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Dramatic Publishing

VOTE?

A Play
by
ERIC COBLE



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(VOTE?)

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“*Vote?* was commissioned and premiered by Eckerd Theater Company, Ruth Eckerd Hall, Clearwater, Florida.”

Vote? premiered at the Murray Theater of Ruth Eckerd Hall, September 14, 2004. It was produced by the Eckerd Theater Company (Julia Flood, artistic director), directed by Julia Flood, dramaturgy by Elizabeth Rivkin, scenic design by Lino Toyos, sound design by Lee Ahlin, costume design by Amy Cianci, and production management by Barry Hamilton.

CAST

Nicole Aleshea Harris
Daniel, Washington, Vardaman, Murray . . . Jared O’Roark
Krista, Peterson, Mott, Burns Becky Dixon
Marcus, Douglass, King Joshua Goff
Stanton, Johns Melody Craven-Heinz

VOTE?

A Play in One Act
For 2 Men, 3 Women (minimum cast)*

CHARACTERS

DANIEL ALIGHIERI . . an 18-year-old boy who knows movies
NICOLE HARRISON an 18-year-old girl with questions
KRISTA STONE an 18-year-old girl on a mission
PETERSON a Revolutionary soldier
STEPHENS a Revolutionary soldier
MARCUS a Revolutionary soldier
GEORGE WASHINGTON a general
J.K. VARDAMAN a Southern legislator with a stick
ELIZABETH CADY STANTON an early feminist
LUCRETIA MOTT an early feminist Quaker
FREDERICK DOUGLASS an abolitionist speaker
PEGGY BAIRD JOHNS . . a newspaper woman on the front lines
LUCY BURNS a feminist leader on the front lines
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. a man on a march
PATRICK MURRAY a man with concerns
A CROWD OF YOUNG PEOPLE

* Maximum cast: 20 of any gender (see page 6)

PLACE: Several of the United States.

TIME: Between the present and 1778.

PRODUCTION NOTES

CAST: *Vote?* can be performed by 5-20 actors of any ethnic group, though several Caucasian and African-American actors are requested. If double-casting, one woman can play Nicole. Another woman can play Krista, Peterson, Mott and Burns. A third woman can play Stanton and Johns. One man can play Daniel, Stephens, Washington, Vardaman and Murray. Another man can play Marcus, Douglass and King.

COSTUME AND SET CHANGES: They should be as simple as possible (a wig, hat, skirt, jacket, vest, etc.) for maximum speed.

SETTING: A bare stage representing different parts of the nation at different times.

VOTE?

AT RISE: *NICOLE HARRISON, 18 years old, stares at an unseen TV downstage for a few moments lost in the images and music... Then DANIEL ALIGHIERI, also 18, sticks his head in, glances at the TV and calls out to her. Hip-hop music may be playing in the background.*

DANIEL. This is it. This is where he jumps out of the helicopter—watch this—this is so off the hook—

NICOLE. How does he keep his sunglasses on when he's falling through the air?

DANIEL. Shh! Shh! Watch this... BOOM! Right on the car!

NICOLE. That's gonna bruise in the morning.

DANIEL. They're all shooting through the roof—BOODA BOODA BOODA BOODA—

NICOLE. What is it with everybody and their guns in these movies?

DANIEL (*acting it out*). —and he fires back—DOOM DOOM DOOM DOOM—

NICOLE. He's the good guy; why does the good guy have to shoot everybody?

DANIEL. Nicole, get real, it's the only way to stop the bad guys—DOOV DOOV DOOV—

NICOLE. That and drive their car over a bridge, apparently.

DANIEL. That's good too. KA-BA-BOOM! Watch how he lands on his feet—

NICOLE. When this is done we're gonna watch my movie, right?

DANIEL. Absolutely. But how can you not get into this? Have you ever seen anything like this?

NICOLE. He does look good in that coat.

(KRISTA STONE, another 18-year-old girl with backpack, walks in quickly.)

KRISTA. Nicole! Daniel! Come on! Go go go!

NICOLE. Hey, Krista.

