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Rocket City, Alabam'

by Mark Saltzman

A PLAY WITH SONGS OF
THE AMERICAN SOUTH

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



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ROCKET CITY, ALABAMA was first produced by the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in Montgomery, Alabama as *ROCKET CITY* on April 20, 2008. *ROCKET CITY* was developed in association with the Southern Writers' Project, a program of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival (Geoffrey Sherman, producing artistic director). The performance was directed by David Ellenstein, with sets by Michael Schwiekardt, costumes by Susan Branch, music direction by Brett Rominger, lighting by Mike Post, sound design by Richelle Thompson, and dramaturgy by Susan Willis. The production stage manager was Sara Lee Howell, the production assistant was Kerrie Riber. The cast was as follows:

AMY LUBIN Lori Prince
 MAJOR HAMILTON PIKE, JR.. Fletcher McTaggart
 JED KESSLER. Daniel Cameron Talbott
 WERNHER VON BRAUN. Matt Bradford Sullivan
 ISRAEL WATKINS James Bowen
 HARRY S. TRUMAN, BENJY, LEMUEL DECATUR,
 LESTER PRUITT, ROCKET VOICE Paul Hopper
 GENERAL BARKLEE, HEINZ KLAUBER,
 RABBI BENJAMIN, ANNOUNCER Ralph Elias
 SUSANNA PRUITT, SARAH. Greta Lambert
 BERTINA DUPRAY, EUVELLA, BARONESS VON BRAUN Suzanna Hay

This play was developed in the Hothouse at the Playhouse
 program at Pasadena Playhouse.

CHARACTERS

AMY LUBIN – Young New York woman, early 20s

MAJOR HAMILTON PIKE, JR. – American blue-blood, Princeton- educated Army officer. Mid-20s to early 30s

JED KESSLER – Amy’s Alabama-born fiancé, 20s

WERNHER VON BRAUN* – The German rocket genius. Mid-30s to early 40s

ISRAEL WATKINS (plays guitar) – Alabama-born, African-American truck driver. 30s to early 40s

CHARACTER MAN 1 – Harry S. Truman, Benjy in London, Lemuel Decatur, Lester Pruitt, Rocket Voice

CHARACTER MAN 2 – General Barklee, Heinz Klauber, Rabbi Benjamin, TV Announcer

CHARACTER WOMAN 1 – Susanna Pruitt, Sarah in London

CHARACTER WOMAN 2 – Bertina Dupray, Euvella, Polly, Baroness Von Braun

*Note: Characters in the play who speak German correctly pronounce Von Braun’s name: “VEH-nah fahn BRAH-oon.” The R in “Braun” is lightly rolled.

These character roles can be distributed among more actors, if budgets and talent pool permit.

If there isn’t a guitar-playing actor available to play Israel Watkins, a guitarist might be added to the cast to accompany Israel when he sings. In that case, the actor playing Israel might play the harmonica, if he has that skill. The overall goal is to have an authentic acoustic delta blues feel to the blues music.

SETTING

This play is set mostly in Huntsville, Alabama in the early 1950’s. It’s performed by a minimum of nine actors, 6 Male (5 White, one African-American) 3 Female (White).

This story is based on true events.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The historical facts, the real events, of this play are all readily researchable – e.g. the career of Wernher Von Braun, the development and launch of America's Redstone Missile, the post-war history of Huntsville, Alabama, and the German rocket bombing of London. It is historical truth that Huntsville, to this day, is home to a Jewish community dating back to the 19th century. And like any typical American town during and following WWII, Huntsville had an anti-German mindset. When that attitude thawed, yes, baskets of German food were brought around to welcome the new immigrants.

Some notes on the music: Though *Rocket City, Alabam'* is not a musical, a music director is most likely needed for any production. The character playing Israel Watkins provides the musical element of the show and ideally, an African-American singer-actor-guitarist is cast as Israel. But if your singing-actor can't play guitar, a guitarist, preferably African-American, should be added to the cast. In this case, Israel would be a solo singer (and perhaps harmonica player) with a back-up guitarist. But preferable by far is Israel as a classic Delta bluesman, playing his own acoustic guitar.

Musically, the first act is blues and the second act, gospel and spirituals. (This play, on one level, is about traveling from the Earth to a higher altitude.) The blues songs should never be sung slowly, never in the grim, moaning style of blues, but rather the aggressive, hard-driving blues style. "Alabama Bound" should be performed with railroad propulsion. "Poor Boy" is biting and driving. The gospel songs of Act Two are also up tempo. The music should accelerate the play, never slow it down.

