



# boom

BY PETER SINN NACHTRIEB



DRAMATISTS  
PLAY SERVICE  
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**boom — NACHTRIEB**



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The world premiere of BOOM was presented by Ars Nova,  
Jason Eagan, Artistic Director; Jon Steingart & Jenny Wiener, Executive Producers.

BOOM was originally developed at Brown/Trinity Playwrights Repertory  
in the summer of 2007, directed by Kenneth Prestininzi.

*For my science teachers*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

On a year off from college, I landed a four-month job working for a marine biologist on a Caribbean island station (more like a spit of sand) just off the coast of Panama. For ninety days straight we woke before dawn, boated out two miles to a shallow reef, and observed fish spawn (specifically the Beaugregory Damselfish, *Stegastes leucostictus*, for those of you interested in the details). We recorded who was mating with whom, the number of eggs laid, the number of laid eggs cannibalized by the male, and many other exciting tidbits of fish data.

On occasional mornings, sudden, fierce, fast-moving storms would blow through as we worked in the water. First a strong wind, then hard rain that would transform the first couple feet of the sea to a froth. Down below, as the sky got dark, the fish would retreat into the crannies of the coral, as though they were readying for sleep/night. Meanwhile we hapless humans bobbed at the surface hoping that lightning wouldn't strike our boat. The storms would pass quickly, the sun would return, and the fish would gradually emerge into the open once again.

So, yeah: fish, sex, hiding from impending doom ... What a totally awesome play that would be, I thought to myself approximately ten years later. Am I right? Totally, right?

In college I majored in both theater and biology and I think this play might be an attempt to understand the relationship between the two. For me, both fields are attempting the same thing: to try and make some sense of the world in an epic and intimate way.

BOOM was originally developed at Brown/Trinity Playwrights Repertory (Lowry Marshall, Artistic Director), in Providence, Rhode Island, in the summer of 2007. It was directed by Kenneth Prestininzi and the production stage manager was Kristen Gibbs. The cast was as follows:

JULES ..... Jimmy King  
JO ..... Susannah Flood  
BARBARA ..... Constance Crawford

BOOM received its world premiere by Ars Nova (Jason Eagan, Artistic Director; Jon Steingart and Jenny Wiener, Executive Producers), in New York City, on March 20, 2008. It was directed by Alex Timbers; the set design was by Wilson Chin; the costume design was by Emily Rebholz; the lighting design was by Marcus Doshi; the sound design was by Mark Huang; and the production stage manager was Alaina Taylor. The cast was as follows:

JULES ..... Lucas Near-Verbrugge  
JO ..... Megan Ferguson  
BARBARA ..... Susan Wands

BOOM was subsequently produced at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company (Howard Shalwitz, Artistic Director), in Washington, D.C., in November, 2008. It was directed by John Vreeke; the set design was by Thomas Kamm; the costume design was by Ivania Stack; the lighting design was by Colin K. Bills; the sound design was by Neil McFadden; and the production stage manager was William E. Cruttenden III. The cast was as follows:

JULES ..... Aubrey Deeker  
JO ..... Kimberly Gilbert  
BARBARA ..... Sarah Marshall



## CHARACTERS

JULES — a marine biology graduate student. Twenty-eightish, uncomfortable, excitable, literal.

JO — an undergraduate journalism student. Twenty-twoish, strong, skeptical, physical.

BARBARA — A natural history docent. Forties to fifties, buoyant, vulnerable, passionate, grand.

## PLACE

Jules' subterranean university research lab that has been awkwardly fashioned into a living area. There are no windows. A large thick door is the only entrance. There is a fish tank, bubbling.

A sea of cabinets and drawers and other modes of storage dominate the walls.

This is also an exhibit.

There is a control station that looks like an old-style tech booth with giant levers, switches, analog knobs and such. And a timpani. Maybe some other special devices. This is Barbara's main area.

## TIME

When we least expect it.

## A NOTE ON BARBARA'S SPEAKING HABITS

Barbara occasionally uses a gesture instead of words. In the script I have placed the text that the gesture is intended to substitute in brackets. [*Like this!*].



The universe could so easily have remained lifeless and simple — just physics and chemistry, just the scattered dust of the cosmic explosion that gave birth to time and space. The fact that it did not — the fact that life evolved out of nearly nothing, some ten billion years after the universe evolved out of literally nothing — is a fact so staggering that I would be mad to attempt words to do it justice.

