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Bird in the Hand

**Comedy by
Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas**



Bird in the Hand



Comedy. By Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas. *Cast: 2m., 2w., 2 to 3 either gender (more possible).* A man who runs a theme park in Miami dedicated to tropical birds takes us on a tour of his final year in high school. He explains how he came to inherit the park from his father and lose his best friend in the process. The narrator feels caged and out of place, much like the imported birds he cares for. He considers choices he might have made and daydreams about how his life might have turned out differently. A wry comedy full of striking images, the play was awarded the coveted designation of Critics' Pick by *The New York Times*. *Minimal set.* *Approximate running time: 90 minutes. Code: BK9.*

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Bird in the Hand

By

JORGE IGNACIO CORTIÑAS



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(BIRD IN THE HAND)

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Bird in the Hand was originally commissioned by the Center Theatre Group, Mark Taper Forum. Sustained developmental support was provided by New Dramatists and Fulcrum Theater.

Bird in the Hand was also developed at the O’Neill National Playwrights Conference and read at the New York Theatre Workshop and as part of Hartford Stage’s Brand: NEW Festival.

The premiere of *Bird in the Hand* was produced by Fulcrum Theatre and presented at Theater for the New City in New York. Performances began on August 29, 2012.

CAST

Felix Debargo Sanyal
Gabriel..... Alejandro Rodríguez
Susan Susannah Flood
Vanessa..... Crystal Finn
Chorus of Birds Alicia Ohs, Robert Grimm, Theo Koppel

PRODUCTION STAFF

Director Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas
Choreography..... Katie Workum
Set Jiyoun Chang
Lights Kate Ashton
Sound Matt Stone
Costumes..... Mark Nagle

For the violinist

“Unhappy birds, I grieve for you, you who once were kings.”

—*The Birds*, Aristophanes

Bird in the Hand

CHARACTERS

FELIX: A 27-year-old man who begins to recount events that transpired when he was 18 years old. Cuban-American, smart, a prankster, best friends with Gabriel.

GABRIEL: Cuban-American, 18 years old. The sort of young man who wears his hair parted and takes his dinner plate into the kitchen when he is done eating. He is dating Susan.

SUSAN: Anglo-American, 17 years old. She is thin, and she can't understand why everyone else isn't also thin. She is the sister of Vanessa.

VANESSA: Anglo-American, full-bodied, a *Venus* by Rubens. She is extremely anxious and entirely sincere.

VARIOUS TROPICAL BIRDS (nonindigenous):
FLAMINGOS, PARROTS, MACAWS, etc.

TIME

The present

PLACE

Miami

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Dialogue in parentheses is spoken as something like a reversal, an aside, a surrender.

The characters in this play don't typically argue; they don't typically fight. Possibly never. If it appears that there is conflict in a scene, try again.

A NOTE ON THE STAGING

The play works best with a pared down style of staging—no blackouts, no costume changes and no attempts to achieve naturalistic illusion. Aim for the effect of an ensemble telling a story.

Some scenes begin or end with moments of narration. The narration is always told from Felix's point of view, but the speaking of his text is passed along among the performers the way relay runners pass on a baton. The performers should move from narration into their characters and back into the narration with a minimum of fuss. The director should resist the temptation to illustrate or explain this device, so for example no one should imitate the performer playing Felix, nor should there be any overlapping of lines. Some audience members may experience mild dissociation which eventually evolves into melancholic harmony. The play welcomes this effect because it mirrors the experience of the teenage characters.

Finally, when designing and staging the birds, whatever the solution employed, keep in mind how strange and lonely they are, how their presence haunts the play with evidence of exile.

Bird in the Hand

SCENE 1

FELIX. I look back at my story the way a tourist studies a cheap map. I'm trying to remember how I got from point A to the point called The-Man-I-Am-Today. You would think there would be a line I could draw. You would think I'd be able to retrace my steps.

Let me rewind.

Point A was the place I grew up: Florida. Maybe you don't care, but just so you know, people actually have to grow up in Florida.

So back at point A, my father was this immigrant. Now thing about immigrants is they're prone to clichéd behavior. So it's like my father was compelled by evolution, you know, to set up a "small business." Except instead of setting up something normal like a corner store or a shop that sold religious statues, I mean even a medical supply outlet would have been acceptable—but no. My father went and opened a theme park. For the tourists. Bird Land Family Theme Park. He even did these commercials, which everyone in my high school made fun of, where he'd use his thick accent and say, "Come and see my birds of the tropics."

