

Heading Out by R.W. Schneider

When does the play take place?

I'm inclined to say "now" but the producer could choose to place the play before or after #me too. The only thing that dates it internally is the debate about Foucault, a debate which could have happened in the USA any time from the early 80s on.

Where?

A college with a first-rate philosophy department. Public or private, but not a party school.

Casting

1 m, 2 f, 1 x

Synopsis

Nyssa met Thaddeus when she took his freshman survey course in Western Philosophy. A professor and a student with unusually compatible minds, they found themselves embarked for a multi-year cruise on the deep waters of philosophic conversation. In Nyssa's final semester, however, the tone of the voyage changed abruptly. Like the brave sailors in *Moby Dick*, they encountered a topic that sank them utterly. Months later, the wreckage is still floating. The second act is an alternative to the first. The characters leave from the same port, but the wind carries them to different destinations.

Development History

None whatsoever. I've never heard it read. A theatre in Connecticut scheduled it for a reading series but then cancelled the series. They said it was a conflict with use of the space.

Why is it right for American Place?

As I see it, plays that "excite and challenge the audience" can't do one without the other. I wrote *Heading Out* to be talked about at length afterwards. Whether you conceive of it as a play of ideas, a political play, a #metoo play or a twisted romantic comedy, *Heading Out* will contribute to national debates of which Florida is now a hotbed. It's really two plays, in fact, because each act takes the characters to different destinations.

A final way you might consider *Heading Out* is as a piece of ethnic theatre, perhaps as *La Gringa* or *The Chinese Lady* is ethnic theatre? (I don't know either play.) If you chose to make it so, *Heading Out* is a play about whiteness; a pale cast of whiteness hangs over it. It might even be whiteness itself that's heading out? There's something to discover there. May I suggest offering it to a Black director?

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HEADING OUT



Characters

JILLIAN HARRIS, PROFESSOR	63
THADDEUS, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR	44
NYSSA SOMMERVILLE, RECENT GRADUATE	22
ALEX, CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT	51

One.

The second week of August. The lounge of a university philosophy department. Chairs and a sofa. There might be pictures of philosophers on the wall. Elsewhere in the room are faculty mailboxes. One wall is devoted to cubby holes where faculty and students keep personal effects. There's an elaborate, new-looking coffee machine and a microwave oven. Nyssa enters with an empty cardboard box. She takes in the room she hasn't seen for three months, then, with an air of finality, moves to her cubby hole and begins removing its contents: a coffee cup, some papers, a tattered notebook, a half-empty bag of Smarties and a paperback copy of Foucault's The Will to Knowledge. Thaddeus enters behind. He sees her and exits discretely. She hasn't seen him—but Jillian has.

JILLIAN (OFF)

Thaddeus! I see you, Thaddeus! Don't go sneaking off!

THADDEUS (OFF)

Hello, Jillian. I wasn't sneaking off...

(Jillian Harris, gray-haired and voluble, backs into the lounge, still talking to Thaddeus in the hall. She carries an armload of books.)

JILLIAN

How was your summer?

THADDEUS (OFF)

Um, summer was fine. Very productive.

JILLIAN

And the house? The *local* house, I mean, the here house... Come in a second while I put these away.

THADDEUS (OFF)

I got in last night. The garden's overgrown. Couldn't find the key to the shed.

JILLIAN

You know what they say, Thaddeus, "he who has two houses seeks everything in vain."

THADDEUS (OFF)

Is that an ancient proverb?

JILLIAN

Very ancient: I just made it up. Come see the new coffee machine! Quite opulent. Quite the machine! We've entered a new phase of decadence!

(Thaddeus re-enters. Jillian turns and sees Nyssa.)

JILLIAN

Well, look who's here! Hello!

NYSSA

Hello, Professor Harris.

JILLIAN

Didya have a nice summer?

NYSSA

Just fine. Hello Thaddeus.

THADDEUS

Hello... Um.

JILLIAN

Have you seen the new coffee machine? The continuation of caffeine by other means! *Cafégo, ergo sum!*

NYSSA

It's very fancy.

JILLIAN

It was Alex's idea. I'm certain the emperor Nero had one just like it in the *Domus Aurea*. Our department is descending into Roman opulence! Soon there'll be orgies here!

NYSSA

You should hold out for gladiators.

JILLIAN

Gladiators! Ha! Ha! That's very good! We'll have to talk to Caesar about that!

THADDEUS

Indeed.

JILLIAN

But Nyssa, didn't you graduate in May? With Departmental honors?

NYSSA

Oh, I did, don't worry.

JILLIAN

Because I remember you parading around in one of those funny square caps.

NYSSA

I just came in to clean out my cubby.

JILLIAN

Well, that's alright, then. We'll miss you.

NYSSA

I'll miss you, too, Professor Harris.

JILLIAN

"Jillian," please! Well, I'll see you both later. New semester, so much to prepare...

(She picks up a stack of photocopies and exits. A brief silence.)

THADDEUS

Nyssa...

NYSSA *(willed cheerfulness)*

How was your summer?

THADDEUS

Nice. Quite varied. Quite successful. I spent it in Rhode Island.

NYSSA

With your family?

THADDEUS

Yes. A whole summer instead of just weekends.

NYSSA

New glasses!

THADDEUS

Thank you. I... uh... ran over the old ones with the lawnmower.

