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Swing State

By

REBECCA GILMAN

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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(SWING STATE)

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“*Swing State* received its world premiere at Goodman Theatre, Chicago, Ill., on Oct. 17, 2022, Susan V. Booth, Artistic Director; Roche Schulfer, Executive Director. The Goodman production of *Swing State* was subsequently produced by Audible Theater (Kate Navin, Head of Audible Theater) in New York City, opening on Sept. 17, 2023.”

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CAST:

PEG Mary Beth Fisher
RYAN Bubba Weiler
DANI Anne E. Thompson
KRIS Kirsten Fitzgerald

PRODUCTION:

Director Robert Falls
Set Design Todd Rosenthal
Costume Design Evelyn M. Danner
Lighting Design Eric Southern
Composer/Sound Design Richard Woodbury
Fight and Intimacy Consultant Nick Sandys
Dramaturg Neena Arndt
Production Stage Manager Pat Fries
Associate Set Designer Sotirios Livaditis
Assistant Director Spenser Davis

Special thanks to Tom Mitchell, Ralph Henry
and all The Prairie Enthusiasts.

Swing State

CHARACTERS

PEG SMITH: 65.

RYAN SEVERSON: 26.

SHERIFF KRIS CALLAHAN WISNEFSKI: 50s.

DEPUTY DANI WISNEFSKI: 27.

TIME: Mid-July to late August, 2021.

PLACE: Cardiff Township, somewhere in the driftless area of Wisconsin.

SETTING

The action of the play takes place in the big room of Peg's house. It's her kitchen, dining room and sitting room. Basically, it's the original downstairs of an old farmhouse that she and her husband renovated (themselves) back in the day. Depending on your point of view, it is either homey in a *Country Living* magazine circa 1977 way or cluttered.

If it's not homey, then "cluttered" is the operative word here. It is NOT messy or dirty. Everything has its purpose. Everything is here for a reason. Even if it's a knick-knack or a throw pillow, it is here because it has a good association. Somebody made it, and Peg likes it.

Some essential features of the interior:

A stove where a cast-iron skillet lives

A couple sets of Pyrex mixing bowls (the real ones from 30 years ago, not the cheap ones they pass off as Pyrex today)

Dried beans in Mason jars

Onions, potatoes and garlic in a bowl

An old Bose radio (the kind with the CD player on top)

Bookshelves with books on them (some cookbooks, lots of field guides to the flora and fauna of Wisconsin, novels, biographies, history, poetry)

Two very comfortable reading chairs with handmade quilts or afghans draped over the backs and good reading lamps

A water cooler (the modern kind) with a five-gallon jug of Culligan water

NO TV!

A dog bed with a handmade afghan in it

A door that leads to the rest of the house, including stairs to the second floor

A door that opens onto a back porch with a screen door (the inside door is always open in the summer because it has to be hot as hell—above 90—before the AC gets turned on)

What's out back:

The barn

The garage

The vegetable garden

Walleye's kennel

40 acres of remnant prairie and an oak savanna on a bluff, surrounded by thousands of acres of farmland that is owned by the Callahan family

Swing State

SCENE 1

(It's around eleven p.m. There are legal papers on the counter and a soup pot on the stove.)

PEG SMITH is making zucchini bread. There is a colander filled with zucchini in easy reach. She's already grated the zucchini and has her dry ingredients in a bowl. She cracks three eggs and mixes them in a bowl that has oil in it. She whisks the ingredients together.)

PEG. What is the *(Stops whisking.)* ... next step?

(She looks at the recipe and realizes she needs her reading glasses. They're on her head.)

As she reads, she takes up the knife she used to slice the zucchini.

Her eyes leave the recipe. She's thinking. She rests the knife, point first, on the cutting board.

A blank moment of not moving.)

PEG *(cont'd)*. Right.

(She goes to the pantry with the knife. She pulls out a bag of dates and stares at them.)

PEG *(cont'd)*. I have no memory of buying these.

(She puts the dates back and finds the walnuts. She finds a measuring cup and measures out the walnuts, dumps them on the cutting board, takes up the knife and chops them.)

PEG (*cont'd*). I can't see a downside—I can't, I can't—

(Her chopping has become quicker, more intense. She isn't chopping; she's slamming the knife onto the cutting board, like "CAN'T CAN'T CAN'T" is playing through her head.

She stops. Beat. She considers the knife.

She places her right hand on the counter and rolls up her sleeve. She turns her wrist to the ceiling, places the knife on her forearm and considers slicing her wrist.

No.

A blank moment of not moving.