DANIEL. Hey, Kris. You ever see this?

NICOLE. Daniel's showing me his favorite movie.

DANIEL. It's not my favorite. I just memorized it. It's been on HBO like twenty-eight times this fall.

NICOLE. You're just in time to watch the movie I rented after this.

KRISTA. Fine, but—

DANIEL. Nicole's makin' popcorn. If she doesn't burn it again. Otherwise she's makin' charcoal.

NICOLE. Hey—

DANIEL. And the smoke alarm will go off and my mom will freak and it'll be a real party.

KRISTA. Nicole. What's today?

NICOLE. ...Tuesday?

KRISTA. Election Day. You guys asked for a ride, I'm giving you a ride. Come on.

DANIEL. Aww, maaan.

KRISTA. We got three other people to pick up—

NICOLE. We're all settled in for movies, Krista.

KRISTA. So you can get resettled. It'll only take twenty minutes.

DANIEL. Yeah, but we're up to the big fight here.

KRISTA. The polls close in an hour, and I gotta pick up a pizza for the election-night party—

DANIEL. How about we just do the pizza without the voting?

KRISTA (*takes the remote from DANIEL*). Daniel, loook. Magic! You push button! TV goes off! Such power!

DANIEL (*taking it back*). Gimme that.

KRISTA. Come do your duty, then you can come back and eat your charcoal.

NICOLE. "Do your duty"—what, did you enlist this morning?

KRISTA. You guys bothered to register—now you get the payoff! Come on!

DANIEL. We registered because you made us.

NICOLE. You had, like, a hundred of those cards you were handing out to all the seniors—

KRISTA. 'Cause it's the most important power we get when we're eighteen!

DANIEL. Oh please.

NICOLE. Krista. Krista. It's pulling levers or touching a screen. It's not a superpower.

DANIEL (*to TV*). This is the part where he reloads while he's flying through the air—

NICOLE. Let's watch the movie and we can go vote next year. Or whenever.

DANIEL. BOOM-BOOM-BA-DA-BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!!

KRISTA. Okay, look, I'll agree that ammo-brain here may not cast the smartest vote, but, Nicole, I know you've been paying attention in history.

NICOLE. Yeah.

KRISTA. This is big. This is solar. Everything in the last two hundred years has been leading up to the moment when Nicole Harrison casts a ballot. And then we get to eat pizza.

NICOLE. There's no point, Krista.

KRISTA. No point? No point??

NICOLE. There are thousands—MILLIONS—of people voting today, right? There's just one of me. It's like adding one drop of water to the ocean. Is that drop gonna change the shape of the ocean? Change the tide? I think it's great you're so excited, Krista. Really. But you can't expect the rest of us to get all worked up.

DANIEL. Actually you can expect us to get worked up if you two keep talking through the climax of my movie.

NICOLE & KRISTA. It's just shooting.

DANIEL. Yeah, but how am I supposed to hear it with you click-clackin' like seagulls over there.

KRISTA. Why does the good guy have to shoot everybody anyway?

NICOLE. It's the only way to get the bad guys.

KRISTA. Uh-huh. Maybe your history class did go in one ear and out the other.

NICOLE. What.

KRISTA. "Ballots are stronger than bullets." Abraham Lincoln said that. He knew something about both.

NICOLE. Well, yeah, but—

DANIEL. Are you two stayin' or leavin', 'cause I can't turn up the volume any higher without my mom bargin' in here.

KRISTA. Come on, Nicole. Twenty minutes. Be a citizen of this country.

DANIEL. I got the remote, Nicole. Such power.

KRISTA. The movie will be here when you get back.

DANIEL. You'll have the rest of your life to put your drop of water in the ocean.

KRISTA. It's the right thing to do, Nicole.

DANIEL. It's right for Ms. Activist over there. Is it right for you?

KRISTA. Nicky...

DANIEL. Nicole...

NICOLE. If I stay I gotta get my jacket. Did you turn the A/C on or something?

KRISTA. It'll get a sight colder before the winter is through.

