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In the Middle of Nowhere

Drama by Kent R. Brown



**Winner of the Beverly Hills Theatre Guild—
Julie Harris Playwright Award**

Winner of the Beverly Hills Theatre Guild/Julie Harris Playwright Award *In the Middle of Nowhere*

Drama. By Kent R. Brown. Cast: 1m., 1w. Early one September morning, in an isolated farmhouse in the middle of rural Nebraska, Rebecca Pender peeks out her bedroom window and sees a vision of the end of the world. The next day, she and her husband, Lucas, stand transfixed as they witness the collapse of the World Trade Center. Insidiously, the trauma of 9/11 unlocks within Rebecca's psyche a Pandora's box of repressed fears. She loses weight, obsessively sanitizes the house, claims the water is tainted, even prowls gun shops and army surplus stores. She fails to keep appointments with her psychologist, preferring to hide out in movie theaters or drive isolated back roads. Though Lucas does not fully embrace Rebecca's deepening paranoia, he can't envision life without her. He sells his business, helps Rebecca build an underground shelter and stockpiles food supplies and weapons. They sever all relationships with family, clergy and friends. But while Rebecca thrives on the energy of their collaboration, Lucas begins to decline—a voracious cancer has gripped his life. At last, Lucas takes his place in their front yard, flashlight in one hand, shotgun in the other, scanning the skies in search of the Armageddon that must surely be coming. *In the Middle of Nowhere* examines how fear poisons the soul like a virus, ravaging all who come in contact with it. *Area staging. Approximate running time: 90 minutes. Code: IA3.*

Cover design: Jeanette Alig-Sergel.

ISBN-10 1-58342-703-1
ISBN-13 978-1-58342-703-3



Dramatic Publishing

311 Washington St.
Woodstock, IL 60098
ph: 800-448-7469

www.dramaticpublishing.com

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Printed on recycled paper

IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

By

KENT R. BROWN



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(IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE)

ISBN: 978-1-58342-703-3

For my wife, Gayle,
whose love of life and sense of adventure
enrich each moment we share together.

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Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the significant contributions made by my wife, Gayle, and my good friend Melvyn Chase, who first brought Rebecca and Lucas to life. Their multiple talents and insights, so generously shared during an early developmental reading, were invaluable in shaping the heart and soul of the play.

My deep appreciation, also, to Candace Coster, Jeffrey D. Ault, Paul G. Barry and, especially, to Stewart J. Zully, for their unwavering endorsement and support.

Prizes and Awards

Winner, Beverly Hills Theatre Guild/Julie Harris Playwright Award Competition, Beverly Hills, Calif., 2007

Winner, Actors' Theatre Playwriting Contest, Santa Cruz, Calif., 2007

Winner, ARTSport Playwriting Contest, Playhouse on the Green, Bridgeport, Conn., 2007

Production History

February 14, 2010: Staged reading at Theatre 40, Beverly Hills, Calif.; Artistic/Managing Director: David Hunt Stafford.

Cast Mitchell Ryan
Salome Jens

Director Bruce Gray

November 14, 2008: Produced by the Sands Theater Center, DeLand, Fla., in association with Judy Thompson and Deb Stanley; Artistic/Managing Director: Jeffrey D. Ault.

Cast Clark Adams
Rene Sands

Director Stewart J. Zully
Stage Manager Jo Crandall
Set and Lighting Illusion Scenic
Scenic Painter Debi McNabb
Technical Director Ed Kirkland
Incidental Music Ron Bienstock

September 11, 2008: Produced by Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre, Santa Cruz, Calif., as part of their Full-Length Play Festival; Production Facilitator: Wilma Marcus Chandler.

Cast Jaye Wolfe
Mindy Pedlar

Director Robin Aronson
Lighting Design Kyle Grant, Paul Anderson
Set and Costume Design Robin Aronson
Sound Design Jamie Amos

January 27, 2008: Staged reading at the Sands Theater Center, DeLand, Fla., as part of the DeLand Theatre Festival; Artistic/Managing Director: Jeffrey D. Ault.

Cast Al Valletta
Rene Sands

Director Stewart J. Zully
Production Manager Jenny Barbieri

November 11, 2007: Staged reading at Playhouse on the Green, Bridgeport, Conn.

Cast Keir Dullea
Mia Dillon

Director Kate Katcher

IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

CHARACTERS:

LUCAS PENDER: A man of character, loving, devoted to his wife.

