

OUR WOKE TOWN

by Joe Hanrahan

Setting: An Audition Room; table, two chairs, extra chair for actress

Characters:

Beverly	A Producer
Jeffrey	A Director
ZhlenHa-a-a	An Actress

Jeffrey enters quickly, followed by Beverly

BEVERLY: JEFFREY! Our audition notice said, specifically, Diverse Casting, ALL ethnicities...

JEFFREY: I don't care WHAT it said...

BEVERLY: JEFFREY! We have a place in this...an obligation to...to this theatre community. And to the world! And beyond! (BEVERLY tries to get a laugh out of him.) Our company supports diverse and gender-free colorblind casting...

JEFFREY: Bev, we're doing "Our Town." What does Gender Free have to do with "Our Town"? In "Our Town" I don't think the characters even know what a gender is!

BEVERLY: Exactly. That's why it's the perfect play to do now, today! A small community, with history and tradition, yes, but free from racism, from the shackles of sexism and stereotyping...

JEFFREY: Shackles of sexism? Grovers Corners is a...a small town...Americana..."OUR Town"...from an America a hundred years ago. There's families in the play; there's a milkman, for God's sake...

BEVERLY: MilkMAN...There's the Stage Manager...

JEFFREY: The Stage Manager. Yes. We talked about this, I don't care if the Stage Manager is a man or a woman, or whoever, whoever's right.

(pause)

BEVERLY: Then why won't you read THIS actress?

JEFFREY: I'm open to men, women, transgender, actors of color, actors with disabilities, actors who've never acted, but there is...there is...a...a nod we have to give to the time, the place of this script...

BEVERLY: Then why don't you give a nod to the changes sweeping our society right now!

JEFFREY: Well, there wasn't much anything sweeping anywhere when "Our Town"...

BEVERLY: Give me a break! "small town..."our town"...America a hundred years ago." We both know you're going to take this well-made, classic piece of theatre and twist it and turn it

and stick it inside out until nobody, nobody, including the actors, knows what's going on. It's going to be called "Our Town", but it's going to be your town.

JEFFREY: We are a postmodern theatre company. Talk about shackles, we are not shackled to...to...things like...conventional plot...simple narrative...feeding a script like pablum to a passive audience...

BEVERLY: Then why are we shackled to old-fashioned casting?

JEFFREY: We are not! We are not. WE...are committed to exploring the human condition, through theatrical techniques which enable...actors...and audiences to look beyond their everyday...

BEVERLY: Ok. OK. I know the mission statement.

(letting off steam pause)

BEVERLY: Just read this actress. Puh-le-e-e-s-e. She came out for auditi...

JEFFREY: I...It...it...I just don't know if it fits...

BEVERLY: If she fits! She! We advertised open auditions. And it takes a lot of courage for anyone to audition, in any circumstance.

JEFFREY: There are a lot of people waiting to read out there...

BEVERLY: Then stop wasting time with this stupid argument.

JEFFREY: You may be the producer, but I'm the director of this play and...

BEVERLY: Read this actress!

JEFFREY: Ok, Ok...Ok.

BEVERLY: Just read this actress.

(getting your breath pause)

JEFFREY: Is...it...she...ready?

BEVERLY: By this time, I would hope so. I'll bring her in.

(BEVERLY leaves. JEFFREY stews for a moment, picks up and drops a script on the table, paces, then sits at the table. BEVERLY returns with ZLENHA-A-A. ZLENHA-A-A wears an odd combination of clothing. She walks a little differently. She stands a little differently. She will speak a little differently. And she possesses a perpetual clear-eyed smile.)

BEVERLY: And here we are. And here she is. And here's her resume.

(BEVERLY hands an unusually thick stack of papers to JEFFREY. He pages through a bit of it.)

JEFFREY: Mmm...mmm-mmh...uh, does this have what you had for breakfast this morning?

(BEVERLY shoots a scolding look at JEFFREY.)

ZLENHA-A-A: Breakfast. The most important meal of the day. (ZLENHA-A looks from JEFFREY to BEVERLY, and seems pleased at the her response. JEFFREY and BEVERLY stare for a second.)

JEFFREY: Uh-huh. So, it's uh...your name is...Z...Z...Zlen...uh, Ha...A. A. ZlenHa-A-A.

ZLENHA-A-A: The A is silent.

JEFFREY: Which one?...never mind...pronounced, then, ZlenHa-A?

ZLENHA-A-A: That's close.

JEFFREY: Good. Can I call you something else? Uh, Za...ZZ Top...or...Z-Dog or...

