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Spark

By

TOM ARVETIS

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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Spark premiered at Adventure Stage Chicago on April 12, 2014, and ran until May 15, 2014.

CAST:

Pandora Charlotte Ellison
Jude Danielle Davis
Farren Mykele Callicutt
K..... Ebony Joy
Dr. Lowell Michael Mercier
Amin Mike Ooi
Drew Drew Johnson
Janice..... Allison Latta Lashford
Cord..... Kaelan Strouse
Tico Blake Russell

CREATIVE TEAM:

Producing Artistic Director Tom Arvetis
Managing Director Mary Kate Barley-Jenkins
Director Rives Collins
Dramaturg Matthew Reeder
Scenic Design..... Simon Lashford
Projection Design..... Liviu Pasare
Lighting Design Brandon Wardell
Costume Design Jessica K. Wardell
Props Design Kitty Campbell
Sound and Composition Design..... Michael Huey
Fight Choreographer Matthew Engle
Stage Manager Phil Claudnic
Assistant Stage Manager..... Bailey Heinz
Assistant Director..... Ben Kaye

For L, S, V and M.

INTRODUCTION

The ancient Greek myth of *Prometheus* has held my fascination for as long as I can remember. I think it has something to do with the central metaphor of fire as the source of knowledge and the awakening of human consciousness. Indeed, there is a way to view all of human history as a quest for control of fire, from the most advantageous innovations of creativity and technology to the most dangerous harnessings of power.

According to the story, fire was not something humans intuitively understood how to use. It was something that Zeus alone controlled. And because he didn't believe humans were responsible enough to use fire without destroying themselves, he denied them the privilege of access. But Prometheus wasn't satisfied with Zeus' estimation of humanity. He saw possibility and hope where Zeus only saw inevitable disaster. And so, by stealing a single glowing ember from Zeus' hearth and sneaking it down from the top of Mount Olympus in the cavity of a fennel stalk, he sacrificed himself to Zeus' vengeance in order to give the gift that would transform humanity forever.

As part of *Spark's* development process, Rives Collins and I brought this story to a handful of Chicago middle-school classrooms as well as a couple of groups mixed with adults and kids in the West Town neighborhood in order to understand how this ancient story still resonates with young Chicagoans. By embracing mythology as a source of inspiration, we found a useful mechanism for engaging both young people and adults in an inviting exploration of metaphor.

What might the fire in the story represent?

What technologies today might be considered dangerous if they were used inappropriately?

Like the unbreakable chains that bound Prometheus to the side of a cliff for an eternity, what are the unbreakable chains that hold us back today?

After a handful of such “discovery” sessions, I became fascinated by the part of the story where humans had to survive the darkness of night and the harshness of winter without the advantage of fire. Might there be a way to tell that story? Could it be done in such a way that a young audience would recognize it? As the world of the play began to emerge, Rives also encouraged me to consider Pandora’s relationship to Prometheus. Their stories, as it turns out, are closely connected. And the environment of our play was shaping up to provide another metaphorical connection.

Though I am tempted to write at length about our process, I should really let the play speak for itself. So why write anything at all? Because I think what makes this play different is how it was developed. We made this play by being in relationship to young people throughout the writing process. The sharing of the mythology was our entry into meaningful dialogue with them. I had the seed of an idea, but the play only grew when we began to nurture it with their reflections and observations. We used process drama techniques to invite deeper participation and imagination. More than the specific words they may have used to respond to our questions, we paid attention to the ideas that excited them most. What sparks generated heat? What was the story that really mattered to them?

As a writer for and about young people, I have come to cherish this process that provided me the opportunity to be in relationship with them. I’m not sure how other adult writers

maintain their connection. For me, the world moves too fast anymore. I don't feel like I can keep up with all of the things a 21st-century adolescent has to contend with. I'd surely fail if I had to wait until the play was written to find out if the ideas within it held their interest. So I crave the opportunity to be in dialogue with them during the making process, to ask them questions and hear firsthand how they see the world.

It certainly helps to have stellar collaborators, and I'd like to conclude by acknowledging that this play would not have come to be without the courageous commitment of my unflappable colleagues. It took a deep trust in each other and a great faith in the creative process that we would emerge from our effort with something quite so special. I am forever grateful.

