

BURNING
A Ten-Minute Play
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CAST:
XERXES: An activist man.
MAUDE: His long-suffering girlfriend.
AUDIENCE MEMBER: Joe Q Public.

*XERXES rushes on stage carrying an American flag,
followed by MAUDE. It can be a real flag, a little flag,
or a paper drawing of a flag.*

XERXES

That's it, I'm burning the fucking thing!

MAUDE

You can't do that!

XERXES

Oh yes I can... if I can find my damned lighter.

XERXES searches for a lighter.

MAUDE

Calm down.

XERXES

Calm down? Fuck off. Now is not the time to be calm!

MAUDE

Now's the time to be irrational?

XERXES

Evidently it is. I'm just following my executive branch's example.

MAUDE

But you don't agree with what they're doing... doesn't following their example seem like a bad idea?

XERXES

Don't use that rationality shit with me. *(to audience)* Anybody got a lighter I can use?

MAUDE

Now don't bother them.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I have one.

The AUDIENCE MEMBER hands him a lighter.

XERXES

Thank you. You're helping me strike a blow, I really appreciate that.

MAUDE

Strike a blow?

XERXES

That's right.

MAUDE

Nice hyperbole.

XERXES

Shut it. Time to do it.

He holds up the flag and tries to light it. The lighter gives him difficulty.

MAUDE

Stop it... stop it.

XERXES

Fucking thing... light, damn you, light.

MAUDE

It's a sign from God, don't do it.

XERXES

(to AUDIENCE MEMBER) Your lighter is broken.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

It's child proof.

XERXES

What do I have to do?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Press the little button.

MAUDE

Don't encourage him.

XERXES fails again at lighting the lighter.

XERXES.

Fuck!!!

MAUDE takes it from him and hands it back to the AUDIENCE MEMBER.

MAUDE

Why don't you just keep this?

XERXES

THAT'S what's wrong with this country. It's not the usurping president or the war based on lies or the complete disregard for the environment... it's fucking child-proof lighters and meals that tell you they'll be hot when they come out of the microwave and... and...

MAUDE

Timers on cross-walks.

XERXES

No, I like those.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Nipples on mannequins?

They both look at him.

MAUDE

Thanks for playing. No. Those let you know what a shirt's going to look like in the wind.

XERXES

Does anyone else have a lighter?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I've got two sticks.

XERXES

What?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

You want to light it on fire? Work for it.

XERXES

Oh, I bet you think I won't! Give me those fucking sticks.

He grabs the sticks and begins rubbing furiously.

MAUDE

Who are you?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I'm Joe. I work from nine to five and enjoy sitcoms. My wife doesn't work, she just stays at home and watches soap operas and takes care of our two kids, Barbara and Kenneth. I eat foods with Olestra in them because they've never caused my ass to leak, only other people's. I smoke 13 cigarettes a day, because no one in my family has ever had lung cancer. I jerk off in a booth half a block off of Van Ness on Geary Tuesdays and Thursdays because I really like gay porn, but I don't feel this is being unfaithful to my wife because I still have sex with her at least as often as I pretend to have sex with men, and besides, she's got a very large male tabby cat that I suspect she likes more than me anyway.

XERXES

God damn it! How did cave men do it? Who would have the patience to discover that doing this long enough produces flame? God give me strength!

A pack of matches flies from the wings and hits him.

Or matches. Matches or strength, either one's fine.

MAUDE

You're not still obsessing about that, are you? Normally you've moved on to some other cause by this point. Aren't there dolphins to save from tuna, or arctic wildlife to reconnect with their parents, or cancer victims who really need a joint right now?

XERXES

I hate it when you belittle that I care.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I really miss the war coverage. I did get to see a flag burning there the other day. It was in Jordan, or one of those places. Egypt, maybe. It had a picture of our president attached to it. They were really mad. I don't know why they can't just understand that we were just freeing the Iraqi people. I mean, we couldn't have made it any easier for them: we called it "Operation Iraqi Freedom." I sometimes think the Muslim people just aren't smart, or

AUDIENCE MEMBER cont.

they're just not trying to understand us, or maybe they can't hear us because of those towels they're wearing.

XERXES

Shut up. I may be fighting for you, but I don't want to listen to you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Activists are so sensitive.

XERXES

Just be quiet. It's time. I'm lighting this up now.

He drops to his knees. All the lights but a spot on him drop out. He ritualistically lights a match... which MAUDE enters his spot and blows out. Lights to normal.

God fucking damn it.

MAUDE

I can't let you do that.

XERXES

Yes you can.

MAUDE

No I can't.

XERXES

This flag is mine. I paid \$5.99 for it at Wal-Mart. I now own it, and I'm going to burn it.

MAUDE

I live here, too.

XERXES

Don't stand in the way of my statement.

MAUDE

Don't stand in the way of my house not smelling like fucking smoke! Don't stand in the way of my right to have a boyfriend who's not in jail!

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I think it is actually illegal again now. They go back and forth on it. You can't burn the flag or kill bald eagles, but you're absolutely encouraged to devastate apple pies. Pretty mixed standard, if you ask me.

XERXES AND MAUDE

Shut up!

MAUDE

We're trying to have a private argument here!

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Stage is a pretty stupid place to do that, if you ask me. And do you really think the management of [insert theatre name]'s going to let you light that on fire. I don't buy it, not for a minute. You don't have the balls to light that flag on fire, because if you do your little "peace show" won't be going up tomorrow!

XERXES

Fuck you!

He lights another match, which MAUDE blows out.

God damn it!

He lights another, which MAUDE blows out.

Son of a bitch!

MAUDE

Just give me that flag!

XERXES

No!

They struggle briefly... the flag rips in half. They drop the pieces, freeze, turn out to the audience...

XERXES AND MAUDE

Oh shit.

And run from the stage. The audience member stands up, applauding enthusiastically.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Oh that was fucking BRILLIANT. I am so out of here. I missed Malcolm in the Middle for this. *(yelling offstage at XERXES and MAUDE)* You know Malcolm's free, right? *(to self)* I can still get home in time for the X-Files. *(again toward offstage)* The truth is out there, all right, and it's on Fox!

He storms out. The lights narrow on the two remaining halves of the flag, then fade to black. End of play.