

The Gulf of Misunderstanding, or, North and South America Looking at Each Other¹

A Chris Browne Valenzuela play based on the Tancredo LeBrun² novel

(Sample)

¹ This sample of the play is written fully in English. A bilingual version of the play (where the characters speak in Spanish when they would be speaking in the language) is also available for performance.

² Tancredo LeBrun was a Chilean writer, journalist, teacher, workers' rights activist and politician of the first half of the Twentieth Century. LeBrun's entire oeuvre is currently in the public domain, and Chris Browne Valenzuela (the playwright of this piece) is his great-grandson.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Miss Mabel Jones: A 20-something government worker charged with examining correspondence in the Spanish Department of the New York's Censor's Office.

Mr. Sebastián Herrera: A 30-something Chilean businessman caught in the United States during World War I.

PROLOGUE

(The following paragraphs should be projected onto the backwall of the stage before the play starts)

No sooner had the United States entered the European War than the necessity was seen for an official censorship of international correspondence. Accordingly, in New York, San Francisco and New Orleans, the government established offices authorized to examine every letter which left the country.

After the sensational discoveries which brought to light the cable correspondence of Count von Luxburg during his stay in Buenos Aires, the order was given to use very special care with all the letters coming or going to South America.

Miss Mabel Jones was one of the staff charged with the duty of examining correspondence in the Spanish Department of the New York's Censor's Office.

SCENE I

The stage is split into two. The stage right half is Miss Mabel Jones' office. A simple 1918 office covered with papers. A picture of President Woodrow Wilson hangs on the wall. There's a typewriter on the desk. A pair of small flags: an American one and a New York State one adorn the one corner of her desk that's not covered in correspondence. On her desk there are three receptacles of documents labeled "To be reviewed", "Clear", and "Flag for further review." This last one rests empty. Stage right is Mr. Herrera's hotel room. While not a completely luxurious space, some of its elements are reminiscent of the Gilded Age. This half of the stage features an arm chair and a desk, much more neatly arranged.

The lights come up slowly on Miss Jones' half of the stage. She is sitting on her desk going through letters while muttering some of the words she reads out loud. Her desk light is on and it's clearly evening. While she is tired, there is a certain amount of contained and prideful joy in her work.

Miss Jones: *"Dear mother, everything is Jake here..." "We picked up a dog from the street. I'm attaching a picture" A puppy! (Miss Jones looks at the attached picture as her expression changes from excitement to puzzlement, and goes back to the letter) "unfortunately, Firulais moved, so he looks more like an ink blotch or a ghost." (as she places it in the "Clear" receptacle.) Well, taking pictures of animals is a fool's errand. Whoever figures that one out will make Edison look like an amateur.*

(Picking up one letter after another from the "To be reviewed" pile)

"Don't forget to feed Julieta every morning at..." (she drops it into the "Clear" bin) "Why don't you write to me weekly anymore? Is there another ma—" (she drops it into the "Clear" bin) "Aunt Gertrudis wrote to me saying I wasn't getting any of the inheritance, please tell that ancient slut—" Clear! ...and not any of my business.

From Mr. Sebastián Herrera: "My dear Soledad, ...this North American world seems simply horrific" (Miss Jones is intrigued, but not yet alarmed) "I don't think it will ever be worth it to bring you and the kids to this land of ungodly materialism." ...That can't be right.

(As Miss Jones continues to read, the lights shift from illuminating her side of the stage to illuminate Mr. Herrera's. He is revealed writing his letter as he speaks it out loud. Their voices coincide for a few seconds as both sides are momentarily lit.)

Miss Jones/Mr. Herrera: *"This is a country of dollars and cents. 'Business' is this nation's only true God"*

Mr. Herrera: “With us the first question of friends when they meet is naturally ‘How is your family?’ Here the usual greeting is ‘*How’s business?*’ The fact that men are appraised here only for their money is crystallized even in their language. We say: ‘Someone has a million pesos;; but here they say of a man: ‘*He is worth* a million dollars,’ which means that this is his value, the public’s appraisal of him. He is worth as much as the number of his dollars.’

This country of Money-Makers and practical men has not produced a James Watt, who discovered the strength of steam, but they have a Robert Fulton! who applied it to their industrial ends. Science is not studied here for its own sake, but for the sake of money.

