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Burst

By

RACHEL BUBLITZ

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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RACHEL BUBLITZ

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(BURST)

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Burst received its world premiere at Alleyway Theatre (Chris J. Handley, Artistic Director) in Buffalo, N.Y., opening on Oct. 26, 2022.

CAST:

SARAH BOYD Tracie Lane
JENNIFER WEAVER..... Aleks Malejs
ALEXIS LYONS..... Christine Turturro

PRODUCTION:

Director Daniel F. Lenzian
Scenic and Costume Design..... Collin Ranney
Lighting and Sound Design Emma Schimminger
Stage Management..... Kimberly Neiss

SPECIAL THANKS

This play wouldn't be what it is without the support I received from MACH 33: The Festival of New Science- Driven Plays. Special thank you to Aidan Fenwick for helping me make sense of the science in *Burst*. Additional thanks to Arden Thomas, Brian Brophy, Caltech Performing and Visual Arts and the Pasadena Playhouse for developing so many new science plays through MACH 33.

DEDICATION

To Alex, your experiences with startups were invaluable to me when I wrote *Burst*, and, more importantly, your love allows me to be the best creative I can be. I love you.

Burst

CHARACTERS

SARAH BOYD: Female, early to mid-30s. CEO and founder of Tactix. Conventionally attractive. Charismatic. Her clothes could have come out of an L.L. Bean catalog. Wears a puffy vest and sensible dress shoes. Often wears red lipstick.

JENNIFER WEAVER: Female, early to mid-30s. Chief of technology for Tactix. Brilliant. Does not put a considerable amount of time in her clothing choices and that shows. Probably wearing a comfy and unflattering sweater or sweatshirt, but nothing too baggy. Sneakers all the way.

ALEXIS LYONS: Female, late 20s to early 30s. Journalist. Charming, able to make most people she comes in contact with trust her right away. Outfit is polished, probably the only one onstage in heels.

SETTING: Sarah Boyd's office on the Tactix campus located in Mountain View, California. The office contains a desk, a laptop, a pair of socks, two or more office chairs, a couch, two boring paintings, a closet and a huge window with a view of the Tactix campus. The thermostat for the entire complex is set to a brisk 60 degrees.

TIME: Very late.

CASTING NOTE

The races of the characters have not been specified to encourage diversity when casting this play. That being said, Sarah Boyd exemplifies white privilege on many levels. Does this part have to be played by a white actor? Not at all, just an element to consider. Additionally, if Sarah is played by an actor of color and the part of Weaver is played by a white actor, you run the risk of playing into the stereotype of white victimhood at the hands of women of color, especially Black women. Having both women of color in the roles would potentially avoid that. Consider thoughtful casting that keeps the unfortunate truths of our society in mind while selecting actors.

burst* (bûrst): 1. To break open or apart suddenly and violently: explode as from internal force. 2. A sudden effort or spurt; rush: a *burst* of speed. 3. To give sudden expression to passion, grief, etc: to *burst* into tears; also, to be filled with violent emotion: to *burst* with rage.

—*The Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary.*

Burst

(Lights up on SARAH BOYD in her office, rehearsing her presentation.)

SARAH. Hi. I'm Sarah, Sarah Boyd. I'm here today to talk to you about a problem. A problem we all face right here, right now. That problem is plastic.

Let's start with your morning, with the food you first consume when you wake up. The plastic gallon of milk. The plastic sleeve in your cereal, keeping it fresh. The plastic bag your fruit came home from the store in. Let's move to the bathroom, to the toilet paper that came wrapped in plastic; to your toothbrush, made of plastic; your toothpaste, in plastic, like your shampoo, conditioner, soap dispenser—I could go on for days. And if we actually sat and contemplated all of the quickly used plastics we purchase and discard on a regular basis, if we think of all of the plastic we use and let that add up in our minds, and then we multiplied that for each person in our house, on our street, in our neighborhood, our city, our state, our country—we would be buried. We would be buried with fear and shame and the totality of what our inaction is costing this planet.