—Tom Arvetis

Spark

CHARACTERS

PANDORA: a 12-year-old girl. Curious. Intuitive. Resident of Sanctuary.

JUDE: a 12-year-old girl. Clever. Resourceful. Resident of Sanctuary.

FARREN: a 12-year-old boy. Focused. Driven. Resident of Sanctuary.

K: a teacher. Female. Reports to Dr. Lowell.

DR. LOWELL: Amin's right hand. Male.

AMIN: ageless leader of Sanctuary. Rarely seen in person. Usually seen on the Storyteller. Male.

DREW: Pandora's father. Laborer. Resident of Sanctuary.

JANICE: Pandora's mother. Architect. Resident of Sanctuary.

CORD: a 13-year-old boy. Not from Sanctuary.

TICO: a 17-year-old boy. Not from Sanctuary. Nonverbal.

STORYTELLER: the voice of Sanctuary.

KEEPERS: elder residents of Sanctuary.

TIME

The not-too-distant future.

PLACE

Sanctuary. A network of corridors and chambers beneath the Earth's surface.

“Prometheus, teacher in every art, brought the fire that hath proved to mortals a means to mighty ends.”

—Aeschylus

“One moment the world is as it is. The next, it is entirely different. Something it has never been before.”

—Anne Rice

Spark

1. TOUCHING THE PORTAL

(Somewhere in Sanctuary. It is dark. A tight spotlight on the base of a climbing ladder. PANDORA and JUDE stand there, looking up. They each wear Gear—the term used to describe their wearable electronic technology.)

PAN. Thirty seconds.

JUDE. Too easy.

PAN. OK. Twenty-five.

JUDE. Twenty seconds.

PAN. OK. Twenty seconds.

JUDE. OK. Ready?

PAN. Wait. Wait. How are you timing?

JUDE *(referring to her Gear)*. Stopwatch mode.

PAN. OK.

JUDE. Ready?

PAN. Wait. Wait. What if I fall?

JUDE. You're not going to fall.

PAN. But what if I do?

JUDE. Then I'll catch you.

PAN. OK. Good.

JUDE. Ready?

PAN. Wait. Wait.

JUDE. What now?!

PAN. What do you think is on the other side?

JUDE. I don't know. Does it matter?

PAN. Kind of. I mean, what if I get up there, and it opens, and I get snatched or something?

JUDE. Seriously?

PAN. I don't know. Maybe.

JUDE. It hasn't opened for as long as we've been alive.

PAN. So?

JUDE. So you have a better chance of disappearing down one of the bottomless tunnels than you do of getting snatched through that Portal.

PAN. What do you think is on the other side?

JUDE. Whatever it is, it's awful. So, you ready?

PAN. Why am I going first again?

JUDE. Because you lost the game. And the winner—that's me—gets to choose the punishment.

PAN. Couldn't I just walk down a dark tunnel without my Gear? That's what we did last time.

JUDE. That's what we do every time. It's time to do something different.

PAN. I know. It's just that this doesn't feel right. I feel like something is going to go wrong.

JUDE. All you have to do is go up, touch the Portal and be back down in twenty seconds. What's so hard about that?

PAN. Nothing, it's just ...

JUDE. We're running out of time.

PAN. Don't make me do it. Please?

JUDE. You're really that scared?

(PAN nods.)

JUDE. Fine. But you're not getting off that easy. I'm gonna find the darkest tunnel you can imagine.

PAN. Darkness I can handle.

(A tone is heard. Not unlike the kind of sound that cues students in school to change periods.)

JUDE. Come on. We're gonna be late.

(They exit.)

2. SLEEPWALKING

(In blackness.)

STORYTELLER. Safe passage, dear Residents. Day number ten thousand nine hundred forty-seven. Begin now.

(Tone. Lights up on Central Central—the primary gathering place for Residents of Sanctuary, dominated by the Storyteller—a large screen used for projecting text and images. There is a sudden burst of activity. Bodies enter from several directions, moving in very methodical, deliberate patterns. Their footsteps are rhythmic. All wear a common garb despite size and gender differences. Each individual carries “Gear”—a wearable electronic device that is the sole object of their attention as they walk. Despite changes in direction, they all proceed flawlessly while their vision remains fixated on their device. It's as though they've walked this path a thousand times and could do it a thousand more in their sleep.

