



INSIGNIFICANCE

BY TERRY JOHNSON



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INSIGNIFICANCE was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on July 8, 1982. It was directed by Les Waters and designed by Tony McDonald. The cast was as follows:

PROFESSOR Ian McDiarmid
SENATOR William Hootkins
ACTRESS Judy Davis
BALLPLAYER/HEAVY Larry Lamb

CHARACTERS

THE PROFESSOR. White haired and bright eyed. Around seventy years old. He wears a shabby sweatshirt and a loose dark suit. He thinks a great deal and speaks concisely.

THE SENATOR. A fat, sweaty man wearing a large, pale, sweaty suit.

THE ACTRESS. A stunning blonde carefully composed to look a little younger than she is. Listening to her one might guess at twenty years, or at other times forty.

THE BALLPLAYER. All-American boy turned forty. He resembles a retired astronaut.

THE HEAVY. Tall, dark mobster type, probably CIA.

SETTING

1953. A hotel room. New York.

The room is modern, circa '53, and has a large expanse of window looking out onto the city. There are stars and there is light from a neon sign on a building below. There is a door to the corridor, one to the bathroom, and a double bed.

INSIGNIFICANCE

ACT ONE

A New York hotel room, 1953, night.

The Professor sits with a pad, calculating.

He is seventy, white haired, bright eyed. He wears a shabby Princeton sweatshirt and has bare feet. Beside him is a pile of paper a foot tall. A Gladstone bag lies on the bed, a clock is ticking.

He hears a cheer in the distance and goes to the open window. His face is lit by flashing red neon. He looks upward.

There is a knock on the door.

SENATOR. (*Offstage.*) Professor?

The Professor goes to the door.

The Senator stands with a bottle, like a nightmare salesman. He is a fat, sweaty man in a pale, sweaty suit.

It's a dog of a night, Professor. I got bourbon. Sort of a peace offering for calling on you so late although I couldn't see as how you'd be sleeping on a night like this. You'll have to forgive my intrusion but I've got something to say to you that has to be said before the morning. This is a hell of a hotel, ain't it? You have a good flight? Each time I fly there is half as much time spent in the air and twice as much spent in the terminal. Progress. Yes sir. Now we got whisky, we got glasses, and we got the whole night ahead of us. Half the night for you and half the night for me.

PROFESSOR. Thank you no, I don't drink.

SENATOR. And I don't take no for an answer, Professor. You're

going to need a drink. It's a dog of a night and tomorrow's going to be a dog of a day.

PROFESSOR. Would you like some water?

SENATOR. No sir.

The Professor goes to the bathroom to adulterate his drink.

Did you know that according to the law of probability you drink a glass of water, you drink a piece of Napoleon's crap. Perhaps even Mussolini's but more likely Napoleon's on account of he's been dead longer. You put a glass to your lips, you're as good as puckered up to Napoleon's butt. So I don't drink water, no thank you. I don't intend to be part of the alimentary cosmic canal I can tell you that, no sir. I'll stick to good ole Jack.

PROFESSOR. The same probability must surely exist for all liquids.

SENATOR. Yeh, but whisky's a cleanser. You ever drop a worm in whisky? It'll go stiffer'n a nail in two minutes. If I'm drinking pieces of Napoleon I know they're dead pieces of Napoleon and aren't still swimming around with filthy little minds of their own. Not that I have anything against Napoleon; I just don't have time for any of his shit. I'm not an educated man, Professor, but I hope you've noticed I'm a jackdaw when it comes to picking up little facts of knowledge. I don't have any pretensions but I like to think I can hold my own, leastways up to the letter S.

PROFESSOR. S?

SENATOR. My pa made it a rule we should learn one new word every day. I never went to college but I'm midway through the S's. You want to know today's word? Solifluxion. You want to know what solifluxion is?

PROFESSOR. It's the movement of soil due to natural causes.

SENATOR. I'll bet you got to W X Y Z already, ain't you? Yes sir, the movement of soil due to natural causes. You and I got a lot in common, Professor. You love knowledge, I like knowing things. I'd give a great deal to know all you know. This the stuff you hump about with you all the time? Must be quite a few years' work right there.

PROFESSOR. Please. Sorry. Thank you.

SENATOR. To tomorrow, Professor.

PROFESSOR. Tomorrow?

SENATOR. First thing you have to remember is that you ain't on trial. You're not accused of anything. You're not here to be accused. If you feel accused that makes me an unhappy man. Are you feeling accused?

PROFESSOR. No. Persecuted, maybe.

SENATOR. Are you now?

PROFESSOR. Or have I ever been?

SENATOR. That's not an accusation, that's an inquiry. The last thing I want to do is persecute you, Professor; I merely want to know, and this is entirely off the record, what your answer to that question might be. It seems to me there are only two answers possible. There is yes and there is no. There are however some citizens who seem to believe there is a third answer possible that does not require the use of either of those two words and I'll tell you Professor, they have turned these committee hearings into one royal pain in the butt. There's a guy called Larry Parks, impersonates Al Jolson. You know how many times he cited the Fifth Amendment? Seventy-nine times. He got awfully tired. I said to him Larry; you can cite the Fifth Amendment until you're black in the face but you ain't gonna make a nigger out of me. So he sat there, he put out his cigarette, he sat there some more, then he sang like a bird. So I'm not here to persuade you to one testimony or another, Professor; all I ask is that you give us a straight yes or no so's we can all fly home and get a long weekend. I haven't seen my wife in three months. My balls think my pecker's been cut. Last time I bought a ticket home I had to spend two extra sessions trying that jumped-up coon Robeson for contempt and missed the damn plane. I'm offering you a quick dismissal in return for a straight answer to a straight question. You want to try one of those little words by way of experiment? You want to try a yes or a no?