I was so traumatized by this that I developed a mild case of Stockholm syndrome and so I ended up getting a job there. The tourists would waddle in with their lobster sunburns and their unflattering shorts and I'd tell them the story of how—better yet, let me show you.

The flamingos were the main attraction, i.e., they were over here.

(A FLAMINGO squawks.)

FELIX *(cont'd)*. And I'd walk in and I'd go, yeah, um, welcome to the Flamingo Exhibit I guess. And yes, that is a bad attitude you hear in my voice because it's my right to resent being guilt-tripped by my father into having to work here.

We've started now. That was me back at Point A. That was back when I was a bit of a smartass.

So, first thing: The flamingos you see here today are so not native to Florida. They were brought here, just like everyone else was. Total fact. The dude who first brought these flamingos to Florida was this, you know, real estate developer. This was way back. Before there were shopping malls or tollbooths.

(A FLAMINGO squawks.)

FELIX *(cont'd)*. See, this city used to be swamp. The real estate developer dude came and saw that this land was lonely and overgrown, so he sails to Cuba and buys a flock of flamingos. When he lets them out of their shipping crates, the flamingos start to squawk. I'm talking major honking. Then they take off, circle once in the sky—and fly themselves right back to Cuba.

Real estate developer goes back to Cuba. Buys another flock. But this time he clips their wings. Every six weeks he clipped their wings. When the flamingos laid eggs, he took the chicks away, raised them separately. Told them this was paradise.

That real estate developer is dead now, but the flamingos are still here. The animal rights petition people say we

should send the birds back. And it makes you think: if bringing these birds to Miami was a mistake, then so is this job. If building a city on this swampland was a mistake, then so are our lives.

Any questions?

(A FLAMINGO squawks.)

FELIX *(cont'd)*. Then thanks and come back and see us again.

(The group of tourists shuffles off. GABRIEL approaches holding a broom and a dustpan.)

GABRIEL. Yo, Felixcito. Your tours are getting a little too ... goth.

FELIX. This is Gabriel. He's my best friend.

GABRIEL. How do you get away with that shit? It's like you're surrounded by this shield that blinds management or something.

FELIX. Yeah. That shield is called charisma.

GABRIEL. It's called being the owner's son.

FELIX. So that's what you think of me?

GABRIEL. Yeah, kiss ass, I do.

FELIX. Dude—you haven't even heard my latest revolutionary plan. Mind you, this is classified. (I have a way to get these flamingos back to Cuba, where they belong.) I'd love to tell you the plan, but the question is: Can you handle it?

GABRIEL. Whoa, I'm kinda focused on trying to pass the SAT. I've been studying. Quiz me.

FELIX. Seriously soldier, what time are you free tonight?

GABRIEL. Listen to you. You don't even have to study. Everyone says you're getting into what? Harvard?

- FELIX. Don't worry about the math section. Cut your losses. Concentrate on the verbal.
- GABRIEL. Is this you quizzing me yet?
- FELIX. Quandary.
- GABRIEL. Quan ... like in Spanish, cuanto, quandary means how many? Choice. Um, having to pick?
- FELIX. The SAT is in English, on account of this being America, just so you know. And the word means dilemma. Try vain.
- GABRIEL. When is this test again?
- FELIX. Three weeks. Vain.
- GABRIEL. Like in biology class?
- FELIX. V-A-I-N. As in hopeless. Futile.
- GABRIEL. How did you figure that out?
- FELIX. That one you just have to memorize. Look, go study some more. I have another tour group coming in.
- GABRIEL. Kiss ass.
- FELIX. So, Gabriel, what time am I picking you up? And remember—classified.
- GABRIEL. Thing is, I have another date. With Susan.
- FELIX. OK. I guess I'll spend Friday night at home so my Cuban dad can stare at me and wonder why his only son is bad at sports and has no friends. Awesome.
- GABRIEL. Well who knows if I can even make my date. I'm supposed to be grounded 'cause my parents are being crazy refugees.
- FELIX. Again?
- GABRIEL. No worries. I made an extra key for their car. I wait till they're asleep and I sneak out the window. They'll never know.
- FELIX. So you're going to steal a car from confused senior citizens?
- GABRIEL. It's not stealing if you're related.

FELIX. Know what? Don't worry about my secret plan. I'll find some other best friend to do it with.

