

Acting Edition

Bleachers

by Noah Haidle

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|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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ISBN 978-0-573-71230-2

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CHARACTERS

THE TUBA SECTION

ELIZA – Fifteen. Second chair. A rebel.

NEIL – Seventeen. Third chair. A budding philosopher possibly from another dimension.

JOY – Sixteen. First chair. A leader.

RUSTY – Fourteen. Fourth chair. Scared.

CHORUS

Optional and expandable, the Chorus are silent witnesses, musical ghosts, mascots who never get to take their helmet off, stagehands who never take the stage. They can march, freeze, hum, or shadow the main cast during transitions.

SETTING

Your high school bleachers.

TIME

The high school football season.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Have you ever heard of that movie *American Pie*?

Have you ever heard a joke that starts, “This one time, at band camp...”

(I would ask, “Do you remember...” but most of the people reading this were born long after the film came out in 1999.)

I went to the same public high school in Michigan as Adam Herz, the screenwriter of *American Pie*, where I was first chair of the tuba section in the marching band.

His movie and its interminable sequels (including *American Pie: Band Camp*) made my marching band the punchline of a national joke. Although it's been almost thirty years since I've sat in the bleachers of a high school football game playing music for a team and community that belittled me and my friends, the sting never quite goes away.

I wrote this play to give my younger self the sense of agency it never had and in so doing hopefully it gives you a sense of agency now.

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NOTES FOR THE DIRECTOR

Monologues

There is a symbiotic relationship between the band, the announcer, the referee's whistle, and the game itself. The band is required to fill up any lag time in the game with high-spirited music – i.e., during timeouts, moving the chains for a new set of downs, etc. – but since the interval of down time is usually quite short, the band only plays a few measures of music. They never play music while the football team is actually engaged in the game. The snippets of songs exist to fire up the crowd but never to distract the football players from the game. But the tuba section never plays the fight song, they play themselves, speaking their hearts in place of music.

Chorus/Floating Ensemble

BLEACHERS is designed to scale. While the central story can be told with just the four actors playing the tuba section, the presence of a Chorus can be drawn from other members of the marching band, kids in the theater department, or any other students from the broader reality of high school that are overlooked, half heard, or nearly forgotten. In the appendix you'll find a number of brief Choral interludes. Use all of them. Choose a few. Invent your own in your rhythm. Use them as a visual echo, or a musical underscore, or as a reminder that the four tuba players in the bleachers are never really alone. Encourage your students to contribute ideas for Chorus moments. Give them agency. Let them rewrite silence.

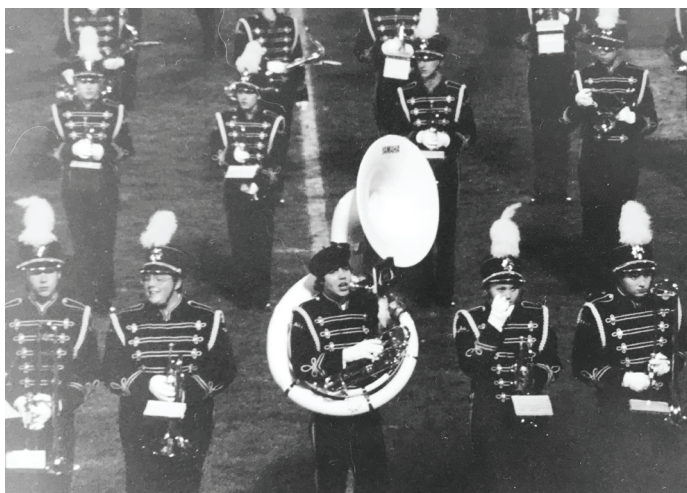
Localization

BLEACHERS is also designed to be hyper-local. The more personal it feels to your school and community, the more powerful it becomes. You are encouraged to: swap in your school mascot and colors, reference your actual fight song, use local place names, "Behind the Casey's" or "Over by the east gym," and let students insert inside jokes or custom chants where appropriate. Feel free to modify background details, school-specific terminology, and any line that would make students say, "That's not how we talk."

This is a script built to adapt. The goal is recognition.

Let the audience see themselves. Let the students tell their vision.

Make it yours. Make it true. Make it LOUD.



*For everyone in high school who feels like they're in the background of
someone else's story*

(That's seventeen-year-old me carrying the sousaphone.)

The Season Opener

(Friday night.)

(A high school football stadium.)

(The bleachers.)

(More accurately, the back of the bleachers.)

(The tuba section is always in the back of every place they inhabit, the music room, the bus, the bleachers, it doesn't matter. They are invisible to everyone and thus able to watch everyone else, the rest of the band, the student section, and of course the football field, too.)

NEIL. Do you think tubas remember their players?

ELIZA. The quarterback's neck is thicker than my torso.

JOY. Anybody with two first names makes me suspicious.

NEIL. Like, when after I graduate, will the next person have to earn my tuba's trust again?

ELIZA. What are you babbling about, Neil?

NEIL. Memory.

Loss.

Continuance.

JOY. Your tuba won't remember you.

No one will remember any of us.

We're the background noise of the real story.