The solo guitar underscoring is loose and improvised. All of the following are valid approaches to the guitar underscoring and can be used alternately: Playing the given melody note for note, improvising on the melody, or just strumming the chords. All are valid approaches to the underscoring which, of course, must always stay in the background, and never compete with the spoken dialogue.

And one note on the set – putting a missile on stage need not be daunting. Really, it's just a big empty cylinder painted with the markings of a Redstone Missile.

—Mark Saltzman

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ACT ONE

Scene One – Harry Speaks

(Late 1940's/early 1950's period music of the pre-rock, bland E-Z listening type: Perry Como, Kate Smith, Patti Page, instrumentals by Liberace or Manitovani. Nothing swingin' or jazzy or "cool." This soothing, gentle music is interrupted by: A HUGE, THUNDERING BOOM! Over the fading sound, PRESIDENT HARRY S. TRUMAN appears in his characteristic suit, bowtie and wire-rim glasses.)

PRESIDENT TRUMAN. My fellow Americans. This is President Harry S. Truman. The news I have to bring you tonight is not happy news. But we are a strong nation. We've come through a war together and we're going to come through this.

At 1:04 yesterday afternoon, the Soviet Union detonated their first atomic bomb. Yes, we are no longer the only atomic power in the world, but even so, our nation still stands tall with a mighty military that day and night watches our skies and protects us from catastrophe and obliteration. So sleep well.

(back to music)

Scene Two – General Barklee's Office In The Pentagon

(**MAJOR HAMILTON PIKE JR.** stands before **GENERAL BARKLEE**. Major Pike is about 30, one of the new generation of Cold War warriors. The General, a Southerner of the older generation, still lives in his WWII glory. Major Pike carries a rolled-up map. Just a moment ago, he set a document on the General's desk, awaiting signature.)

GENERAL. Our country has never been in greater danger. That's what the President said to us at the briefing. He wants to know what we're doing. Or, in his words, what you lame-brain lazy bastards in the Pentagon are doing.

MAJOR PIKE. Sounds like Mr. Truman. General Barklee, it's exactly because of this situation that you must sign this document immediately.

GENERAL. Which is this?

MAJOR PIKE. It will put one of the army arsenals under my command.

GENERAL. I don't sign over something without knowing what's what.

MAJOR PIKE. It's a classified project, sir.

GENERAL. I'm the head of Army ordnance, Major Pike! Classified projects my left buttock. What do you want with my arsenal?

MAJOR PIKE. I thought your signature would be merely a formality, sir.

GENERAL. Major, you'll answer my question.

(**PIKE** realizes this won't be an easy sell and slows down, as if speaking to a child.)

MAJOR PIKE. Yes, sir, General Barklee. Weapons development. The Russians now have the A-bomb. And we have the A-bomb. But we have no way of delivering it.

GENERAL. You got a bomb, you drop it from a plane! Good enough in the last war, wasn't it?

MAJOR PIKE. That war is over, sir. The Russians have their anti-aircraft guns, we have ours. A plane carrying an A-bomb would be detected and shot down miles from its target. The delivery system will now be guided missiles, and we need a place to build them. So if you'll just sign this...

GENERAL. (*reminding PIKE of his rank*) Which army arsenal are you REQUESTING that I authorize?

MAJOR PIKE. I have a map right here. Let me show you.

(*The MAJOR unrolls his map and looks for a place to hang it.*)

MAJOR PIKE. This won't quite work...

GENERAL. Put it on the other wall or something.

MAJOR PIKE. Not enough room. I'll just spread it out here...

(*PIKE rolls out the map on the floor and gets to his knees, spreading out the map.*)

MAJOR PIKE. Over here you see Birmingham. Nashville. Chattanooga.

GENERAL. I don't like seeing an Army Major prowlin' around the floor like a possum.

(*PIKE stands up.*)

MAJOR PIKE. Sorry, sir. Now, northern Alabama is here....

GENERAL. And I don't need a lecture on Southern geography. I'm a proud son of Lookout Mountain, Tennessee.

(*The GENERAL points down to his hometown on the map.*)

MAJOR PIKE. Then as you would know, here is the Tennessee-Alabama border.

GENERAL. (*an irate order*) You take off your shoes when you walk on Tennessee!

(*MAJOR PIKE does so.*)

MAJOR PIKE. Yes, sir. South of the Tennessee border is the Redstone Arsenal – right there, in a little Alabama town called Huntsville. Population sixteen thousand, four hundred and thirty seven. The missile construction facility would be right here.