NICOLE. What?

KRISTA. I said this is your last chance. Are you coming with me or not?

DANIEL. If we leave our post now "His Excellency" will come down on us like a team of horses.

NICOLE. Who's "His Excellency"?

DANIEL. This is the part with the swords, Nicky. You gonna watch or not?

NICOLE. Why is it so cold in here?

KRISTA (*moving the pillows offstage*). January in Pennsylvania, boy, what do you expect?

NICOLE. What did you just call me?

DANIEL (*moving pillows*). Keep moving—else your toes will go black.

KRISTA. Like Anderson yesterday.

DANIEL (*putting a ragged blanket around NICOLE*).

Don't know if he'll keep 'em.

KRISTA (*pulling on a ragged coat and scarf*). He'll be lucky if he keeps his foot. (*We begin to hear howling wind.*)

NICOLE. Who are you talking about?? Where'd the snow come from? Where are we?

(KRISTA and DANIEL have become PETERSON and STEPHENS respectively, two Revolutionary War soldiers.)

PETERSON. Cold's got him.

STEPHENS. Better him than me. I'll leave you to the watch. (*He heads out.*)

NICOLE. Daniel! (*She starts to follow him—PETERSON pulls her down to the ground.*)

PETERSON. Get down here! You really are going mad—

NICOLE. Let go of me—

PETERSON. You stick your head over that hillside and the British will pick you off quicker than you can say "Jack's your uncle."

NICOLE. The British...

(MARCUS, an African-American man in ragged clothes, crawls over beside them.)

MARCUS. Gentlemen.

PETERSON. Marcus. The cold's getting to Williams' brain here.

MARCUS. Better the brain than the fingers. I'd keep moving yours if want to keep 'em, Williams.

NICOLE. Okay. I'm dreaming. I hit my head on Daniel's TV or ate some of his popcorn or something and I'm dreaming— (*Standing.*) —but it's so cold!

MARCUS (*pulls her down*). Dreaming or not, we're not letting you get shot—

NICOLE. —by the British. Right. And why are the British hiding over the hill?

PETERSON. Ha. Them hiding.

MARCUS. Ever since they took over Philadelphia they've been sitting down there stuffing their faces by cozy fireplaces indoors—

PETERSON. I hear they got beef and potatoes and mince pie for Christmas.

MARCUS. Well, I'm not jealous. I was happy as a clam for my spoonful of rice.

PETERSON. And that piece of pumpkin we fried on that rock, don't forget that feast! Remember that, Williams?

NICOLE. No. And I think I'm glad I don't. So we're in Pennsylvania, right?

PETERSON. Nowhere I'd rather spend January than Valley Forge. (*He and MARCUS laugh.*)

NICOLE. Valley Forge...? Oh man.

MARCUS (*to PETERSON*). If he's that bad off, maybe we should send him to the doctor's cabin.

PETERSON. We already have over a thousand dying men stacked up in those sheds, I'll not send another.

MARCUS. You'd rather he go mad out here? Maybe start something to get the whole English army down on top of us?

NICOLE. I don't need a doctor! I need to get out of here!

PETERSON (*laughs*). You don't think we all feel that way? Not a man of the Revolutionary Army doesn't want to go home to his family right this second. Months—for months, all twelve thousand of us freezing, dying, dropping like flies out here from illness and hunger—

MARCUS. You trying to cheer him up?

PETERSON. I'm saying he's not alone. And he's not dying on my patrol. Bundle up. Keep moving.

NICOLE. I can't feel my toes.

MARCUS. At least you still have boots.

PETERSON. You can count on two hands the number of men who still have boots.

NICOLE. So why don't we leave? I mean, this is the Revolutionary War, right? Colonists vs. the British, 1776, all that?

PETERSON. Good. Your brain's not completely frozen.

NICOLE. So you've already retreated from Philadelphia, right? Why not keep retreating? Go hide somewhere warm until the spring, then come back and fight. You don't have to suffer like this—

MARCUS. Amen.