GABRIEL. Harsh dude. (*Starts to leave, then ...*) Hey loco. Wouldn't it be badass if this SAT included some Spanish words? 'Cause if it did, I would know some of those and that would give me an advantage?

FELIX. The test is multiple choice. You'll be fine.

(GABRIEL exits. FELIX watches him go. Then the next tour begins.)

FELIX (*cont'd*). Hi and, yeah, welcome to the Flamingo Exhibit. These flamingos you see here today are so out of place, so far from their native ecology, that um, they've started dying off. Enjoy them while you can.

I mean, my father is going to have to pay for my college tuition and you tourists are clearly willing to pay for admission and the birds are going to die eventually so it's not like it's anyone's fault.

Every once in a while, and if we're lucky, maybe they'll do it today, the flamingos start to squawk. They start running back and forth—you watch them you swear something is about to happen. They say if you see a flock of flamingos flying it looks like fireworks in the daytime—swirls of red and black feathers. I bet that looks amazing. But right in the middle of their loudest squawking—the flamingos stop. It gets so quiet afterwards, you can hear mosquitoes buzzing.

Maybe the flamingos shut up when they remember—oh yeah—our wings are clipped. They could try walking, theoretically they could walk right out of here, but probably they're not sure where they would go. Probably they can't remember where they're from. Who their friends are supposed to be.

Any questions?

(Static.

FELIX looks at one of the pink FLAMINGOS. The FLAMINGO looks at FELIX.)

SCENE 2

SUSAN. Also, back then, there were more characters. There was this anorexic girl and her sister who were also part of the whole story. These two sisters lived in a house without any adults. I was never invited over, on account of the anorexic not liking me too much? But point is if I'm going to tell you the story then I have to imagine what went on in that house. What did white people in Miami talk about when they were by themselves? Probably, they weren't talking about Fidel Castro. But they still had to fill up all that space in those quiet, air conditioned houses.

I figure they talked about airport security.

(VANESSA is getting ready for her shift at airport security.)

VANESSA. Thing about working for airport security is, everyone wants to hear about my job. They want the scary stories. If I were a CD, stories about my job would be my greatest hits. That's all people want to hear. It thrills them. They want to see me dress up in my uniform. They want to watch my training videos. Guess what? It's not my job to entertain people. It's my job to stop the hijackings.

SUSAN. I think people more or less understand that.

VANESSA. That's why my supervisor is able to emotionally blackmail me into working Friday nights. She was like, Hey, everyone else has stuff to do so if you don't work tonight, who will?

SUSAN. Yeah well, tonight I have a date with my boyfriend Gabriel. Even though he doesn't have his own car, and even though he's not really my boyfriend. But he's coming over.

VANESSA. What are you two going to do?

SUSAN. We'll watch your training video. I'll show him your uniform.

VANESSA. You can't do that. I'm not a sideshow.

SUSAN. Take a chill pill. I was kidding. We'll probably make out on the sofa.

VANESSA. How late is he going to be here?

SUSAN. I told him 9 o'clock. But who knows what time he'll show up. He's hispanic.

VANESSA. I've been thinking. OK, my job at airport security gave me a sense of purpose and that allowed me to bring my weight under control. That was good. But now, my job is stressing me out and stress makes me want to eat. So that's bad.

SUSAN. You're doing a good job. Your weight is getting closer to normal.

VANESSA. (Do you think someone will ever fall in love with me?)

SUSAN. Are you getting sucked into a freakout spiral?

VANESSA. (A little.)

SUSAN (*talking her down*). OK, look—Mom isn't around right now.

VANESSA. (No, she's not.)

SUSAN. So we're on our own for a while.

VANESSA. I'm too young to be the breadwinner.

SUSAN. It's stressing you out, I understand that.

VANESSA. At my job, they train me to worry.

SUSAN. For me, it's about keeping a positive attitude.

VANESSA. I can't block things out the way you do. Your self-control, it's incredible. You push the carrot sticks around on your plate, but you don't eat them. I can count your ribs.

SUSAN. When you look at a situation, you should ask yourself, what's the positive side to what I'm experiencing.

VANESSA. Your arms have gotten so thin, your wrist watch just slides off.

SUSAN. Think of it as a bracelet.

VANESSA. Just tell me, do you have anorexia?

SUSAN. There are starving children in Africa. Why should we be any different? What makes us so special? Have you tried to look it at that way?

(VANESSA is dressed and ready for her shift.)