Video content and narration plays while Residents go about their patterns of movement.)

STORYTELLER. News Feed: Progress continues on the expansion of Corridor Z. Effective new tunneling methods are being implemented, thanks to the innovative experimentation of young people playing the Game. Their techniques are being adopted in real time by Diggers who are under pressure to complete tunnel expansion by Freedom Day.

News Feed: A new well source has been discovered near Corridor M, thanks to the innovative experimentation of young people playing the Game. Residents will enjoy an increase in water rations only after the water purification system is relocated.

(Another tone.

AMIN, the ageless leader of Sanctuary, appears on the Storyteller.

The Residents stop their march and turn toward the screen.)

STORYTELLER *(on monitor)*. We embark on our daily rotations as we always do, with the Sanctuary Creed.

AMIN. In Sanctuary ...

ALL. We find ourselves.

AMIN. In Sanctuary ...

ALL. We keep ourselves.

AMIN. In Sanctuary ...

ALL. We prepare ourselves.

AMIN. We need sacrifice.

ALL. We have courage.

AMIN. We need obedience.

ALL. We have discipline.

AMIN. We need patience.

ALL. We have hope.

No freedom without surrender.

In loyalty to him.

Amin.

AMIN. Dear friends,

In a few days, we will celebrate Freedom Day. A day that commemorates our determination and optimism in the face of adversity. A day that honors you, my friends, for your commitment to a better future. Our elders had the courage and vision to do something that had never been done before. When life on the Surface was growing more dangerous day by day, our elders had the wisdom to provide a safer haven—a Sanctuary—where we built a new life free from the madness of the world above. And lucky we did, my friends. For we are safe. And we endure. This Freedom Day we celebrate our fellowship. Our endurance. Our strength. Be proud, my friends. And safe passage.

(Tone.

The Residents resume their formation marches, mostly leaving the stage. We are left with PAN, JUDE and FARREN.)

3. TEST PREP

(FARREN begins a physical warm up [stretching, jumping, etc.]. JUDE is still engrossed in her Gear. She is game planning. PAN is no longer focused on her Gear but is not warming up either.)

FARREN. You nervous?

PAN. No. Why?

FARREN. You look nervous.

PAN. I'm not nervous.

FARREN. Good. Because there's no more room for mistakes.
The exam is in three days.

PAN. I know.

FARREN. We need to do better than we did yesterday.

PAN. I know. I know.

JUDE. It was my fault, Farren. Give Pan a break.

FARREN. I'm just saying ... The rules of the Game haven't changed. We should know what we have to do by now.

JUDE. Look. I didn't build our stacks well. I admit it. I must have left a back door open. Once they found their way in, they made us pay for it.

FARREN. Outliers are relentless. We know this. (*Pointedly at PAN.*) We can't be afraid to eliminate them.

PAN. I got it, Farren. OK?

(*FARREN continues his stretching. JUDE, her planning. A beat.*)

PAN (*cont'd*). I wish there was a version of the Game that didn't require us to kill anything.

FARREN. Here we go again ...

PAN. You know ... Like a mode where you could just explore and build stuff without worrying about health or hunger. No danger lurking in the shadows. No gunfire in the distance. No Outliers.

FARREN. Seriously? No Outliers? You're dreaming. That's like saying there's no Amin.

JUDE. It's a little unrealistic, Pan. Don't you think?

(*PAN shrugs.*)

FARREN. Besides, it sounds too easy. How would we figure out our rank? How would we know who's in charge? How would we know the rules?

PAN. It was just an idea.

FARREN. I need my rank. It's gonna get me where I want to go.

PAN. Where's that?

FARREN. I'm gonna be a Caretaker. Just like Dr. Lowell.

JUDE. Wow. That's ambitious.

FARREN. Maybe. But at least I'm willing to work for it. Not all of us have parents who will take care of them.

JUDE. What are you talking about? I earned my rank. Nobody handed me Guild Leader.

FARREN. Whatever.

JUDE. Please don't play the orphan card, Farren.

FARREN. The only thing I play is the Game. Have you checked the Leaderboard lately?

JUDE. I'm not worried about you.

FARREN. You should be.

