

THE DENIZENS OF TUNA, TEXAS

I needed to reread the play to write out some character descriptions which the producers wanted for audition publicity. It was a good exercise.

Reading through the script of *Greater Tuna* I initially failed to notice that the character “Jody” was a boy. He only has two scenes, and though it might be easy to dismiss them as ‘not too important’ I think he gives at least a brief insight to the heart of this play.

The author’s through the publicity blurbs often refer to the ‘denizens’ of Tuna, Texas. “Denizen” is one of those words that sound a lot worse than it is. It’s like saying, “Tuna is the third smallest town in Texas.” There’s nothing really wrong with that, but who would want it. The same is true of the Denizens – who would want to be that?

After college I was a denizen of Denison. I felt the same way. Denison, Texas, in the early seventies wasn’t that much different than Tuna. It had 20,000 people most of whom were waiting for something to happen that they knew never would. I was young, energetic and ready to set the world on fire. I was amazed to find out that my school administration was not as inspired by my vision as I was. They knew when I went to the liquor store, but not when our play was performed. It took me three years to figure that out why that made sense in that town. Everyone in Tuna that had those thoughts has already left; the rest could not care less.

In full disclosure I have every reason to believe that Denison is a far nicer place now, they are certainly doing good theatre at the high school – better than I was every capable of 45 years ago, but let’s get back to ‘Tuna’.

The ‘Players’ production of ‘Tuna’ will multicast the rolls famously created by Jaston Williams and Joe Sears. Although this actually diminishes the theatrical beauty of the original productions of this franchise, it nonetheless allows companies to expand upon the simple beauty of the show.

The characters are distinct unto themselves, but must still weave a visual quilt where they are all intricately woven. The play is more like sketch comedy than a classic play unit. The action moves very quickly, especially in the first act with each small speech adding a chapter to the understanding of the town. Even the title *Greater Tuna*, while obviously mocking urban sprawl for the “third smallest town in Texas”, subtly may suggest the character montage that makes the vehicle work.

It is my hope as director that upon the occasion of the auditions for this show we will hit upon a casting combination, based on the actors available, which will establish multi-characterizations of the denizens in a manner that allows more than two persons on stage at a time, but still give a delightful charm of the inbred nature of these simple folk. How many actors it will take to create the nearly twenty characters (and a dog) is unclear at this point.

Thurston Wheelis & Arles Stuvie: [Male, indeterminate ages 28+] These two radio staples of Tuna also serve as a sort of chorus for the town. They rattle off news, weather, sports, and comments like media talking heads but are clearly aware of what they are saying and the effect it might have. It’s not like they don’t know or care about what they are reporting, it’s just somehow, somewhere, beneath them.

Didi Snavely: [adult female] Local business owner has one scene where she reads an ad for her gun emporium, and appears at the end of the play to cuss out her husband (R.R.).

Harold Dean: [middle aged adult male] Local weather man, has one scene where he forecasts a cornucopia of bad weather.

Elmer Watkins: [old white guy] He has two small scenes: (1) announces an upcoming Klan gathering in scene one, and (2) then opens it at the end of the play.

Petey Fisk: [adult male] He is the zealot life blood of the Tuna Humane Society. With his addictive behavior it is fortunate that he picked up a puppy instead of a narcotic. And he has four scenes to sell it.

Charlene Bumiller: [middle aged woman] Matriarch to a family that Tennessee Williams would have disavowed. She has three scenes and interacts with other characters more than most.

Jody Bumiller: [young female] She loves puppies and listening to the radio and has two small, but touching, scenes.

Stanley Bumiller: [young adult male] the darkest character in the play and one of the most memorable. He was warped by serving time in jail and will no doubt spend the rest of his life brooding and complaining about things he can't change – save one.

Charlene Bumiller: [high school senior] Threatens God in her prayers to become an agnostic because she didn't make cheerleader – wants to fit into her brother's jeans despite her ample hips.

Chad Hartford: [adult male 30+] Big City investigative reporter who in his one scene interviews Charlene about cleaning up the smut in the Tuna ISD.

Leonard Childress: [middle aged male] Local radio talk show host, has one scene in Act I (Act II blurb written as “taped”).

Phinias Blye: [older male] long time political hopeful who announces another run for city council in his one small scene.

Pearl Burras: [just past middle aged female] Aunt to Bertha, she depends on Stanley to provide her with strychnine which she uses to mercifully kill stray dogs. An iconic ‘Tuna’ character, has a soliloquy that probably nailed Joe Sears's Tony nomination.

Vera Carp: [peer to Pearl] has only one short scene with Pearl, while interacting with an unseen character off stage.

R. R. Snavely: [middle aged male] local UFO enthusiast, married to the gun store owner -- has two short scenes.

Reverend Spikes: [older middle aged] Fundamentalist preacher of local Baptist church, has one scene to eulogize dead judge with every cliché ever written.

Coach Chassie: [middle aged male] Goes on the radio for one scene to apologize for the latest loss of the high school team.

Sherriff Givens: [middle aged male] bumbling useful idiot who has one scene to show his stupidity.

When these characters are broken down like this they are metaphorically like marbles on a glass table. A better metaphor would be one of those big funnel shaped attractions where you roll a coin around and around until it reaches the narrow neck at the bottom and spins wildly before disappearing. You can do that with a penny or a whole roll of coins, but you've got to do it just right. If they bump into each other they slide crudely into the hole, and it's a waste of money, but when they're all spinning it's an amazing sight that you dare not look away from for even a second.

That's why these characters work, however briefly they may appear. It's an ensemble aboard a speeding train, whether it's two guys up there working their butts off, or twenty -- the characters are the story. The characters are the play. They tell a story even though there's really not a story.

- **Auditions are February 19, 20, (21st if we need callbacks) at 6 PM, 518 Pike Place, 78209.**