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Principal Principle



Dark Comedy
by
Joe Zarrow

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"Former public school teacher Joe Zarrow achieves something remarkable ... an entertaining play about education that re-creates all the quirks and craziness of modern education without lapsing into either cynical hopelessness or Hollywood-style superteacher fantasies. His dialogue feels authentic, and his characters are flawed but likable human beings, not mouthpieces for this or that ideology."

—Jack Helbig, *Chicago Reader*

Principal Principle

Dark comedy. By Joe Zarrow. Cast: 5w. Armed only with her dreams of making the world a better place and six weeks of training, Kay Josephs quits her corporate job to teach English at Chinua Achebe High School Academy on Chicago's South Side. She meets her department colleagues: the diplomatic department head Ola Lawrence, the proudly crusty soon-to-be retiree Denise Corey, and the dynamic, inspirational and rebellious Shelley Woods. On the first day of the school year, the business-minded principal announces that she has instituted a harsh new program whereby teachers' jobs are linked to high-stakes standardized testing in terrifying new ways. Kay wakes up to harsh realities: the copy machine is broken, the system is broken, and the spirits of her fellow teachers are broken. Or are they? *Principal Principle* is a dark comedy of academic intrigue that offers terrific performance opportunities for a diverse cast of women and inspires powerful audience debates. *Unit set. Approximate running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Code: PMI.*

*Stage Left Theatre at Theater Wit, Chicago, featuring (l-r) Elana Elyce, Barbara Roeder Harris, Cassy Sanders, Arya Daire and McKenzie Chinn.
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Joe Zarrow



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In addition, all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“*Principal Principle* had its first developmental production at the Brown/Trinity Playwrights Repertory Theatre in Providence, R.I., in the summer of 2012 under the artistic direction of Lowry Marshall and Ken Prestininzi.”

The world premiere of *Principal Principle* was produced by Stage Left Theatre (Artistic Director Vance Smith) and Theatre Seven of Chicago (Artistic Director Brian Golden) at Theatre Wit in Chicago in the spring of 2014. The cast was as follows:

KAY JOSEPHS Cassy Sanders
DENISE COREY Barbara Roeder Harris
OLA LAWRENCE..... Elana Elyce
SHELLEY WOODS McKenzie Chinn
MS. BANERJEE..... Arya Daire
ROSE TaRon Patton

Director Scott Bishop
Scenic Design..... Joe Schermoly
Prop Design..... Cassy Schillo
Lighting Design John Kohn III
Sound Design Adam Smith
Costume Design Brenda Winstead
Dramaturg Zev Valancy
Stage Manager Jason Crutchfield

Principal Principle had its first developmental production at the Brown/Trinity Playwrights Repertory Theatre in Providence, R.I., in the summer of 2012 under the artistic direction of Lowry Marshall and Ken Prestininzi. The director was Heidi Handelsman, the scenic design was by Michael McGarty, the prop design was by Natalie Kearns, the lighting design was by Oona Curley, the sound design was by Alex Eisenberg, the costume design was by Christine Mok, and the stage manager was Chris Redihan. The cast featured Caroline Kaplan, Constance Crawford, Mary C. Davis, Liz Morgan, Michelle Ilutsik Snyder and Korama Danquah.

Principal Principle

CHARACTERS

(In order of appearance.)

RUBY (V.O.): Banerjee's secretary. Between scenes, Ruby comes over the intercom to make announcements. These should be recorded.

KAY JOSEPHS: 26 to 32. Caucasian. First-year English teacher. Looks harmless.

DENISE COREY: 55 to 65. Caucasian. 33-year veteran English teacher. Proudly crusty. Close to retiring but energetic in her way.

OLA LAWRENCE: 35 to 45. African-American. Head of the English department. Nervous, diplomatic. A peacemaker.

SHELLEY WOODS: Early 30s. African-American. Seven-year veteran English teacher. Acerbic, flirty, slightly manic. A fighter.

MS. BANERJEE: 35 to 50. Indian-American. The principal. Driven. Businesslike. No-nonsense. Note: this role could also be played by an actor of East-Asian descent, changing her last name from BANERJEE to WEI. The principal stands a bit outside the black-white racial dichotomy woven through much of the rest of the play.

