummingbird parking lot parties, when they were both a little toasted. But have they talked about it since? Of course not.

SISSY NA NA

African-American or possibly Afro-Cuban or African-Puerto Rican. Mid-40s. Gender non-conforming bartender and karaoke wrangler at the Cat's Meow on Bourbon Street. No surgery or hormones—she just dresses to reflect who she is. Though not without her demons, at the end of the day Sissy may be the most functional of all these lovable fools. She's got no patience for fooling around, she gets the job DONE. Maybe, probably, she gets other people's jobs done way more than she takes care of her own shit, you know? She is seduced

by the potential of a joyful moment, of people having FUN and letting their guard down. This is why she has a specific kind of love for her profession, and yes, she does consider karaoke wrangling a profession, shut up.

MISS RUBY

White, or African-American, or a mix. Let's say she's 85. Dying (literally dying) infamous Bourbon Street burlesque performer, had a club on Bourbon Street for years. Kind of the "mama" of Bourbon Street, she has had many ups and downs. At her core a brilliant businessperson/showperson, and also a woman ahead of her time when it comes to thinking about women's bodies, sex, and objectification. If she had been born later, she might have been a performance artist, the belle of the art world. Instead she is the Belle of Bourbon Street, destined to be loved by a few and then forgotten.

ENSEMBLE

NURSE'S AIDE, a home health or hospice worker.

PROBLEM ROOM DUDE, a drug dealer who lives in the Problem Room.

PARTY GUESTS, at Miss Ruby's funeral party. As many as your production can swing, but seven minimum. These guests should be a variety of ages and races—people who have known Miss Ruby over the years, as well as new devotees.

THE RESIDENTS OF THE PROBLEM ROOM: At least four or five people are living in the Problem Room. It's a drug den of sorts—they are really holed up in there. These characters can double as the Party Guests.

I've assigned races to these characters; in some cases it indicates the way the play was cast in the original production, in other cases it indicates what I had in mind when I wrote the parts. In terms of race, please cast this play according to the needs of your company and the way you read the character; I only ask that one never casts the play as all white, as that simply is not how New Orleans works.

PLACE

The Hummingbird Hotel on Airline Highway,
New Orleans, Louisiana.

TIME

Late April/Early May, 2014.

NOTE ON SONGS/RECORDINGS

Be advised that Dramatists Play Service, Inc., neither holds the rights to nor grants permission to use any songs, recordings, images, or other design elements mentioned in the play, other than “Oh Sweet Baby” sung in Act Two. It is the responsibility of the producing theater/organization to obtain permission of the copyright owner(s) for any such use. Additional royalty fees may apply for the right to use copyrighted materials.

The Steppenwolf and Manhattan Theatre Club productions of this play used Nina Simone’s “Be My Husband” instead of “Oh Sweet Baby.” Certain verses of Simone’s song were altered so they read like the verses in “Oh Sweet Baby.” “Oh Sweet Baby” is an original song written by the playwright and legally available for use in production at no additional fee. If you would like to use any song other than “Oh Sweet Baby,” rights must be cleared with the copyright holders per the above paragraph.

In the Steppenwolf production of this play, “I’ll Fly Away” was used instead of “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.”

For any other songs/recordings, images, or other design elements mentioned in the play, works in the public domain may be substituted. It is the producing theater/organization’s responsibility to ensure the substituted work is indeed in the public domain. Dramatists Play Service, Inc., cannot advise as to whether or not a song/arrangement/recording, image, or other design element is in the public domain.

POETRY AND THANKS

The poetry that Francis quotes in the play is pulled from poems by two different poets with New Orleans roots—John Sinclair and Daniel Kerwick.

The song the women sing in Act Two, "Oh Sweet Baby," is inspired by the Divine Divas, an informal women's a cappella group in New Orleans. They sing for donations of whiskey and chocolate.

Miss Ruby is inspired, in part, by Chris Owens, a living legend in New Orleans who still performs her burlesque act in her club on Bourbon Street. If age is a number, hers is unlisted.

NOTE ON OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE

The overlapping dialogue in this play is most often indicated by dialogue laid out in two columns, indicating where and how conversations overlap and dovetail. In general, the play is laid out so the conversations toggle back and forth, but more overlapping is possible and encouraged—each company that produces the play can find their own rhythm.

At times a slash (/) is used to indicate an overlap. The slash indicates where the next character should begin their line. Slashes only function WITHIN columns.

At times you will see certain characters inserting a word or commentary on another character's longer speech. In general, it should feel like the character with the longer speech does not wait for the interjections—just barrels through.