So we don't. We recycle, sometimes. Maybe we share a story of a straw caught in a sea turtle's nose. And we think, that's horrible, but now I've done my part, and we feel a little better about ourselves. We feel like we've done something, when plastic is literally burying us alive. Because the hard truth, friends, is that ignoring the pile won't make it go away. It's a problem. A huge, nasty, plastic problem. But I didn't come

here today to scare you with this monster of a problem, well I did, but I'm also here to offer you a real solution. That's right. I want you to join me in solving this problem. Because together, you and me, we will solve the largest dilemma ever brought before mankind. My name is Sarah Boyd, I am the founder and CEO of Tactix, the only company with a real solution to this plastic disaster. Won't you join me?

(There's a knock on the door.)

SARAH *(cont'd)*. GOD DAMN IT! I SAID NOT NOW!

(JENNIFER WEAVER opens the door, but doesn't enter.)

WEAVER. Sorry, I just—

SARAH. Weaver? What are you—I didn't mean to yell at you, come in.

(WEAVER enters. She has a report on a device. Probably an iPad.)

SARAH *(cont'd)*. I thought you were my assistant—
(Yelling off.) WHO CAN'T EVER SEEM TO FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS!

WEAVER. Sorry—

SARAH. Stop apologizing—it makes my skin crawl when women apologize for no reason.

WEAVER. Right, sor—I mean, I have the report on the phase separation of the polyhydroxyalkanoate-polylactic copolymer from polyethylene I've been running. I was going to just leave it, but I saw your lights still on. Are you busy?

SARAH. Yes, so incredibly busy my eyeballs might explode. I was at court all day and have to get a huge chunk of my presentation set before Greg gets here for an interview tonight,

not to mention the stack of notes I need to go over before the fundraising strategy meeting tomorrow, but I have time for you. I always have time for my favorite CTO. Sit down.

(WEAVER sits.)

SARAH *(cont'd)*. I just need to have a quick chat with Nina—

(SARAH opens her door and looks out.)

SARAH *(cont'd)*. She's—she is not out there.

WEAVER. Yeah, that's why I just came in.

SARAH. I can't believe she would just—her stuff is gone. She left for the day! Without a word to me, her boss. I cannot believe she would just take off like that.

WEAVER. It's pretty late.

SARAH. It's not that late.

WEAVER. Sarah, it's almost ten. I'm usually in bed by now.

SARAH. OK, sure, and that's fine because you're not my assistant! I'm still here. If I'm still here, she—when did she leave for the day?

WEAVER. Oh, I—I have no idea.

SARAH. Right. I know she was here at least until seven because she came in around then to tell me they'd set up the last of the ping pong tables—oh! Did your team just love them?

WEAVER. Um, yeah. They're great.

SARAH. Thought it would be a fun way to give everyone time to stretch and move, you know?

WEAVER. Makes sense.

SARAH. All the divisions got them. Two per division. I almost got pool tables, because of the plastic ping pong balls—if I'm being honest, it just doesn't look great for us

to have that much plastic. But then pool is just so much less, I don't know, bouncy? I think the action of ping pong is much more conducive for what we're going for, you know?

WEAVER. It is a lot more active.

SARAH. Exactly. And then, I thought, "Oh my God, Sarah, you can just biodegrade the used ping pong balls! It's what you *do!*" I laughed so hard, it was right in the middle of a totally different thing, I think I gave my publicist a heart attack. But I'm glad I realized it, because I really don't think pool tables have the same effect as ping pong.

WEAVER. OK, but ping pong balls are made from celluloid and their sequencing makes it impossible to separate—

SARAH. Don't sell yourself short, if anyone can figure it out, it's you.

WEAVER. If you say so. Anyway, the report, you wanted to go over the numbers—

SARAH. Hold that thought, I have to get to the bottom of all this about Nina.

(SARAH goes to her phone and dials.)

WEAVER. OK. Take all the time—

(SARAH holds up her hand to silence WEAVER.)

SARAH *(into phone)*. Hey, Lee! Oh man, you pulled the night shift again? You lose a bet or something? ... Hahaha, yeah I get that, I'm the same way ... anyway, so listen, I need you to go through the tapes from today and see if you can figure out when Nina left ... you're a dream, thank you!

(Hangs up.)

SARAH (*cont'd*). Ugh, I'm going to have to fire her and find someone new in the middle of all of this—is there anything worse than having to hire a new assistant??

WEAVER. Maybe she had an emergency.

SARAH. That she couldn't come in here and tell me about?

WEAVER. I don't know, she seemed—she seemed good at her job whenever I was around. And she's put up with you for years now.

SARAH. I am a fantastic boss!

WEAVER. Oh yeah, you're a dream.

