

# BUILDING THE WALL

BY

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★ First Edition

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DRAMATISTS  
PLAY SERVICE  
INC.

BUILDING THE WALL  
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BUILDING THE WALL was developed at The Lark, New York City.

## **CHARACTERS**

GLORIA

RICK

# BUILDING THE WALL

*Lights/Sound. A prison meeting room. El Paso, Texas. 2019. Two people stand facing one another, a heavy metal table between them. Gloria is an African-American woman in her 40s. Intelligent. Warm. Modestly dressed. Rick is a white man in his 40s. He wears an orange prison jumpsuit.*

GLORIA. You mind, you mind if I record? I'll also take notes but this allows me to be accurate.

*Rick doesn't respond. Gloria pulls a digital recorder from her bag and sets it up on the table.*

RICK. I imagine we're both being recorded right now.

*Gloria stops and glances around.*

GLORIA. Really?

RICK. And watched.

GLORIA. I think that's supposed to be for my safety.

RICK. Or mine. Kinda weird, when you think about it. They don't want me to kill myself so they can kill me. Are you worried about your safety?

*She studies him a moment.*

GLORIA. No.

RICK. But you're nervous?

GLORIA. Sure.

*Rick nods.*

RICK. I like that. That you're honest. That stood out in your letters.

GLORIA. I think if we're not honest, what's the point?

RICK. (*Nodding.*) I haven't met a lot of college professors before. Lawyers, yeah. Shrinks. But— You don't look like what I thought.

GLORIA. How is that? You mean Black.

RICK. I'm not allowed computer access so I couldn't look you up. I don't know what they think I'm going to do with a computer, you know, reach out to my huge fan base and incite a—

GLORIA. Is my race a problem for you?

*A moment.*

RICK. I never know what word to use. Black. African-American.

GLORIA. I like black. Is it a problem, Rick?

RICK. It doesn't matter to me. I'm not racist. I've lived and worked with all kinds of people.

GLORIA. Hispanic?

RICK. In Texas, are you kidding? You could throw a rock in any direction and you'd hit one.

*Beat.*

Unfortunate expression there.

GLORIA. Muslim?

RICK. Sure.

GLORIA. You have Muslim friends? Had Muslim friends?

RICK. I knew some but those people, they kinda stick together, you know.

GLORIA. But you had no personal animus against Muslims and Hispanics.

RICK. No.

GLORIA. And yet here you are.

RICK. Look, I'm not crazy, it was the situation. There was enormous pressure from the Brass and stuff just—

GLORIA. Rick, if you insist on repeating the same bullshit your lawyer gave the court then I am going to walk out of here and never come back. On the other hand, if you want to talk to me, one person to another, really talk to me about what happened and why, maybe help us all understand so that nobody else finds themselves in your situation, then we can do that. But you have to be honest with me. Can you do that? Can you just be honest?

*A moment. Gloria shrugs and starts to pack her things.*

RICK. OK. OK.

*Gloria stops and considers him.*

GLORIA. I want to hear your side, Rick, in your own words. That's why I'm here. If you're honest with me, I'll see that what you say is printed just like you say it. No filter. No editing. Your words.

*She glances at the door.*

They haven't given us a lot of time, Rick. And I don't honestly know if they'll let me come back after today.

*A moment.*

RICK. I don't, I don't have anybody to talk to in here.

GLORIA. You're in solitary, yes?

RICK. "For my own protection."

GLORIA. You sound skeptical.

*Rick shrugs.*

You think one of the other prisoners might try to harm you?

RICK. My experience has been in certain situations people tend to act in their own interests.

GLORIA. There's value in your death?

RICK. Well, the government certainly seems to think so.

GLORIA. There's been no decision yet.

RICK. If you believe that, you're not nearly as smart as you think you are.

*(Quietly.)* I'm not talking about the courts. Justice. I saw things. I know stuff that would make a lot of people look bad.

GLORIA. That's why it's important we talk now. That your story gets told now before it gets changed into something else. Distorted. Revised.

