

Waiting for the End of the World

A One-Act Play

By John Shanahan

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STORY OF THE PLAY

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse gather in a park to usher in the start of Armageddon. But Famine's running late and isn't answering his cell phone. Should the other three kick off the end of the world anyway? What will happen if they do? Or do they need to wait for their fourth member to maintain proper symmetry? Well, at least there are chicken fingers...

About 30 minutes. This show contains adult language. Substitutions are permitted.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

Waiting for the End of the World was first performed in July 2004 at Attleboro (MA) Community Theater with the following cast:

WAR: Karen Gibson
PESTILENCE: Ed Benjamin, III
DEATH: John Shanahan

Additional productions include:

Fledgling Short Plays Festival, Providence, RI
AYTB Theater, Boston, MA
Camelot Players, Lowell, MA
Wilmington Drama League, Wilmington, DE

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(2 m, 1 w)

DEATH: A tired-looking man of 40-50. Clearly too busy.

WAR: A well-built woman in her 30s. Hard-edged and confident.

PESTILENCE: A robustly healthy man, no older than 40.

SETTING

A city park with one park bench and a trash barrel.

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(AT RISE: WAR is sitting on the park bench. She's an athletically built woman. She's got a takeout container of chicken fingers next to her. She snacks on a chicken finger, looks around impatiently, glances at her watch.)

WAR: Any time now, boys.

(A few more beats, and PESTILENCE enters. WAR doesn't notice. He's casually dressed and appears happy. He looks around for a moment, then sees War.)

PEST: *(Loudly.)* WAR!

(WAR jumps up and turns.)

PEST: *(Cont'd.)* HUNH!

(Now WAR is smiling. Together they sing...)

WAR and PEST: Good God, y'all! What is it good for?
Absolutely nothin'!

PEST: Say it again!

WAR: It's so good to see you!

PEST: You too!

WAR: How've you been?

PEST: No complaints. Staying healthy. How about yourself?

WAR: I'm good. I'm good. Don't I look good?

PEST: Compared to the people I usually deal with? Yeah, you look great.

WAR: I'll take that as a compliment, Pestilence.

PEST: Can you believe it's finally here? Everything's in order in heaven and on earth. All the signs are in place. The timing is perfect... It's time.

WAR: It's been a long wait.

PEST: Tell me about it! But I have to say, I've been so busy I've hardly noticed. But you know what that's like, don't you? I've been watching the news lately. You've been going pretty strong yourself!

WAR: I do what I can. But I'm not as busy as you'd think.

PEST: No?

WAR: You'd be surprised. I can hand a lot of stuff off. Warlords, jefes, generals, mad dictators—they're all really happy to take over a solid project. You start a good holy war and it'll run for generations under its own power. I might have to quash a cease-fire now and then, but that's it.

PEST: You're so lucky. You can delegate. I can't delegate. I have to be on the ball constantly, watching for treatments and vaccines, and I have to be out there coming up with mutant strains and variations. Unbelievable. Do you know that I spend two days a week—two whole days—doing nothing but reading medical journals just to try to keep ahead? Kills me.

WAR: You should hire someone.

(SHE offers HIM a chicken finger. He takes one, munching on it through his line.)

PEST: I tried. There's nothing out there for talent. I got one guy, I thought he'd really be great. Good pedigree, medical school degree, a little mentally unstable, the works. I set this guy up in the lab and after a year—a whole year—the best he could come up with was this acne thing that moves around whenever you try to treat it.

WAR: So what did you do?

PEST: What could I do? I had to let him go. Gave him a wasting disease and sent him on his way.

WAR: Seems fair to me.

PEST: Hey, all's fair.... *(HE stops, with a big smile)*

WAR: Oh, that's funny.

(PESTILENCE takes another chicken finger and bites into it. He stops and regards it.)

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PEST: Do you have any idea how many really awful afflictions I could lay on someone with one of these?

WAR: Yes, I do, and I try not to think about it while I'm eating.

(DEATH enters. He is an older man, at least mid-40s, in rumpled business dress. He walks with his shoulders slumped forward. His eyes are slightly baggy. He looks for all the world like a man who's on the verge of simply giving up. He's exhausted. PESTILENCE notices Death and jumps up from the bench. Pointing, he calls out in an announcer-type voice.)