PETERSON. We're with you, Williams. Every man in this camp would be with you—

WASHINGTON (*offstage voice*). Not every man. (*PETERSON and MARCUS scramble up, mindful to keep ducking.*)

PETERSON. Except him.

NICOLE. What.

(And on walks GEORGE WASHINGTON, his clothes and coat only marginally better than the other men. He doesn't crouch.)

MARCUS *(saluting)*. General Washington, sir.

WASHINGTON. At ease, men.

NICOLE. ...General Washington...?

PETERSON. You'd best not stand too straight here, General. If the English see—

WASHINGTON. I'll take my chances with the British. I'll wager they're tucked safely in their beds. Getting fatter while we get stronger.

MARCUS *(quietly)*. Can't say I feel myself getting much stronger. Except maybe the smell.

NICOLE. George Washington?

WASHINGTON. Have we not met?

PETERSON. This is Williams, sir. He's having a rough time of it.

WASHINGTON. You'll be back in your hut soon enough, Williams. In the meantime, keep your eyes and ears open. And your heart brave.

NICOLE. ...you're George Washington.

MARCUS *(pulling NICOLE away)*. Cold affects men in different ways, Your Excellency—

WASHINGTON. Don't call me that. I've told the men to stop calling me that.

PETERSON. Yes, Your...sir. I honestly think perhaps you should crouch perhaps just a tiny bit, sir, if—

NICOLE. I should get your autograph...

WASHINGTON. I must check on the other patrols. Keep up the good work, men—

NICOLE. Wait! (*WASHINGTON stops and looks at her.*)

Sir. Why am I here? Why are *we* here? Why can't we go somewhere warm and come back in the spring? (*PETERSON and MARCUS step back. WASHINGTON walks toward NICOLE.*)

WASHINGTON. You wish to know why we're here? Why my men are slowly turning to icy food for the ravens? Because of one man thousands of miles and eight weeks travel from here. A man who knows nothing of cold and suffering. King George III. We fought the Seven Years War for him against the French and to pay for the war he raised taxes on every man, woman, and child in the Americas. Is this the kind of leader our people deserve? Did we even choose him to be our leader?

PETERSON. No.

WASHINGTON. When we raise our voices loud enough to be heard, how does he answer?

MARCUS. With bullets.

WASHINGTON. We fight for the innocents his soldiers shot dead in Boston. We fight for our fallen brothers in Brandywine. We fight to win ourselves a leader who answers to us, not us to him. The day you hand control of your fate to distant rulers who care not what you think and feel and suffer, you become a pawn. We fight in Valley Forge and die in Valley Forge for the right to select our own leaders and command our own lives. We fight because "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal"!

PETERSON & MARCUS. No taxation without representation!

WASHINGTON. And we make our stand here in this frozen wasteland because this is where we must. Do you

think I don't hear the cries of my men? The starving chants of "No meat, no soldier" coming from their cabins at night? I walked here on the same path as you. The wagons rolling over the muddy roads, digging their deep ruts that froze instantly. Walking the road became walking on broken glass and half our men were already without shoes. You could have tracked this army to Valley Forge by the bloodstains from their feet—

NICOLE. Oh man...

WASHINGTON. But if we retreat further, if we scatter to the winter wind now, all is lost. This is the place. This valley. This river. This hillside. These men. You are all that stands between freedom for our families...and death at the hands of a tyrant watching us safely from across an ocean. That is why we are here. Hold this post. You'll rest soon. (*And he leaves.*)

NICOLE. ...wow.

MARCUS. That's why he's "His Excellency."

PETERSON. I almost forgot my nose was frozen for a minute there.

NICOLE. Maybe Daniel was right...

MARCUS. What?

NICOLE. "The only way to beat the bad guys is with a gun..."

PETERSON. If my gun weren't frozen I could at least go after a raccoon.

MARCUS. Wouldn't a squirrel be perfect just now?

PETERSON. Stop. Stop! My stomach will be growling too loud to hear an English cannon go off.

NICOLE. You guys are the real deal. You're willing to die so people like you can vote.

PETERSON. Ha.