

A Short Play By Warren Leight: “Union Square Incident”

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Union Square Incident premiered on November 14, 2016 as part of The 24 Hour Plays on Broadway (Mark Armstrong, Executive Director; Tina Fallon, Founding Producer) at the American Airlines Theatre. It was directed by Elena Araoz with the following cast: Ashlie Atkinson, Jason Biggs, Michael Cerveris, Russell G. Jones, Olivia Washington and Julie White.

Warren Leight’s plays include *Side Man* (Tony Award), *No Foreigners Beyond This Point* (Drama Desk nomination), *Glimmer, Glimmer and Shine* (ATCA nomination). In TV he’s been the Showrunner and Executive Producer of *Law and Order: SVU* (Imagen, NAACP, and Prism Awards), *In Treatment* (Peabody Award), *Lights Out*, and the Edgar-winning *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*.

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Jason Biggs and Ashlie Atkinson in “Union Square Incident”

Lights up on a bare room with a few benches and one door upstage left or right. We will learn it’s a holding pen of some sort. On one bench, a black man, RUSSELL, is seated. His pockets have been emptied and turned inside out. He has no belt or shoelaces. He’s stressed out. In a corner, rocking back and forth, ASHLIE, a Brooklyn activist, is clearly in a deep state of distress. She doesn’t even notice now as the door opens. And MICHAEL, a middle-aged, Upper West Side white male, enters. Pockets turned inside out. No belt. He tries to bargain with JASON, the bro-guard, at the door.

Michael If I could just have my phone, for a second. My wife is, she’s not well. She’s been anxious ever since the... I need to let her know where I am.

Jason As soon as everything’s cleared up, you can make a call.

Michael She’ll be worried. I need to let her know where I am..

Jason I’m sure she’ll be fine. Okay, pops. Just relax. (to Ashlie) Hey you, my twitchy friend.

Jason goes to Ashlie, who is startled by his touch. He motions her toward the door. She's broken.

Jason Guess what?

Ashlie I give up.

Jason That's all we wanted to hear. And now, let's see that smile of yours, from your Avi. (He mimics her Avi smile) You are free to go.

Ashlie Really. That's it?

Jason (for everyone's benefit) I told you, if you have nothing to worry about, you have nothing to worry about.

Jason walks Ashlie out. The door closes in Michael's face. He looks around.

Michael Where am I?

Russell I don't know. I don't think it's the Tombs. Some place new they must have set up.

Michael New place?

Russell I thought we went over a bridge. And it feels kind of... off the grid. I imagine they want these places out of public view.

Michael C'mon, it's a little soon for all that to be happening. Don't you think.

Russell They knew they were going to win. They must have had it in the works.

Michael You know, no offense, you sound a little... paranoid.

Russell Okay, so what do you think is going on? We're like, being punked for a Prank TV show.

Michael I don't think we're under arrest.

Russell Not officially. They're supposed to tell you if you're under arrest. They tell you anything?

Michael I was marching. Up from Union Square. They said everyone move to the sidewalk. I tried to move, but it was crowded, before I could get there, these two guys grabbed me –

Russell Were they in uniform?

Michael No. Suits.

Russell Could be FBI? Or some bullshit Task Force.

Michael They put me in a van. Then here. They took my wallet. My cell phone.

Russell Did you shut it down first?

Michael No. I mean, he asked for my cell — he said it was protocol.

Russell You got to shut it down. And have a strong password — they're probably putting your photos through facial recognition.

Michael It's mostly just pictures of my kids.

Russell Also going through your emails, your social media, your texts. And every place you've been is geo-tagged. Unless you've been using a Tor browser, or a two-factor authentication on –

Michael My wife and I share an AOL account. I don't think we ever set that –

Russell AOL? Nah... I don't think you did.

Michael Anyway, they can't go through the email... not without a warrant.

Russell I wish I had a pen right now. I keep a little list. I call it "funny shit white people say."