[Lines in brackets] are optional cuts.

AIRLINE HIGHWAY

ACT ONE

Scene 1

The lights rise at as close to the dawn's pace as we can swing in a theater. It is 5:40 A.M. in the courtyard/parking lot of the Hummingbird, a hotel on Airline Highway on the Northwestern edge of New Orleans, Louisiana, just before it turns into Metairie. It is one of those old-school hotels from maybe the '40s, with an old neon sign portraying a big blue and yellow hummingbird holding a flower in its mouth, and the words "The Hummingbird" underneath it.

We can see the hotel office downstage right, with floor-to-ceiling glass windows, and the main building, with two floors of rooms, opening up onto a shared parking lot. There is a black, rusted wrought-iron rail along the second floor walkway. There is one abandoned car in the lot—maybe it is up on cinder blocks. A gutter pipe hangs down s. l., near the office, with a green vine that has grown all the way up it.

The hotel, as you might imagine, has seen better days, back when it was a modern hotel with a fresh coat of hummingbird-pink paint. Back then, Airline Highway was the main thoroughfare in and out of New Orleans, which took you straight to Baton Rouge.

Now, it is a dirty beige—remnants of a paint job about fifteen years ago when it was painted an awkward shade of yellow. Some doors have numbers, some don't. While the hotel has occasional out-of-town guests, most of the people in the rooms work in the service industry in the French Quarter—

bartenders, bouncers, dishwashers, karaoke DJs, strippers, and so on.

We see the light changing slowly from purple to pink to something approaching day. In the middle of that light is Terry, who is nobody really, hanging out in his spot in the middle of the top walkway, watching the traffic go by, smoking a cigarette.

In these opening moments, perhaps just prior to curtain or just after, several guests at the Hummingbird are seen emerging and doing their thing. Perhaps getting ice, or a Coke from the machine, or walking out of the parking lot to catch the bus. At least one of these guests emerges from the Problem Room: a room filled with too many people, mostly young, but not necessarily all young. It's smoky in there and there's loud music and/or loud TV.

All these early morning figures walk by Terry, but do not faze him. He smokes and watches the world go by. For a moment, the stage is quiet. A few birds. The sun emerging.

Then the whirr of cars driving by again, and the sound of a bus stopping: air brakes, the door opening, people getting off the bus.

Terry times it perfectly, so that he finishes his cigarette, crushes it under his heel, and pushes it off the side of the balcony before Krista enters—she is maybe 30, 32, dressed in sweatpants and an oversized hoodie. She wears heavy makeup and carries a gym bag.

KRISTA. You smoking?

TERRY. No ma'am.

KRISTA. I walk up there I'm going to smell smoke on you?

TERRY. Yes ma'am you will. Because I wash dishes at a bar. And everybody smokes there. And I don't have money for laundry. So I haven't washed clothes in two weeks.

Krista starts taking off her bra/stripper top, pulling it out from under her hoodie.

KRISTA. Fair enough. Don't smoke.

TERRY. I wouldn't do that to you.

KRISTA. It's not me I'm worried about.

Krista unfolds a ratty old plastic chair and sits in it, near the abandoned car.

TERRY. I stopped smoking. You stop stripping.

KRISTA. It's only temporary.

TERRY. How many years / temporary?

KRISTA. And I'm damn good at it. *(Under her breath.)* Fuck you...

Wayne, the manager of the hotel, shuffles into the interior space of the lobby in his PJs and slippers to put coffee on. He is barely awake, starts the coffee.

Upstairs a door opens and a man, maybe 50, wearing sunglasses and dressed in pants and a shirt with a button-down collar, leaves a room—Tanya's room. Krista says "Good morning" quietly, Terry kind of nods hello. The man just walks away. Another door opens, and Sissy Na Na walks out in her bathrobe and platform boots, tall, brown-skinned, strikingly lean body; hair in a hairnet or maybe tied up with a bandanna; no makeup, but a scarf around her neck. She says the following plainly.

SISSY NA NA. Morning, hos. Tanya needs my rubbing alcohol. Thinks she's got an ear infucktion.

KRISTA. *(Indicating the door Sissy came out of.)* You've been in there all night?

SISSY NA NA. Since I got off work, 'round three.

TERRY. How's Miss Ruby doing in there?

SISSY NA NA. Not good. She keeps calling me Charlie.

KRISTA. Who's Charlie?

TERRY. *(To Krista.)* Her son who died in Iraq.

SISSY NA NA. Can't you see the resemblance?