You must not be misled by the frequent news in the papers regarding some endowments or philanthropic gifts from the rich man of the North. This is ‘advertising;’ it brings more money; it is a sound investment. I have heard here of a man, that making his last will and testament, leaves five thousand dollars to each of his servants who have been with him for more than ten years. ‘But we have no servants who have stayed so long as that,’ objects his wife. ‘Never mind,’ replies the philanthropist, ‘it will look well in the papers.’

And speaking of rich men! The millionaire is a thing of yesteryear. Now they compete to become billionaires! To obtain and show off obscene wealth, as if what is not shown does not exist. Eclectic mansions in the worst possible style line the avenues that thunder with the sound of Mr. Ford’s infernal machine: the automobile. Everything is furious and raucous. Like a spoiled child who never got enough attention.

But this child is an entire people. A materialistic people, a people whose only thought is money, who dream of money, who exploit beauty, who make of religion a trade, a metalized nation that cares about quantity over quality...”

(The lights switch back slowly between the two halves of the stage. Once again, the two characters start talking simultaneously while they are both lit until Miss Jones is left by herself.)

Miss Jones/Mr. Herrera: ...which does not scruple to coin love, will not hesitate to trade in justice, honor, truth and all the most sacred of the Old-World ideals for dollars and cents.

Miss Jones: “*With the most affectionate greetings to all, and a thousand kisses from your adoring husband,*” ...That can’t be right. Well... It’s not dangerous. Not exactly treason material... *(she puts the letter back in the envelope and hovers it over the “Clear” receptacle.)* Although... this poor woman... she shouldn’t be left with this and only this idea of my country... of my people! ...Mabel! Don’t let it become a bee in your bonnet. None of my business!

(She drops the letter violently in the “Clear” receptacle and walks away. After a moment she looks back, heavy with temptation)

Miss Jones: But... what if it is my business? Am I not a *United States Government Employee?* Tasked to defend the wellbeing and honor of my country? ...Double-U, Double-U, Double-U, Double-U, Dee. *(She looks wistfully at the Woodrow Wilson portrait on the wall)* What Would Woodrow Wilson Do? *(as if an epiphany had suddenly come, she takes the portrait from the wall and looks at it)*

Well, he wouldn’t stand still. The man who courageously leads us in this European war for democracy and freedom. In his own words: “The World Must be made safe for democracy!” “I am sorry for those that

disagree with me because I know that they are wrong!" "WE ARE NOT PUT INTO THIS WORLD TO SIT STILL AND KNOW, WE ARE PUT INTO IT TO ACT!!!"

(She kisses the portrait and puts it back on the wall. She descends like a hawk onto her typewriter. We hear the call of a red-tailed hawk that's often confused with a bald eagle, and starts typing while saying out loud:)

Miss Jones: "DEAR MADAM, YOU COULD FIT WHAT YOUR HUSBAND KNOWS OF MY COUNTRY IN A TEA STRAINER!" *(She stops herself. Takes a breath, tears the page apart and starts over. Much more composed)* "My dear madam, for the first time in our history, the government has appointed clerks to review international correspondence. Your husband's letter has fallen under my responsibility. The missive is not of a serious enough nature that it should be intercepted, but I dare think that neither you nor your husband will take it amiss if I attach a few... comments on the impressions he has expressed to you. Please excuse my intrusion into your private correspondence, of which I am guilty, driven by an irresistible sense of justice.

"I don't believe my country can be fairly accused of materialism, nor that we worship no other God than the dollar. I am convinced that my nation is the most idealistic in the world. Let me remind you that as soon as we learned of the horrors of the war in Belgium, a unanimous impulse was felt throughout our republic to aid the cruelly attacked kingdom, not only with financial resources, but with the lives of our soldiers. My country continually gives millions to aid distant and unfortunate lands, as well as our fellow countrymen in need. I need only recall the heroism shown by my compatriots during earthquake in San Francisco or the volcanic eruption in Messina. Is this materialism, my lady? Is this the selfishness of vulgar misers?

