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SF PERUSALS

Grounded

George Brant

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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The New York premiere of ***GROUNDED*** was presented by Page 73 Productions, Liz Jones and Asher Richelli, Executive Directors; Michael Walkup, Producing Director, at Walkerspace at Soho Rep. The opening date was January 16, 2014 The performance was directed by Ken Rus Schmoll, with sets and costumes by Arnulfo Maldonado, lighting by Garin Marschall, and sound by Jane Shaw. The Production Stage Manager was Megan Schwarz Dickert. The cast was as follows:

THE PILOT . . . . . Hannah Cabell

GROUNDED was first produced in a rolling World Premiere by SF Playhouse (California), Borderlands Theater (Arizona), and Unicorn Theatre (Missouri) as part of the National New Play Network's Continued Life program.

CAST

THE PILOT – a woman in her mid-to-late 30's. She should have no allergies or asthma after 12 years of age, distant vision of at least 20/200 but corrected to 20/20, and near vision of 20/40 but corrected to 20/20. She should have a sitting height of between 2 foot 9 inches and 3 foot 4 inches, and a vertical standing height of between 5 foot 4 inches and 6 foot 5 inches tall. She should possess normal color vision and meet other physical weight requirements, with no more than 32% body fat. She should be able to complete a 1.5 milerun in 13 minutes and 56 seconds or less, as well as complete 50 sit-ups and 27 push-ups in a timed test of one minute each. She should have graduated at the top of her class and have a well-rounded education. She should possess heightened situational awareness.

DESIGN

The sound and lighting design will play an important role in the production, reinforcing The Pilot's mental landscape and contributing a growing sense of unease throughout. The design should be more abstract than literal, or perhaps transform the literal into abstract.

Productions are invited to create their own melody for "The Pony Song."

PERFORMANCE

The telling of this story must be active, allowing for a full range of emotion; the end must not be played at the beginning.

The audience is The Pilot's confidante, to varying degrees of familiarity, until perhaps the final pages.

When other characters enter The Pilot's story, the Pilot does not fully inhabit them; she is not an actress.

SPECIAL THANKS

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(in order of appearance)

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Erica Nagel and Laura Kepley

For Laura

(Lights rise on **THE PILOT**, *a woman dressed in an Air Force flight suit.)*

THE PILOT.

I never wanted to take it off
Staring at myself in the mirror
Myself in this
I had earned this
This was me now
This was who I was now who I'd become through sweat and brains and guts
This is me

It's more than a suit
It's the speed
It's the G-Force pressing you back as you tear the sky
It's the ride
My Tiger
My gal who cradles me lifts me up
It's more
It's the respect
It's the danger
It's
It's more
It's
You are the blue
You are alone in the vastness and you are the blue
Astronauts
They have eternity
But I have color
I have blue

I'm in the blue for a reason
I have missiles to launch

I have Sidewinders
I have Mavericks

I rain them down on the minarets and concrete below me
The structures that break up the sand
I break them back down
Return them to desert
To particles
Sand

At least I think I do
I'm long gone by the time the boom happens
Tiger and I are on to another piece of sky

Boom
Boom goes Saddam's dipshit army and then I'm home on leave
Wyoming
Leave is fine but it's slow
Slow and the blue is there everywhere but far away
Far

So I go to a bar
Pilot bar
I drink with my boys and we tell stories about flying
We try to make it into words
You can get close
But you never can

A guy comes up to me
A guy always comes up
No not always
It takes balls
Hard to casually sidle up to a bunch of drunk Air Force on leave
Maneuver yourself through all the boys to get to me
That takes some offensive flying of its own

But the guy makes it through

Gets up from a card game and runs the gauntlet to get to me
He's kinda cute
I tell him straight off who I am what I am
I've learned not to wait
Once they find out
They tend to run away
Most guys don't like what I do
Feel they're less of a guy around me
I take the guy spot and they don't know where they belong

But not this one
This one's eyes light up
This one thinks it's cool
This one kisses me in the parking lot like I'm the rock star I am
He's not afraid to kiss me

Eric
He's Eric
I take him home
We fuck
First time's okay
Then he asks me to put my suit on
He says please
I tell him just once

Just telling him is enough
He's hard as a Sidewinder
It's a good three days
A very good three days

He tells me he can feel the sky in me
I tell him he's crazy
But something shifts
Something's breached

I'm back downrange

First time I'm sad leave is over
Shit
For Eric who works in a hardware store the family store
Shit
Like some 50's movie
I've got my little woman at home know who I'm fighting for
All that true corn
True cheese

Lucky I got shit to distract me
I got tracer fire
I got RPGs
And I've got the blue
It's good to be back in the blue
Alone in the blue

Back at base I got webcams
I got Eric with a little delay
He misses me
I miss him too

