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Plays on Principle: Ten 10-Minute Plays

By

PAT MONTLEY

Dramatic Publishing Company

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Plays on Principle (which originally included seven of the ten plays here) was premiered at the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore in 2019 as part of a bicentennial celebration. The production was funded by a Creativity Grant awarded to the playwright by the Maryland State Arts Council.

CAST:

Christine Demuth	Michelle Lee
Chris Edwards	Richard Peck
Flinn Leigh Eng	Vernon Rey
Melissa Feliciano	Molly Ruhlman
Layla Hodge	Owen Sahnnow
Timothy Johnson	Sally Wall

PRODUCTION:

Director	Pat Montley
Set, Sound & Lighting Designer	Daryl Beard
Stage Managers	Naomi Berkenbilt, Javier Jaramillo
Set Crew	Jim Houston, Scott Macleod, Richard Peck, Owen Sahnnow

For Sally
my best critic
and dearest

Voting Your Conscience

CHARACTERS

BOBBIE: 18 to 80 years old, any race, any gender.

DARNELL: 18 to 80 years old, any race, any gender.

TIME: The evening of a past or future election day.

PLACE: A polling place in the USA.

Question: How do we decide if the end justifies the means?

(At lights up, we see a folding table with a chair. On the table, we see a large canvas bag with a zipper and lock, marked with large letters spelling “Provisional Ballots” and a large loose-leaf binder marked “Chief Election Judge Manual.” Leaning against a table leg is an upside-down sign that reads, “No Electioneering Beyond This Point.” We hear noise of tables and chairs being folded up and stacked in the next room and sounds of a storm outside. BOBBIE is sitting at the table, filling out a form. DARNELL enters backwards, with a large bin marked “Voted Ballots.”)

DARNELL *(calling offstage while entering)*. You all can leave when you’re finished stacking those tables and chairs. Use the back door by the parking lot. It locks automatically. Bobbie and I will wait for the pick-up. *(To BOBBIE, teasing.)* The price we pay for power, eh? *(Parks the bin.)* This is the first one. There are a dozen more—and they’re heavy. Whose idea was it to return to paper ballots?

BOBBIE. Certainly not the wanna-be hackers.

DARNELL. Did you call central?

BOBBIE. Yeah. Said they'll be an hour.

DARNELL (*looking at watch*). The weather, I guess. It's a mess out there.

BOBBIE (*gesturing to the bin*). Oh well, that gives us plenty of time to lock up the ballots. (*Holds up the bag.*) Here, I've got the provisional ones. (*Holds up a sheet of paper and pen.*) If you just sign next to mine, we're done with these.

DARNELL (*signing*). You know, I was surprised to find out you were the "other" chief judge. I didn't know you were ... I mean ... I never saw any election signs in your yard or ...

BOBBIE. Come on, Darnell! Never imagined that the neighbor who mowed your lawn while you had a broken arm could possibly be a Republican?

DARNELL. No! That's not—I just don't ... I guess I can't imagine how such a decent person as you—how any Republican—can want ... *him* for president.

BOBBIE. Some of us aren't voting for "him." We're voting for conservative policies.

DARNELL. But how can you want such a dangerous man in the White House? Aren't you afraid?

BOBBIE. A lot of people are counting on his coming around to being advised by—

DARNELL. As if he would take advice—

BOBBIE (*ignoring the interruption*). By people with more sense and experience.

DARNELL. "More sense and experience"? The Cabinet *he* appoints? The judges *he* nominates? The Congressional reps that ride into power on *his* coattails? Really?

BOBBIE. OK, OK. Now we just have to sign and lock all the ballot bins and we're good to go.

DARNELL. Doesn't feel "good" to me. Most of these votes are probably for him.

BOBBIE (*teasing the "losing" opponent*). Cheer up—we're only one district.

DARNELL. Yeah, but the largest and most heavily Republican district in the state.

BOBBIE. Just one state.

DARNELL. A very critical *swing* state. It could make all the difference.

BOBBIE. Come on. Really?

DARNELL. Really. These votes could decide the election.

BOBBIE. Wow.

DARNELL. But you probably see that as "good."

BOBBIE. Well ... if you want to know the truth ... (*Looks around, checking for privacy.*) I'm actually not a Republican.

DARNELL. What?!

BOBBIE. I just switched parties last year so I could vote Republican in the primary and try to get somebody *else*—anybody else—as the Republican candidate.