Then she places the knife on the cutting board, on end, point facing up. She slowly lowers her head toward the knife point as if she's going to put it through her eye.

No! Stupid! She drops the knife.)

PEG (*cont'd, in answer to something or someone we can't hear or see*). I don't know.

I don't know what to do.

(Headlights flash through the window, and the sound of wheels on gravel is heard.

She tries to recover herself.)

PEG (*cont'd*). Finally.

(She turns on the stove to reheat the soup in the pot.)

PEG (*cont'd, calling through the screen door*). Hey!

(RYAN SEVERSON enters in his Golden Hearth uniform. He's just gotten off work.)

RYAN. Sorry it took me so long.

PEG. Hey. What happened?

RYAN. It was a shit day. *(Sees the bread fixings.)* What are you making?

PEG. Zucchini bread.

RYAN *(disappointed)*. Yippee.

PEG. I've got soup for you. I'm warming it up.

RYAN. I'll eat it cold. I don't care.

PEG. It'll only take a minute.

(She hands him a glass so he can get some water.)

RYAN. Did you eat?

PEG. At like, seven.

(RYAN has gone to the sink to get tap water.)

PEG *(cont'd)*. Don't drink that.

RYAN. The bottled stuff's expensive.

PEG. And the well water's full of nitrates. Do you want colon cancer?

RYAN. I might. If it got me off work.

(He gets water then goes to the stove and takes the lid off the soup. He makes sure PEG isn't looking and sticks his finger in it.)

RYAN *(cont'd)*. It's warm. I'm eatin'.

PEG. It's not, but whatever.

(He finds a bowl and serves himself some soup.

As he does, PEG picks up the papers on the counter and holds them, hesitating. Then she puts them back down. RYAN doesn't notice.)

PEG (*cont'd*). So why was it a shit day?

RYAN (*taking his soup and water to the dining table*). I had to go to Janesville, first of all. Then my truck was getting serviced, so they stuck me with this piece of shit ...

(RYAN eats. PEG sees that he's hungry. She takes homemade bread from a linen bag, slices some and brings it to the table with some butter.)

RYAN (*cont'd*). All the trucks got governors on 'em to keep you from speedin'?

PEG. What's a governor?

RYAN. A thing. That kicks in. That keeps you from speeding.

PEG. But how does it work?

RYAN. Fuck if I know.

PEG. Not an answer.

RYAN. It's like a sensor that monitors the wheel speed, then cuts off the fuel injectors so you can't go no faster.

PEG. So you do know.

RYAN. Whatever. Can I tell my story?

(PEG nods.)

RYAN (*cont'd*). They're s'posed to be set at sixty-five but this one was totally fucked up, and it kept kickin' in at forty. So I'm pokin' along like some idiot—I got semis comin' up behind me, right on my tail, blowin' their horns. Then some moron in a Kia passes me on the shoulder—cut right in front of me from the right, right when this other guy was passin' me on the left.

PEG. Jesus.

RYAN. They're headed right at each other in my lane—no way I can stop in time. At the last second, the guy on the left swerves back over. Scared the crap out of me.

So when I got to my first stop, I called my boss and I was like, “You gotta send me a different truck,” and he was like, “There’s nobody here that can do that now,” and I said, “Well I’m not moving till you fuckin’ figure it out.”

PEG. How did that go over?

RYAN. It meant I sat in the parking lot of the Kwik Trip for four hours till they finally showed up with another truck. Leavin’ me sittin’ here, eatin’—what is this?

PEG. Vegetable soup.

RYAN. At eleven o’clock. On a Friday night. Makes a man want a drink.

(PEG pointedly moves his glass of water closer to him.)

RYAN *(cont’d)*. I said I *wanted* a drink, I didn’t say I was gonna drink. There’s a big difference.

PEG. It’s not just that you’re sober, I don’t want you to lose your commercial driver’s license—

RYAN. I’m not.

PEG. Or rub your boss the wrong way—

RYAN. They would hire a monkey right now to drive a truck, OK? I ain’t gonna get fired. Jesus.

PEG. OK.

RYAN. And? But?

PEG. OK. I’m sorry. You did the right thing.

But did you have to wait in the parking lot of the Kwik Trip? Couldn’t you go to a park or something?

RYAN. There’s a camera in the cab of my truck. They’re watching me all the time. I can’t go run around in a park.

PEG *(picks up the papers again)*. This is what I wanted to show you—

RYAN *(indicating the soup)*. Can I please just finish?

PEG. It's already eleven—

RYAN. I wanta eat when I'm hungry! Not when people tell me to.

PEG. Can't I explain it *while* you eat?