RICK. And why are *you* here, Professor? Out of your Ivory Tower. Purely for academic reasons? You're what, performing a social service? No thought for yourself? You didn't think, maybe, for just a second, about the possibility of a big book deal, future movie rights, awards, fame?

*A moment.*

GLORIA. I've thought about it, sure, but I can't say that's what drives me. I think this could be a book, yes. There's interest in you, certainly, in your story. I think it's very important. But maybe it's not a book, maybe it's an article. Or maybe at the end of the day I just go home and burn my notes.

RICK. In that case, what's the point in me talking to you?

*Beat.*

Why are you here?

*A moment.*

GLORIA. The first time I understood race in this country I was at a Fourth of July parade with my folks. They had put red, white, and blue ribbons in my hair and I was very proud of them. I was standing there on the corner, holding my mother's hand, my daddy had gone to get me a snow cone, and this policeman who was providing security looked over at me and smiled. I knew he was going to say something nice to me because that's what grown-ups did. And he leaned over and said to me very quietly, "Hello, little nigger, how are you doing today?" I was six.

*Beat.*

I think it's fair to say that most Black people don't spend a lot of time trying to understand racism so much as survive it. We're looking for the work-around, not the explanation. I'm a little bit different, maybe. I've thought a lot about that police officer. Was his racism so intrinsic to who he was that he wasn't even aware of it any longer? Or did he know exactly what he was doing and there was a special thrill in taking this Black child's racial innocence? I started in psychology and moved into sociology but where I wound up was history. I look at the continuum of events and try to sort out those moments of change where often it is a single individual's decision to act or not to act that sends history spinning in this direction or that. We're at one of those moments right now. You're at the heart of it. I can't imagine—I think it's important, I think it's *critical*, to understand *you*. Understand why you did what you did.

*Beat.*

RICK. I didn't talk at trial, the only reason I didn't talk at the trial



was because my lawyer said I shouldn't.

GLORIA. Self-incrimination.

RICK. Not that it obviously made any kind of difference to the jury but the worst part was me sitting there all those weeks, listening to the bullshit being said and not able to respond.

GLORIA. So you want to clear the record. I get it. We can do that.

*A moment.*

RICK. Yeah. OK. So. It wasn't about race.

GLORIA. What was it about?

*Rick looks away; seems uncomfortable.*

Why don't you start by telling me about yourself, your family, growing up. Austin, right?

RICK. Born, yeah, but we moved a lot.

GLORIA. Why was that?

RICK. Military brat. Dad was Air Force.

GLORIA. Were you close?

RICK. *(Laughs.)* My dad? I don't think he was too big on family. He told me I was a mistake. On more than one occasion. Mostly I tried to stay out of his way.

GLORIA. He was abusive?

RICK. Well, that would be awfully convenient, wouldn't it? Wrap this whole thing up in a nice tidy bow.

GLORIA. He never hit you?

RICK. Sure, of course he did. Rung my bell good a couple of times. Nothing wrong with that. Discipline. You know, "Spare the rod."

GLORIA. Religious household?

RICK. My mom was a big believer. My dad, not so much. More of the Church of Budweiser.

GLORIA. He drank?

RICK. *(Flatly.)* This is Texas.

GLORIA. He had a problem?

RICK. Not when he was drinking! He liked a cold one at the end of the day; take the edge off. Or two or three. Not so different from

# BUILDING THE WALL

by Robert Schenkkan

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On January 20, 2017, Donald J. Trump was sworn in as the 45th president of the United States. Over the next sixteen months, events would unravel that test every American's strength of character: executive actions, an immigration round-up of unprecedented scale, and a declaration of martial law. Rick finds himself caught up as the frontman of the new administration's edicts and loses his humanity. In a play that recalls George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the Nazi regime, BUILDING THE WALL is a terrifying and gripping exploration of what happens if we let fear win.

**Also by Robert Schenkkan**

ALL THE WAY  
THE GREAT SOCIETY  
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