PEST: Ladies and gentlemen, unwitting victims of the upcoming Apocalypse, would you please welcome the hardest-working man in Armageddon, the Griiiiiiiiiim Reaper!

(PESTILENCE and WAR applaud.)

DEATH: Yeah. Great. Thanks. A little louder so everyone hears.

PEST: What? They're going to believe it? Not real likely.

DEATH: You could be a little more discreet. It wouldn't kill you.

PEST: Why bother? Watch this... Excuse me, folks—can I have your attention? Hi, my name is Pestilence and I just wanted to let you know that the end of the world is coming. Today. That's right, the end is nigh—and we mean it this time. The Horsemen of the Apocalypse, sitting right here. Death and devastation on its way. Repent, for the end is at hand.... Anyone? Anyone? Hello? No? See? They watch too much TV.

DEATH: You're an ass.

WAR: What's wrong with you?

DEATH: I'm tired, okay?

WAR: *(Offering the takeout box.)* Have a chicken finger.

DEATH: That's not funny. You know I'm a vegetarian.

WAR: I haven't seen you in a while. I forgot.

DEATH: Of course you did.

PEST: If you're so damn tired, you should have taken some time off.

DEATH: Time off? Are you joking?

PEST: Why not? Give the poor mortal suckers a break for a few days.

WAR: Heh! Imagine the ruckus that'd cause.

PEST: The media would have a field day! "A Day Without Death!" Details at 11!

WAR: Every movie channel would run "Death Takes a Holiday" over and over.

PEST: That would be funny.

DEATH: Oh, yes, and then when I return from my "rest," I've got a tremendous backlog of deaths to catch up with and process, so I've got more work than when I left. I can't leave the office for a minute! Do you have any idea how many people die every day?

PEST: A lot?

DEATH: More than a lot, thank you. And it's all the "your time has come" type. I haven't been able to do any custom work since the late 1800s. Time off. Indeed. Once this is over, I'll rest.

PEST: You'll have to. We all will. We'll be out of work.

WAR: That just seems weird, doesn't it? (*A short, reflective pause.*) I'm going to miss it. Aren't you?

DEATH: No.

WAR: Not at all?

DEATH: No. Not at all. It's gotten so dull, so repetitive. There's nothing new to what we do.

PEST: I beg to differ. I was just telling War—

DEATH: Set 'em up, knock 'em down. Over and over. It's like an incessant game of ninepins.

WAR: Tenpins.

DEATH: Excuse me?

WAR: It's tenpins now. They don't really play ninepins any more.

DEATH: It doesn't—

PEST: I love bowling.

WAR: I was never crazy about it. I was hooked on bocce for a while, though. I spent some time in Italy around the turn of the last century.

PEST: I never played bocce. Is it fun?

WAR: It kills time.

DEATH: (*A burst.*) It's not about bowling! It was an analogy, all right? Forgive me for attempting to exercise a little artistic license. I'm— (*A big sigh.*) My point is, no—I'm not going to miss it when it's gone. Being Death is dull.

WAR: A deathly bore?

(*WAR and PESTILENCE laugh.*)

DEATH: Can we just get started, please?

PEST: Skinny's not here yet.

WAR: Don't call him that. He hates that.

PEST: Well, since he's not around to hear it, what does it matter?

DEATH: You've never liked Famine.

PEST: I don't mind the guy. It's just...I don't know. He's always been—this is how I see it, anyway—he's always been kind of the weak sister in the group.

WAR: "Weak sister"?

PEST: No offense.

WAR: Offense taken.

PEST: All right, look. Lo, he is dreadful in aspect and mankind doth tremble before him, but he's not like you, War, coming on all hellfire and destruction. And he's not like Death, he whom all peoples of the world doth rightly fear. Or even me, o'ertaking them in my myriad guises. I mean, yes, he kills a lot of people, I give him that. But...he's always seemed the lesser of four evils, you know what I'm saying?

DEATH: Still, he *is* one of us.

PEST: Yes, he is but that doesn't mean I have to treat him as an equal.

WAR: He *is* kind of boring. You ever have to talk to him at length?

PEST: No, thank goodness.

DEATH: I have, and I don't think he's that bad.

PEST: He clears his throat all the time. It's annoying.

WAR: I know! And it's not even like he's just clearing his throat. It's this thing, this sound, like... (*SHE makes a kind of dry, retching sound like there's something large stuck in her throat.*)

End of Freeview

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