

from BADLANDS

a play in two acts

by Brent Englar

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### CHARACTERS

JEFFREY, 25; recent transplant to Los Angeles

CYNTHIA, 30; travel writer; dating Jeffrey's boss

### TIME

The present

### PLACE

Various locations in San Francisco, where Jeffrey is supposed to be attending a business conference.

*Synopsis: I was inspired to write Badlands in the months following my move from Maryland to Los Angeles, where I had been hired as a sales representative for a chemical company run by my uncle. The play's protagonist, Jeffrey, has been similarly transplanted, and he now finds himself working as an assistant to his one-time best friend, Tyrone. For a brief while Jeffrey is able to distract himself with the thrill of a new home and girlfriend, but as his enthusiasm for his job diminishes (due in part to his growing realization that he and Tyrone have drifted much further apart than he'd imagined), he begins to seek escape in an idealized fantasy of the American West through which he traveled en route to California.*

*Unable to turn for answers either to his best friend or girlfriend, and thousands of miles removed from familial comforts, Jeffrey discovers in this scene an unexpected kindred spirit in Tyrone's would-be fiancée, Cynthia.*

(JEFFREY slings a backpack over his shoulder and heads for the door,  
only to find CYNTHIA blocking his way)

JEFFREY

What?

CYNTHIA

Shouldn't you be in bed?

JEFFREY

And sleep through San Francisco? The city beckons—

CYNTHIA

—You're on a business trip, Jeffrey!

JEFFREY

Tyrone is on a business trip—

CYNTHIA

And you're here to assist Tyrone.

JEFFREY

Don't act like that. You knew this was going to happen.

CYNTHIA

That doesn't mean I approve.

JEFFREY

Yes, well, I already have a mother, Cynthia. So if you're through disapproving, I suggest coming with me.

(He walks past her; she watches him for a moment, curious in spite of herself)

CYNTHIA

Come with you where?

JEFFREY

(pulling a camera from his backpack)

Sightseeing. Where else?

CYNTHIA

What do you want to see?

JEFFREY

I'll leave it to you.

CYNTHIA  
That's really not fair.

JEFFREY  
Last chance to say yes.

CYNTHIA  
Or you'll leave me behind?

JEFFREY  
Three ... two—

CYNTHIA  
—If you want to go, let's go.

JEFFREY  
After you.

(She begins to walk in a loop around the stage. He crosses to meet her downstage and they stand in place for a moment, gazing in every direction at the cityscape surrounding them)

CYNTHIA  
You're not taking any pictures.

JEFFREY  
Right.

(He points his camera at something in the back of the theater and clicks; he points it in another direction and clicks again, followed by a third point before she stays his hand)

CYNTHIA  
It isn't going anywhere.

JEFFREY  
I am.

CYNTHIA  
No tomorrow?

JEFFREY  
Better not push too far.

CYNTHIA  
We need to get away from the convention center. Nothing makes for less inspired

pictures than tourists.

JEFFREY

You're talking to the eternal tourist.

CYNTHIA

You're not. Come on, we'll take a cable car.

JEFFREY

Oh, no, nothing touristy about that.

CYNTHIA

Jeffrey, some things in life are indispensable.

(Behind them, a two-seat bench descends from the fly space; they cross to it and sit down, swinging slightly above the stage as they talk)

JEFFREY

Where are we going?

CYNTHIA

We're getting lost.

JEFFREY

Glad I invited you.

CYNTHIA

I always begin by getting lost, no matter where I go. Once you find your way back to where you started from, you're no longer a tourist.

JEFFREY

Isn't getting lost somewhat essential to the tourist experience?

CYNTHIA

But not getting found.

JEFFREY

Except by the fire department.

CYNTHIA

Relax. I have been here before, you know?

JEFFREY

You know we need to be back before Tyrone—

CYNTHIA

—Oh ho, he's suddenly worried about Tyrone.

JEFFREY

Well, yeah. He's my boss.

CYNTHIA

I have been lost in every city in America.

JEFFREY

I thought you hadn't traveled much in America.

CYNTHIA

I've been to the cities. My goal is always for someone to ask me for directions.

JEFFREY

You do realize you're insane?

CYNTHIA

Jeffrey. The first time it happened was New York City. I was probably twenty years old—

JEFFREY

—Making it how long ago?

CYNTHIA

It was last month, since you asked.

JEFFREY

Ah ha.

CYNTHIA

I'd been to New York before—several times, in fact. Now it's nearly impossible to get lost in most of Manhattan—all you have to do is walk at right angles and count—but further south the streets begin to veer quite spectacularly in new directions—almost as though they want to fold back on themselves—west becomes north, east becomes south and then north-northwest ... Have you been?

JEFFREY

Once. Class field trip.

CYNTHIA

You have to go back. Los Angeles and New York. You can't have the one without the other.

JEFFREY

Why?

CYNTHIA

Find out for yourself.

JEFFREY

So you were saying ...?