Sissy Na Na poses a silly girly pose.

KRISTA. Oh. Well, it's dark in there. We should open the blinds today.

SISSY NA NA. The light hurts her eyes.

Sissy Na Na knocks on Tanya's door.

Tanya. Tanya. Tanya. Tanya. Tanya.

The door opens a crack.

Here.

Sissy Na Na passes the rubbing alcohol through the door. And the door closes. Sissy Na Na speaks to Terry.

You gotta cigarette?

TERRY. No.

SISSY NA NA. Really?

TERRY. I'm clean.

Sissy gives Terry a big sniff and kind of goes "huh." And then goes back to her room. Another man, dressed in generic-white-guy, slightly businessy clothes, walks into the parking lot, looks at a little piece of paper, and heads to Tanya's room. Wayne pokes his head out of the door of the office. He speaks loudly, not quite yelling.

WAYNE. Coffee.

The man going up the steps is startled.

MAN. What?

KRISTA. Nothing, he's just letting us know coffee.

MAN. Oh, uh.

TERRY. It's cool.

MAN. Oh.

Maybe a slightly awkward moment where the guy hesitates, then guy goes to Tanya's room and is let in.

KRISTA. Why are you here so early?

TERRY. Gonna go see if Mr. Wayne will pay me to fix those gutter pipes.

KRISTA. Those gutter pipes have been hanging like that since forever.

TERRY. They need to be fixed.

KRISTA. I guess.

TERRY. It's bad for the foundation, the water leaks down and the foundation will crack.

KRISTA. How you gonna fix that gutter pipe, Terry / if you start hammering on it, it's gonna bust into a billion pieces...

TERRY. I'm gonna tack it back up with some nice nails and some wire, I know how to fix a gutter pipe.

Francis rides up on a sturdy bike that he probably made himself. He is wearing a helmet that drops down over part of his face, like a helmet mask. It is decorated with tinfoil, Mardi Gras beads, doubloons, and glitter. He is a poet himself and he quotes from the poet John Sinclair...

FRANCIS. "Ashes to ashes
Dirt to dirt
Love, work, and suffer
Is our sentence here on earth
& ain't nobody getting out of here alive—"

Happy Jazz Fest, people!

Krista snaps fake little poetry scene snaps and Francis laughs a delicious, high-pitched "I'm still buzzed and life is beautiful" laugh.

He make coffee yet?

KRISTA. Yeah.

FRANCIS. Thank frikken god. I gotta be over at work in like two hours and—hold on—

Francis moves to the door for the coffee.

You want some?

KRISTA. Sure.

Francis goes in. A moment of silence between Terry and Krista. It's like we hear the day dawning.

TERRY. Do you ever sleep?

KRISTA. Sure I sleep. But I'm saving up money to take a trip home to Alabama to see my family, so I'm not sleeping right now.

Did Wayne rent my room yet?

TERRY. Not yet.

KRISTA. *(Under her breath.)* Asshole.

AIRLINE HIGHWAY

by Lisa D'Amour

4 men, 5 women, extras

In the parking lot of the Hummingbird Motel, off the titular highway near New Orleans, the hotel's residents have gathered to celebrate the life of Miss Ruby, an iconic burlesque queen who has been a mother figure to them all. Miss Ruby's life is nearing its end, and she requests that her funeral take place while she is still alive so she can attend the festivities. As the Mardi Gras-esque celebration continues into the night, the stories of the residents, their pain and disappointments unfold.

"Ms. D'Amour's dark comedy...draws a compassionate but unvarnished collective portrait of the underclass of New Orleans." —**The New York Times**

"D'Amour's deep and decidedly soulful work takes us convincingly into the world of the 'real' New Orleans. ...As she did in her suburban-set Pulitzer finalist Detroit, D'Amour demonstrates a special insight into both how place defines people and how people seek to define themselves against the expectations of the American dream. ...D'Amour has written another quintessentially American work." —**Variety**

"...a beautiful and mesmerizing kaleidoscope of a play..." —**New York Magazine**

"...a gentle, even sentimental, portrait of those who keep New Orleans humming. ...while much of AIRLINE HIGHWAY is about the lives of those who form a tight community in their cheap hotel, the other side...involves the preservation of New Orleans' distinctively outre counterculture. In America—and in this play—every tradition is always fighting off commodification, just as each old motel now has to worry about where they are putting the next Costco." —**Chicago Tribune**

Also by Lisa D'Amour
DETROIT

ISBN 978-0-8222-3485-2



DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE, INC.