

# IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE

BY SINCLAIR LEWIS

ADAPTED BY

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DRAMATISTS  
PLAY SERVICE  
INC.

IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE  
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IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE was commissioned and originally produced by Berkeley Repertory Theatre (Tony Taccone, Artistic Director; Susan Medak, Managing Director; Theresa Von Klug, General Manager) in September 2016. It was directed by Lisa Peterson; the scenic design was by Rachel Hauck; the costume design was by Meg Neville; the lighting design was by Alexander V. Nichols; the original composition and sound design was by Paul James Prendergast; the dramaturg was Madeleine Oldham; the production stage manager was Michael Suenkel; the assistant stage manager was Christina Hogan. The cast was as follows:

ADELAIDE TARR GIMMITCH/

EMMA JESSUP ..... Sharon Lockwood

LORINDA PIKE ..... Deidrie Henry

DOREMUS JESSUP ..... Tom Nelis

FRANK TASBROUGH/BISHOP PRANG/

EFFINGHAM SWAN ..... Charles Shaw Robinson

R.C. CROWLEY/JOHN POLLIKOP ..... Mark Kenneth Smaltz

MARY JESSUP GREENHILL/JAIME JOHNSON ..... Anna Ishida

SISSY JESSUP ..... Carolina Sanchez

JULIAN FALCK ..... Alexander Lydon

PHILIP JESSUP ..... Will Rogers

DR. FOWLER GREENHILL ..... William Thomas Hodgson

BUCK TITUS/BUZZ WINDRIP ..... David Kelly

SHAD LEDUE ..... Scott Coopwood

KARL PASCAL ..... Gerardo Rodriguez

DIMICK/DAVID ..... Gabriel Montoya

## ADAPTORS' NOTE

This play is meant to be performed by an ensemble of 12–14 actors. Every actor plays multiple characters with the exception of the actor playing Doremus Jessup.

This play is meant to move swiftly. Scenes and acts flow continuously from one to the other, stopping only for the intermission and the end of the play. Scenery should be kept to a minimum, allowing for easy transitions.

Throughout the play we have made specific musical suggestions that, to us, capture the spirit of the moment. These are open to directorial interpretation.

All narrated speeches begin with the notation: \*\*

In narrated sections, line breaks and paragraph demarcations indicate a change in speaker (i.e. a different actor assumes the role of Narrator).

The distribution of the narration among the ensemble should be decided by each production—except for the lines of narration specifically designated for either THE ACTOR PLAYING DOREMUS or THE ACTOR PLAYING LORINDA.

Specific crowd responses in one scene (Act Two, Scene 2, the rally for Buzz Windrip) will be elicited from the audience by the ensemble. This participation will be set up in the prologue, during which the actors will “train” the audience. These are meant to be simple and fun, even though audience members will be asked to cheer and applaud characters whose political positions they may loathe.

On page 37, in Act Two, Scene 2, Buzz Windrip refers to certain audience members by name (i.e. [Betty and Jack Shafer] etc). Those names should be tailored to real individuals in the audience who are known to be attending each performance.

We have adapted this novel with enormous respect and admiration for its author, Sinclair Lewis. Even when taking liberties with both content and form, we have tried to retain the intent and ambition of the original text.

Mr. Lewis was a singular artist, and his ability to grasp the complexity and underpinnings of American society and to reimagine the world continues to be a source of inspiration. With this play, we hope to sustain his artistic legacy and to translate his overreaching vision into a compelling piece of theatre.

—Tony Taccone  
Bennett Cohen

## CHARACTERS

BRIGADIER GENERAL HERBERT Y. EDGEWAYS

ADELAIDE TARR GIMMITCH

LORINDA PIKE

CROWD MEMBER 1

CROWD MEMBER 2

DOREMUS JESSUP

FRANK TASBROUGH

R.C. CROWLEY

DAVID GREENHILL (*offstage*)

EMMA JESSUP

MARY JESSUP GREENHILL

SISSY JESSUP

JULIAN FALCK

PHILIP JESSUP

DR. FOWLER GREENHILL

RADIO ANNOUNCER (*offstage*)

BISHOP PRANG

BUCK TITUS

SHAD LEDUE

MAN 1

MAN 2

MAN 3

MAN 4

MAN 5

WOMAN 1

WOMAN 2

MINUTE MEN (*multiple; n/s*)

PRIVATE WILLIAM DOOLEY (*n/s*)

EMCEE

BUZZ WINDRIP

LEE SARASON

HECKLER

KARL PASCAL

JAIME JOHNSON

JOHN POLLIKOP

PRIEST

VOICE (*offstage*)

EFFINGHAM SWAN

GUARDS (*multiple; n/s*)

FIRST MINUTE MAN

SECOND MINUTE MAN

DIMICK/PRESIDENTIAL AIDE

DOCTOR

VOICE 1

VOICE 2

VOICE 3

SERGEANT

PRISON GUARD

MAN MOVING PRESS 1 (*n/s*)

MAN MOVING PRESS 2 (*n/s*)

FARMER

**TIME**

May 1936 – mid-1938.

