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Nest

by **Bathsheba Doran**



NEW YORK HOLLYWOOD LONDON TORONTO

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NEST by Bathsheba Doran
Signature Theatre (Arlington, VA) April 24th – June 24th 2007
Directed by Joe Calarco
World Premiere

NEST was commissioned Signature Theatre, who requested a play inspired by the true story and Ballad of Susanna Cox. *NEST* had its World Premiere at Signature Theatre in Arlington, VA on April 24, 2007 under the direction of Joe Calarco with following cast and crew:

Cast (in alphabetical order):

JOE	Michael Grew
ELIZABETH	Vanessa Lock
CHAPLAIN	Stephen Patrick Martin
JACOB	Charlie Matthes
DANIEL BOONE	Richard Pelzman
DRUMBLE	James Siaughter
SUSANNA COX	Anne Veal

Understudies:

DRUMBLE/CHAPLAIN	Paul Danaceau
JACOB/DANIEL BOONE	Christopher Janson
SUSANNA/ELIZABETH	Melora Kordos
JOE	Joseph Thanner

Scenic Design	James Kronzer
Costume Design	Kate Turner-Walker
Lighting Design	Chris Lee
Sound Design	Matthew M. Nielson
Production Stage Manager	Katherine C. Mielke
Production Manager	Chris Akins
Dramaturg	Irina Brown
Assistant Director	Sara Sahin
Directed by	Joe Calarco

CHARACTERS

JACOB GEER – mid-30s

ELIZABETH GEER – his wife, mid-30s

SUSANNA COX – their indentured servant, early 20s

A CHAPLAIN – 40s

DANIEL BOONE – a pioneer, in his prime

MR. DRUMBLE – a publisher, late 50s - early 60s

JOE – a writer, early 20s

PLACE

In and around Philadelphia

TIME

1808-1809

NOTES

The play is to be performed without an intermission. In Part 2, the three movements require a fluid expression of time and space. The intent is impressionistic not realistic.

The text of the *Ballad of Susanna Cox* is the original text that was sold at her hanging. Daniel Boone's song "The Cuckoo's Nest" is an old British folk song which later evolved into an Americanized cowboy song. The version in the play includes a final verse sung by Daniel and Susanna which I wrote myself.

“ ‘Twas in truth an hour
Of universal ferment; mildest men
Were agitated; and commotions, strife
Of passion and opinion fill’d the walls
Of peaceful houses with unquiet sounds.
The soil of common life was at that time
Too hot to tread upon; oft said I then
And not then only, ‘what a mockery this
Of history; the past and that to come!’ ”

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1805

“Another thing, Willie, while we are on this subject. *(Pause)* The sadness after song. *(Pause)* Have you run across that Willie? *(Pause)* In the course of your experience? *(Pause)* No? *(Pause)* Sadness after sexual intercourse, one is familiar with of course.”

Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*

For my friend, Polly Lee

PART 1

Scene 1

(A dark kitchen in the middle of the day. SUSANNA COX, her work set aside, masturbating, quietly, efficiently. An animal mindlessly seeking release, crouched.)

JACOB enters, holding a jug. He watches for a moment.)

JACOB. Susanna?

(She stops immediately)

What are you doing?

(a beat)

SUSANNA. Nothing.

(a beat)

JACOB. I need more water upstairs. I spilled what was left in here.

(She takes the jug and fills it, her back to him. He watches. Eventually, she hands it back. Jacob doesn't move.)

JACOB. Is that something you do often? In the kitchen?

(a beat)

SUSANNA. I think you mistook yourself.

(a beat)

JACOB. *(a whisper)* I won't tell anyone.

(A beat. He exits.)

Scene 2

(Jacob's study, high up in the house. Books and papers crowding his desk.)

ELIZABETH *scans the bookshelves, looks through papers on his desk.*

JACOB *enters with the jug.)*

JACOB. I thought you went out.

ELIZABETH. The meeting was cancelled. I'm just looking for your copy of "The Adventures of Daniel Boone."

(JACOB gets it from the shelf and hands it to her.)

JACOB. It's bad.

(JACOB looks through some papers, apparently ready to get back to work.)

ELIZABETH. Jacob... I actually only came in here to borrow this, but...

I saw a letter on your desk. I read a few words before I even knew what I was doing.

(She takes the letter from his desk)

"I find I wake, reluctant to rise, confident the day will be filled only with loneliness...

I carry out my daily activities as normal, and nobody has noticed that my spirit has left me. I don't know if it will return."

(Pause.)

JACOB. I was actually only writing to Lewis, to ask if he knows of any work. I don't think I'll send it.

(a beat)

ELIZABETH. No, I certainly wouldn't send it if you're asking for work.

(a beat)

ELIZABETH. Is there something I can do?

JACOB. Nothing.