—Richard Dawkins, *The Ancestor's Tale*

There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being.

—Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*



# boom

*Barbara bursts into the space.*

*She wears a nametag. She's just come from a meeting. Severe emotion is being wound up and contained.*

*A deep breath.*

*She puts something on the lab set that should have already been there. Fish food, maybe. She crosses to her area.*

*She pulls a big lever that, with a snap, shuts off the lights, except perhaps an interesting one around her.*

*Barbara picks up a set of timpani mallets and plays a brief, loud, introductory song that suggests danger. The ferocity of the playing contrasts her exterior calm. She's working something out hitting the drum.*

*Upon completion, she sets the mallets down, pulls another lever that turns on the lights of a fish tank.*

*Barbara pulls another lever that lights up the lab/apartment.*

*Jules, smiling, stares at Jo.*

*Jo, not smiling, stares at the fish tank.*

JULES. Are you thirsty?

JO. No. *(Beat.)*

JULES. Can I take your coat?

JO. I'm not wearing a coat. *(Beat.)*

JULES. Can I take something from you and put it somewhere?

JO. Take off your shirt.

JULES. Pardon?

JO. You're not deaf.

JULES. Now?

JO. Did you want to fuck clothed?

JULES. You sure you don't want some water? Something stronger?  
*(Beat. Jules begins to unbutton his shirt. Jo stares at the fish.)*

JO. What kind?

JULES. Um, Old Navy.

JO. The fish.

JULES. Oh. Beaugregory Damsel fish.

*Stegastes leucostictus.* As they were called in ancient Greece.

That's Dorothy.

JO. Like the *Golden Girl*?

JULES. Like my younger sister. Her name, at least.

JO. Is she tall and mannish?

JULES. No, we're from Kansas.

You know ... Dorothy?

My parents were into obviously relevant names.

JO. What'd they call you?

JULES. Jules.

After Jules Verne. I'm glad they didn't call me Vern, you know, because ...

They had a hunch I liked aquatic things.

JO. Why?

JULES. I was a water birth. Unintentionally.

You never told me your name.

JO. Take off your pants. *(Beat. Jules slowly undoes his belt and pulls his pants down. He has difficulty disrobing. Balance issues? Forgetting to take his shoes off first? While doing this ... )*

JULES. I only lived there till I was five. Kansas. Then we moved. My mom, two sisters and me did. My dad stayed. Sort of. I mean, I was five so I don't really know the actual details, you know, he, um, well, he stayed in Kansas. But left. In a way, I guess. More like sucked up. And then dropped. Into a field.

He wasn't really happy. Before. Hated being a weatherman. I think he hated Kansas. I remember that much. My five-year-old intuitive sense of ... grief.

Anyway, we moved to Florida. Which, at least in my opinion,

was much nicer than Kansas. For a while. Until, well, until my sister decided to run outdoors in a hurricane right when a palm tree decided that it couldn't stay in the ground anymore, and my mom, other sister and I moved to Kenya. "Let's start fresh! Let's get away from it all!" my mom said. Although the "all" we were getting away from apparently didn't include malaria, and the fevers that malaria causes and the hallucinations that the fever causes and the hyenas that wait outside of medical tents ready to pounce on weak young flesh staggering out in a dream, and soon my mom and I moved here, where we've lived ever since. Except for my mom, who couldn't have picked a worse time to go on a tour of un-reinforced masonry in California. And here I am. *(Jules is now in his flannel boxer shorts, T-shirt, and socks.)* Where are you from? *(Jo kisses Jules actively, aggressively, maybe pressing him against a wall. Jules is frozen, stiff, not responding. Jo stops kissing, steps away. Beat.)*

JO. Massachusetts.

JULES. Oh. Nice.

JO. No, it's not.

JULES. Too many blizzards?

JO. I like snow. *(Beat.)*

JULES. Which part of Massachusetts?

JO. What was that?

JULES. Worcester?

JO. You said you loved to kiss.

JULES. When?

JO. "I love kissing, body contact, oral sex, and intensely significant coupling."

JULES. Oh right.

JO. You wrote that in your ad.

JULES. You remember things.

JO. That was the worst kiss ever.

JULES. It was surprising. I was surprised.

JO. That was a kiss of someone who does not enjoy the feel of lips.