JUDE. Are you threatening me?

PAN. Guys, we're still on the same team. Remember?

JUDE. He just threatened my rank!

FARREN. Just do your job. Don't expose us to any hazards. Don't take unnecessary risks. Eliminate danger. That's how we'll pass. That's all I care about.

JUDE. Fine.

(A beat.)

PAN. Do we have a plan for today's run, Jude?

JUDE. Yes. As your Guild Leader, it is *my* duty to assign each of us a task.

(JUDE waits for FARREN to object. He doesn't.)

JUDE *(cont'd)*. I'll be building our shelter. Pan, you will need to secure fresh water.

PAN. Got it.

JUDE. Farren—

FARREN. Don't worry about me. I'll do what I do best.

(K enters.)

K. Safe passage, students. I know you are feeling the pressure of your upcoming exam. We'll need to make the most of our time together so you are feeling well prepared and confident.

PAN. Miss K, what happens if we fail the exam?

K. You can't fail the exam, Pan. It's better to think of it as a tool that helps determine your purpose.

FARREN. You don't have to lie to her, Miss K. If you fail, you end up at the bottom. A digger. A mole.

PAN. Shut up.

K. There are variety of roles and responsibilities in our community. The exam is only one way of helping us find our way. Now, shall we begin with today's simulation?

FARREN. Yeah. When are we gonna shoot something?

JUDE. Will you just chill for a second?

K. Your exam is rooted in the Game. And the Game has many components. It measures strength: your ability to perform under extreme pressure. It measures endurance: your ability to sustain yourself and those around you with the nutritional resources at your disposal. Finally, it measures intelligence: your ability to strategize, adapt, outwit.

FARREN. Miss K, we already know this.

K. All of these things might serve you well in the short term. And the Game wants you to believe that you alone are most important. But I'm here to tell you that your ability to cooperate, to collaborate, to listen and to sacrifice will make the difference between mission success and mission failure.

FARREN. Don't you worry, Miss K. I got this.

K. All right, then. Let's begin our first simulation of the day.

(Each of the three students occupies a separate, isolated space. K codes something into her Gear, establishing the parameters of their simulation. A map of the Game appears on the Storyteller.)

K *(cont'd)*. The landscape of the Game is modeled on the Surface and poses all sorts of challenges. From the need to find drinkable water to building shelter to protecting yourself from Outlier invasion.

(On the word "Outlier," the map is suddenly populated with multiple red dots.)

K *(cont'd)*. The goal of this first simulation is to find each other and assess your resources.

(Each of the players appears as a colored dot—PAN is blue; JUDE is green; FARREN is yellow. They are noticeably separate from one another.)

K *(cont'd)*. You will each be dropped in ... now.

(A major tech shift sends us into the Game. Lights and sound give focus to FARREN, who immediately lifts his weapon up and, in the style of Call of Duty, is continuously taking aim

and shooting anything that moves. He moves with military precision. On the map, the yellow dot moves toward the blue dot. As it does, the surrounding red dots disappear.

(K's voice can be heard coaching from the side.)

K *(cont'd)*. Farren, there's more to the game than your kill ratio. I'd like you to focus on finding your teammates.

(Lights and sound give focus to JUDE, who begins to build a shelter in the style of Minecraft.)

K *(cont'd)*. Excellent decision, Jude. Shelter is important. Be sure to take your time with an eye toward security. We don't want a repeat of yesterday.

(The green dot on the map doesn't move. She is safe from red dots at the moment. Lights and sound shift to give focus to PAN, who is transfixed by a glow in the DL corner of the stage. The tempo of the simulation slows, distorting the environmental sounds and gunfire.)

K *(cont'd)*. Pan ... You need to remember your objective. Find your teammates. Pan, your position is vulnerable.

(On the map, several red dots are very close to PAN's blue dot. But PAN is drawn like a magnet to the glowing object. She is oblivious to K's remarks.)

K *(cont'd)*. Pan, I lost you. Can you hear me? You are in danger. There are Outliers everywhere. Get out of there.

(Suddenly, FARREN rolls in, aims his weapon in PAN's direction and fires. The Storyteller goes red. "Friendly Fire. SIMULATION TERMINATED." Tech dramatically shifts us back to Central Central.)