RYAN. Can't I just eat?! I just want like, ten minutes without somebody throwin' something at me! Please!

PEG. Fine! You don't have to yell!

(He eats. PEG waits.)

RYAN. Listen, I know you wanted me to mow tomorrow—

(A shadow passes across the outside light. PEG sees. She gets up to investigate.)

PEG. I already did it.

RYAN. I was just gonna say I'd do it on Sunday.

PEG. If you need the money, you can change the oil in the tractor for me. But I don't need any more help on the prairie right now.

(She stands at the door, watching.)

RYAN. You see somethin'?

PEG. I'm not sure.

RYAN. Where's Walleye?

PEG. Asleep on my bed.

RYAN. You should leave her outside at night. What good's a watchdog if she ain't watchin'.

PEG. There's nothing to watch for. And she likes to sleep with me.

RYAN. 'Cept you never sleep.

(PEG either doesn't hear or doesn't respond.)

RYAN (*cont'd*). What you got? Raccoons?

PEG. Nothing. (*She comes back inside but keeps watching.*) I was hoping it was a bat. I haven't seen a single one this summer.

RYAN. You *want* to see a bat?

PEG. Of course I want to see a bat. That's why we have bat boxes. Bats are great.

RYAN. OK.

PEG. They're flying mammals for fuck's sake.

(*Beat.*)

PEG (*cont'd*). We used to watch them pour out of the bat boxes at night and we'd count them. Ten, twenty, thirty ... then in the morning they'd swoop back in. Jim was going to put up more boxes, but they started to disappear, so he didn't see the point.

RYAN. Where'd they go?

PEG. They died. From white-nose syndrome.

RYAN. What's that?

PEG. It's a fungus. *Pseudo* ... something *destructans*. I can't remember the Latin. *Pseudo* something ... *noascus destructans*. Pd for short.

RYAN. Just "fungus" would've been fine.

PEG. Somebody brought it over on their shoes from Europe, they think, into a cave in New York. It was native to Europe so the bats over there were immune to it, but it's new to our bats and it kills them—the hibernating bats—while they're sleeping. The fungus grows over their faces. It's a white fungus—that's why it's called white-nose syndrome. The theory is that it stops their breathing, so they're startled awake from their torpid state and they start flying around, burning up calories that they can't afford to lose. You'll see

them flying around outside caves in the middle of the day, in the dead of winter, looking for food. But there's nothing to eat—it's winter, there aren't any bugs—and eventually they burn up all their stored fat and they starve to death. They've found caves where the entire floor is littered with dead bats.

RYAN. Fuckin' ray of sunshine. That's what you are.

PEG. I added them to the list.

RYAN. What list? My list? Am I s'posed to do somethin' about it?

PEG. The list of things that are gone. First it was the chorus frogs. We used to have chorus frogs in that ephemeral pond at the bottom of the driveway? We heard them every spring, but that pond is basically runoff from the Callahan's farm. I assume the glyphosate killed them. Or the nitrates killed the pond. Then the whip-poor-wills went. There was one that would sing every night up on the bluff in the summer. So loud. If it was a full moon you could see his silhouette when he flew up to get a moth. I can't remember the last time we heard a whip-poor-will. We used to have nighthawks. They'd circle over that dip in the road between your house and ours. I don't know how long it's been since I've seen one. Six or seven years? Ten years? They're aerial insectivores. Those birds. They eat bugs on the wing. That's why they're all disappearing. We've killed all the bugs. There's an insect apocalypse, they call it. *(Thinks.)* I think I've seen one monarch on my milkweed all summer.

(RYAN is staring at her. She sees this.)

PEG *(cont'd)*. I'm just stating the facts. It's what we've done. Our species. As a species, we suck. Jim and I—we used to fantasize that some plague or virus would come along that would kill all the humans but nobody else and that

way, the planet could be rid of us and everything else could recover. When the pandemic started, I thought, “Oh, if you had only lived a couple more months. This might be it! Maybe this will take us out and everything can live.” Early on, I even—I thought about going into one of those bars in town where nobody wore a mask and getting COVID on purpose, but then I was afraid I’d give it to somebody or somebody would take me to the hospital and some poor exhausted nurse would have to watch me die.

RYAN. Jesus Christ. Can you throw me a bone here? So I don’t go open a vein? Like go back to the bats. Is like, every bat on the planet dead?

PEG. No.

RYAN. And some scientists someplace are prob’ly working on stoppin’ this shit, right?

PEG. There’s a response team, and some funding.

RYAN. Then maybe they’ll fix it.

PEG. They won’t.