GENERAL. And who we got building these missiles?

MAJOR PIKE. Fortunately, the greatest rocketry mind in the world. Dr. Wernher von Braun and his team.

(PIKE, fluent in German, pronounces the name accurately: "VEH-nah fahn BRAH-oon." with a slight roll in the R in Von Braun.)

GENERAL. Those Nazi scientists we captured?

MAJOR PIKE. As I said, sir, the best in the world. During the war, while we invented the A-bomb, they invented the guided missile.

GENERAL. And you're going to park these Nazis in an all-American southern town? Not in my army, and not in my South!

(Lights down on the military men, lights up on ISRAEL WATKINS, an African-American blues singer, wearing classic bluesman attire: a dark suit and open-collar white shirt. He sits in a chair playing guitar; performing in semi-limbo, with perhaps a suggestion of a juke joint / blues club.)

(ISRAEL, in his first two scenes is a vague figure, perhaps part of the play, perhaps an observer or a theatrical "device." It isn't until he meets AMY (Act One, Scene 9) that he is perceived as an actual character in the play.)

(ISRAEL plays and sings the traditional blues song: "Alabama Bound," up tempo, with a blues guitar train rhythm. He sings with excitement and anticipation.)

ISRAEL.

I'M ALABAMA BOUND
I'M ALABAMA BOUND
AND IF THIS TRAIN
DON'T STOP AND TURN AROUND
I'M ALABAMA BOUND

(ISRAEL plays a "train" riff on the guitar that segues into the real sound of a moving train.)

Scene Three – An Alabama-Bound Train

(Lights up on the inside of a train, two women sitting side by side in their seats.)

(AMY LUBIN of the Bronx is 21, dressed casually in her individual style that owes very little to the fashions of the moment, other than a touch of Greenwich Village bohemian. Certainly no bobby-soxer nonsense for this sharp college girl.)

(Next to her, is SUSANNA PRUITT, a middle-aged, wealthy, well-educated, Southern society woman. She wears a stylish traveling outfit, worthy of the New York fashion magazines she reads. And she makes sure she dresses five percent, not fifty percent, better than the ladies in her Alabama social set. If Susanna has some “country gal” mannerisms, they are carefully chosen affectations, like the gold banjo brooch she is wearing.)

(AMY is asleep. SUSANNA is reading some newspaper clippings she keeps in her purse.)

(AMY stirs.)

AMY. *(a yawn)*

(AMY wakes up and stretches her arms wide and fast. She accidentally slams the back of her hand into SUSANNA's face.)

SUSANNA. Oh!

AMY. Oh God, I'm SO sorry! I hit you right in the face! Did I hurt you?

SUSANNA. Well, my make-up might be mussed. But don't you worry, I brought my little tool chest.

AMY. I'm really sorry. When I fell asleep, there was no one sitting there.

(SUSANNA pulls out her compact and begins repair work.)

SUSANNA. Don't you spit beans over it. I'll be all patched up by the time we get to Alabama. That where you're getting off?

AMY. Yes, I'm Alabama bound!

SUSANNA. Just how I was born.

AMY. Excuse me?

SUSANNA. Alabama bound. On a Pullman sleeper heading south from Tennessee. Mama was coming home from Aunt Carol Jean's in Knoxville and I popped out a bit ahead of schedule.

AMY. Really! Now, your cheek – you're sure you're OK?

SUSANNA. Oh, honey. I've deserved to have my face slapped many a time. And at what town are you gettin' off?

AMY. Huntsville.

(SUSANNA *slaps* AMY's arm *lightly*.)

SUSANNA. Don't tell me! Don't you tell me! That's where I live. Where I was born!

AMY. I thought you said you were born on a train.

SUSANNA. I was. But officially, it's Huntsville. You see, that train was still over the state line when I was born and they were gonna write "place of birth, Tennessee" on the birth certificate. Tennessee? Well, Mama wouldn't hear of it!

(AMY *laughs at that*.)

SUSANNA. And where were you born?

AMY. New York City. A section called the Bronx.

SUSANNA. (*what a word!*) The Bronx! Isn't that a lovely name.

AMY. Oh, the name might not be all that lovely, but that part of New York is. There are parks and ponds. And a street called the Grand Concourse that looks like a boulevard in Rome.

SUSANNA. Well, I've seen Rome, on our honeymoon. And Paris and Venice – We were invited to dinner there by a contessa.