(a beat)

ELIZABETH. You are isolating yourself. You've stopped coming to church. You ignore the farm. You have stopped taking your morning walks...

JACOB. In Philadelphia I was working with a number of prominent politicians –

ELIZABETH. No you weren't...

JACOB. I was!

ELIZABETH. You were not, Jacob! It isn't work if you aren't being paid! As I remember it, mostly what you did was sit in the City Tavern with them and drink.

JACOB. That's where everything happened!

ELIZABETH. When we met you were quite happy, I seem to remember, at the thought of living in the country and running the farm. Quite happy, I remember, at the thought of living in nature, now that the city, you said, had got so crowded and dangerous, was so prone to disease. Quite excited you said, for the time to think and read and write, which is what, you insisted, you did best. And I seem to recall that you were running out of money, unclear how to earn any, and were quite thrilled when you saw the size of this house!

(She gets her breath back. JACOB opens his mouth to speak but she cuts him off.)

ELIZABETH. *(cont.)* It's not my fault Jefferson offered you no place in government, and it's not my fault that your thoughts are not always enough to keep you entertained all day. As you had previously believed.

(a beat)

You could take more of an active role in running the farm. I wish you would.

JACOB. I stopped taking an interest years ago. I noticed it made no difference, they do very well without me. I am trying to help our farm by writing a pamphlet addressing America's agricultural future. I shall send it to Mr Drumble in Philadelphia. Although I doubt

he'll publish it. He ignored the last three things I sent him. I have become invisible.

ELIZABETH. Because you are isolating yourself! We're only fifty miles from Philadelphia! Go to town more!

JACOB. And do what?

Jefferson hasn't written in almost three years. No more has Lewis or Madison.

(a beat)

Europe's producing the greatest philosophers since ancient Greece at the moment and where do they all meet up? A stone's throw from the house my father was born in. Sometimes I wish my parents had stayed in Switzerland.

(Pause.)

ELIZABETH. I would take you to my meetings, Jacob, but they are only for women.

JACOB. Why aren't there any meetings for just men?

(a beat)

Oh my mistake, of course there are. They're called politics.

Scene 3

(DRUMBLE alone on stage. He is giving a lecture at the University of Pennsylvania.)

DRUMBLE. As of now, the English language contains only English poets. Shakespeare's gone. He is theirs. Marlowe is gone. Chaucer and John Donne and Milton are gone. Theirs. And who do we have?

We have the great authors of our constitution, a document I published myself. We have Mr. John Filson he author of "The Adventures of Daniel Boone" which has sold most satisfactorily. But what we haven't got is a Plato!

Who will be our Homer? Who our Euripides, who our Socrates and Sophocles? I think we can live without another Aeschylus...

I read a new play this morning, currently being performed in Paris. There is an American character in it. He is the villain. Murdered by a group of wealthy widows that he has failed to seduce in the final act.

(a beat)

The scene is supposed to be comic. We can no longer depend on Europe for art. Europe no longer understands us

We are currently without a voice and I consider it a national emergency. America must be written. She longs to be articulated, she craves form and meaning. In the last three years, our country has doubled in size. Here in Philadelphia we have all watched as our population has tripled in size as the Athenians watched, when Athens sprung up around them. Someone must describe this new place. My guess is that someone in this room has already begun. Because in a gathering of twenty or more there is always at least one secret poet. One who explores the secret properties of letters. An alphabetist. An alchemist. There is a poet in this room, I know there is. Or perhaps you write prose. Sitting by

your window, night after night, weaving magical tales with your fingertips. Whoever you are, send whatever you're writing to me, as quick as you can. I will read plays, poems, stories, novels, even the beginnings of novels. Because although you may think yourself a future doctor, or lawyer, or farmer of these United States, you may also be the first great American poet and not know yet that you are the man we will one day hold up to the world, and say look who sits with Shakespeare! Look who sits with Homer and the Greeks! He is of *American* soil! This is his book! And in it he offers you our souls...

Scene 4

(Outside. Night. JOE waits. DRUMBLE enters.)

JOE. Mr. Drumble? Great speech. Very inspiring.

(a beat, gesturing his manuscript)

These are some poems.

DRUMBLE. You are a student at this university?

JOE. Yes, sir.

DRUMBLE. What are your poems about?

JOE. Birds, sir.

(a beat)

DRUMBLE. How interesting. The theme of wilderness is what drew me to the story of Daniel Boone.

(a beat)

The concept was mine. I commissioned the author to create a narrative of Boone's legendary adventures. There are so many stories still to tell about the wilderness. Different stories. One about a boy like you... or what about a father, trying to make a home for his family, alone in a cabin, surrounded by wolves. Or is it a pair of brothers, twins, trying to start up a farm and making friends with savages?

Listen...

(They listen.)