**NOTES**

A slash (/) indicates a point of interruption.

In Act One, Scene 5, simultaneous dialogue is used to indicate overlapping lines. Lines that do not appear simultaneously with other lines should be heard clearly by the audience, even if background dialogue/noise continues under.

# IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE

## PROLOGUE

\*\*Good evening ladies and gentlemen and welcome to [name of city where production is happening].

*The cast all says hi...the audience says hi back.*

\*\*A few small things before we begin.

\*\*First, please turn off your cell phones.

\*\*Next, those of you who go to the theatre have undoubtedly suffered through a lot of crowd scenes. You know, where a few actors are yelling and screaming trying to make up for the absence of a real crowd. Never works, right? So tonight, we're asking you to help us overcome that problem.

All we need from you are a few simple reactions.

Applause...

*An actor shows an "applause" sign.*

Cheers...

*An actor shows a "cheers" sign.*

And Boos.

*An actor shows a "boos" sign.*

When the time comes, we'll be holding up these signs to signal your cue.

Now I know this is [name of city where production is happening] so you guys are game. But why don't we give it a quick try...

*He does so.*

...Okay...applause. Good...cheers. Excellent. And boos. Wow! Great boos.

Of course, this is [name of city where performance is happening]  
...I should have known. Boos are like the native language here,  
right?

And full disclosure: You may be asked to cheer for a character  
whose opinions you may disagree with. Wildly disagree with. But  
we're all in this together, right? Are you with me?

*Audience: Yes!*

I said are you with me?!

*YES!*

...Beautiful.

\*\*And finally, the management of the theatre wants you to know  
that any resemblance of the events in the play to current events is  
purely coincidental. It is true that in 1936 there were race riots in  
our cities, a vast income gap between the rich and the poor,

\*\*A major drought in several states,

\*\*A wave of right-wing populism sweeping the country,

\*\*Millions of new immigrants,

\*\*And foreign wars creating global terror...

\*\*But that's where the similarities end.

\*\*We urge you to reserve judgment before making any hasty his-  
torical parallels.

\*\*And now, ladies and gentlemen, it is our great pleasure to present  
Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*.

## PART ONE

### ACT ONE

#### Scene 1

*May 1, 1936. Patriotic music. A meeting of the Rotary Club in Fort Beulah, Vermont. A small platform with a podium with chairs on either side. Seated nearby is Frank Tasbrough, president of the Rotary Club.*

\*\*May First, 1936. Fort Beulah, Vermont.

\*\*Six months before the presidential election.

\*\*Excitement rippled through Town Hall, the scene of this month's meeting of the Fort Beulah Rotary Club.

THE ACTOR PLAYING LORINDA. Among the audience was Lorinda Pike, whose political views differed from every other member of the Rotary Club, with the sole exception of...

THE ACTOR PLAYING DOREMUS. Doremus Jessup, editor and proprietor of Fort Beulah's only newspaper. There to report on the patriotic address of Brigadier General Herbert Y. Edgeways.

EDGEWAYS. We must be prepared to defend our shores against all the alien gangs of international racketeers that call themselves governments!

*Applause. Gimmitch takes the podium. Edgeways sits.*

THE ACTOR PLAYING DOREMUS. And the passionate ejaculations of that proud Daughter of the American Revolution, Mrs. Adelaide Tarr Gimmitch.

GIMMITCH. I tell you my friends, what this country needs is discipline!

THE ACTOR PLAYING DOREMUS. Mrs. Gimmitch was renowned

for a lifetime of gallant campaigning against women's suffrage and for having, during the Great War, kept the American soldiers entirely out of the French cafés by the clever trick of sending them ten thousand sets of dominoes.

GIMMITCH. Now this will shock you but I want you to listen to one woman who will tell you the unadulterated hard truth instead of a lot of sentimental taffy... Because I believe, down in my gullet, that what this country needs is to be in a real war again.