I gain weight
Does love make you heavy?
I feel the harness tight against my waist
Try to watch the burgers in the caf
Hold the burgers
It's not the burgers

I'm up in the blue and I almost hurl in my mask
Make it down just in time to puke on the tarmac
Tell the boys I drank too much last night
Do a test
Pink
I'm pink
Pink
Fuck

I can't fly with it

With her
I know it's a her
I can't
Rules and regulations

It's the ejection seat
'Cause an ejection would be an ejection
A G-Force abortion

I want the sky
I want the blue
But I can't kill her
I can't kill her
I can't

I take one last flight
The both of us
So she can have a taste of what it means
Get it in her blood
Let her know that there is this
That this could be hers one day
That she will not be a hair-tosser
A cheerleader
A needy sack of shit
There is this
There is blue

And then I land
March to my Commander
I tell him
He's sorry-happy
I know the feeling

They run tests
Ultrasound
I see her
There in the grey
Looks like she's waving

I pack my suit

Say goodbye to Tiger
They ship me out
Stateside

They put me behind a desk
Grounded
The pilot's nightmare
Eric thinks I'm still in the desert still flying
His fantasy girl up in the sky

I don't know how to tell him what to tell him what I want what he'll want
I decide it's worth finding out

I hide my belly under the desk
Skype him
Small talk then boom
There's a delay
That fucking delay
Then tears
I can feel them through the screen
He's so happy
And I didn't know it until then but I'm happy he's happy
And we smile and I feel him here with me Eric's here delay or not he's here months till I can see him for real but he's here

More tests
They're a little worried about her
Stick a camera up me
Get a good look
She should be okay

My belly
My belly presses against the desk
Harder
Harder
Too big for the desk now

Air Force sends me on my way
The boys raise a glass
Hope I'll be back soon
Count on it assholes

Deep breath
I go to Eric's
White-knuckled the whole drive
Skype is one thing but
I can't hide my belly offscreen anymore
These fucking stretch marks
I'm not who left
I'm not who he
Shut up
I suck it up and ring the bell
Ready to see his face fall to see whatever flygirl fantasy he's got going dispelled by the civilian whale before him
He opens the door
He looks at me
He cries instead
He touches my belly
He kisses it and I feel things shift again
I smile
Am I crying now?
Fuck
He wants to take my picture
With my suit on
I tell him I can't fit anymore
He says, "I know. Please."
I say if we go outside
If the sky's in the background

I must look ridiculous
Can't zip up the front
Naked tight belly spilling out

(for the camera) Cheese

We go back inside
He puts it up on his computer
As his desktop
He says, "Demi Moore can kiss your ass."
And godammit he's right

We laugh
He stops laughing
He gets down on his knee
Shit
I pull him up
That's not how I want it
This is how I want it
And I throw him on his single bed
And I get on top
And we fuck
He fucks the whale
And I tell him I scream
Yes
Yes
Yes

Eric moves in
I say I do and he does too
The cheese I know the corn
It sneaks in
Love sneaks it in

Then we're three
I'm right
It's a girl
Samantha
Sam
A perfect girl

But not too perfect

She's got a spark in her eye
She's gonna be trouble
Like I said perfect

Maybe a little small
A little early
But that's okay
Just means we have to watch out for her at first

First

few

years

Keep an eye on her
Keeps me at home
Keeps me away from the blue
But that's fine
Every night Eric points to the sky and tells Sam "that's Mommy, that's where Mommy lives"
But she doesn't get it and it's not where I live anymore and so I tell him to stop

I love her and him I do I ignore the tight ball-bearing in my sternum I do for years three years but it grows it grows I'll scream if I don't get out and up I was born for this but I was born for that too I don't can't can't not be there be up alone alone in my sky

I don't know how to tell him
How to tell him I need more than this
That he is not everything
That she is not
She is he is but –
He stops me
He understands
He wants me to go
Excited even
Says he'll get his bragging rights back

I kiss him
This is why I married you this is why you are mine
We fuck and it is a fierce and wonderful thing

…

I report to my Commander
He's happy to see me
Was waiting for me
Tells me I'm needed now more than ever
Pilots pilots are the most needed
It's a new desert now Iraq is done stick a fork in it
I tell him fine different desert same war
I am ready to suit up
Tiger I want Tiger back she must have missed me she will embrace me and lift me back up into the blue

Commander smiles a funny smile
He says, "New plane"

I say new plane?
But Tiger

The funny smile again
He says, "Forget Tiger. New plane, the newest."

Fuck
A new
I think of breaking it in
The seat the stick the pain in my ass but then I think
I do think
I'm sorry Tiger but I think
It's new
Brand new
It's the latest
I think of the speed
The firepower
That I will be the first to fly her
That she will be mine all mine

I think of all that and a smile sneaks out
I nod and say can I see her?