Michael Cerveris, Russell G. Jones and Julie White in "Union Square Incident"

The door opens again. JULIE walks in. A very angry, put-together middle-aged white woman. She has no purse; if wearing pants, her pockets are turned inside out. No jewelry. Except for a Hillary button. She's going at it, with Jason, who's annoying the fuck out of her.

Julie You can't actually do this, you know. You can't detain people without –

Jason Ma'am, instead of being all upset, just try to relax –

Julie Relax. Relax and enjoy it? You can't do this!! I am a lawyer. I know my rights.

Jason No one is violating anyone's rights. You're not being detained.

Julie So I'm free to leave?

Jason Just as soon as everything is cleared up. Are we good.

Julie NO, bro, we're not good. And if you can't talk to me, without patronizing me, I'd rather you not talk to me at all.

Jason Suit yourself. Have a nice day.

He closes the door on her. She looks around.

Julie That little pissant son of a bitch. "You're not being detained." He just lied straight to my face.

Russell If nothing else, they have turned that into an art form.

Russell gets up, as Michael helps Julie to a bench.

Julie This really is completely illegal.

Michael You're a lawyer?

Julie What are you?

Michael An aging liberal.

Russell With an AOL account.

Julie Ha! You two were marching?

Russell I saw them taking this girl down. In her twenties. I started to video it –

Julie Which is perfectly legal.

Russell For now. And... I end up here. I don't know what happened to the girl.

Julie These motherfuckers... "Don't worry, he doesn't mean those things he's saying. It's just to get elected. There'll be checks and balances. It can't happen here. It won't happen here."

Michael Guys, take it easy, nothing is happening here, with all due respect –

Julie Don't fucking say that. Anytime any man anywhere says all due respect, it means he has absolutely no respect for you, or for that matter, any woman.

Michael You're sounding a little hys — (catches himself)

Julie Hysterical. Go ahead, say it. Go on.

Michael looks to Russell, hoping for what, male support?

Russell Don't look at me. I'm with her.

Julie Do you know what this year has told me. I don't matter. The only reason a woman ever matters is her vagina, and now that mine's too old and He doesn't want to grab it, it's okay for me to be marginalized or discarded or vilified. Even by other women.

She breaks down. Russell awkwardly comforts her.

Michael I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to negate –

Russell Give her a moment.

Julie No... tell me. What weren't you trying to negate?

Michael Your feelings. It's just... we're all feeling raw. But, I have to believe things aren't going to be as bad as everyone says. It's easy to demonize the other side. To assume the worst. If we could try to

understand where they are coming from –

Russell Oh I know where they're coming from. The KKK, the FBI, the KGB — this wasn't an election, it was a coup d'état.

Michael No... it was an election. We lost. They won.

Julie First of all, they didn't win. Second of all, they rigged it.

Michael Now who do you sound like? It's not rigged. He tapped into something.

Russell American Homegrown Racism, brewed to perfection.

Michael Yeah, some of that. And some genuine anger, and frustration. And — let's be fair. She had a lot of baggage.

Julie Don't you dare. Do not start with that false equivalence bullshit. He's a draft dodgin', tax dodging, climate-change-denying racist misogynist, who will deport your family and potentially destroy the world, or at least all civil liberties, but — hey, how about those emails.

Michael It wasn't just the emails. Or the KGB or misogyny or racism or even her not having a message. It was a perfect storm.



Julie White in "Union Square Incident"

The door opens again. And now OLIVIA, a young black woman enters. She's a mess, she's been crying. She's bruised, clothes a little ripped.

Jason Here we go. Nice and easy.

Olivia I want to see him. Why can't I see him.

Jason Why don't you just sit down. Let your friends here take care of you. (to the rest) Folks. This young lady's had a bit of a hard day. Can you make some room for her.

Olivia all but collapses into Michael and Russell's arms. They walk her down to the bench. Julie helps hold her there. She's in some kind of shock.

Olivia They must have shot him. He might be dead.

Michael No one's been shot. That's not going on –

Russell and Julie glare at him.

Julie Do any of us have any idea what's going on? (off Michael) I don't think so. So how about we ask her what happened to her, instead of telling her?