SETTING

Chinua Achebe Academy High School, a 95% African-American public high school in a middle-of-the-road neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. The English department office. Crowded. Desks, papers, books, cinderblock walls with laminated posters, and a wheezing, broken, old photocopier. Other scenes can be suggested minimally—a podium, some chairs.

NOTES

Ruby's announcements are key to creating Achebe's public school atmosphere, but they also cover scene transitions. Increase or decrease Ruby's repetitions to fit your production's needs.

Banerjee is a tricky character. In order for her to avoid becoming a mustache-twirling villain, she needs to fight for the teachers' acceptance on a personal as well as a professional level.

“Schools are contradictory sites; they reproduce the larger society while containing spaces to resist its dominating logic.”

—Henry Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals*

“Too much television watching got me chasing dreams.”

—Coolio, “Gangsta’s Paradise”

Principal Principle

ACT I

SCENE 1: Where Do I Sit?

(The English department office, the main setting of the play. There are four desks of varying neatness. KAY JOSEPHS sits by herself at the one bare desk with her bag and a couple of plastic crates full of supplies. She is straightening her things but isn't quite sure what to do next. The PA crackles on.)

RUBY (*V.O.*). Attention all audience members. Attention all audience members. Welcome to *Principal Principle* at <*your theatre and production company here*>. Please silence all cellphones, pagers and other electronic devices. Electronic devices making noise or light during the performance WILL be confiscated, and will only be returned if you provide a note from a parent or guardian. For the safety of all members of the Chinua Achebe High School Academy community, flash photography is strictly prohibited. The contact sheet inside your program can be filled out and returned to a theatre employee for five points of extra credit and a free piece of chocolate. Following today's performance, we will hold a brief, ungraded discussion section in the theatre. (*Previous two lines may be omitted based on your production.*) Please note that everything in this play that confirms your long held suspicions about the way public schools operate is true, whereas anything that offends your sensibilities is, in fact, completely made up. Please enjoy the performance. PLEASE enjoy the performance.

(Enter DENISE COREY. She has a messy tote bag and rolling suitcase. KAY speaks immediately when DENISE steps in.)

KAY. Am I in the right desk?

DENISE. Good morning!

KAY. Good morning.

DENISE. I'm Ms. Corey. Who are you?

KAY. Kay Josephs.

DENISE. Are you sure you're in the right place, Kay Josephs?

KAY. That's what I just asked you.

DENISE. Are you a teacher? You haven't got an ID badge.

KAY. They didn't give me one yet.

DENISE. Are you a student?

KAY. No. I'm a new teacher.

DENISE. Prove it.

KAY. What?

DENISE. You haven't got an ID badge. I've never seen you before. Prove that you're a teacher.

KAY. I don't know how to prove—

DENISE. Teach me something.

KAY. Uhh.

DENISE. Teach!

KAY. Like, grammar?

(They are cut off as SHELLEY WOODS and OLA LAWRENCE enter, holding coffee.)

OLA. Denise, stop torturing the new kid.

DENISE. Ola! Shelley!

(Whenever the English teachers are together in the office throughout the play, they have the manic energy of teenagers)

getting on a city bus at 3 p.m. They talk quickly and almost over each other, and their mood can change on a dime. They often laugh at their own jokes. It can be overwhelming.)

SHELLEY. Good to see you.

(SHELLEY and OLA embrace.)

OLA. Good morning, Ms. Josephs.

KAY. Good morning, Ms. Lawrence.

OLA *(putting an arm around DENISE but still speaking to KAY)*.

Was Denise giving you a hard time?

KAY. She asked me if I was a student.

DENISE. I was just teasing, sweetie. Welcome.

SHELLEY. Good morning, Ms. Josephs. Shelley Woods.

KAY. Nice to meet you.

DENISE. Good morning, Ola.

OLA. Good morning, Denise.

(They embrace.)

OLA *(cont'd)*. Ready?

DENISE. To leave? Yeah. Ha ha ha.

SHELLEY. One more year, girl.

DENISE. I know it. I'ma get those pension payments. I'ma sit and watch *Ellen* every day.

SHELLEY. Oh, I'm so depressed. Summer was so great. Brandon and I went to Vegas.