SARAH. I hear your sarcasm, but she knows. She knows that I need her here, with me, as long as I am in my office. I've told her that is my expectation! I don't know why it is *so* impossible to just do what I've asked! Maybe what I want doesn't exist.

WEAVER. Not until we have AI assistant technology at least.

SARAH. That would—you think you could build me that in your spare time?

WEAVER. Oh sure, that's not a problem.

SARAH. Great. That'll help me out a ton.

WEAVER. I'll get right on that then.

SARAH. Perfect.

WEAVER (*pulls up the data on her device, shows SARAH*). Separating the polyactic acids and polyhydroxyalkoates from breakdown impurities is our main obstacle.

(SARAH swipes through the report.)

SARAH. OK.

WEAVER. I'm setting up a new series of experiments that should be ready by next week. I want to try a few different temperature/pressure combinations to identify the optimum conditions for the PLA-PHA copolymerization reaction.

SARAH (*hands WEAVER the device*). Great. Perfect. Thank you.

WEAVER. Just doing my job.

SARAH. And I appreciate it. Have to admit, at this moment in time, I'd rather have you home resting up, considering tomorrow you have to give a testimony in court.

WEAVER. I thought this was a top priority.

SARAH. It is, but—

WEAVER. I have dozens of reports in my backlog, all with that angry red exclamation mark blinking beside them, all of which have also been marked “top priority” by you, so I thought I'd power through.

SARAH. The trial is top *top* priority. Go get some sleep.

WEAVER. About that—

SARAH. No. We're not discussing it again.

WEAVER. The report, it wasn't the only reason I stayed late. The testimony—

SARAH. You know, I wasn't going to say anything, but after all these years, I can read you like a book, and you, Jennie, you look terrible. Really. And I know right now—look, I know we're going a hundred and twenty miles an hour down a road the width of my pinky nail, and if any of us veer off the path even for a second, the whole thing will just go off the rails and explode. I know that's a lot of pressure. I feel it, and I can see that you feel it too.

WEAVER. I do. Which is why—

SARAH. Which is why you are getting a massage tomorrow.

WEAVER. A what?

SARAH. A massage! I just hired a massage therapist on retainer. (*Takes out her phone.*) Best part is that she comes in here with her portable table and can just work her magic on anyone I ask her to—there, you're booked.

WEAVER. Oh.

SARAH. She has magic hands. She'll come by when you're all through with—well she'll be here at 11:30 and you should be back to the office by then.

WEAVER. OK.

SARAH. I have never in my life met anyone with hands like hers. She could crush your skull with her fists. I'm serious.

WEAVER. That sounds really strong.

SARAH. Only the best for you.

WEAVER. Thanks.

SARAH. You are so welcome. Got to take care of yourself.

WEAVER. Right. Yeah. About that. Sarah—

SARAH. How's Michael doing?

WEAVER. Michael is great, I guess.

SARAH. And you two are doing well?

WEAVER. Yeah, I guess—

SARAH. Wow! You two are my heroes. And I bet he misses you. He's probably home all alone, wondering where on Earth you could be.

WEAVER. He knows I had to stay late tonight.

SARAH. But you didn't. I asked you not to. Remember?

WEAVER. I know.

SARAH. OK then. Go home! To Michael.

WEAVER. I have—I need to tell you—

SARAH (*checking the time*). Well I am all ears! As long as it has nothing to do with the trial, feel free to share with me anything you need to get off your chest.

WEAVER. It's—well—actually Michael and I were talking—a lot—

SARAH. Oh God, he's not asking you to marry him or something, is he?

WEAVER. No, we're not—he just agrees with me that the trial is—

SARAH. What did I just say?

WEAVER. I mean, right. Yeah, that's—that is it. You hit it right on the head.

SARAH. Wait, really?

WEAVER. Yep. Michael is going to ask me to ma—marry him.

SARAH. Oh, that's—are you going to say yes?

WEAVER. Well, um I guess so. If we do a whole big thing do you want to be in it? Like as a witness.

SARAH. Like your maid of honor?

WEAVER. Uh, yeah, maybe.

SARAH. Of course, that sounds, that's—that will be so, so, so great. Yeah. (*Picks up phone and scrolls through her calendar.*) Wow, so have you talked about dates or anything like that? Because right now, well really for the next year, it would be an absolute nightmare for you to take off, and if I have to take off too—God, I don't know, I guess I might have to take off a day for this, right? And well that—we'll just have to be strategic.