(BEVERLY elbows him, shoots him another look.)

JEFFREY: OK. OK, uh...and, so, you're from...you're...you're...you've come from...uh...?

ZLENHA-A-A: Mars.

JEFFREY: Mars. (looks at BEVERLY.) The planet Mars. And...how long have you been here?

ZLENHA-A-A: (looking around) One hour.

JEFFREY: No, I meant...

ZLENHA-A-A: In your time.

JEFFREY: I meant, when did you come to...ah, come to Earth...?

ZLENHA-A-A: 4 months ago. In your time.

JEFFREY: OK. Um, and you've done...so much work...on Mars. (paging through voluminous resume) How long have you been acting?

ZLENHA-A-A: In your time?

JEFFREY: Never mind. But you've done...now...how many shows?

ZLENHA-A-A: (pauses) 824.

BEVERLY: Whoa...

ZLENHA-A-A: Not counting revivals.

JEFFREY: Ah, sure. So theatre's big on Mars, uh?

ZLENHA-A-A: Yes. Everyone goes to the theatre at least once a week. In our weeks. Even theatre people go to the theatre on Mars...(JEFFREY and BEVERLY exchange a look, ZLENHA-A-A misinterprets)...I know I'm not very experienced...

JEFFREY: Uh...

ZLENHA-A-A: ...in your world. But when I'm not in a show, I read. I practice.

JEFFREY: These shows...

ZLENHA-A-A: And I'm been reading the playwrights of Earth. I've read all of Thornton Wilder...

JEFFREY: All of him...?

ZLENHA-A-A: And Eugene O'Neill. Anton Chekhov. Arthur Miller. Euripides. Lillian Hellman. Samuel Beckett. Caryl Churchill. August Wilson. Diane Aberdeen...

JEFFREY: All of them...You've read...Wait, who's Diane Aberdeen?

ZLENHA-A-A: She's just written one script. Produced in her country, South Africa. It's brilliant. There was this thing called Apartheid...

JEFFREY: Yeah, I've heard of that. (to BEVERLY) Would you check on Diane Aberdeen? Get a script. (To ZLENHA-A-A) So, these shows you did...on Mars...

ZLENHA-A-A: Some of them were short plays.

JEFFREY: I'm not going to ask how short...in my time...

BEVERLY: (giving JEFFREY another look.) Zlen...uh...What's your favorite role?

ZLENHA-A-A: (a bit shyly) Oh. That would be Ooonsanda-a.

BEVERLY: Ooonsanda-a...?

ZLENHA-A-A: From Gundee-mahl's "Tanloonee-oo and Ooonsanda-a." The classic love story.

(JEFFREY and BEVERLY look at each other.)

ZLENHA-A-A: But I love all of Gundee-mahl's work.

JEFFREY: Gun..dee...

ZLENHA-A-A: Gundee-mahl. The Shakespeare of Mars.

JEFFREY: OK. Good. Good. And you want to read for “Our Town.”

ZLENHA-A-A: “Our Town.” A metatheatrical three-act play by Thornton Wilder, telling the story of the fictional Earth town of Grovers Corners, between 1901 and 1913, through the everyday lives of its citizens.

JEFFREY: Yes. And...

ZLENHA-A-A: It’s so beautiful.

JEFFREY: Yes. And you’re reading for...

ZLENHA-A-A: Emily.

JEFFREY: Emily. Mmm-mm. Now, ZlenHa-a...I give this speech to every actor who auditions for us...we are a postmodern theatre company. We’re not going to be doing your grandmother’s “Our Town”...

ZLENHA-A-A: You know my grandmothers?

JEFFREY: No, I...

ZLENHA-A-A: Which...I have 157 grandmothers. ..156. One...just...evolved.

JEFFREY: Uh, She, uh...she...uh, sorry...?

ZLENHA-A-A: Why?

JEFFREY: What I...What I mean to say is that we are known for taking classics like “Our Town” and disassembling them, tearing them apart, and then reassembling them to give a true post-modern view of..

ZLENHA-A-A: Disassembling...”Our Town”? (ZLENHA-A-A’s truly radiant visage is replaced instantly by something just as truly quizzical. BEVERLY gives a pointed look to JEFFREY.)

(pause)

BEVERLY: Don’t you worry about that now. We’re just going to have you read. (turns back to JEFFREY) Right?

JEFFREY: Right. So, you have Emily’s sides...?

ZLENHA-A-A: It’s in my memory.

JEFFREY: You memorized the sides, good...