OLA. Oh, God, we didn't even make it out of the city this summer. A lot of time at the park, a lot of craft projects with Jessie and Anna. *(She takes out a couple of small art objects from her bag, obviously made with love by 3-year-*

olds. She sets them on her desk, where they remain for the rest of the play.) I don't know what Meredith and I did.

(KAY perhaps does a double take as she figures this out.)

SHELLEY. Kay, did you get a little break when you left your last job?

KAY. Well, I'm a Chicago Teacher Corps member, so, no break.

(Beat.)

SHELLEY. So this summer you had your six weeks of intensive, graduate-level training?

KAY. This year, they bumped it up to eight weeks.

DENISE *(mock impressed)*. Eight whole weeks! Remind me where you're from, sweetie?

KAY. My place is in Logan Square—

DENISE. But where are you *from* from?

KAY. Naperville.

OLA. You all should have been there to see Kay's sample lesson on compound sentences. Ms. Banerjee and I agreed that she'll be a strong addition to the department.

SHELLEY *(to KAY)*. Yeah? You ready for this?

KAY. I wouldn't quite say ready. First year is really hard on a lot of Teacher Corps members. I am aware that the next nine months are going to kick my butt while having no real subjective understanding of what that butt-kicking will be like.

DENISE. When are we supposed to get down there?

OLA. Five minutes.

KAY. Where?

SHELLEY. Lecture hall. Ola, are they still inflicting the Cornell Review on us?

OLA. There's that.

(Beat.)

DENISE. Ominous much?

SHELLEY. "There's that," but there's also ... ?

OLA. We should leave now if we want to get seats.

SCENE 2: Banerjee's Welcome Speech

(An electronic school bell rings: "booooooop." The voice of MS. BANERJEE's secretary, RUBY, comes over the PA system. The English teachers are aware of the bell and RUBY's voice as they drop their conversation and move to the lecture hall.)

RUBY *(V.O.)*. Attention all teachers, attention all teachers. Welcome back from summer break. Welcome back. Please report to the lecture hall immediately. Please report to the lecture hall immediately.

(MS. BANERJEE stands at a podium in the lecture hall. We see some of the English department teachers sitting in one of the rows of seats or perhaps standing in the back of the auditorium, watching BANERJEE. There is a large rabbit logo behind her or on the podium.)

BANERJEE. Honor. Achievement. Rigor. Excellence. HARE pride. That is our mission. Listen to these numbers from last year: Cortez Jackson, fifteen thousand, National Louis University. Loretta Muhammad, full ride to UIC. Damarco Peters, the million-dollar man! Over one million dollars in scholarships last year. Let's give those figures a hand. *(Applause.)* Those big numbers let me know that I am achieving

my goals. Have we met all our goals? We aren't reaching all our kids to the same extent that we're reaching the Damarcos and the Loretas. Achebe students have been failing to make expected annual gains on the EPAS tests for two years now. How can we lean in and step it up? We've already got an amazing roster: veteran teachers at the top of their game, electrifying rookies from the Chicago Teacher Corps. But the most exciting new player in our starting lineup for this year's Education Super Bowl is the Cornell Review.

SHELLEY (*under her breath*). Here we go.

BANERJEE. The Cornell Review has been a franchise player in the test prep industry for decades. SAT, GRE, MCAT, LSAT. Now that they've added the Illinois EPAS tests to their repertoire, we've added them to the team. But that's not all.

DENISE (*under her breath*). Uh-oh.

BANERJEE. Cornell Review norm-referenced metrics, one given at the end of each semester, will ensure that we are serving each and every child.

SHELLEY. So you're replacing the department-written semester finals with standardized tests?

BANERJEE. Please hold your questions. These Cornell Review-designed semester finals are key to this year's curricular initiative: "Come Out On Top" or C-O-O-T or COOT.

(The teachers stifle giggles.)

BANERJEE (*cont'd*). Research shows that competition pushes individuals to their highest levels of achievement. The department with the best growth on their section of the Cornell Review semester finals will be rewarded with a brand new Canon ImageRunner Multifunction Photocopier.

KAY (*aside, excited*). Ooh!

BANERJEE. Want to know what second place is? Second place department gets a case of copy paper. Third and fourth place departments go into turnaround.

(The teachers go into disturbed hubbub.)

OLA. What!?

SHELLEY *(a little too loud)*. That's against the contract.

DENISE. Some bullshit.