(RYAN has finished his soup. During this, he takes his bowl and spoon to the sink, washes them and puts them in the drying rack.)

PEG *(cont’d)*. There’s more soup if you want.

RYAN. I’m good.

(PEG waits.)

RYAN *(cont’d)*. It was real good. Thank you.

PEG. Thank you for doing your dishes.

RYAN. OK. What do you want me to sign?

PEG. You’re not signing anything.

RYAN. Aren’t we doing this easement thing?

PEG. I only want to explain it to you. You don't have to sign anything. I sign the papers at the lawyer's office tomorrow.

RYAN. Why are you drivin' all the way over there? Do it on Zoom or whatever.

PEG. It has to be notarized, so I have to sign it in front of them. I just wanted to explain what I'm doing because it involves you.

RYAN. How?

PEG. I'm putting the prairie in a conservation easement. Do you understand that part?

RYAN. It says nobody can ever fuck with your land.

PEG. Exactly. Then I'm leaving the prairie to The Prairie Protectors.

RYAN. The prairie geeks. Got it.

PEG. They'll own it, and they'll take care of it. They have volunteers so when I'm gone, they'll take over the management of the land—

RYAN. Wait a minute. Is this your will?

PEG. Yes.

RYAN. I thought it was just a thing that said you was protectin' the land.

PEG. It's both. It's to make sure everything's protected in perpetuity. Or until the world ends. So like, another fifteen years.

RYAN. I don't even wanta hear this shit, and you're crackin' jokes? I'm goin'.

PEG. Please. I got myself all geared up to talk to you about this tonight. The forty-eight acres of prairie goes to The Prairie Protectors, but I'm leaving the three acres that include the house and the barn to you.

RYAN. What the fuck are you talkin' about?

PEG. I'm leaving the house and the barn and the surrounding three acres to you.

RYAN. When?

PEG. When I die.

RYAN. Fuck you, no you're not.

PEG. Ryan—

RYAN. Fuck no. No way. This is—this is crap—I don't need a house. I already got a house. Plus, you don't want me in your house. I'll wreck it.

PEG. I don't care.

RYAN. How can you not care?!

PEG. Because I'll be dead. This is for when I die.

RYAN. *If* you die.

PEG. *When* I die. Everybody dies.

RYAN. Wait. Are you—are you sick?

PEG. Not that I know of.

RYAN. Then we don't gotta worry about this.

PEG. But we didn't know Jim was sick.

RYAN. That fucking EMT.

PEG. We don't need to go over it—

RYAN. “The first sign of heart disease is usually death.” Who says that? To somebody when her husband just died.

PEG. Well that's why I'm doing this now. To be on the safe side. OK?

(RYAN rubs his eyes with the palms of his hands. This a sign of agitation.)

PEG (*cont'd*). I'm trying to do something good for you, not upset you—

RYAN. It's a will!

PEG. It's what people do and it's OK. You'll be OK. You're doing so well now—

(She still has the papers in her hand.)

RYAN. Don't come near me with that thing.

PEG. You're being ridiculous.

RYAN. You're bein' morbid as shit!

PEG. The lawyer said this happens all the time. She said she has clients who draw up their wills and then won't sign them because they think it'll jinx them, like they'll sign it and then die the next day. But it's not a jinx or a curse. It's not like I'm going to sign it tomorrow and die on Sunday.

Ryan. *(She puts the papers down.)* You don't have to take the papers, OK? But I still want to do this. Most of the people in The Prairie Protectors who knew Jim are dead. Even if we could have had a memorial ... these young people didn't know him. I hoped—if you're here, maybe you could tell them about him. So they'll know how much he loved it here.

(RYAN doesn't answer.)

PEG *(cont'd)*. I'll put the rest of the soup in something for you ... *(She finds an old pickle jar or some other totally recycled container.)* I keep cooking for two. I think I've cut the proportions in half, but I keep cooking for two ...

RYAN. You are cooking for two.

PEG. I meant ...

(Pause. PEG can't look at RYAN. She finds something to do with her hands.)

RYAN. I know what you meant. He's been gone a year, but you ain't better.

PEG. Don't worry about me, please. Take care of yourself. And let me do this for you, if you want me to feel better. It'll make me feel better. OK?

RYAN. You promise me you won't die on Sunday?

PEG. I promise. I won't die on Sunday.

SCENE 2

(A week later, afternoon. DEPUTY DANI WISNEFSKI and SHERIFF KRIS CALLAHAN WISNEFSKI are looking around the house for PEG. DANI wears a mask. KRIS does not. When the scene begins, KRIS is in another part of the house.)