That funny smile again
He pulls a picture out of a folder

I think it's a joke

I say this is a drone

"No," he says, "it's a Reaper"

I say it's a drone

He says, "It's the newest we have, the best we have"

I say this is a drone
You want me in the Chair Force

He tells me careful, that is not its name that I know better that that is not its name

I say you want to stick me in the Chair Force
I am a real pilot a fighter pilot I can help let me help

He says, "This is how you help
This is what we need
This is the war"

I say bullshit
A million dollars to train me
You don't spend a million dollars so I can fly a remote control plane
You need fighter pilots
You always need fighter pilots
I say is this punishment?

He says, "What?"

I say for getting pregnant is this how you punish me?

He says, "No, no," he says, "listen. You'll be hunting down the real bad guys, conducting personality strikes"

I say sir –

He says, "Just try it for a few months, and we'll see –"

I say sir no one ever comes back from the Chair Force
it's the Bermuda Triangle no one ever comes back

He says, "I realize it's an adjustment"

I say sir with all due respect –

He says, "Major? Shut the fuck up."
He says, "I know how it is
I know all you F-16s love being worshipped I know you love being top shit
I know
So listen to me
Carefully
I am not asking you to give that up
Because top shit will come top shit is on its way
There was a time the bomber pilot was top shit you're too young you wouldn't remember
It's use
Use
Which one is useful
Which one gets the job done
They're not making F-16s anymore Major
The F-16s are dinosaurs
Put out to pasture
Used for drone target practice
The drones?
Can't make 'em fast enough
Five years, tops
Two
Fuck one
In one year
The drone will be king
And you
Patience
You will be top shit again
Dismissed"

I can't look Eric in the eye when I tell him
UAVs
Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
A drone pilot
A proud member of the Chair Force

He says, "When do you leave?"
I say when do we leave?
He says, "What?"
I say how do you feel about Vegas?
He says, "What?"

I say I will be in the war by way of Las Vegas
I will operate out of Creech Air Force base in Nevada
I will not live on the base there are no barracks on the base
I will work seven days a week a twelve-hour shift and then each night I will come home home to you and Sam

Well?

The tears again
They are not weakness in him they are what I love
He says, "We'll be together the three of us we'll still be together it's a gift a gift"

A gift
I will look at it that way I will try to look at it like that
A gift
The drones are a gift
I have been given a gift
I get to fly again
Sort of
But I will not be eight thousand miles away while I do it
I will see my daughter grow up
I will kiss my husband goodnight every night
No tracer fire

No RPGs
The threat of death has been removed
The threat of death has been removed from our lives
Viva
Viva
Viva Las Vegas

…

We get a small place in the suburbs
An anonymous home
Fill it with our things ourselves
Eric puts the picture on the wall the one of me with the belly and the blue
He looks for a job
I watch Sam and unpack and count the hours till I have to report
Until I become something else something less
Stop
We do the Strip a few times
It's bullshit
That fucking fake Pyramid
What the fuck
We see some bullshit shows
Neil Diamond
Some Beatles circus thing
Don't ask me
Fuck

And then it's time
0700 Eric kisses me goodbye I kiss Sam
I hop in my car and drive downrange

I have a fast car
Surprise
It takes me out of the driveway
Out of the suburbs into the desert
The Pyramid is behind me

Smaller smaller
The radio gets fuzzy goes static
The Pyramid disappears
And I am alone
Alone in the desert
An hour of quiet
Of static

The base rises out of the sand
Creech
Some name
Like a monster from a shitty movie

I'm downrange
Downrange after an hour's drive

I'm saluted
The gate rises
I find a space
A parking space
A pilot who needs a parking space
I put on my flight suit
A grounded pilot who wears a flight suit
I report for duty
For training
For retraining
For drones

First we stand sweating on the tarmac
Look at one in a crate
They're stored in pieces in crates
Excuse me Tombs
Tombs
The pieces are removed from the Tombs
Assembled on the tarmac
Like a toy model

We walk around a finished one

The last time we'll see one in person
Last time a pilot will see her plane
Ridiculous
A bunch of grounded pilots staring at a pilot-less plane
A plane with no cockpit
A bird with no eyes

The Reaper
11 million dollars
They tell us that bunch of times
11 million

It's bigger than I thought
Wings twice as wide as Tiger's
And loaded
Sidewinders
Stingers
Hellfires
Fucker's loaded

And turns out it's not blind after all
This camera system mounted on its belly:
The Gorgon Stare:
Infrared
Thermal
Radar
Laser
A thousand eyes staring at the ground

We go inside
We sit in a row at desks
Like we're in a typing class
Like we're learning how to make a spreadsheet
We learn to fly instead
We learn to fly with our asses firmly on the ground

It's bullshit
I pick it up quick
Not that that matters

Not that that's a source of pride

The only tricky part is the screen
The belly
You're not looking out you're looking down
Like you're in a cloud looking down
Take some getting used to