NYSSA

They make you look older and wiser.

THADDEUS

We both know those are illusions.

NYSSA

Any progress on your theory of affection?

THADDEUS

Some. I'm more convinced than ever that Plato got it wrong.

NYSSA

But you're not ready to publish.

THADDEUS

I'll publish someday. I've got a few things to work out.

NYSSA

Un-huh.

(Pause.)

THADDEUS

How was *your* summer?

NYSSA

My summer was just fine.

THADDEUS

Did you work?

NYSSA

Forty hours a week in a photo studio.

THADDEUS

Well...

(Thaddeus moves further into the room so as not to block the doorway.)

NYSSA

Well?

THADDEUS

We seem to be conversing. I didn't expect it. I thought it might happen, but I didn't expect it.

NYSSA

Why wouldn't we converse? I'm not scared of you.

THADDEUS

Maybe I'm scared of you. Without actually...

NYSSA

That's ridiculous. / You have...

THADDEUS

I don't actually...

NYSSA

No.

(a beat)

THADDEUS

I saw you at commencement. At the reception.

NYSSA

I saw you, too. You looked away.

THADDEUS

I wanted to make it easy for you to ignore me.

NYSSA

Which meant ignoring *me*.

THADDEUS

You were talking to other people. I sent you a psychic fax of congratulations.

NYSSA (*no irony*)

I got it. Thank you.

(*a beat.*)

THADDEUS

I must say, I didn't think I deserved to be *shunned*, exactly. And now it seems I won't be...

NYSSA

...shunned... exactly.

THADDEUS

Which is fine with me. In any case, I didn't expect we'd be conversing.

NYSSA

But you rehearsed for it—you rehearsed it in your mind. This feels rehearsed.

THADDEUS

Didn't you?

NYSSA

What?

THADDEUS

Rehearse?

NYSSA

No!

THADDEUS

Really?

NYSSA

So... go on. What have you got to say to me?

THADDEUS

I thought a lot about what you said—the last time we spoke...

NYSSA

In April.

THADDEUS

You remember the month.

NYSSA

Go on.

THADDEUS

I think you're right. For the essential. I think you're essentially right. I *am* a pervert.

NYSSA

Oh.

THADDEUS

But not the sort of pervert you meant. Not the kind of pervert who goes around trying to cop a feel whenever he can.

NYSSA

I don't really care what kind of pervert you are.

THADDEUS

You should. You should care a lot. If you have children—*when* you have children / you should cuddle them.

NYSSA

I won't! Clear on that. No children.

THADDEUS

If you do, lots of hugs. Lots of cuddles.

NYSSA

Thanks for the tip.

THADDEUS

I'm just saying... Parents who neglect that aspect of affection—physical affection—their child can have problems later on.

NYSSA

With cuddles and hugs. I get ya.

THADDEUS

The deficit is hard to make up. You *can't* make it up. There's the case of the Rumanian orphans... Anyway, cuddles and hugs are important to me. I trust them when I don't necessarily trust other signs of affection.

NYSSA

So, you're depraved because you're deprived? God, that's so lame!

THADDEUS

I'm sorry if it doesn't satisfy you. It's sincere, I think.

NYSSA

I expected better.

THADDEUS

So you *did* rehearse! You had expectations. Let's hear your speech.

NYSSA

I don't have one! I only imagined what you would say.

THADDEUS

And not what you'd reply?

NYSSA

I wasn't planning on replying.

THADDEUS

A whole summer to think about this? You knew we might run into each other and you didn't prepare?

NYSSA

I didn't think about it much, so I didn't make up speeches.

THADDEUS

I see.

NYSSA (*lighter*)

Anyway, I didn't think you'd say anything that lame.

THADDEUS

What did you think I'd say?

NYSSA

I dunno. I just thought you'd apologize.

THADDEUS

I apologized in April.

(Alex, the head of the department, enters.)

ALEX

Hello, Thaddeus. Nice summer?

THADDEUS

Hello Alex. Yes, a nice summer. Very / productive.

ALEX

Hello, Nyssa.

NYSSA

Hello, Professor.

ALEX
Something's changed about you.

THADDEUS
Um... which of us do you mean?

ALEX
You!

THADDEUS
New glasses?

ALEX
Ah, yes. That's it.

THADDEUS
I ran over the old ones with the lawnmower.

ALEX
Good job! Wanna hear a joke?

THADDEUS
Shoot.

ALEX
How did they separate the men from the boys in ancient Greece?

THADDEUS
I dunno.

JILLIAN
I've heard this one before.

THADDEUS
How did the separate the men from the boys in ancient Greece?

ALEX
With a crowbar.

THADDEUS

That's funny, Alex. Well, *amusing*...

ALEX

I thought a Platonist would appreciate it.

THADDEUS

I'm not really a Platonist anymore...

ALEX

Did you see the new coffee machine? Quite something, eh? It's the high-pressure model. Well, see you around!

((Alex checks his¹ mailbox, finds nothing and exits. Pause))

NYSSA

He hasn't seen any of us for three months.

THADDEUS

When you become a chair, other people become different types of furniture.

NYSSA

That's good. *That's* funny.

End of Sample.



¹ I've supplied masculine pronouns for Alex only to make reading easier. If the role is conceived of as female or intersex, the pronouns should be adjusted accordingly.