REBECCA PENDER: A woman of the land, fierce in spirit.

TIME:

From September 2001, to the present.

SETTING:

A turn-of-the-century farmhouse in Mayfield, Neb., a small town in the middle of nowhere.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

The play is best served by platforms, a table or two, straight-back chairs, minimal area lighting and modest sound support. Costuming may remain the same throughout, with an occasional scarf or overcoat as convenient. While a few handprops are crucial, the majority may be pantomimed.

Lucas and Rebecca address the audience as well as each other. Past and present actions are entwined throughout the play.

NOTE: The play is conceived *without an intermission*. If an intermission is required, it should be taken where noted in script. Regardless of the decision, the action should continue unbroken from the previous moment.

IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

AT THE CURTAIN:

(LIGHTS up on LUCAS and REBECCA. They face the audience. They look tired. LUCAS, in fact, is quite ill but tries to disguise the fact. There's not much time left.)

LUCAS. Hello. Our name is...Pender. I'm Lucas and this is my wife, Rebecca.

REBECCA. Hello.

LUCAS. We appreciate the time you've made for us. Especially on such short notice.

REBECCA. We got up at 4:30. Drove nearly straight through. Still got lost twice. But here we are. Good thing I made sandwiches. Chicken salad. Lucas loves my—

LUCAS *(feeling a sharp pain in his stomach)*. Sweetheart? We have to move along now. Not...much time...left.

REBECCA *(tentative at first, then gaining confidence)*. All right. I guess then...first...we live in Mayfield, Nebraska. It's a small town about ten miles northeast of Broken Bow.

LUCAS. Broken Bow's almost dead center of the state.

REBECCA. Where we are it's all pretty much...wide...open...sky. Off to the west are the Sandhills...miles and

miles of rolling sand and grass for hours on end sometimes.

LUCAS. The summers are hot. And in the winter...from the back porch to the barn...the wind can slice you nearly in half. But you make do.

REBECCA. We have a rambling two-story farmhouse. Our daughter, Cheryl, was born there. Four bedrooms, lots of kitchen space, a dining room...big attic and cellar.

LUCAS. My granddaddy Lucas built it as a wedding present for my father and mother. We added on here and there over time. And we used to have about...oh, six hundred acres in corn and... *(He coughs but waves off REBECCA's concerned expression.)*

REBECCA. Soybeans, Lucas, we grew—

LUCAS. Soybeans, yes, and...uh...some cattle, too, over the years. Fair-sized farm.

REBECCA. Lucas used to work the land himself until Dr. Stafford discovered his leaky valve.

LUCAS. We lease what's left of it now. We get along.

REBECCA. And we had Pender's Feed and Grain store, too. On the right there...as you come in off the highway next to the Citgo? For nearly thirty years. Lucas had seven people on payroll.

LUCAS. For itself...Mayfield is a proper community with proper neighbors. German ancestry, mostly, like mine... with a few Irish here and there.

REBECCA. My folks came from Holland. Never been there myself. Some day...maybe.

LUCAS. Mayfield loves its Friday night football, And Homecoming? Nothing but bonfires and hot dogs as far as you can see. We're the Mayfield Marauders. Haven't cracked .500 in eight years. But hope springs eternal.

REBECCA. And there's a farmers market every Saturday in summer and spring. And on Sundays we have prayer circles for those who pray...

LUCAS. ...and pray for those who don't.

REBECCA. That's my mother you just heard speaking there.

LUCAS. You know everybody miles around...went to school with half of them...dated the other half. You visit. Ask about their aches and pains. Their sons in the military. Daughters, too. These are hard times.

REBECCA. But nothing too personal.

LUCAS. No. Nothing...too...intimate.

REBECCA. Better to save that for God.

LUCAS. Well, now you have it, the picture of things. Normal people in a normal community. Old-fashioned values for the most part. Nothing to be frightened about. Least that's what we thought.

(LIGHTS out on REBECCA.

We are now in the Pender farmhouse.

It is 2001.

LUCAS and REBECCA are stronger, more vigorous.)

LUCAS (*cont'd*). We'd been up late celebrating Rebecca's birthday. Cheryl and her husband, Howie—he's an eye doctor in Chicago, gives us free eye exams—anyway, Cheryl calls around 7:00 to wish Rebecca happy birthday and did she get the silk blouse they'd sent, was it the right size?