*She turns to the General, laughing, flirtatious for a 60-year-old woman.*

Come on, now, General, just among us Rotarians and Rotary Anns, 'fess up! Don't you think that when a country has gone so mad that the thrifty and industrious have to pay for the shiftless ne'er-dowells, then maybe, to save their lazy souls and get some iron into them, a war might be a good thing? Come on now, General!

*Clapping, crowd exhorts the General, who chuckles and stands.*

EDGEWAYS. Well, then! Since you folks are bound and determined to drag the secrets out of a poor soldier, I better confess that while I do abhor war, there are worse things. A state of so-called peace, in which labor organizations are riddled with insane notions out of anarchistic Red Russia! A state in which college professors, newspapermen, and notorious authors are secretly promulgating these same seditious attacks on the grand old Constitution! A state in which, as a result of being fed with these mental drugs, the People are flabby, cowardly, and lacking in the fierce pride of the warrior! No, such a state is far worse than war at its most monstrous!

*Shouts of support and applause. The General sits.*

GIMMITCH. Thank you, General, for speaking the truth. And the only candidate running for president daring to speak the truth, the only man who has the backbone to stand up to our enemies and can restore our country to greatness, is Senator Berzelius Windrip!

*More applause.*

LORINDA. (*Standing, angry.*) Look here, Mrs. Gimmitch, if you think / that—

TASBROUGH. You are out of order Mrs. Pike.

LORINDA. I want to register my / objection—

CROWD MEMBER 1. Sit down, Lorinda!

LORINDA. These people are using the election to provoke / people—

CROWD MEMBER 2. Save it for your bohemian friends!

LORINDA. She's stigmatizing the poor / to create a mob—

TASBROUGH. We are all familiar with your political opinions, Mrs. Pike. But it is my duty as chairman to remind you that it's Mrs. Gimmitch who has been invited to address us.

*“Hear, hear!” and “Sit down!”*

Please take your seat. Thank you, madam.

I'm so sorry, Mrs. Gimmitch. You were saying?

GIMMITCH. Thank you, Mr. Tasbrough.

*(Pointedly.)* And to all of you who believe in freedom of speech. There is good news, my friends. At this moment, Minute Men marching clubs made up of volunteers are springing up all over this country. Young Christians learning warlike skills, that they may help to rid our country of its undesirable elements. A new generation of American patriots, armed with the Sword and the Gospel, ready to reclaim the future and lead our nation towards its God-given destiny!

*Cheering, handshakes, drumming...the meeting breaks up, leaving Lorinda and Doremus on one side. Tasbrough, a businessman, and R.C. Crowley, a banker, approach them.*

## Scene 2

*Following directly from the previous scene.*

CROWLEY. What did you think of the General and Mrs. Gimmitch, Doremus?

DOREMUS. Highly successful, R.C.!

CROWLEY. *(Pleased.)* Really? How so?

DOREMUS. In the short span of an hour, they succeeded in releasing more gas into the atmosphere than at any other time in human history.

# IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE

by Sinclair Lewis  
adapted by Tony Taccone  
and Bennett S. Cohen

10M, 4W (doubling, flexible casting)

A cautionary dark satire about the fragility of democracy and how fascism can take hold even in the land of liberty, *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE* follows the ascent of a demagogue who becomes president of the United States by promising to return the country to greatness. Witnessing the new president's tyranny from the sidelines is a liberal, middle-class newspaper editor from Vermont who trusts the system will fix itself—until he ends up in a prison camp. Sinclair Lewis' eerily prescient 1935 novel gets a fresh update in this adaptation that examines what brings a citizenry to the point of sacrificing its own freedom and how a courageous few can prevail to overcome the fall.

*"...thrilling and grim... IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE is an argument for journalism as a basic pillar of democracy. ...The curious pronoun in Lewis's title, lacking an antecedent, may well refer to the rise of fascism in the United States. But a less literal reading of the title suggests that "it" is something more subtle: a collective apathy, born of ignorance, and a populace that can no longer make the kind of judgments that participatory democracy requires."*  
—**The New Yorker**

*"IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE [drives] relentlessly toward believable, shudder-worthy horrors."*  
—**East Bay Express**

*"...deeply relatable... harrowing... [IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE's] point [is] that demagogues flourish when thinking but complacent members of a society fail to rise up and act as a collective."*  
—**San Francisco Chronicle**

*"...a thought-provoking and effective reminder that democracies are fragile things."*  
—**SFist.com**

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