Michael (chastened) What... happened?

Olivia They were putting some people in these pens. You know, with the metal rails. And my boyfriend, he

noticed two of them weren't on right, so he worked them apart. We squeezed through, and ran. Down the block, and right into this group of, I don't know, counter-protesters. I guess. They came like, out of nowhere.

Russell (sotto) Or not.

Olivia They saw us, started chanting all kinds of names. By then the Security People were behind us, but instead of stopping them, they let the mob beat on him, and pull on me. Grabbing at me, everywhere. Finally one of the Security says, that's enough, fellas. And they stop. Part like the Red Sea. Security took my boyfriend away, he was bleeding bad from the head.

Julie I'm so sorry.

Olivia We weren't even marching. Just came up out of the subway at Union Square and it was on. I tried to tell them that, but –

Russell It doesn't matter. Wrong race, wrong place, wrong time.

Michael I can't believe this — it can't be — this isn't happening. Not in New York. New York is different. You heard the Governor, he said it would be a sanctuary.

Russell And you think the new regime is just gonna be ok with that.

Michael Yeah. I do. I know my city, I know my county.

Julie So we're all paranoid, and it's just a little swing of the pendulum. And nobody's rights are going to be taken away...

The door opens. Jason comes in, with a big smile on his face. He has a RED BAG for Julie. A TIE for Michael. Cell phones, belts for Michael and Russell.

Jason Okay. That didn't take so long did it.

He hands Julie, Michael, and Russell some of their possessions back.

Michael We're okay to go?

Jason Like I said, if you have nothing to worry about, you have nothing to worry about. Sorry for the inconvenience. What we're dealing with, there are a lot of moving parts. But cut to the chase, there's no reason to detain you any longer.

Julie You said we weren't being detained.

Jason (almost laughing) Are you sure I said that? Either way, it's in the past. Right?

Russell (looks at cell phone) My photos have been removed.

Jason Oh have they. I'm sorry about that. It must have bounced around a bit.

Julie (checking bag) I had a cell phone, where is it.

Jason If it turns up, we know where you live. Anyway, I know you all don't want to be here any longer than you have to, so let's not worry about the little losses, okay.

The four look at each other.

Michael Guys...

Russell Fuck it, let's go. (Russell looks to Olivia, who may be in shock. He goes to help her up.) C'mon, sweetheart, the door's open.

Jason Actually. Not so fast there. Right now, it's open for you three.

Russell You said we were all free to go.

Jason Did I say all? I don't think I said all. She's had a rough day, we just want to make sure we know, and she knows what's what before she goes home. Nothing bad's going to happen.

Julie But she will be going home.

Jason Everyone's a winner here. So many winners. Believe me. Eyes on the prize everyone. (to Michael) I know you want to call your wife, she must be worried sick.

Jason leads, Michael starts to follow. Then Jason notices Russell and Julie are looking at each other.

Jason Folks, operators are standing by. Make your move.

Russell I believe I'll sit awhile. Keep this young lady company.

Julie now turns, goes back to Olivia as well.

Julie I'll stay too. You said it's just a little while. So, why not.

Jason To be honest, there's no way of knowing how long this is all going to last.

Julie (sharp) No there isn't, is there?

Jason, whose tone has been jocular throughout, suddenly turns full-bore threatening.

Jason Are you people kidding me. You've done nothing but bitch and complain since you got here. Now I hold the door open for you, and you pull this crap. For this friggin whore.

Julie You won. You people fucking won. Why are you still so angry?

Jason What you said before, about being marginalized, discarded, you got that right.

Julie and Russell realize they've been recorded. They glance around for cameras.

Jason C'mon pops, you don't need these losers.

Michael Actually, I might as well wait too.

Jason Are you FUCKING kidding me, you stupid cuck. We're not playing around here. This isn't a feel good after-school special.

Michael I think we get that.

Russell But this young lady, she's frightened, so for now, we'll just stay with her.

Jason This could take a lot longer than you realize.

Julie No, we know. So... until it ends, we're just going to be here for each other.

LIGHTS OUT.