BANERJEE. Everything I've described today is a research-based best practice. You have a problem, send me an email. These rules come from downtown. We're through messing around. We have to prove that we're doing right by these kids. *(Beat.)* Formal classroom REACH observations start very soon. Happy new school year.

SCENE 3: Takeout

(Bell. The veteran teachers all exit together while KAY is isolated in her own light. She enters the English office with a sad little school lunch on a cardboard tray, along with a fat Cornell Review binder. She also has now acquired a dangly name badge like the other teachers. Lunchtime.)

RUBY *(V.O.)*. Attention teachers. Breakout sessions are as follows: Group one will start in the first floor computer lab for gradeline software training with Mr. Hodgson. Group two will start in the security office for state-mandated sexual abuse reporting instruction with Officer Williams. Group three will return to the lecture hall with Ms. Banerjee for distribution of revised Cornell Review curriculum binders. New teachers must collect ID badges from the main office. Lunch will follow your second session.

(KAY sits alone with her lousy lunch. SHELLEY, OLA and DENISE enter; chattering happily but heatedly, with Asian take-out: smiley face plastic bags, folded paper containers, etc.)

SHELLEY. Miss Josephs, where did you go?

KAY. I went to the lunch line.

OLA. I'm sorry. On the first day of teacher week the whole department always gets takeout from Little Siam Noodles.

KAY. They put me in a different breakout group from you guys.

DENISE. You should have come with our group. Nobody checks.

OLA. Sure, they check. They have those roll sheets.

SHELLEY. Do you want some of my noodles, Kay?

KAY. Thank you, but I'll just suffer through my chicken thigh sandwich.

SHELLEY. Suit yourself. *(She begins to unpack her lunch. Loud, comical stage whisper.)* Denise is right. Nobody checks the roll sheets.

OLA. Shelley.

SHELLEY. We don't have enough money to do an asbestos abatement in the gym. We can't afford a dedicated roll-checker.

OLA *(to SHELLEY)*. You're gonna get her clicked.

KAY. What does "clicked" mean?

(Beat.)

SHELLEY *(to OLA)*. See what you did?

KAY. Did I get clicked? Is that bad?

SHELLEY. No.

OLA. Yes.

SHELLEY. Yes. If a teacher doesn't yet have tenure—

OLA. Which you don't—

SHELLEY. Then, that teacher could be fired at any time. And the principal technically would not have to explain why he or she did it. The principal would just log on, open up the new teacher's file and "click" ... (*Miming a computer mouse click.*) their name, and they'd be gone.

OLA. Kay, dear, I absolutely do not expect you to get clicked.

SHELLEY & KAY (*simultaneously to OLA*). Thank you.

OLA. But you should be careful nonetheless.

KAY. Oh, I'll be careful. I know all the required paperwork. Turn in lesson plans every week. Turn in grade reports twice per quarter. Call all my absent students' parents every day and turn in a phone log every week.

DENISE. Somebody read the teacher handbook. Gold star!

KAY. I'm just worried that I'm a novice teacher and all this COOT stuff is—

DENISE. Sweetie, do you hit children?

KAY. No!

DENISE. Then you're fine!

SHELLEY. You'll be fine. Achebe is a good school. Besides, nobody downtown is going to close Achebe, because nobody wants this real estate. Ola, please stop scaring Ms. Josephs.

OLA. She should be prepared.

SHELLEY (*to KAY*). Know how often I turn in my phone log?

OLA. Shelley.

SHELLEY. Never. Ne-ver. I call parents when I need to; I just don't waste my time writing it all down. You have to either be a good teacher or do your paperwork, not both.

OLA. If she's new, she should do everything.

SHELLEY. The paperwork is just there to prove that you're a good teacher in case you're actually a bad one.

KAY. I'll probably just do the paperwork. And if they give us lesson plans, can't we just turn one in together every week?

SHELLEY. Well, we don't all teach the same thing every single day.

KAY. But Ms. Banerjee said that it was key that we implement and drive coherency through every course team using the pacing guide in the Cornell Review lesson binder.

SHELLEY. Shut. Up. Can I see that?

(SHELLEY comes over to KAY's desk. KAY gives her the binder she's been leafing through.)

SHELLEY *(cont'd)*. I want ammunition.

DENISE. These are getting worse every year. Not that anybody follows them.