"There is no better example of the generosity of my people than how we welcome the migrant. As we receive millions of souls, the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Where else is the refugee treated as a citizen, with the same rights as the native-born? Where is the law imposed by Jesus Christ himself to welcome the stranger more fervently fulfilled?

"The spirit of giving is an intrinsic part of our national soul. We have great millionaires, it's true, but they understand the responsibility of money and give a large part of their fortunes to the good of the community. Carnegie, a hunter of the dollar like few others, has donated two hundred million dollars to establish libraries throughout the country. With forty million dollars, Rockefeller founded the University of Chicago. Henry Ford's Peace Expedition may have been foolish, but this was the folly of a dreamer, of an idealist, not that of a money-grubber. As a proud American, I can tell you with confidence that there is no act less patriotic than to accumulate a hoard and sit on it like the dragons in the tales of old.

"When your husband accuses us of materialism, what he's really seeing is 'practical idealism.' Yes, we want to make more money; but it's not because of an obsession with it, it is because of what money can do. If we focus on quantity before quality, it's because it's better to ensure that every citizen has access to bread, shelter, and clothing; and once this mission is achieved, to raise the entire population to the quality commensurate with their individual efforts.

"In the words of our president: *'We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We shall be satisfied when these rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them'*

“Don’t you think our Wilson is a poet of international politics? I could write much more on the subject, but I am convinced that if a Cervantes were to write a twentieth-century Quixote, he would show our country gallantly fighting for high, shadowy ideals with such tenacity, faith and generosity and with such a spirit of sacrifice that will turn the distant cloudland of our dreams into a radiant sun of reality.

“I beg you once again, madam, to excuse my intrusion, but I feel sure that you will understand and forgive me.” Signed: “Your Friend from the Other Continent”

(She picks the original letter from the “Clear” receptacle, stuffs her own in the envelope so that they are both together and triumphantly drops it back. In her ecstasy she takes her coat and hat, blows a kiss to Woodrow Wilson and walks away. “Stars and Stripes forever” sounds as these actions are being carried out. Dim to Blackout as the music also fades out. After a brief moment the lights come back up and she runs back.)

Miss Jones: WHAT ARE YOU DOING, MABEL?! YOU COULD GET FIRED. YOU COULD GET ARRESTED! THIS IS NOT JUST UNORTHODOX, IT’S ILEGAL!

(She picks the envelope back, struggles to get her own letter out and prepares to rip it in half until she catches Woodrow Wilson out of the corner of her eye)

Miss Jones: Double-U, Double-U, Double-U, Double-U, Dee. Double-U, Double-U, Double-U, Double-U, Dee. Double-U, Double-U, Double-U, Double-U, Dee...

(As she repeats the acronym to herself, she slowly stuffs the letter back, puts it in the receptacle and backs away. Blackout.)

SCENE II

The lights slowly come up on Mable Jones' office. The setting is similar to the beginning of Scene I. Some time has passed

Miss Jones: *"I get dizzy just from looking at the Woolworth building from the ground."* Clear! *(She puts it in the clear pile.)* And how sweet.

(She picks another letter from the "To be reviewed" pile)

Miss Jones: Let's see... "Herrera" *(she suddenly recognizes the name.)* HERRERA! SEBASTIÁN HERRERA! ...Oh. Oh. Oh. Uuuuh. *(She looks at the portrait of Woodrow Wilson.)* What have we done? Oh, Mabel, you've really put yourself behind the eight ball now.

(She slowly and painfully pulls the letter from the envelope with just one eye open, until she pulls it out swiftly. She starts reading frantically)

Miss Jones: *"My dear Soledad..." "How are the kids..." "the weather is much more humid than in Santiago..."* *(she scans quickly the rest of the letter and then lifts her sight)* He doesn't know... He doesn't know! *(looking into the distance)* Oh, Soledad Elgueta de Herrera, my friend from the other continent, you have kept our secret! Our sisterhood has begun and no man or border could possibly challenge it! ...or ...you know ...your husband hasn't received your reply yet. At any rate *(looking at Woodrow Wilson)* we are safe for now. Never again. That's enough adventures for us.

(She goes back to the letter)

Miss Jones: *"The American Woman is not a Woman. They belong to a third sex infected by suffragism."* *(she stops and looks at the audience)* Oh no.