WEAVER. Hold on, I tell you I'm getting married and you come back to me with vacation days?

SARAH. It's late, OK? And I am very busy. I have to get my talk figured out before the reporter comes in tonight because I have to be at court ALL DAY tomorrow and every other day this week, and you come in here freaked out and I naturally think it's about, you know, IMPORTANT THINGS like WORK and then it's just about a stupid wedding. *And*

he hasn't even asked you *and* the last time I checked you had ZERO interest in marrying Michael or anyone for that matter and so shoot me if I'm not over the moon happy for your might-not-even-be-happening wedding!

WEAVER. I feel like we're drifting apart.

SARAH. Then why do you care if he asks to marry you?

WEAVER. No you—you and me. I thought we were friends.

SARAH. Oh my God, of course we're friends, I started this company WITH you, you can't get more friendly than that.

WEAVER. Then you'd think you'd be happy for me.

SARAH. I'm fucking thrilled. I'm foaming at the mouth.

Michael is the greatest human who has ever lived. *Mazel tov*.

WEAVER. Thanks a lot.

SARAH. I am happy for you. Really. Congrats, that's huge, and Michael is so lucky, and I think you two will be so happy, but right this minute, I am behind on literally one million things, and so—

WEAVER. Working on the roll-out presentation?

SARAH. Trying to.

WEAVER. Let me hear it.

SARAH. No.

WEAVER. I could give you feedback.

SARAH. I do not want your feedback.

WEAVER. You have trouble with the technical elements.

SARAH. Gee thanks. Really know how to make a girl feel smart.

WEAVER. Sorry, I didn't mean—

SARAH. It's fine. And anyway, that's not what they want to hear.

WEAVER. It's a science talk.

SARAH. Nobody cares about science.

WEAVER. OK, I'm sure you'll nail it. You always do.

SARAH (*expecting her to leave*). Weaver?

WEAVER. Yeah?

SARAH. I really need to get back to work.

WEAVER. Right. Yes. It's—Sarah, don't freak out, but it's the trial—

SARAH. I said no, I said we were not discussing—

WEAVER. I know and I'm sorry, but you have to! We are going to talk about this, and you are going to hear me! For my health, my mental and physical health—I just think, I just can't—I can't do it. I have never wanted to do any sort of speaking in public, I do not do well with a lot of people and you know that, I can never get enough air and I have to fight the urge to vomit the whole time, and now I'm expected to speak in a courtroom on top of which, the testimony you expect me to deliver—

SARAH. Is Michael even proposing or were you just stalling?

WEAVER. Why can't you just listen?

SARAH. I've heard it. You've told me before.

WEAVER. But you never really listen to me. You don't understand!

SARAH. No, you don't understand. You wanted to be a part of something that would change the world, help the planet. You think that's just going to be an easy thing?

WEAVER. No, I didn't think easy—

SARAH. But you thought all your work would be done in the lab and you could just leave everything else on me, right?

WEAVER. When we started out, we said, we always said that you would handle the public, so that I could focus all my energy on the work in my lab.

SARAH. OK, but when we started out we were twenty-year-olds sneaking beers, blabbing all night in our dorms. We're grownups now, and sometimes grownups have to do hard things.

WEAVER. Why did you even take her to court in the first place?

SARAH. There was a person, a person making defaming statements about Tactix—

WEAVER. She's allowed to have her own opinions. She doesn't think we can do what you say we do—

SARAH. What our company does.

WEAVER. Can't we just prove her wrong, is my point, instead of all this legal mess?

SARAH. If anyone can just lie about us then everyone will see us as weak. We can't be seen as weak and so we attack.

WEAVER. It's business not combat!

SARAH. You know, I do need your help on the presentation. Let's sidebar the whole trial. Listen—

(Back to presentation mode.)

SARAH *(cont'd)*. We've all seen the facts, the figures, the images of our oceans overwhelmed, of our fellow creatures overpowered, our dumps saturated, litter lying in the streets, tumbling by on our freeways, clinging to our parks and wrapped around our souls—

(Snapping out of presentation mode.)

SARAH *(cont'd)*. Is souls weird? Oceans, streets, freeways, parks—I know souls is a jump.

WEAVER. Souls aren't very scientific.

SARAH. That's true.