JULES. I was hoping we could talk a little bit first. *(Jo smiles.)*

JO. I didn't come here to talk.

JULES. It would help me relax.

JO. Why?

JULES. I've never met anyone. This way.

JO. Which way?

JULES. With the help of technology.

JO. So?

JULES. I'm anxious.

JO. Why?

JULES. It's abrupt.

JO. And?

JULES. I've got some spanakopita. I just heated them up. So maybe we could — *(Jo goes to kiss Jules. He jumps back. Jo and Jules engage in a little cat-and-mouse. Maybe furniture is involved.)*

JO. Come here.

JULES. We should eat them while they're warm.

JO. This is not a game.

JULES. Warm and flakey.

JO. Sex! Now!

JULES. I appreciate your youthful eagerness, but you should understand that sometimes it takes me — *(Jo jumps on Jules, pushes him onto the ground or futon and gets on top of him.)* Holy crap.

JO. Stop thinking.

JULES. But —

JO. Start fucking.

JULES. I —

JO. Make me believe in life!

JULES. I can't just —

JO. Listen to your instincts!

JULES. I'm a homosexual. *(Jo stops. A beat.)* I think that's why I'm having a difficult time. *(Jo gets off of Jules.)* I should have mentioned it earlier.

JO. You didn't.

JULES. No.

JO. Why didn't you?

JULES. I thought it would make you not want to come over. Do you mind if I put my pants back on?

JO. You don't look gay.

JULES. Clothing-wise?

JO. You don't have gay eyes.

JULES. I'm wearing contacts right now so —

JO. Did you think I was a man?

JULES. What?

JO. Jo with an e?

JULES. Your name is Jo?

JO. The female spelling.



JULES. You sent me a picture.

JO. So you're bi-curious.

JULES. Oh, no. It's good to know your name.

JO. Did you just get born again? Are you a fundamentalist?

JULES. I'm a marine biologist.

JO. I don't get it.

JULES. Well, it's a field of science where we study —

JO. What is this?

JULES. I should put on some music.

JO. This is bullshit. (*Jules walks to an iPod with speakers.*)

JULES. I just bought one of those things that play all your songs.

JO. I don't have a lot of time! (*Barbara dums the timpani, lightly.*)

JULES. No. We don't.

JO. I'm twenty-two.

JULES. OK.

JO. It's Saturday night.

JULES. I think if I explained why —

JO. And there is an enormous world out there!

JULES. Uh-huh.

JO. Millions and millions of options.

JULES. It's a vibrant campus.

JO. And I only get to pick one at a time! Of all the recitals, ragers, and sex partners I could have selected from tonight, I picked this. I picked you. And ... And ...

JULES. Yay?

JO. And what if? What fucking if? (*Beat.*)

JULES. What if what?

JO. What if this is it?

What if I've set a series of events into motion that will doom me to be trapped forever in some desperate monotonous life and in my last breaths, when I look back at all the mistakes I've made, I'll remember this moment, now, as the moment I truly fucked it all up. And then I die.

JULES. Mm. (*Jo collects her bag, about to leave.*)

JO. Did you think about that?

JULES. Maybe.

JO. Did you think about what that means?

JULES. Don't go!

JO. Maybe you should think about that 'cause WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE! (*Barbara pulls down a large lever/switch, which makes*

*a loud noise. Jo instantly collapses to the floor as though she has just been unplugged.)*

JULES. Are you OK? Jo? Hello? (*Jules shakes Jo gently. She doesn't move. Checks for breathing, pulse. None.*) Shoot! Shoot shoot shoot. (*Jules looks around as though maybe someone could help, does that "emergency situation" shuffle of indecision. Finally, he kneels beside her, pinches her nose and slowly moves in to do rescue breathing. Jules is almost over her lips when Barbara flips the switch up. Jo jerks awake.*)

JO. AHHHH! (*Jules falls back.*)

JULES. Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness.

JO. Motherfucker.

JULES. That was shocking. (*Jo sits up, looks at the surroundings suspiciously, searching for a cause.*) Are you all right?

JO. I hate that question.

JULES. You weren't breathing.

JO. What's your point?

JULES. You were yelling at me, about to leave, and then you collapsed and weren't breathing.

JO. How old is this building?

JULES. Uh, I don't know. Forty, fifty years?

JO. Is it safe?

JULES. It was designed to be a bomb shelter. I don't ... Do you need to lie down?

