

# CARDINAL

BY GREG PIERCE



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CARDINAL  
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*For Željko Ivanek*

The New York premiere of *CARDINAL* was produced by Second Stage Theater (Carole Rothman, Artistic Director; Casey Reitz, Executive Director) on January 30, 2018. It was directed by Kate Whoriskey, the scenic design was by Derek McLane, the costume design was by Jennifer Moeller, the lighting design was by Amith Chandrashaker, the sound design was by Leah Gelpe, the fight direction was by J. David Brimmer, and the production stage manager was Donald Fried. The cast was as follows:

LYDIA LENSKY .....	Anna Chlumsky
JEFF TORM .....	Adam Pally
NANCY PRENCHEL .....	Becky Ann Baker
NAT PRENCHEL .....	Alex Hurt
LI-WEI CHEN .....	Stephen Park
JASON CHEN .....	Eugene Young

*CARDINAL* was originally commissioned by Second Stage Theater with support from Benjamin Maurice Rosen.

## **CHARACTERS**

LYDIA LENSKY: 30s

JEFF TORM: A few years older than Lydia, mayor

NANCY PRENCHEL: 60s, owner of Bread & Buttons Bakery

NAT PRENCHEL: 40s, Nancy's son, baker at Bread & Buttons Bakery

LI-WEI CHEN: 50s, entrepreneur, father

JASON CHEN: 30s, Li-Wei's son, entrepreneur-in-training

## **PLACE**

Various locations around a small, depressed, Rust Belt city in upstate New York.

And an office on Mott Street, Chinatown, New York City.

## **TIME**

Spring into summer.

Scene 1: The Mayor's Office  
Scene 2: The High School Gymnasium  
Scene 3: Bread & Buttons Bakery  
Scene 4: Jeff's Bedroom  
Scene 5: An Office in Chinatown  
Scene 6: Bread & Buttons Bakery  
Scene 7: Jeff's Bedroom  
Scene 8: An Office in Chinatown  
Scene 9: Nancy and Nat's Kitchen  
Scene 10: The Factory  
Scene 11: The Mayor's Office  
Scene 12: Metal Ghost Gift Shop and Bakery  
Scene 13: A Hallway in Brindle Hospital / The Waterfront

## NOTES

... means the line trails off

— means an interruption

// means the point at which the following line begins

Dialogue in brackets should be unspoken. Example:

JEFF. I didn't know what was gonna happen, Mom, I was just— [trying to help]

*If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading.*

—Lao Tzu

# CARDINAL

## Scene 1: The Mayor's Office. A spring afternoon.

*The office looks out over the city's decrepit waterfront. Jeff, the mayor, sits at his desk which is cluttered with papers, files, a gold-plastic fish trophy, a dying plant, and a half-empty cup of brownish-green juice. Lydia sits across from him, her Brooklyn-chic style in sharp contrast with his conservative rumple. Lydia is confident and casual with Jeff, occasionally picking at him as though he were her little brother. Jeff is staring at her, trying to wrap his mind around the idea she's just proposed.*

JEFF. Red?

LYDIA. Yeah.

JEFF. The whole city?

LYDIA. Just downtown. Six-block radius.

JEFF. Red.

LYDIA. Yeah.

JEFF. Why red?

LYDIA. It's sexy.

JEFF. *(Needing a better answer.)* OK...?

LYDIA. We're trying to *entice* people to move here, Jeffrey.

JEFF. "Jeff?"

LYDIA. So...red. *(Re: the trophy.)* What'd you win this for, biggest fish?

JEFF. Most fish.

LYDIA. In what, an hour?

JEFF. A day.

LYDIA. How many fish?



JEFF. I don't remember.

*Beat.*

LYDIA. I find that hard to believe.

JEFF. Five.

LYDIA. That doesn't sound like a lot of fish, Jeff.

JEFF. I was nine.

LYDIA. You have a trophy from when you were nine *on display*?

JEFF. It's good to see you, Lydia.

LYDIA. You too. So what do you think of my idea?

JEFF. You want me to literally "paint the town red."

LYDIA. Just downtown. But it has to be everything you see when you walk down Main Street. That's the only way we'll get the effect.

JEFF. Of...?

LYDIA. ...Of feeling like we're nowhere else in America.

JEFF. (*Trying to understand.*) ...Because it's all red.

LYDIA. Oh my god, Jeffrey—

JEFF. —I'm sorry! The idea's pretty out-there and I'm not a very visual person.

LYDIA. (*Re: his outfit.*) I can tell.

JEFF. What's wrong with this?

LYDIA. Nothing, you're a hot mayor, but your town is dying and we need to do something drastic. And this is it. (*Jeff takes a slurp of his vegetable juice as he thinks.*) Are you a health nut now?

JEFF. No.

LYDIA. Good. All I remember you and my sister eating is pizza.

JEFF. (*Skipping over that.*) Listen, I think it's awesome that you're thinking big to help out your hometown // but I've already got some big ideas in the works and I need to give 'em a shot before I go drastic.

LYDIA. Thanks. [for that condescending compliment] (*Then, when he's finished.*) Like what?

JEFF. Uh...for one, huge tax breaks to businesses who wanna relocate here.

LYDIA. OK...though tax breaks are like reason number thirty-five why businesses choose to relocate.

JEFF. We just haven't been very effective at getting the word out yet.