ELIZA. We're not the background, we're the underscore.

JOY. Down on that field are the kids who will be remembered.

The marching band?

We're the help.

ANNOUNCER. Touchdown, East Grand Rapids!!

#24, Thrillin' Dylan Anderson!!!!

(The crowd goes wild.)

(The members of the tuba section do not.)

(They strap on their extremely cumbersome tubas and stand to play the fight song.)

ELIZA. "Once more, into the breach, dear friends."

NEIL. "Unto the breach."

ELIZA. Unto?

NEIL. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

ELIZA. Unto.

You're sure?

NEIL. *Henry V*, Act Three, Scene One.

When I was twelve my Dad made me memorize inspiring speeches to counteract slothfulness.

I'm sure.

ELIZA. "Once more, unto the breach, dear friends."

ANNOUNCER. The East Grand Rapids Marching Band invites you to sing along to the fight song, "Onward East High"!

(JOY is section leader.)

JOY. Let's put a little extra juice on the fight song, people.

(Four whistles from the unseen drum major, Kate.)

Rusty, follow me.

(Lights shift.)

*(Instead of playing the fight song **RUSTY** speaks to the audience [which is the central conceit of Bleachers, at every impetus to play music, the tuba players reveal their inner lives instead].)*

RUSTY. *(To us.)* I don't want to be here.

Not like, existentially.

Here-here.

In these bleachers.

In my fourteen-year-old skin.

Everyone always acts like I'm fine.

Because I show up.

But showing up isn't the same as being okay.

I feel like I'm holding up a mirror that's reflecting everyone else and nothing of me.

Do you know that feeling?

Like, when you become a really good version of, "Don't worry, I'm fine."

I want to go home.

But I don't know where home is anymore.

(Lights shift.)

*(The fight song just ended. **RUSTY** didn't do so well.)*

ELIZA. What does it feel like to be a musical prodigy?

RUSTY. I am so sorry.

NEIL. Probably akin to Mozart resting his fingers on the piano keys for the first time

JOY. Don't listen to them.

ELIZA. They didn't have pianos back then only harpsichords.

NEIL. Probably akin to Mozart resting his fingers on the harpsichord keys for the first time.

ELIZA. What I wouldn't give to be touched by the gods like you have been, freshman.

RUSTY. I don't mean to be a burden.

JOY. You're not a burden, Rusty, you're new, and everybody knows what it feels like to have to start at the beginning.

Right?

ELIZA. We're supposed to make him feel better right now?

He just made all our lives harder.

Especially yours, Joy.

ANNOUNCER. Caledonia to kick off from their own 25-yard line.

*(A tradition: everyone stomps the bleachers, holds their hands above their heads, wiggles their fingers and says, "Aaaaaaaaaaahhhh" until the ball is kicked; then they drop their hands, and the **BAND MEMBERS**, except **RUSTY** [because no one told him], all say:)*

ELIZA, NEIL & JOY. Crescendo!!

ELIZA. As far as I can recollect, freshman, you're the only band member who signed up at the beginning of the semester.

NEIL. Thus missing the glories of band camp.

RUSTY. It was a last minute decision.

I'm really grateful to Mr. Papalko for letting me join so late.

ELIZA. Why the change of heart?

RUSTY. My parents wanted me to play in the band.

ELIZA. Music lovers, are they?

RUSTY. No.

It's so I can appear well-rounded on my college applications.

NEIL. You signed up to play the tuba to get into college?!?

The price is too high, sir.

RUSTY. I signed up for band to get into college, Mr. Papalko sent me to you because I can't even read music.

NEIL. Mr. Papalko always makes the rejects play the tuba.

ELIZA. He made you play the tuba, too.

NEIL. Need I say more?

JOY. Not being able to read music raises the difficulty of my job by a few orders of ten, Rusty.

RUSTY. If it's easier I can just pretend to play.

JOY. It's definitely easier but it's also unacceptable.

As section leader I'm responsible for your musical and marching abilities.

You pretending to play would be a failure of leadership on my part.

RUSTY. Maybe I could switch to another instrument?

ELIZA. You got sent to the seventh circle of hell, freshman, it's a one-way ticket.

NEIL. Back of the bleachers.

The farthest you can get from social acceptance.

RUSTY. Playing the tuba can't be that bad.

NEIL. Ummmmmmmm.

ANNOUNCER. Interception, East Grand Rapids!!

#10, Mike Edison!!

(The crowd goes wild.)

(The tuba players do not.)

(Lights shift. ELIZA speaks to the audience.)

ELIZA. *(To us.)* I used to pretend I was invisible.

Not metaphorically, literally invisible.

I'd walk the halls like I was the hero of a stealth video game.

Avoid eye contact.

Step-light.

Slouch.

Hide.

Because if I was invisible, then it made sense that nobody saw me.

But being invisible isn't safe, it's lonely.

I don't need to be the main character.

I just want to be noticed enough to be in the credits.

"Tuba Player #3," I'm not even asking to have a name.

Maybe someday soon someone will notice me enough that I can feel real.

(Lights shift.)

JOY. You signed up for social self-immolation, Rusty.