(LIGHTS up on REBECCA talking on the “telephone.”)

REBECCA. It’s just lovely, Cheryl. Fits beautifully. And, Howie? You’re such a dear. Thank you so much. It’s just perfect.

LUCAS. Rebecca mentions how I’d impressed her by cooking salmon steaks on the grill.

REBECCA. No, they weren’t dry, Cheryl...hardly at all, honest. They were...

LUCAS. Moist and tasty.

REBECCA. Moist and tasty. *(Laughs.)* Yes, that was Daddy coaching me in the background.

LUCAS. Then the twins get on the phone.

(SOUND: Two young girls singing “Happy Birthday.”)

LUCAS *(cont’d)*. They go on about the fun they’d had at Camp Eagan that summer. How they’re going to send two more potholders for Grandma’s kitchen art gallery.

REBECCA. Oh, yes, do send them soon. I can’t wait. Bye, bye, now. Love you, too!

(LIGHTS out on REBECCA.)

LUCAS. A little after nine, Rebecca goes upstairs to dress for bed while I lock down all the windows and doors, turn out the lights. I keep the floods on over the garage, of course, and the porch lights, front and back. No sense being foolhardy. As I’m changing into my pajamas we share another laugh over the poor salmon I charred beyond recognition. And after we pray to the Lord to keep

us safe, we kiss each other good-night and roll over, she on her left side and me on my right. And we fall asleep.

(SOUND: We hear “Abide With Me” being hummed and partly whispered by REBECCA.)

LUCAS *(cont’d)*. It’s around 3:00 when I hear Rebecca. It’s hard to get my bearings at first...then I see her standing by the window.

(LIGHTS reveal REBECCA peeking through the “window blinds.”)

LUCAS *(cont’d)*. Rebecca? Sweetheart? Anything the matter?

REBECCA. Ssshhh.

LUCAS. Are you feeling all right? What’s wrong?

(REBECCA raises her hand as one silences a child. She is breathing in short spurts.)

LUCAS *(cont’d)*. I’m out of bed now, thinking there must be something I have to see. She grabs my arm. Her grip is fierce. Her eyes...wider than I’ve ever seen them.

REBECCA. Don’t look.

LUCAS. Don’t look at what? What do you see?

REBECCA. Promise me.

LUCAS. Promise you what?

REBECCA. We aren’t safe!

LUCAS. Rebecca, we’re fine. I locked all the doors and—

REBECCA. We’re not fine! You have to promise me, Lucas.

LUCAS. Yes, yes, of course, I promise you whatever you want. Now please—

(REBECCA runs from the bedroom.)

LUCAS *(cont'd)*. Rebecca? *(He looks through the “window blinds.”)* I look through the blinds. Grass, weeds, and the two poplars I planted to celebrate the birth of the twins. Porch lights way off at the Baldwins. Edgar and Charlene. Good neighbors for thirty years or more. Nothing frightening about the Baldwins. All I can figure is...Rebecca's had another attack of the fears...those times when you see...the end of things. Like two months after Cheryl was born...out of nowhere Rebecca says she dreamed...baby Cheryl...facedown in her crib...not breathing. Rebecca's so afraid to leave Cheryl alone she carries her from room to room, her ear to our baby girl's chest to hear if her heart is still beating. We took turns staying awake while little Cheryl got her sleep. We were exhausted. Gets so bad, Rebecca stays in her nightgown and robe days on end. Then one morning...Rebecca's in the truck with Cheryl tucked under her arm. Five hours later she's up on a ladder painting Cheryl's bedroom sunshine yellow...white clouds and bluebirds flying all across the ceiling. No more fears. All gone. Since then, except for some moody spells here and there...and breaking her collar bone that time in '88 when she slipped on the back porch stairs...well, Rebecca's health has been enviable. Until that night of her birthday.

(LIGHTS up on REBECCA at “Bronson's Grocery.”)

REBECCA. The next morning I'm at Bronson's Grocery. We need some eggs, milk, toothpaste...orange juice. Funny how all of a sudden everything seems used up. I'm thumping eggplants to see if they're ripe.

LUCAS. And Allison Billings comes down the aisle...the church secretary at Trinity Lutheran. She's pushing little Karen in the stroller cart.

REBECCA. I wave hello and ask how everyone is getting along in the Billings household.

