



ACTUALLY

BY

ANNA ZIEGLER



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.



ACTUALLY
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ACTUALLY was originally produced in a co-production between Geffen Playhouse (Randall Arney, Artistic Director) and Williamstown Theatre Festival (Mandy Greenfield, Artistic Director). Opening night at Geffen Playhouse was on May 10, 2017. It was directed by Tyne Rafaeli, the scenic design was by Tim Mackabee, the costume design was by Caitlin Ward, the lighting design was by Lap Chi Chu, the sound design was by Vincent Olivieri, and the stage manager was Liz Brohm. The cast was as follows:

AMBER Samantha Ressler
TOM Jerry MacKinnon

Opening night at Williamstown Theatre Festival was on August 12, 2017. It was directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz, the scenic design was by Adam Rigg, the costume design was by Paloma Young, the lighting design was by Ben Stanton, the sound design was by Jane Shaw, and the stage manager was Dane Urban. The cast was as follows:

AMBER Alexandra Socha
TOM Joshua Boone

ACTUALLY was originally produced in New York City by the Manhattan Theatre Club (Lynne Meadow, Artistic Director; Barry Grove, Executive Producer), with an opening night on November 14, 2017. It was directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz, the scenic design was by Adam Rigg, the costume design was by Paloma Young, the lighting design was by Yi Zhao, the sound design was by Jane Shaw, and the stage manager was Dane Urban. The cast was as follows:

AMBER Alexandra Socha
TOM Joshua Boone

ACTUALLY was developed/written in part at the Sallie B. Goodman Retreat at McCarter Theatre Center.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As I write this note, on September 27th, 2017, the current administration in the United States has just issued interim guidance that undoes or complicates some of the previous administration's mandates around the implementation of Title IX as it relates to cases of sexual misconduct on college campuses. One of these new measures has to do with the standard of proof used to determine the outcome of these cases; while the Obama administration stipulated that this standard should be “preponderance of the evidence” (otherwise known as “fifty percent plus a feather”) the current administration has suggested that schools have more leeway to decide what standard they deem appropriate. Now universities can adopt a “clear and convincing” standard, if they so choose, but preponderance of the evidence is still permissible (and in fact will likely continue to be used much of the time since it was also suggested that the same standard be applied to all campus misconduct cases—and many, if not most, colleges use preponderance of the evidence when it comes to those other kinds of cases). When I wrote this play, preponderance of the evidence was the norm. Schools risked serious repercussions if they didn't uphold the various measures set out in the “Dear Colleague” letter penned in 2011 by the Education Department under President Obama.

The backdrop against which the play was written and the backdrop against which you are reading it (whenever you are reading it) is both hugely important and also, from my point of view, beside the point. The play, to me, not only holds up a mirror to a certain moment in time (2015 or 2016, probably) but also hopefully speaks to a larger and more timeless question about who we are as men and as women and what forces drive our actions. It looks at how difficult it can be to determine what happened in a bed between two real people capable of all that humans are capable of—obfuscating, deceiving themselves, not understanding, not wanting to be impolite or to embarrass themselves, of letting need or insecurity take precedence over empathy. It asks that you consider whether “good” people can make bad mistakes—or worse. And if *Actually* is making any kind of statement, it is that one, about the quality and complications of

our souls. What standard of proof is used to determine the outcome of the case is not nearly as important to me as the human question at the heart of the play.

So even if you are reading this in 2025—or 2050, and colleges are no longer handling these kinds of cases (or if there are no more colleges!)—I'd like to think the story will still resonate. Only time will tell.

CHARACTERS

AMBER, early – mid 20s, high-strung, talkative, charmingly neurotic. She does not present as insecure. She is Jewish.

TOM, early – mid 20s, appealing and confident with some swagger that conceals a deeper vulnerability. He is African-American.

A Note on the Playing of the Characters

As Amber and Tom, you should address the audience as though it is composed of your best friends, confidantes with whom you feel completely comfortable, relaxed and open. This is key because you are not, in fact, defending yourselves. What these characters truly want is to understand their role, or complicity, in what happened, and to learn how events from earlier in their lives might have shaped them in such a way that this night became, in some sense, inevitable. Tom and Amber therefore need to reveal every detail, every clue, everything they can think of that might have even a shred of relevance, so that, through these revelations, each can come to an informed conclusion about why what happened happened—even if it means that these characters come to see themselves as “guilty” in some way. Amber and Tom are not here to proclaim their innocence; they are interested in truth, even if the truth is that the truth is not simple, is not just one thing.

One further note, along the same lines: In playing these characters, use anger sparingly. Tom and Amber are not as furious about the injustice of this experience as they are baffled by and trying to understand it. So a spirit of inquiry pervades. These are cheerful, engaged storytellers. This is not to neuter the characters of emotion or their stakes in their own story, but an admonition to use strong emotion economically, to remember that the audience is a friend with whom each character can be his/her most relaxed self.