AMY. Oh, it sounds wonderful! Me, I've never even been out of New York before.

SUSANNA. Is that so? And what could be bringing you all this way?

AMY. My Alabama fiancé. We met in New York. He was there for a reunion of his pilot buddies from the war. And one of those buddies lived on my floor.

SUSANNA. He lived on your *floor*?

AMY. No, I mean the same floor of my apartment building. Third story up. Across the hall.

SUSANNA. A third story love story. And what's the name of your young man? I'm sure I know the family.

AMY. Jed Kessler.

(SUSANNA playfully slaps AMY's arm again. Maybe a touch too hard.)

SUSANNA. Don't tell me! Don't you tell me! Of course, I know Jed Kessler! Ruth and Martin's boy. They live on Ashburton Street and Martin has the appliance store on the courthouse square. They go to the Jewish church on Chestnut Street.

AMY. Yes, that's my Jed. The Jewish churchgoer.

SUSANNA. And you attend a church of that denomination in the Bronx?

AMY. Not really. I mean, yes, I'm Jewish. But not much of a churchgoer you might say. You probably know more about Jed's family than I do.

SUSANNA. Oh, darlin', in Huntsville, I make it my business to know everyone. But I'm no busybody, it's professional interest. I'm Susanna Pruitt. I write the social column for the Huntsville Courier.

AMY. I'm Amy Lubin. So look at this, I'm meeting a newspaper columnist.

SUSANNA. Oh, wasn't such a hard job to get. My husband Lester owns the paper.

AMY. Still – you're a genuine writer.

SUSANNA. English major at Bama.

AMY. Bama?

SUSANNA. University of Alabama. I graduated Class of...did you really think I was gonna tell you what year?

AMY. (*friendly flattery*) Last year?

SUSANNA. Oh, I knew I was gonna like you! For my senior thesis, I wrote and published a book on local history. "Home Sweet Huntsville." I'll send a copy to you at the Kesslers.

AMY. Oh, so nice of you, Mrs. Pruitt.

SUSANNA. (*with a smile*) "Susanna" will do just fine. And I bet after hearing my story, you can guess why my Mama named me that.

AMY. No, I can't guess...

SUSANNA. (*giving a hint*) Well, I was comin' to AL-a-bam-a...
(AMY still doesn't get it. Then:)

AMY. Oh, yes! "Susanna!" Do you have a banjo on your knee?

SUSANNA. No, but I got one on my booby! See this gold brooch? Banjo-shaped. Twang twang. Now don't you hate me, Amy-from-New-York, but I've just got to put something about you in my column. Has your engagement been formally announced?

AMY. As formally as we do things in the Bronx. Which is to say, my mother screamed the news out the window.

(SUSANNA takes AMY's hand.)

SUSANNA. Then why don't we make the formal announcement in my column? But till then, we'll keep it our little secret, all right? We have ourselves a deal?

AMY. Sounds fine. If that's the way things are done.

SUSANNA. Oh, we're gonna be good friends, I know it. I adore Jed. He'd get the blue ribbon in the handsome bake-off, that's for sure.

AMY. It would go nicely with his bronze star.

SUSANNA. Bless his heart, winnin' the war for us. (*pointing out the window*) Oh, lookit out the window, there's the state line. Mama and I would sing our little song whenever we crossed over to Alabama.

AMY. You know, I bet I can guess what the song was.

SUSANNA. I'm gonna call you my froggy-girl, 'cause you're
always two jumps ahead. (*singing*)

OH I COME FROM ALABAMA

...Sing along!

(*AMY joins in, awkwardly. No accompaniment*)

AMY & SUSANNA.

WITH A BANJO ON MY KNEE

AMY.

AND I'M GOIN' TO LOU-EEZ-EE-ANA...

SUSANNA. (*all too quick to correct her*)

LOOZEE-ANA

AMY.

"LOOZ-EE-ANA," MY TRUE LOVE FOR TO SEE...

SUSANNA. Lord, we know who she means!

MY TRUE LOVE Jed-Kessler GONNA SEE

OH SUSANNA...

AMY & SUSANNA.

OH DON'T YOU CRY FOR ME...

(*Light up on ISRAEL who picks up the song on guitar
and voice, bluesing it up. He sings at the same time the
women are singing "Oh Susanna."*)

ISRAEL.

AMY & SUSANNA.