LUCAS. Just fine, she says. Then Allison's cell phone starts ringing. It's her husband, Andy, calling her from his office. Andy sells State Farm.

(SOUND: The far-off whine of an approaching airplane.)

REBECCA. Then Allison...she starts screaming...my father, my father!

LUCAS. Then little Karen starts up screaming.

REBECCA. More cell phones now and people going for their cars, leaving carts in the middle of the aisles. The manager runs to his office, turns on Channel 13. The North Tower is...it's all smoke and flames and...

(SOUND: The airplane whine is closer now.)

REBECCA *(cont'd)*. Everybody's crowding in. Trying to see. Holding their breath, gasping.

LUCAS. Evelyn Hawkins crosses herself and starts praying.

REBECCA. And then...United 175 hits the South Tower... at 590 miles per hour.

(SOUND: Sudden silence.

LIGHTS shift...

The glow of their “TV” plays across their faces.)

LUCAS. Then four days straight.

REBECCA. From every angle.

LUCAS. On every channel.

REBECCA. The planes crash into the towers again and again. All that blue sky. A beautiful day. Everyone said so.

LUCAS. Then the towers...how could they just fall in on themselves like that?

REBECCA. People running...everywhere.

LUCAS. Like the Japanese monster movies we used to see at the Sunset Drive-In.

REBECCA. That man...do you remember him...in a business suit carrying a briefcase? His hair, his face...every inch covered in white dust. Except his eyes...unbelieving.

LUCAS. Sisters and wives holding pictures of brothers and fathers and husbands, all hoping a reporter will put their desperation on television.

REBECCA. Harriet Stillwater? She drives straight through to her sister Eileen's in New York.

LUCAS. Twenty-one hours. Arrives Thursday.

REBECCA. And that night on national news—couldn't believe it—there they are on a street corner holding a picture of their brother, Mark.

LUCAS. And Windows on the World?

REBECCA. Lucas and I were there two years before.

LUCAS. For our anniversary, Cheryl and Howie put us up at Embassy Suites. Got us tickets to *Phantom of the Opera*.

REBECCA. And the Pentagon...

LUCAS. And those poor people in Shanksville. What courage.

REBECCA. It would always be inside us now. In our living room. Everywhere. No place to hide.

LUCAS. That's what Rebecca had seen looking through the blinds that night. A vision of things to come.

(The glow from the "TV" fades out.)

LUCAS (*cont'd*). After several days, the planes...the falling towers...people called the networks...asked them to stop.

REBECCA. Children couldn't sleep, hid under their beds. Thought we were still under attack.

LUCAS. Churches all around filled up most Sundays. People came who hadn't been in years.

REBECCA. Nightly vigils. Discussions...questions. Why did they do this? Why do they hate us so much?

LUCAS. Hardly anyone we knew had any idea what Muslims believe in, good or bad.

REBECCA. Or where, even, Afghanistan and all those other places really were.

LUCAS. So Rebecca and I get out a map.

REBECCA. Spread it over the dining room table. Hadn't looked at that part of the world since high school.

LUCAS. Most I remembered was Suleiman the Magnificent. The Persian Empire, I think.

REBECCA. Two weeks after the planes, Billy Jackson and his two brothers beat up a high school boy...an exchange student from India.

LUCAS. Because he looks different.

REBECCA. Has dark skin.

LUCAS. Speaks funny.

REBECCA. He's from over there where they hate us, is how Billy justified it. He wasn't alone.

LUCAS. The Scouts, Lions, Rotary...all put on fundraisers for the families of the victims. Three volunteer firemen drive out to help at Ground Zero.

REBECCA. The Prairie Quilt Guild camps out at our house for days on end.

LUCAS. Twelve sewing machines going full tilt on both floors. Women sleeping in shifts. Prayers at breakfast and supper is about all the talking they did. I've never felt such conviction. In about three weeks they finish up seventy-five quilts. Mostly log cabin design...for family and home.

REBECCA. We send two dozen to a women's shelter in Brooklyn, another three dozen to the Salvation Army.

LUCAS. And the rest—all red, white and blue, looking like American flags—well...

REBECCA. Those we send overnight to Fire Department Headquarters, Mayor's Office, New York, New York, 10007.

LUCAS. All the ladies signed the card. God bless your courage and may God keep you safe. But, in time...well, the everyday just has a way of creeping back in. Bills. Work. Checking up on friends and family. The things that need doing. It's natural. It's your own backyard.