CYNTHIA

Yes. Manhattan. The Village—that's where the roads go screwy—and I was sitting by myself outside a tiny coffeehouse, scarf around my neck, collection of short fiction in my hand—very much the *New Yorker*—and this sweet older woman walked over to me, family in tow, a scowl on every face but hers, and she asked me how to get back to Times Square. Which is only about forty-five blocks away, but I smiled very sympathetically and directed her to the nearest subway. The one and the nine, I think it was. And just like that, I was a citizen of New York. Initiated into New York life. You know, a part of me is still sitting outside that coffeehouse, offering directions and a sympathetic smile to every tourist kind enough to ask.

JEFFREY

And your goal is to replicate that experience in every city in America.

CYNTHIA

In the world. I know, it's extraordinarily silly, and I'm trying my best not to sound too enthusiastic ... But there's simply no other way to sound. It's one of the most rewarding experiences I know.

JEFFREY

Where did it happen in this city?

CYNTHIA

Haven't you guessed?

JEFFREY

I don't think so.

CYNTHIA

It's happening now.

JEFFREY

Where are we going?

CYNTHIA

This looks good.

JEFFREY

Right here?

CYNTHIA

Let's go.

(She hops off the swing and pulls JEFFREY after her. The bench reascends into the flies. During the following they make a slow loop around the stage and then down into the audience, at last walking through the center aisle and out the back of the auditorium)

CYNTHIA (Cont'd)

(as they walk)

Tell me about where you have lived, Jeffrey.

JEFFREY

How well do you know Maryland?

CYNTHIA

Not well.

JEFFREY

Tyrone's never taken you back to meet the folks?

CYNTHIA

Once. They'd rather come out here.

JEFFREY

For obvious reasons. Then you've probably seen all you need to see.

CYNTHIA

You don't like Maryland?

JEFFREY

I like Maryland. Lots of trees. Baltimore, Washington, Appalachia and the Atlantic, all within driving distance. There's just nothing overwhelming to say, not about my neighborhood. Maybe you haven't noticed, but the East Coast is actually one giant suburb. We just get off at different exits along the interstate. Do you ever watch movies about life in small towns? They still make a few of them, though they tend to set them no later than 1970. But there's always a couple of scenes that show up, in one context or another—the slow walk down Main Street, typically a detour into a general store, the private hideaway just outside town where everyone leans against the rocks or tree trunks to make room for summer passing them by. Maybe—it's quite possible—no one really does any of these things. They're only figments in the underutilized imaginations of screenwriters and art directors, who look around Los Angeles and wish there were more Main Streets and rocky forest hideaways. My own childhood was certainly never set in

that kind of movie. But last summer as I drove through Midwestern towns and Southwestern towns with populations in the hundreds—sometimes less! ... Let me ask you something—in a town of, say, fifty-six people or thirty-seven people, does the mayor go out to the population sign with a bucket of paint every time a baby is born or an old man dies? Does it even matter at that point? Or maybe that's the point it matters most, I don't know. But once or twice it was all I could do not to turn my car down a side road and make number thirty-eight. Let Tyrone hire an assistant with actual qualifications.

CYNTHIA

What qualifications would you bring your thirty-seven neighbors?

JEFFREY

An outsider's perspective.

CYNTHIA

Cultivated in the great strip mall back East?

JEFFREY

I'm telling you, I would be a completely different person if someone had cleared away all the clutter and let me grow up ... exposed.

CYNTHIA

To ...?

JEFFREY

Is this the devil's advocate speaking or do you really want to know?

CYNTHIA

Do you know?

JEFFREY

Of course I know! And so do you. You're telling me those children you played with in the Mediterranean backwaters weren't better off for having been surrounded by clean lines and clear spaces?

CYNTHIA

Many of them were very happy.

JEFFREY

There you go.

CYNTHIA

But there were only a few I kept in touch with as adults.

JEFFREY

So?

CYNTHIA

If you're not happy in childhood you have bigger problems than the number of houses on your block.

JEFFREY

I had a happy enough childhood. I'm not looking to win a consolation prize here, I'm just ... You've traveled all over the world. Why do you always come home when the trip ends? What do you love so much about it?

CYNTHIA

It's my home.

JEFFREY

Your home can be anywhere you stick a house. What makes a house in your yard different from a house in anybody else's?

CYNTHIA

How can I explain something like that?

JEFFREY

I should just know, right? Intuition?

CYNTHIA

Yes.

JEFFREY

That's my point. I don't know. And it's no one's fault. It's not my parents' fault. But it's not my fault either. It's a product of the landscape, no different from corn or wheat or dandelion spores.

CYNTHIA

They take root too.

JEFFREY

I know. I don't despair—I love dandelion spores.

CYNTHIA

They are pleasant.

JEFFREY

Of such pleasantries are composed my own humble strivings.

CYNTHIA

Whatever assistance I can offer.

JEFFREY

I appreciate that. Try to send some of those good vibes Tyrone's way, would you?

CYNTHIA

I can't do that, Jeffrey.

JEFFREY

(cheerfully)

Then we're all of us lost.

(They reach the back of the auditorium and exit)