A Note on the Elisions in the Text

There are a number of instances where the end of one character's line overlaps with the beginning of the next character's line. For instance, on page 40, "I didn't even try" for Amber runs into "Try to remember" for Tom, "try" being the overlapping word. There is no way (that I could find) for punctuation to match how both characters should understand the sense of the line, so sometimes the word or phrase will look like the end of the sentence, and sometimes the start of one. This is a bit arbitrary. Do your best not to read someone else's punctuation as your own. Speak in clear unison on the overlapping word or phrase. Use these moments as reminders to you and the audience that as far apart as these characters are, they also share a great deal.

A slash (/) in a character's line indicates the next character should begin speaking at this point.

*“And we are put on this earth a little space that we might learn
to bear the beams of love.”*

—William Blake

ACTUALLY

Lights up on a college party. Princeton. Two students, freshmen—Amber and Tom—are outside on the quad. A first date. Sort of. They're drinking. A lot.

AMBER. So I was reading tonight in our psych book about the pratfall effect, and it's actually really interesting: It's about how a person's attractiveness increases or decreases after he or she makes a mistake. So a highly competent person, like, say, a celebrity, would be *more* likable after committing a blunder, while the opposite would be true if—

TOM. God, do you ever stop talking?

AMBER. What?

TOM. *(With a small smile.)* Just stop talking.

AMBER. Okay.

TOM. I'm gonna kiss you now.

AMBER. Oh.

Okay.

They do. Amber's not sure what to do with her hand so it hovers awkwardly over Tom's shoulder, not touching it.

Let's play a game. Let's play Two Truths and a Lie.

TOM. *(Emphatic.)* Um. No.

AMBER. Come on.

TOM. Okay. I have two truths for you...I hate games and I hate that game.

AMBER. But you'll play it.

TOM. And why would I do that?

AMBER. If you wanna sleep with me tonight, for one thing.

TOM. *(Without missing a beat.)* Who goes first?

A sharp shift in tone. Amber and Tom abruptly turn to face the audience.

AMBER. So.

TOM. *(To the audience.)* In some ways I've been on trial my entire life.

AMBER. It wasn't an actual trial. It was a hearing but it felt like a trial. We sat across from each other. At these long wooden tables. I felt like I was a character in *The Crucible*. Maybe because our "trial" was in a classroom where I'd happened to read *The Crucible* earlier that semester.

TOM. We sat across from each other.

AMBER. The room was very cold. I had to wear *two* layers. The cardigan I carry with me because I am *always* cold but also my jacket. *Inside.*

TOM. I couldn't believe how cold this girl got. She'd have goose bumps like sitting outside on a seventy-five-degree day.

An abrupt shift back to each other, and into a continuation of the original scene.

AMBER. Okay my first truth is: I thought I'd fall in love on my first day of college.

TOM. *(That's weird.)* First day?

AMBER. *(She speaks very fast.)* Well, my parents did. My dad was my mom's professor in a class called History of the American South and she liked his accent and in a sort of twisted way that he was old enough to be her father and I guess he liked being able to lord it over her and probably her looks—my mom was very attractive back then—because then they were together.

TOM. That was allowed back then?

AMBER. You don't even know if anything I just said was true.

TOM. Okay. Fair point.

AMBER. Second one: I have never excelled at any sport.

TOM. But you're on the squash team.

AMBER. Third one: I have no feelings for you whatsoever.

Tom stares at her.

So now you guess.

TOM. No, I know. I'm thinking.

AMBER. Lay out your thought process.

TOM. Well, I'm an arrogant bastard so I think you do like me... And that shit about your parents is either too detailed to be a lie or so detailed it's the obvious lie.

AMBER. Hm. Interesting.

TOM. You're on a team here so I think you've excelled at sports. And I'm way confident you're into me—

AMBER. So you've said.

TOM. But—I'll go with the lie is about your parents.

AMBER. The lie was not about my parents.

TOM. Then you're no good at sports.

AMBER. I'm no good at sports.

TOM. How the hell did you get on the squash team?

AMBER. *Anyone* can get on the squash team.

TOM. Is that right.

AMBER. I mean, you don't have to be great. You can be good, or just okay. It's a great way to help you get into college. Just like being black.

TOM. (*Incredulous and amused.*) Um. You know you can't say that. Right?

AMBER. But it's not a micro-aggression or anything.

TOM. 'Cause it's like a *macro*-aggression.

AMBER. (*Unapologetic, matter-of-fact.*) Come on. Everyone has things that help them get in. I'm not saying either of us is remotely unqualified to be here.

TOM. (*In disbelief.*) Wow. Okay.

AMBER. No, I'm sure you're super smart. You had to beat out a shit ton of other black kids to get in. I just had to beat out some other mediocre squash players.

TOM. You think my only competition was other black kids?

AMBER. Mainly, yeah. We all fill some stupid niche, which reduces us to something much less than what we are, but that's the way it

goes. Has it been very hard for you, being black?

TOM. (*Laughing.*) God, you really are, like...a piece of work.

AMBER. But has it?