LYDIA. Giving huge tax breaks is like saying, (*As though addressing the room.*) "It's true, I live in a shitty place. But won't you join me?"

JEFF. (*Amused.*) I disagree.

LYDIA. What else ya got?

JEFF. I didn't realize I was gonna have to sell you on my initiatives.

LYDIA. You don't, I'm just curious.

*Beat.*

JEFF. We have some beautification plans.

LYDIA. Like?

JEFF. Developing the waterfront.

LYDIA. (*Skeptical.*) OK...

JEFF. That's why I got elected. I proposed we follow Buffalo, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland's leads and develop a safe and beautiful waterfront as a focal point for new shops, restaurants, and community activities.

LYDIA. Why'd you just turn into a Chamber of Commerce video? You finger-banged my sister in our Corolla, // you don't need to break out the mayor jargon with me.

JEFF. Oh my god. A little quieter please.

LYDIA. (*Looking around.*) What, it's not like you have a staff.

JEFF. Janine's on her lunch break.

LYDIA. (*Shocked.*) Janine Tibbles *works* for you?

JEFF. Yeah.

LYDIA. I hated that skank. Tell her I say hi.

JEFF. Will do.

LYDIA. We don't have a waterfront, Jeff, we have a pond that's basically a petri dish—

JEFF. (*This hits a nerve.*) —Technically it's a lake since it has a small aphotic zone where sunlight can't reach the bottom—

LYDIA. —It's a leech festival—

JEFF. —Right! Which is why I'm raising money to have it stocked

with red-eared sunfish which eat *thousands* of leeches per day...then we'll build a proper boardwalk and do something about the smell.

*Beat. Lydia stares at him. Why am I not getting through to you?*

LYDIA. I drove by Ms. Blanchard's old house. Marcy and I used to take piano there.

JEFF. So did I. So did my brother.

LYDIA. There were garbage bags over the windows. And twitchy people lined up across the back porch.

JEFF. (*I'm not disagreeing.*) It's sad.

LYDIA. Every house on Pear Street's either boarded up or fire-bombed, // I didn't feel safe slowing down let alone getting out of my car.

JEFF. Well... [not "fire-bombed"] (*Then, when she's finished.*) That seems excessive.

LYDIA. None of the streetlights work uptown—it's pitch-black at night.

JEFF. That's a half-million dollar repair job.

LYDIA. The population's dropped *fifty percent* since // we grew up.

JEFF. (*Tired of repeating this.*) That figure's not accurate.

LYDIA. Five-O. We're hemorrhaging people.

JEFF. I like how you're using "we." Does this mean you're moving back?

LYDIA. If I can help, yes. I know a few things about urban development, I spent enough of my dad's money studying it.

JEFF. You're staying with your folks?

LYDIA. Yup.

JEFF. I heard you moved to Brooklyn after college?

LYDIA. (*The last thing she wants to discuss.*) Yup, so in terms of my plan...

JEFF. (*Hesitant to bring this up.*) Don't take this the wrong way, Lydia, but some people aren't gonna wanna hear a new idea from you.

LYDIA. Oh my god, I was in *high school*—they can get over it. They're

gonna go for this, Jeff—just call me the meeting and let me explain it. They'll eat it hook, line, and sinker. *(Re: the trophy.)* I'm just tryin' to speak your language.

JEFF. Thanks. I just...

*Beat.*

LYDIA. What?

JEFF. You're right, the situation here is dire. That's why I can't be messing around with paint.

LYDIA. That's why you *have to*. *(Getting progressively excited.)* Jeff, we're a small city with no anchor like a university or hospital which means we're gonna die unless we do something huge. We're in the branding era, which sucks, but it means the only way to survive is to get your town into books like *A Thousand Places to See Before You Kill Yourself*.

JEFF. Is that the title?

LYDIA. And then we can play around with boardwalks. But first we gotta go big.

*Lydia whips out a paint sample and puts it in his hand.*

JEFF. *(Reading.)* "Cardinal"?

LYDIA. Archer Paints will cut us a deal if we buy fourteen thousand gallons. Call me the meeting.

*She knows he will. Jeff's anxiety spikes. She stands up and faces out. Lights change and we are in...*

# CARDINAL

by Greg Pierce

4 men, 2 women

Paint it red. So begins Lydia's wild idea to invigorate her Rust Belt town. But when a whip-smart entrepreneur co-opts her scheme, a precarious rivalry is born. A battle for the town's soul ensues, causing its obsessive mayor, its defiant matriarch, and the rest of its residents to question who they are and where they're headed.

*"...whimsical... [Pierce] is not just satirizing small town America, with its hopeless reinvention schemes and hapless part-time politicians. He's after something larger about the unintended consequences of capitalism on both individuals and societies: meant to be a cure-all, it is too often a comeuppance."*

—The New York Times

*"CARDINAL, Greg Pierce's...take on urban decay and gentrification, offers a breezy but no less pointed version of the tragedy and melodrama in plays like Bruce Norris' Clybourne Park and Lynn Nottage's Sweat. ...[It] also offers...juicy roles in the push-me, pull-you vein of romantic comedies like Northern Exposure. A dark vein of cynicism churns Pierce's blood, however... For most of the evening, it's tough love with a cackle."*

—Deadline.com

Also by Greg Pierce

HER REQUIEM

SLOWGIRL

THE WIND-UP BIRD CHRONICLE

(Earnhart)

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