VANESSA. Well thanks for psyching me up for work. We got a memo and it said that if we weren't worried the minute we put on our uniform then we weren't doing our job. And right now, I'm half to two-thirds more worried than I was before I started talking to you.

SUSAN *(holding up lip gloss)*. Come here. Try this sugar free lip gloss. Tell me what you taste.

VANESSA *(tries the lip gloss)*. Kiwi.

SUSAN. If you were my boyfriend, and you tasted this on my lips, how turned on would you be?

VANESSA. You know me. I'll eat anything. *(Keeps tasting her lips.)*

SCENE 3

(Static.)

A FLAMINGO enters. It begins to cross a vast, empty expressway.

The FLAMINGO stops, hears something in the distance and listens for a moment.

The FLAMINGO continues to cross.

Static.)

SCENE 4

GABRIEL. Then they were at Susan's house. They were on their "date." I mean, I could if I had wanted to, I could have driven past there just to check if the car Gabriel stole from his parents was still in Susan's driveway. Just to check how the blue of the TV lit up one of the windows. And because I'm good with details, I could if I had wanted to, imagined Gabriel sitting there and turning to Susan and saying,

Is this what those dudes who work at airport security see, when they look through the X-ray machines?

SUSAN. This is simulated footage.

GABRIEL. Can you imagine staring at this all day? There's gotta be side effects.

SUSAN. Thing is, you have to know what to look for. The first time my big sister showed me this training video of hers, these endless X-rays, forget it. The suitcases all looked alike. Just gray shapes. I mean, can a regular person tell the difference? No, you can't.

My sister? She's a professional. Used to be she was obese. But now, the pressure of that job, it gives her purpose.

Then later it turned out my sister was eating so much because she wanted to build a wall around herself. Overeating is about wanting to feel safe. It's true. There was an article on the Internet. But get this—now her job is about safety.

GABRIEL. She's still pretty chubby.

SUSAN. I think it's patriotic.

GABRIEL. I guess.

SUSAN. She's totally focused now. Trust me.

GABRIEL. Is your mom ever going to move in with you guys again?

SUSAN. Instead of talking about that, do you wanna hear something really awesome?

GABRIEL. You're gonna get serious about studying for the SAT's?

SUSAN. No silly, I just realized if you stole your parent's car just to get here, it means you're really into me.

GABRIEL. Technically it's not stealing if you're related.

SUSAN. You're so cute. Do you want another Diet Coke?

GABRIEL (*watching the video*). That suitcase there, that one I would search.

SUSAN. OK, explain. On the airport security exam, you have to defend your reasons.

GABRIEL. There was a knot of wires. Something electrical.

SUSAN. It was a hairdryer.

GABRIEL. I'm just saying, we should check it.

SUSAN. I know, but my sister told me since so many passengers have hairdryers, if you stop that suitcase, you get five points off.

GABRIEL. So: like that.

SUSAN. Well, they gotta have standards.

GABRIEL. Guess so.

SUSAN. Definitely, standards.

(GABRIEL stares at the TV. SUSAN stares at GABRIEL. GABRIEL looks at SUSAN.)

SUSAN (*cont'd*). OK, since you're the one who brought up standards?

GABRIEL. Yeah?

SUSAN. So regarding that guy, Felix?

GABRIEL. That suitcase there—look it—that’s definitely not clothes.

SUSAN. Yeah, but it could be books.

GABRIEL. So I lose more points?

SUSAN. You get five points for that one. So you’re back to zero. Can I ask you a question?

GABRIEL. Right there. I would check that small rectangle. What is that?

SUSAN. Plastic explosive.

GABRIEL. Wow. Small.

SUSAN. Right?

GABRIEL. But powerful I bet.

SUSAN. So you and this guy, Felix, you’re friends?

GABRIEL. Why?

SUSAN. Well, you guys hang out, and you’re both cute, so: people don’t know what to think.

GABRIEL. Is that a hand grenade?

SUSAN. Bingo.

GABRIEL. Pretty obvious.

SUSAN. Still—people try it.

GABRIEL. How many points do I have?

SUSAN. Ten for each of the explosive devices. That makes 20. You need a hundred to pass. So you’re behind.

GABRIEL. Give me a minute to catch up here.

SUSAN. The way I look at it, friends need friends to tell them what to think. Seriously: if people can’t tell what’s going on, they get nervous and they start making things up.

(VANESSA enters. She has just returned from her job at airport security.)