DON'T YOU CRY FOR ME

FOR I COME FROM ALABAMA

DON'T YOU CRY FOR ME

WITH A BANJO ON MY KNEE

ISRAEL. (*now singing alone*)

AND IF THIS TRAIN I'M ON

DON'T TURN AROUND...

(*Lights back up on the GENERAL and MAJOR PIKE as
ISRAEL sings.*)

I'M ALABAMA BOUND

I'M ALABAMA BOUND

(*Solo guitar underscoring segues into next scene.*)

Scene Four – General Barklee's Office

GENERAL. So, Alabama's where you want 'em. Where you got these Krauts stashed right now?

MAJOR PIKE. West Texas.

GENERAL. Well, let 'em build rockets with the rattlesnakes. Be among their own kind.

MAJOR PIKE. Without the Redstone Arsenal, we would have to build a missile facility from scratch. That step alone could take a year or two. Which is why I am requesting the Redstone. It produced artillery shells during the war. I want it re-tooled for the manufacture of missiles.

GENERAL. But these men built rockets for Hitler!

MAJOR PIKE. These are not Nazis, General. These are men of science.

GENERAL. You expect that Alabama town to buy that? What do you think, we're all just a bunch of dumb, thick-neck cotton-choppers? Typical Yankee mentality.

MAJOR PIKE. I'm from Virginia myself, sir.

GENERAL. Where?

MAJOR PIKE. Alexandria.

GENERAL. That's Yankee Virginia! Bedrooms for the Washington blowhards. I'm talking about the proud South, that sent and lost her sons in a war with the Japs and the Germans.

MAJOR PIKE. The alternative is building a new facility. And how long will that take, just to get the funds out of Congress? And while the "blowhards" are pushing for their home district, the Russians will be perfecting their missiles.

GENERAL. But these are Nazis!

MAJOR PIKE. I was there, sir, a first lieutenant with the 44th Infantry Division in Austria. I was there, when these men surrendered to us. I know German and I quickly found out what a treasure we had in our hands.

GENERAL. And I see you ain't let them OUT of your hands.
Gonna make your reputation on this missile program?
Got political ideas like General Eisenhower?

MAJOR PIKE. I'm doing what's right for our country.

GENERAL. By sneakin' Nazis into it. How'd you ever pull that off, anyway?

(This signature process is taking too long. MAJOR PIKE decides to play his ace.)

MAJOR PIKE. You might have heard of my father? Hamilton Pike, Senior?

GENERAL. The Washington lawyer.

MAJOR PIKE. Well, he has some clients high up in the State Department and they were kind enough to help us with the visas.

GENERAL. Political influence. Always wins the battle.

MAJOR PIKE. *(coming in for the kill)* Yes, Ham Senior has some Pentagon honchos as clients, too. *(a threat as a joke)* Our big bosses way upstairs! Me, I'd never get to shine the shoes of the *(pointedly)* head of the army, and dad's playing a round of golf with him.

(PIKE pauses as his threat sinks in.)

But, if I may continue, sir. The German scientists we're speaking about chose America. They want to serve our country. And help us prevail against the Russians.

(a beat)

GENERAL. Major Pike – is what you're saying true?

MAJOR PIKE. It has some truth in it.

(a beat)

General Barklee, sir, I promised the President I would deliver him an American guided missile system and soon. As we talk here, the Russians may be already test-launching their first missile. And they may have a map exactly like this, with a circle around that secret radar station on *(indicating a spot on the map with his foot)* Lookout Mountain, Tennessee.

(The GENERAL, a good soldier, knows when he's defeated.)

MAJOR PIKE. Your signature, sir?

(MAJOR PIKE pushes the document in front of the GENERAL who hesitates and signs it.)

GENERAL. The Redstone Arsenal is all yours. *(bitterly)* Congratulations. Or should I say Sieg Heil.

(Lights fade on the General's office. Lights up on ISRAEL WATKINS, singing the lines of "Oh, Susannah," blues style then segueing into "Alabama Bound.")

ISRAEL.

DON'T YOU CRY FOR ME
 DON'T YOU CRY FOR ME
 'CAUSE I'M ALABAMA BOUND
 ALABAMA BOUND
 AND IF YOU WANT MY LOVIN' BABE
 YOU GOT TO LEAVE THIS TOWN

(As ISRAEL is singing, lights up on MAJOR PIKE at his desk in his new office. He unpacks his briefcase and the map we saw. Out of his briefcase, he takes a small American flag and places it on his desk. Next, he takes out a matching Confederate flag, places it next to the American flag. He's ready for Alabama.)

(Guitar chord buttons scene.)

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