Another sharp turn out to the audience.

See it became, almost immediately, “the matter of Anthony dash Cohen.” (*Bashfully.*) Which I couldn’t help thinking looked like what our last name would be if we got married...

TOM. I get an email from the Office of the Vice Provost of Institutional Equity and Diversity. It’s from some dude named Leslie. He made it clear that he was a dude by saying “because the name can be ambiguous I want to make you aware that I am a man.” I’m told to come into the office at my very earliest convenience.

AMBER. What happened was I told Heather who told our RA Olivia who told whoever she told.

TOM. I honestly thought maybe this was about my being an asshole for not joining the Black Student Union.

AMBER. But I didn’t know Heather would tell anyone. She just came into my room and was like “Amber. People are saying you were *topless* at Cap last night. What the fuck. Were you super wasted?” And I’m like “that’s the least of it. I mean, Thomas Anthony practically raped me.” ...And she looked at me with these wide eyes, like she was kind of seeing me for the first time...and I knew immediately that I’d said something I couldn’t take back.

TOM. So I’m sitting across from Leslie, and the guy has an enormous beard. Part of me wonders if maybe there *is* a woman behind there.

AMBER. And so I tell her what happened. Or what I can remember. But I don’t tell Heather everything. I mean, why should *Heather* know everything?

TOM. And he’s like “I assume you know why you’re here” and I’m like “enlighten me, Leslie” not realizing I shouldn’t be, like, a dick right now. And he squints his eyes at me like he can’t believe what he’s hearing.

Okay, so even though my mom was always like “don’t give anyone any reason to write you off” I’m still not great at gauging when I really should be polite. Like in eleventh grade I once said to the

school psychologist: “Who’s *your* shrink, shrink?”

I mean, I had this one weird thing and my high school sent me into therapy. What’s that all about?

AMBER. So I just say to Heather that things went pretty far and she’s like but that’s not rape and I’m like I know that Heather. What might have maybe constituted something approaching sex without my one hundred percent consent was that he got a tiny bit rough with me and at first I was into it but then I wasn’t into it anymore and I stood up and was like “actually, um” but he pulled me back and kept going. And then she says, all horrified, “and all you said was ‘actually’?” and I’m like yeah. And she’s like “but that’s not no” and I’m like I know that, Heather—I am aware that two different words in the English language are not the same word... Also, I was just so so drunk.

Abrupt shift back to the scene.

TOM. Okay, so I guess I’ll say...in the spirit of truth...

AMBER. Or maybe a lie.

TOM. If I can, one day I’d like to play piano professionally. Like in a symphony. Or jazz piano. Or, like, the orchestra pit of *Hamilton* / or something.

AMBER. Oh god I love that show.

TOM. (*Impressed.*) You saw it??

AMBER. No!!

TOM. Okay... The second one is...my mom is the love of my life.

AMBER. Aw. That’s sweet. That better not be a lie or you’re kind of deranged.

TOM. The third one is...

I feel most out of place when people would assume I feel most comfortable.

AMBER. Like when?

TOM. You don’t even know if that one’s true.

AMBER. (*Kind, knowing.*) I know it’s true... The question is which of the other two is the lie.

TOM. Oh fuck.

ACTUALLY

by Anna Ziegler

1M, 1W

Amber and Tom, finding their way as freshmen at Princeton, spend a night together that alters the course of their lives. They agree on the drinking, they agree on the attraction, but consent is foggy, and if unspoken, can it be called consent? With lyricism and wit, ACTUALLY investigates gender and race politics, our crippling desire to fit in, and the three sides to every story.

"...[A] taut, devastating play... a smart, profoundly painful exploration of [a] murky, treacherous sexual culture... ACTUALLY's great strength, and its great heartbreak, is that it allows us to see both Amber and Tom so fully. ...ACTUALLY's wit and intelligence are part of what makes the complex darkness at its center hit so hard. There is brightness in this play, and in these people, and to see its sparks overwhelmed by such fearful and familiar shadows is shattering. In moments, it's even revelatory." —**New York Magazine**

"Gripping... the characters are beautifully rendered and complex... [ACTUALLY is] destined to trigger discussion." —**Los Angeles Times**

"Ziegler's riveting drama...creates a portrait of a generation struggling to keep its balance... with consummate skill, the playwright assembles [an] intricate jigsaw puzzle..." —**The Boston Globe**

"[A] psychologically complex and intentionally frustrating two-person drama... Ziegler's meticulously detailed script is more than occasionally funny, despite its serious themes." —**Time Out New York**

"...smart and penetrating... a top-notch narrative that travels beyond the hot-button issue of date rape it tackles. The characters...are as finely etched as in a good novel, and as satisfying." —**LA Weekly**

"Crafted with compassion, intelligence and insight...Ziegler writes dialogue that is equal parts humor and poignancy... [ACTUALLY] is not to be missed." —**TheaterMania.com**

Also by Anna Ziegler

BOY

A DELICATE SHIP

PHOTOGRAPH 51

and others

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