The rest
It's crazy
You move the joystick
1.2 seconds later the plane moves
1.2 seconds from anywhere in the world
You might as well be in the cockpit
You're not but you might as well

Oh and this:
They never land
Can stay up in the air for 40 hours at a time
We'll be working in shifts
Tapping each other out and taking the controls
A never-ending mission

I am dismissed
It's dark out now
I drive through the desert
Static becomes AC/DC
Thank you
The Pyramid gets closer
And I'm home

Eric asks how my day was
I am limited in my response
Like a teenager but with the justification of security clearance
I say fine
My day was fine

Sam's already in bed

I kiss her perfect forehead goodnight and then eat the dinner my husband has prepared for me and we watch TV and go to sleep

Home will be training too
Getting used to the routine
Driving to war like it's shift work
Like I'm punching the clock
Used to transition home once a year
Now it'll be once a day
Different
Definitely different

But on the true corn hand
Knowing what you're fighting for and all that
I'll have a daily reminder
Not some dream Sam and Eric in my head half-remembered
But there
In front of me
Real
As real as a goodnight kiss

Rest of training's fine
A couple of the boys crash theirs
Oops
Be hard to work that off
Good thing they're not real yet
Not that we can tell the difference sitting in the typing pool

I don't crash mine
Not that it matters
But I don't

Sam misses me at dinnertimes begs to stay up till I get home
I tell her it's too late but we'll make mornings extra-special

I talk like a mom now
A bullshit one

Training over
I've earned a pin
The Chair Force pin
This lame-ass lightening bolt piece of shit
They stick it on my suit
Puncture my suit with the pin so it becomes part of it part of me
I try not to look in the mirror

…

First day on the job
The war
Whatever
Eric makes me French toast for our extra-special breakfast
He hands me my lunch in a brown paper bag and I'm off to the desert to be a pilot
To be of use

I park in my spot and I put on my flight suit and enter a trailer
One of many trailers in a parking lot
An air-conditioned trailer that seals me off completely from all sky all blue

Fuck

My eyes adjust
I am guided to a Naugahyde Barcalounger
I tap the guy in it out
He gives me a nod
I sit
In front of me is a toy throttle and a screen
To the right of me is a 19 year-old chewing gum
He is the Sensor
He will control the cameras

The 19 year-old has been doing this a while
He is part of my team
I have a team now
A headset full of backseat drivers
Analysts advisers JAGs
My lone wolf days are over I don't call the shots anymore
I'm like the back-up singer for Neil Diamond

(Pause as she listens to "Sweet Caroline" in her head, waiting for her turn to sing:)

(singing) BUM-BUM-BUM

That's me
A team

I take the controls
I stare at the screen eighteen inches from my face
A Gorgon Stare
I stare at the desert
They're twelve hours ahead there
Night
Weird
I stare at the screen

It's not like a videogame
A videogame has color
I stare at grey
At a world carved out of putty
Like someone took the time to carve a putty world for me to stare at twelve hours a day
High definition putty

I'm told my mission for the day
To provide support for a convoy
A convoy on the screen in the real downrange
Look out for them
Make sure no bad guys're planting any IEDs
I am told to guide my plane over a road

I'm told to fly left
I fly left
Right
I fly right
Left right left right left

I'm told to orbit
To circle a spot on the ground
Stare at the sand from above
Staring down from above
That stupid song that song?
Seals and Crofts or Alan Parsons or somebody?
The eye in the sky
That's me
That's me now
I fly a plane and stare at a screen that stares at the ground

I don't see anything
And that's good
Just grey putty
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
I'm tapped on the shoulder
A pilot takes my place takes control of my plane
Its not my plane anymore I don't have a plane anymore
It's his
He will stare at nothing now
And I
I will go home

I get in my car
My eyes adjust to color to the distance
Static
AC/DC again somebody up there likes me

I hold sleeping Sam against me
She is real and alive and warm
I eat dinner and I watch another screen and I go to bed

Extra-special morning time and then I cross the desert to look at a screen
Convoy
Nothing
Grey

Home
Eric tells me he's found a job at the Pyramid
Blackjack dealer
Cheating people out of money
I call him the Predator
We celebrate
I'm on top of him and I close my eyes and I see grey for a second
Eric asks what's wrong I say nothing
I jerk him off and we watch the screen and call it a night

The Pyramid is 24 hours too
Eric's the new guy gets the shit shift
The red-eye
Means I have to drop Sam off at day care now
An extra-special drop off
Kiss her goodbye and go to war
Sit in a car and cross the desert to sit in a chair in a freezing trailer
To follow the convoy

Follow the convoy

The convoy

I'm jolted awake by laughter
I've fallen asleep and hit my head on the screen and that is funny

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