NEIL. The berets!

JOY. We don't even get regular band helmets.

Which look stupid enough, but what pimply teenager can rock a beret?

NEIL. I come close.

ELIZA. You come nowhere near close, Neil.

None of us do.

The tuba section are an island unto ourselves.

NEIL. The outcasts of outcasts.

ELIZA. If the marching band is the lowest social caste in high school, tuba players are the Untouchables.

RUSTY. There's not an egalitarian sense of shame among all band members?

ELIZA. Oh, Lord no.

JOY. Each instrument has its own character and they unilaterally think they're better than us.

ELIZA. Up front are the flutes.

Almost all girls who act superior because they get the most melodies.

JOY. Trumpets are mostly young men with a lot to prove.

NEIL. I was a trumpet player until I realized ambition is societal conditioning.

ELIZA. And because your embouchure is too weak to get close to the high notes.

NEIL. You really know how to hurt a guy.

JOY. Clarinets are a good mixture of musicianship and humility but still manage to stick up their noses at us.

ELIZA. Saxophones are groovy but some think they're a latter-day John Coltrane.

JOY. French horns have the same mouthpiece as the trumpet and are for the kids not good enough to play the trumpet.

NEIL. The French horn was my final unsuccessful attempt to not be made a tuba player.

ELIZA. Trombones and baritones aren't cool at all but a little bit cooler than we are thus they also get to look down on us.

NEIL. And then there's an empty row so that people can walk from one side of the band room to the other without having to get too close to the smelly cubbyholes for people's shoes.

JOY. And then there's us.

ELIZA. We are the worst musicians playing the easiest parts.

NEIL. Least gifted.

ELIZA. Excuse me, least gifted musicians and the scourge of all of high school.

RUSTY. If it's so bad why did you choose to be in band in the first place?

NEIL. Are you speaking to me?

RUSTY. I'm speaking to all of you.

NEIL. Then I will answer for myself.

I joined band because I worship music and want to know everything about it but attend a public school in the United States of America.

ELIZA. The only reason the music program can exist is because we are a functionary to the football team.

Arts funding?

Who cares?

No, let's worship the fate of a stupidly shaped ball instead.

ANNOUNCER. Touchdown, East Grand Rapids!!

#24, Thrillin' Dylan Anderson!!!!

(The crowd goes wild.)

(Lights shift. NEIL speaks to the audience.)

NEIL. *(To us.)* I think failure is a form of time travel.

Like, when you mess up bad enough, your brain launches you twenty minutes, twenty days, twenty years in the future to when you're lying in bed thinking about this exact moment and whispering, "Why did I do that?"

And in the meantime, like the present moment, just kind of evaporates.

You don't get to live it.

Which sucks, because I think life is mostly made of mistakes.

And if we time travel through all of them, what's left?

(Lights shift.)

JOY. We're all here in part because we love music.

NEIL. Worship music.

ELIZA. Need music.

JOY. What kind of music do you listen to, Rusty?

RUSTY. I don't?

JOY. Ummmm.

NEIL. Oh, wow.

ELIZA. Hopeless.

JOY. You don't listen to music?

RUSTY. I mean, when it's on in the car.

Or in waiting rooms.

NEIL. Do you even like music?

RUSTY. I like it, but I guess it doesn't speak to me the way it speaks to some people?

Like it's a transmission on the radio but I don't get the signal.

ELIZA. The love of music is the only thing we all have in common.

RUSTY. Then I guess we won't be friends.

ELIZA. That's the thing, we're not friends.

NEIL. Friend-ly.

JOY. Respectful.

NEIL. Co-workers.

ELIZA. Where do you live, Joy?

JOY. 1842 Sherman.

ELIZA. Huh.

JOY. You?

ELIZA. 232 San Luis Rey.

JOY. By the grocery store?

ELIZA. No, the other side.

JOY. Oh. Nice.

ELIZA. Neil, where do you live?

NEIL. You don't really care.

ELIZA. I don't really care because we know each other in the bleachers and that's it.

Neil, what grade are you in?

NEIL. Senior.

You?

ELIZA. Sophomore.

NEIL. Joy?

JOY. Junior.

ELIZA. We don't have any of the same classes because we're all in different grades.

NEIL. Except Joy and I have Physics third period.

JOY. Did you look at this week's problem set?

NEIL. I finished it already.

JOY. Since this morning?

NEIL. The answers appeared on the back of my eyelids as I slept through gym.

JOY. Because I'm completely lost.

NEIL. I can help reveal the open secret order of the universe if it would be useful.

JOY. That would be fantastic, Neil, I feel like I'm drowning.

RUSTY. How do you sleep through gym?

ELIZA. Hush!

Outside of band class, Physics, and the bleachers, we don't know each other.

RUSTY. I get it.

You're not friends you're bound instead by a common suffering, enduring physical hardships and mockery from our community and playing the tuba will define my entire existence.

ELIZA. We're only offering the truth, freshman.

RUSTY. My name's Rusty.

ELIZA. I know what your name is, I choose to call you freshman out of disdain.

JOY. It's still the first two weeks of the semester.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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