ZLENHA-A-A: “Our Town.”

(pause)

JEFFREY: You memorized the play...? The whole play...?

ZLENHA-A-A: Yes. And all of Wilder's work. Plus O'Neill, Chekhov, Miller, Euripides...

JEFFREY: OK, OK. (face in hands) OK. Let's just...do this. Let's...we have a lot of people...

BEVERLY: ZlenHa-A, would you...mind stepping out for a moment, uh, go over...the Emily sides once more...and we'll bring you back shortly. In our time. OK?

ZLENHA-A-A: Yes.

(ZLENHA-A-A exits.)

BEVERLY: So-o-o-o...

JEFFREY: So, you want to read her, let's get it over with...

BEVERLY: No. Because you just want to get it over with. She has the whole script memorized! The whole script. She has a tremendous amount of experience. On her planet or ours! And she's a lovely girl. An Emily-type, perhaps?

JEFFREY: Emily-type! She's an HA!

BEVERLY: She's an actress...

JEFFREY: She is a Human...Alien...Hybrid!

BEVERLY: So...?

JEFFREY: So? So? She comes from Mars! She's an alien...she comes from aliens, and she has been cross-bred with humans to create this, this...!
Look, how much do we know about these...hybrids? How much does anyone know? I've never done a show with one. Who has? We don't know what's in her head, what she might do, how she's going to get along with the other...humans...in the cast. She could be totally batshit, and think that she's normal.

BEVERLY: So she's just like other actors.

JEFFREY: Well, yeah.

BEVERLY: Look...look, look, the Martians here for a year now and...

JEFFREY: Tell me about it!

BEVERLY: I know, you don't trust them...

JEFFREY: A lot of people don't trust them.

BEVERLY: Republicans.

JEFFREY: We're still not sure WHY they came...

BEVERLY: Their planet's dying!

JEFFREY: And so that's why they were abducting people, and then creating these HAs...

BEVERLY: Their planet, their people were dying. And our government knew about this.

JEFFREY: Somebody knew, but most of 'em are denying it.

BEVERLY: We're not going to get anywhere with this...

JEFFREY: And then Martian hybrids opened the door for these, these other...what dy'a wanna call 'em...people, species...from all over!

BEVERLY: Jeffrey! We're in the middle of an audition.

JEFFREY: Reptilians! I can't even be in the same room with them. Their smell...

BEVERLY: They don't smell, they're reptiles.

JEFFREY: But their eyes...

BEVERLY: Jeffrey...

JEFFREY: What if a Reptilian decides to audition? You gonna let 'em read? They can't even talk, they hiss...

BEVERLY: Jeffrey!

JEFFREY: A reptilian stage manager? "This-s-s-s-s play is called Our Town. Written by Thornton Wilder. Name of the town is Grovers-s-s-s-s Corners-s-s-s-s, New Hamps-s-s-s—hire"

BEVERLY: Stop!

(pause)

BEVERLY: Why are you so...?

JEFFREY: I'm talking about...(pause. JEFFREY moves downstage. As he goes through this, sucking all the air out of the room and roasting in the drama, BEVERLY, behind him, responds with increasingly broad eye rolls and head shakes.) I'm talking about...I think I was...once... maybe...abducted. I'm not sure....maybe there was missing time...

BEVERLY: Jeffrey. You've had a lot of missing time...

JEFFREY: (snaps out of terror instantly) All right, all right, all right...

BEVERLY: I don't...Oh my God! You're afraid. Of her. Afraid...of dealing with...something... somebody...new?

(pause. They regard each other.)

BEVERLY: Jeffrey, you've made a career based on being afraid of nothing. You're radical, you're renegade, there's nobody like you, you are Mr. postmodern theatre in this town! You were the first director to do ICEMAN COMETH in an igloo. The first director to have HAMLET actually played by a pig. With a tape recorder on its back, playing Laurence Olivier's audio track. Whoa! That was...

JEFFREY: That was something. William Shakespeare's PIGLET. That was the last time the critics really liked me.

BEVERLY: They still didn't understand you then. If you can't understand something, it's got to be good.

(JEFFREY shrugs, acknowledging.)

BEVERLY: Well, here's your chance get their attention again. To do something new...something brave. There's never been a Human Alien Hybrid in a show before...

JEFFREY: Ohhh, big surprise!

BEVERLY: So if you're so new, so revolutionary...you be the first!

(pause)

BEVERLY: At least, read her! Give her a chance.

(pause)

BEVERLY: We're reading her.