PROFESSOR. No.

SENATOR. Is that your answer or your attitude?

PROFESSOR. My answer.

SENATOR. You're not nor you've never been?

PROFESSOR. That is correct.

SENATOR. In which case we'd go for perjury.

PROFESSOR. Ahah. I've been named?

SENATOR. Three times. I came here tonight to make the situation clear. You're not a politician or a military man; you're not used to kicking about in the shit, then coming up smelling of roses. I'd put you in the same category as the movie people we've talked to: the type of person to whom mud sticks. There's a little solifluxion going on right now; the dirt's shifting and it's heading your way.

PROFESSOR. Am I talking to an official Representative of the House Committee for Un-American Activities?

SENATOR. Well, if you're going on a rabbit hunt it's best to take a dog. Guess I'm the dog. I never paid for it in my life Professor, but if I don't get home soon I'm going to have to screw the stenographer and she's an uglier dog than I am. I'll tell you in confidence I don't think these hearings are going to go on for much longer. You could be our last big fish, Professor. Daddy of the H bomb, old man of the stars; people gonna listen! It's in your power to just about wrap this thing up. We need a man who faced with frankfurters or hot dogs chose hot dogs. Token American if you like.

PROFESSOR. In my lifetime I have been accused by the Swiss of being a German fascist, by the Germans of being a Zionist conspirator, and by the Americans of being a German fascist, a Zionist conspirator, and now a Soviet Communist. I have been an Internationalist and a diehard patriot. By two magazines in one week I was called a conscientious objector and a warmonger; both magazines were reviewing a speech I made to the Mozart Appreciation Society of New England. Now I am asked to stand and say yes or no to a question that belongs in a fourth-grade Latin examination paper. Answer yes or no so that you can decide if I deserve to be called an American. I tell you, on or off the record, I don't care.

SENATOR. You chose America.

PROFESSOR. I did not choose America. I was avoiding Dachau.

SENATOR. Goddam. You know; it's very irritating, you talk to a Jew nowadays, that damn subject always come up. It's the same threat to Democracy I'm asking you to help fight.

PROFESSOR. And how precisely did Communism contribute to

the Holocaust?

SENATOR. Whole damn war was a Soviet plot!

PROFESSOR. Fifteen million dead Russians, a Soviet plot?

SENATOR. They're clever. Overpopulated, underdeveloped, they invite a housepainter to wreck the rest of Europe and throw half their population in front of him. Nothing left of Europe that'll ever be a threat to the Soviets. Nothing left of the Soviets ever be a threat to Kremlin. They won the war, they want another one, and they want to win it from the inside out. So what do you say?

PROFESSOR. I say you ought to see a psychiatrist. Good night, Senator.

SENATOR. Don't make the mistake of treating this like a freshman's debate on civil liberties; there are some who've done that and sounded just fine on the day. One guy got applauded by that cock-teasing bitch of a stenographer, but he ain't earned jack shit since. This thing's got the power to change your life so it's never the same again. Far worse than a swollen prostrate. I glanced through your file. So what about a little cooperation here?

PROFESSOR. I can make it very simple. I will never, testify.

SENATOR. You're subpoenaed for tomorrow.

PROFESSOR. I am here to speak at the Conference for World Peace. The date of my rather sudden subpoena coincided quite beautifully but it will not prevent me from attending. Nor if I had arranged to go fishing would it have prevented me from catching fish.

SENATOR. You ignore a House Committee subpoena and that may be all that's left for you to do. Damn you. Must be near a lifetime's work there. I heard tell you refuse to have copies made of those, why is that? You could spill your drink and wipe out the Milky Way. Strong gust of wind and you're in the middle of an equation you're never gonna get out of. Be a tragedy if any of this... fine work was to go astray. You're called for nine-thirty. I'll be here around eight to pick you up.

PROFESSOR. Bring a good book.

SENATOR. I have every faith in the testimony you'll give, Professor. Peace Conference can slug it out in your absence. Waste of time

INSIGNIFICANCE

by Terry Johnson

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Imagine if Marilyn Monroe and Albert Einstein met in a hotel room. Just briefly. Just for one night. What would they talk about? And what if they were interrupted by the “two Joes”—McCarthy and DiMaggio? *INSIGNIFICANCE* is the intriguing, hilarious, and heartbreaking story of the Senator, the Ballplayer, the Professor, and the Actress. Four icons of American history meeting in one night, in one hotel room, in New York City.

“This modern classic from 1982 memorably blends intellectual stimulation and entertainment...”

—**The Independent (London)**

“[INSIGNIFICANCE] transports us to the birth of celebrity culture. ... The play has a rare quality of timelessness about it... that stems from the way it grasps the nature of acting and the power of theatre. It is thoroughly at ease in its own artifice: we are watching an event that is both unreal and real, people who are both paper-thin impersonations and yet no more flimsy than we are ourselves. ... Johnson wraps theatre into science, and science into sexy, funny, achingly sad stage poetry with a lightness that borders on profound genius.”

—**The Telegraph (UK)**

“Terry Johnson’s richly wrought INSIGNIFICANCE, a cultural collage that both invigorates and entertains, plays brilliant variations on its own scheme of relativity... Johnson’s sure and supple dialogue makes the clashes between these one-person universes achingly human.”

—**Chicago Reader**

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