OLA. Not true.

DENISE. They're passing fads!

OLA. True. Last year it was lit circles. Year before that was ...

DENISE. Blogging.

OLA. Blogging!

SHELLEY *(an outburst)*. *Huck Finn!*?

DENISE. What?

SHELLEY. The Cornell Review curriculum uses *Huck Finn*.

DENISE *(getting up to look at the binder with SHELLEY)*. No!

SHELLEY. Kay, at the meeting, did they tell you what books you have to teach?

KAY. It seemed like it.

DENISE. Springing this on us a week before school starts. Some bullshit.

SHELLEY *(flipping through the binder)*. Only black person, only woman in here is Lorraine Hansberry. And they want

me to teach *The Racist-Ass Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*? No Frederick Douglass. No Harriet Jacobs. No Toni. No Zora. No Richard Wright.

KAY. So you guys don't like *Huck Finn*?

SHELLEY. Bless your little heart.

KAY. I guess it's pretty controversial, huh? All that n-word.

SHELLEY. That's the least of it: Jim is a complete dunce, it's a nightmare to go through all that Missouri dialect with kids who never did phonics, and the ending sucks. Who was the last person to teach *Huck Finn*?

DENISE. Mister Strunk. Late-'90s.

SHELLEY. I am not teaching *Huck Finn* to Achebe kids. You see how they slip that in there, one week before classes start?

DENISE. I knew my last year would be a trial.

SHELLEY (to OLA). And Banerjee didn't even have the guts to break this to you during the July department heads meeting.

(Beat. OLA guiltily focuses on her noodles.)

SHELLEY (cont'd). You knew?

OLA. You were all on summer break. I wasn't going to ruin vacation with COOT.

SHELLEY. OK, Ola, thank you? But you've gotta let us in on intelligence. Now we only have a week. Coulda had more time to organize something.

OLA. I don't think there's fighting back on this.

DENISE. Lavonne would have never said that.

OLA. You can't expect me to be Lavonne. Something's different this year.

DENISE (gets up to make copies). You say that every year.

OLA. Every year it's true!

SHELLEY. What really gets me with COOT is not just the turnaround thing but this whole extrinsic reward system. Dangling a new copier in front of our noses. We ain't falling for that. We are stronger than some dummy who couldn't handle a classroom for five minutes. She can't break us.

(The copier beeps angrily.)

DENISE. Motherfucking piece of shit.

OLA. What?

KAY. It's not working?

DENISE. Not even the first day of school. What did you do?

KAY. I made some copies just now and it was fine.

DENISE. You can't just leave it jammed.

OLA. Oh, god.

KAY. I didn't know it was jammed.

OLA *(picking up the phone sitting atop one of the filing cabinets, peering at a number on a note taped to the wall)*. It happens. Don't worry.

SHELLEY *(kneeling at the copier, opening its panels, reaching in)*. Let me try.

DENISE. Did you use the duplex?

KAY. I don't know what the duplex is.

DENISE. Were you trying to make two-sided copies?

KAY. Yes.

OLA *(note: OLA probably won't get through this whole speech. She cuts*

when SHELLEY has

her "Wait" line). Yes,

this is Ola Lawrence at

DENISE. You can't do that.

KAY. I just wanted to save paper.

DENISE. Not worth it.

Chinua Achebe High School Academy, service contract number 845215. The copier is broken. You need to send someone over. It says in our contract that you can send someone over. Well, we pay three thousand dollars a year for this service contract, and you should be able to send someone over today. Why can't you send somebody over? It's Monday, they can't all be busy yet. Wednesday? Oh, Lord. That's ridiculous! You're making me not want to sign a contract for next year.

SHELLEY (*shoulder deep in the copier*). There's a way to do it safely. You print one side then put the paper back in the tray.

DENISE. Too complicated. She'll mess it up.

SHELLEY. It's not. I'll show you how.

KAY. So many copies came out fine, I hadn't realized.

DENISE. This thing should be put to sleep.

SHELLEY. Just gotta show it some love.

DENISE. I can't be spending 50 bucks at Kinko's every night.

SHELLEY. Wait! Wait!

OLA (*still on phone*). We can't teach without a copier!

SHELLEY (*pulls out a crumpled, toner-streaked piece of paper*). I fixed it.