KRIS *(from off)*. Hey! Peg? Peg?

(KRIS enters from the inside door, carrying a hand-held tablet.)

KRIS *(cont'd)*. She's gotta be around here somewhere.

DANI. It's weird to be in her house. I didn't think it'd be so homey.

KRIS. She's just a person, remember? She's not your teacher anymore.

DANI. She wasn't my teacher. She was—

KRIS. What? I can't hear you.

DANI. She wasn't a teacher—

KRIS *(overlapping, indicating the mask)*. Why are you wearing that?

DANI. I'm trying to be respectful of what people want—

KRIS. Well I can't understand a word you're saying. Take it off.

(DANI does.)

DANI. She was the guidance counselor. Not a teacher.

KRIS. She taught some class, though. Jason had her for something.

DANI. She taught short-semester health sciences classes. Like how to be healthy in mind and body.

KRIS. Lot of good that did.

DANI. I'm sorry.

KRIS. What? It's not Jason's fault if her class sucked.

DANI. I'm sorry about Jason.

KRIS. Why? It wasn't your fault. *(Back to work.)* Nothing was stolen from in the house, right? It was all in the barn?

DANI. I'm not sure. It says on the tablet.

(KRIS futzes with the tablet. She doesn't know how to use it. DANI looks around.)

DANI *(cont'd)*. I wonder if it's scary for her to live here by herself.

KRIS. I don't know how she does it. Jim died two months after he retired. Dropped dead from a heart attack. Nobody saw it coming.

DANI. That's awful.

KRIS. I tried checking on her, regular, after it happened, but the pandemic had started, so she didn't want me in the house. Then I heard she was letting Severson in so I was like, screw that. She'd rather him come in than me?

DANI. Ryan works for her though, right?

KRIS. Her and Jim gave him a quote/unquote job when he got out 'cause he needed one as a condition of release. But I don't know what he did for them exactly. Mowed grass or something. *(Gives up on the tablet.)* I hate this fucking thing. Severson's got a real job now, driving a bread truck. I don't know if she's paying him still. I hope not.

DANI. It seemed like she always wanted to help people. A lot of kids at school were scared of her, but I liked her. She wanted me to go to college.

KRIS. You went to college.

DANI. Real college.

KRIS. Blackhawk is a real college.

DANI. Four-year college.

KRIS. To do what?

DANI. Study.

KRIS. What?

DANI. Whatever I wanted. But I guess I wanted to get married instead.

KRIS. Don't get all sappy sorry for yourself. You're done with that son of a bitch, and you're standing on your own two feet now. OK?

(No answer.)

KRIS *(cont'd)*. Look at me! You. Are. In. Uniform. You. Are. A. Public. Servant. Chin up, shoulders back. Have some fucking pride.

DANI. Yes, ma'am.

KRIS. Jesus it's hot. Does she even have air conditioning?

(Off in the distance, Walleye is barking.)

KRIS *(cont'd, looks out the door)*. Here she comes. She was up in that damn field again. Whoever knew you could spend so much time taking care of weeds.

DANI. It's a prairie. Like in *Little House on the Prairie*.

KRIS. I remember that show. Michael Landon was always walking around in suspenders and no shirt. I loved that show.

(The barking gets louder.)

KRIS *(cont'd)*. It's not all prairie though. She's got those oaks up there. If God had moved 'em fifteen feet to the north, they'd be on our property. With timber prices being what they are, I'd take 'em down. But then I hate seeing things go to waste. It's like a thing with me.

(PEG is close to the house now. KRIS steps out onto the porch. Complete change in demeanor. Very genial.)

KRIS *(cont'd)*. Hey! We tried calling you, but it looks like you left your phone on the kitchen counter!

(Walleye starts barking ferociously. KRIS quickly steps back inside. DANI puts on her mask.)

KRIS *(cont'd)*. What the—

PEG *(from off)*. Walleye no! No! Go in! Go in the—go in the gate. Sit! Sit! Quiet.

(Barking stops.)

PEG *(cont'd, from off)*. Good girl.

(PEG enters in work gloves and a sun hat. She carries a paper sack filled with seeds.)

PEG *(cont'd)*. They said nobody could come until later.

KRIS. We had a minute.

PEG. I thought they'd send a deputy.

KRIS. They did.

(She makes a sort of game-show gesture to reveal DANI.)

PEG. Dani? Is that you?

DANI. Hi.

PEG. When did this happen?

DANI. I started three weeks ago.

KRIS. There was a whole story about it on the front page of the paper.

PEG. I canceled my subscription when they endorsed Trump.