DARNELL. So you're a ...

BOBBIE. Democrat. Right.

DARNELL. But you signed up to be a Republican poll judge.

BOBBIE. I didn't plan it. But they asked me—the woman at the Board of Elections—Shawna. They were desperate. Can never find enough Republicans to be poll judges—even in this district. I guess they're all too indispensable at their high-paying jobs to take the day off.

DARNELL. But you're a *chief* judge. There's supposed to be one from each party so there's no ...

(*They look at the bin of ballots.*)

BOBBIE. So there's no ...

(They look at each other.)

BOBBIE & DARNELL *(together)*. Tampering.

(They look back at the bin. Beat.)

DARNELL. You're not really thinking ... ?

BOBBIE. Oh, but I am. I am thinking. And so should you.

DARNELL. Ohmygod.

BOBBIE. Never mind God. We don't have time for prayer.

DARNELL. Are you serious?

BOBBIE. We've got one hour ... one hour to change the course of history.

DARNELL. You really think you have the right to do that?

BOBBIE. I think *we* have the responsibility to do that.

DARNELL. But these are people's *votes*. What about ... the principles of democracy.

BOBBIE. There won't *be* any democracy when he takes us into corporatocracy. We're already halfway there with Citizens United. And the SCOTUS appointments.

DARNELL. So you're saying we need to violate the very basis of democracy in order to save it?

BOBBIE. How many times have we gone to war in order to save the peace?

DARNELL. Yeah. And look how that turned out. Anyway, what if we're caught? Think of the damage. The credibility of free elections would be forever questioned.

BOBBIE. We don't have "free elections." We have a winner-take-all political system with voter suppression, Gerrymandered districts, obscenely expensive mudslinging campaigns controlled by media access and sabotaged by

fake news outlets, and an Electoral College system that contradicts the popular vote. The election is already fixed. Think of what we're doing as just ... evening-up the fixing.

DARNELL. But that's—all of that's *wrong*. We need to correct that, not practice it. If both sides play dirty, we're lost.

BOBBIE. And if only one side plays dirty, we're lost.

DARNELL. Cheating doesn't cure cheating.

BOBBIE. So what's your solution?

DARNELL. Education. Democracy can only work if people really understand the issues. Then they wouldn't vote against their own best interests.

BOBBIE. Show me a coal miner who could be “educated” to care more about global warming than feeding his family.

DARNELL. He could be—if he were retrained for a job.

BOBBIE. And what solar panel company is going to move its operation to the mountains of coal country?

DARNELL. That's narrow thinking. I still say education is the answer. Most people hear the promise of “tax cuts for all” and don't understand how disproportionately that will benefit the rich. People hear “America First” and don't realize how easily that can lead to wars that their children will have to fight. They need to understand.

BOBBIE. But the issues are so complex—it's almost too much for regular folks to take in.

DARNELL. Exactly why too many turn to fake news outlets for interpretation.

BOBBIE. And we know how that goes.

DARNELL. They should be turning to the real journalists for the facts—and then do their *own* interpreting. But they need to be trained how to do that.

BOBBIE. How can education be the answer when so many right-wing conservative politicians went to college? There's got to be more to it. People have to do more than *comprehend*; they've got to *care*. How do you teach that?

DARNELL. You're right. We've got to get past making ... *(Strikes her/his chest with thumb.)* number one ... *(Raises an index finger.)* our number-one priority.

BOBBIE. And that's never going to happen ... *(Gesturing to the bin.)* under this president.

(Beat. DARNELL circles the bin.)

DARNELL. Could you really live with yourself after ... doing this?

BOBBIE. After saving the country from autocracy and racial hatred? Saving the world from nuclear war? Saving the planet from extinction? I think so. The question is: Can I live with myself if I don't do it? So. What do you say?

(Beat. Then it dawns on DARNELL.)

DARNELL. You planned this all along, didn't you?

BOBBIE. No!

DARNELL. Come on.

BOBBIE. OK, OK, I admit I ... fantasized about it. But I never imagined we'd have the chance to actually do it.

DARNELL. So the sudden storm is a sign of Mother Nature's approval?

BOBBIE. A gift from the universe.

DARNELL. We'll go to hell for this.

BOBBIE. You know you don't believe in hell.

DARNELL. I believe in the hell of a guilty conscience. And so do you.