DRUMBLE. The new world is waiting to be described.

(a beat)

There will be a first great American poet. For all we know... what's your name?

JOE. Joe.

DRUMBLE. For all we know, Joe... it's you.

(a beat)

Such moments dreams are made of. My dreams. In which I meet the first great American poet and he

hands me his manuscript on a moonless night.

(A beat.)

JOE *hands him the manuscript.*)

DRUMBLE. Then I leave to catch a carriage.

(And DRUMBLE exits.)

Scene 5

(Jacob's study. Day.)

JACOB. I think you know why I've called you in here.

(a beat)

It's about what I saw in the kitchen.

(a beat)

Remember?

SUSANNA. I had an irritation...

JACOB. You were rubbing at yourself.

SUSANNA. Yes, sir.

JACOB. On the kitchen floor.

SUSANNA. Yes, sir.

JACOB. Because of an irritation?

SUSANNA. It is an ache.

(a beat)

What will you do to me?

(JACOB takes a moment before launching into his pre-prepared speech.)

JACOB. The solitary act is a common response to a feeling of pressure in the lower regions. The feeling is not uncommon. However, performing it will not relieve your symptoms, as you may have noticed. It will only make them worse.

I have three excellent medical text books on the desk, and when it comes to the solitary act they all say the same thing. Don't do it. It is unhealthy and dangerous. It may cause vision and hearing difficulties later in life. If it becomes a compulsion it can lead to insanity, apparently. So it has to stop. It is not just a matter of the kitchen, Susanna. I am talking in general. It is at your age precisely... how old are you?

(a beat)

Haven't you kept count? I don't blame you... well

you were eleven when you came here so....you must be... what twenty four? Really? I always think of you as younger...

(a beat)

I must get back to work as well. Very busy. Writing a new pamphlet. About agriculture in the new states. Now that Jefferson's doubled the size of this country we have to work twice as hard.

SUSANNA. *(leaving)* Yes, sir.

JACOB. Would you like to see a map?

(He shows her a map)

This is preliminary, not all of these details are confirmed. The cartographers are waiting on the sketches of Lewis and Clark. They were supposed to have been made public over a year ago.

(a beat)

I met Jefferson, you know. Before he was President. And Lewis was a friend. Have you heard of him? The one who went up the river? With Clark?

(a beat)

At one point I thought I might go out there with him. But the expedition received limited funds so... no.

SUSANNA. Have you heard of Daniel Boone?

JACOB. Daniel Boone? The frontiersman? Of course.

SUSANNA. Do you know him?

JACOB. No, why would I?

SUSANNA. *(shy)* I heard...

JACOB. What did you hear?

SUSANNA. When there was Cook... when I was little... she told me... he was born just a mile away... just a mile down the road his house stands.

JACOB. You're right. That's true. He was born in a cabin less than a mile from here. Elizabeth met his father, I think. When she was a little girl. I have a book here,

somewhere, about his adventures. You're welcome to borrow... oh Elizabeth took it... Do you read, Susanna?

SUSANNA. No.

JACOB. Oh.

(a beat)

There's Kentucky on the map. See?

SUSANNA. Where Daniel Boone lives now?

JACOB. Exactly. All this is ours now... We have to start thinking about how we're going to govern out there.

SUSANNA. The Indians?

JACOB. The Indians? No, the Indians are perfectly happy as they are and we can leave them be. We have to think about the Americans that are going to move there. We have to set up some rules.

SUSANNA. Can't they make their own rules?

JACOB. No, that's a bad idea.

SUSANNA. Why is it?

JACOB. Never mind. It's a very controversial issue.

(SUSANNA stares at the map.)

JACOB. What did you feel? When you were touching yourself.

SUSANNA. I said.

JACOB. An ache?

(a beat)

Then what?

(a beat)

Had I not walked in, what would have happened?

(a beat)

When you touch yourself, what happens?

SUSANNA. I can turn my body into water.

(a beat)

JACOB. When I was a little boy, my father caught me, as I caught you. I was in an area in my boyhood house where we kept the coats. Why one cannot do such a thing in the privacy of one's own bedroom, I know not, but I remember that after I discovered the practice I also felt a compelling urge to do it in every room in the house. He mocked the size of my... apparatus. And then told me, that if I continued to pull on it, it could come off. And then I stopped. Mostly. Not entirely.

You've got me wondering now if Elizabeth has done it. Perhaps we are all doing it together alone. All over this house. What a sad and hilarious image.

(a beat.)

SUSANNA. The sin you saw, I commit it daily. Three times daily, sometimes.

JACOB. Susanna?

May I kiss you?

I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to get you into trouble. Or me into trouble. I just... I'd like to kiss you. May I? Can I kiss you?

SUSANNA. Yes.

(They kiss and stay kissing longer than either one of them expects.)

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