(another JEFFREY gesture...an OK OK one.)

(BEVERLY exits. Returns with ZLENHA-A-A.)

JEFFREY: All right. ZlenHa-A...doing...Emily. Which side are you...?

ZLENHA-A-A: Her final monologue.

JEFFREY: Her final monologue. OK. This is...one of the most important moments in the show. Wilder is delivering the real heart and soul, the message of his play.

(He looks to ZLENHA-A-A for her understanding. She nods. Pause. She moves to start...)

JEFFREY: In this scene, Emily has died, she's dead, but she's asked to return to see the living - back to her 12th birthday, one of her happiest days.

(ZLENHA-A-A nods again, starts to move. JEFFREY paces, enjoying the chance to pontificate.)

JEFFREY: Now she knows the future - she knows what will happen to everyone. And from her...perspective...she's...overwhelmed, almost angry that the living just don't understand. That they never realize and appreciate life while they live it.

(ZLENHA-A-A nods again. Just looks. JEFFREY is on a roll now, almost talking to himself. ZLENHA-A-A at some point will look toward BEVERLY, as if for help. BEVERLY responds with a look that says "I do what I can.")

JEFFREY: She feels members of her family don't ever take the time...

BEVERLY: Jeffrey...I think she's got it. ZlenHa-A-A, do you think you understand this scene?

ZLENHA-A-A: (politely) I...I...I think so.

JEFFREY: All right. Let's do it.

ZLENHA-A-A: (Any difference, any strangeness in ZLENHA-A-A is shed. She is now an early 20th Century small town American girl. She is Emily.)

(softly, more in wonder than in grief) I can't bear it. They're so young and beautiful. Why did they ever have to get old? Mama, I'm here. I'm grown up. I love you all, everything. - I can't look at everything hard enough. (pause, talking to her mother who does not hear her. She speaks with mounting urgency) Oh, Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, fourteen years have gone by. I'm dead. You're a grandmother, Mama. I married George Gibbs, Mama. Wally's dead, too. Mama, his appendix burst on a camping trip to North Conway. We felt just terrible about it - don't you remember? But, just for a moment now we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. Let's look at one another. (pause, looking desperate because she has received no answer. She speaks in a loud voice, forcing herself to not look at her mother) I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. (she breaks down sobbing, she looks around) I didn't realize. All that was going on in life and we never noticed. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. (she asks abruptly through her tears) Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? - every, every minute?

(long pause)

BEVERLY: That was...so nice. Jeffrey?

JEFFREY: (He has a hard time looking at ZlenHa-A_A.) Yes. Mmm..mm.

(pause)

BEVERLY: Thank you for coming in.

ZLENHA-A-A: (pause, looks - her first Earth audition) Thank you.

(ZLENHA-A-A starts to leave. Comes back.)

ZLENHA-A-A: Thank you for...thank you for...thank you.

(Starts to leave. Comes back)

ZLENHA-A-A: Thank you for...this. This...audition. I've never done this...

(JEFFREY/BEVERLY exchange a look.)

BEVERLY: You've never auditioned before?

ZLENHA-A-A: No. It's exciting.

JEFFREY: But you've been in so many plays...

ZLENHA-A-A: We don't "audition" on Mars.

BEVERLY: What do you...?

ZLENHA-A-A: We cast. Thank you.

(She starts to leave again. Comes back again.)

ZLENHA-A-A: This is so...excuse me...so...meaningful to me. Just to be able to read this passage...about family, and life, and death....

...your planet...we don't have...families, like yours...we live so long...and death is...an abstract, an evolution. We...

...that's why we came...we took your people...we...(what's the word?)...we blended our two...planets. That's why we came. We so...admire you. We so want to be like you. I hope I...

...Thank you.

(She starts to leaves)

BEVERLY: Should I go tell her she's cast?

JEFFREY: She was...fine...she was good... but...I don't know...I don't know how she'll respond to me...I'm not sure how well we'd be able to work together...

(ZLENHA-A-A comes back)

ZLENHA-A-A: And I would love to work for...you. You are such a good director. Directors on...at home...don't give direction like you did. I've never been so well directed in a play.

(JEFFREY turns away, flattered, falsely modest. ZLENHA-A-A looks towards BEVERLY, who gives her a "You learn fast" look.) Thank you.

(ZLENHA-A-A leaves.)

(JEFFREY stands, paces a bit. Then BEVERLY stands.)

BEVERLY: Should I go tell her she's cast?

JEFFREY: No. I will. (JEFFREY leaves to find ZLENHA-A-A.)

END