JO. (*To herself.*) What now?

JULES. I should bring you some water. A pillow. Spanakopita.

JO. (*To herself.*) Why are you doing this now?

JULES. Has that happened before?

JO. What?

JULES. What just happened.

JO. What just happened?

JULES. I'm being confused.

JO. Do you have bourbon?

JULES. I might.

JO. I'd like some bourbon.

JULES. Are you sure that's a good —

JO. On the rocks.

JULES. That's one of the truths of biologists. We always have ice. To freeze the things we kill.

And for drinks. (*Jo pulls out a steno pad from a backpack and scribbles copious notes. Jules opens a cabinet filled to the brim with plas-*

*tic red frat-party cups. Gets two. He opens a cabinet filled to the brim with bottles of bourbon. He gets a bottle. He opens a stuffed freezer, retrieves some ice and prepares the drink. Perhaps he presses play on the iPod. Before returning to Jo with drinks, Jules heads towards the door and locks the deadbolt, or perhaps some futuristic impressive electronic locking knob.)* So. You go to school?

Here?

What are you majoring in?

JO. Do we have to talk?

JULES. No. No. *(Beat.)*

JO. Journalism.

JULES. Oh neat! Journalism. That's really neat.

JO. Yeah, it's neat.

JULES. What got you into that?

JO. The hair. Newscaster hair.

JULES. *(Not hearing.)* Oh. That's great!

JO. Never seen in the real world. Difficult to reproduce. Huge. That's powerful.

JULES. Mmm-hmm.

JO. Newscaster hair keeps the public from going insane. A soothing visual balance to that cruel graphic icon in the corner of the screen, some artist's rendering of the worst things. The world may be unraveling at a disturbing pace but lo, the hair is not: noble, reliable, immobile ... it's the helmet we all need so badly to help us tolerate another day.

I wanted hair like that. *(Jules returns with the drinks, and a plate of spanakopita.)*

JULES. That's so great to be a journalist. Guardians of the First Amendment. Protectors of democracy. Deep Throat. What?

JO. You weren't listening.

JULES. I was making the drinks.

JO. What was I saying?

JULES. The ice was loud.

JO. You just want to talk about you?

JULES. I'm listening now.

JO. So, your family's dead?

JULES. Pardon?

JO. You have an entire family of dead people? Tornados, hyenas, whatnot.

JULES. Oh. Yes.

JO. That must suck.

JULES. Not exactly how I would phrase the —

JO. That must've really messed you up.

JULES. Everything does something.

JO. You're haunted by ghosts.

JULES. More by the laws of physics.

JO. What are all the thoughts rattling in your mind when you're not listening to the answers to questions you ask? (*Barbara hits the timpani. Jules looks upwards. Jules hands Jo the drink.*)

JULES. Cheers.

JO. I don't think so.

JULES. You don't like cheering?

JO. This isn't a date.

JULES. It isn't?

JO. A "casual encounter" does not have a toasting portion.

JULES. I was starting to feel a bond.

JO. Why am I here?

JULES. That's something we all want to know, isn't it? Is there a "purpose" to our form and substance? Or are we simply the random result of billions of years of chemical reactions and accidents influenced by pressures from the environment? Do we really —

JO. That wasn't my question.

JULES. It's what you asked.

JO. Why did you invite me to your ... what is this, a lab?

JULES. My grant doesn't cover housing.

A drink. Or two. Conversation. Dinner. Building trust. A connection. Dessert. Probably some more drinks. Deep breaths. Focus. Keeping the goal clear. And then ...

JO. What?

JULES. You know.

JO. No I don't.

JULES. What I wrote. Intensely significant coupling. (*Beat.*)

JO. You're a fag.

JULES. You shouldn't make assumptions based on that.

JO. I'm assuming that you fuck men.

JULES. That doesn't mean I wouldn't be able to with a woman.

JO. Have you ever?

JULES. No.

JO. See?

JULES. I've never had sex. With anything.

JO. Interesting.

JULES. I mean, of course, with myself. I'm familiar with the general sensations.

JO. How do you even know you're a gay?

JULES. The non-randomness of the erections.

JO. And still you've never.

JULES. I don't know if it's been a choice.

JO. Yes it has.

JULES. I haven't found the opportunity.

JO. There are thousands of men out there with low standards.

JULES. I know. Was that meant to be insulting?

JO. You have chosen to only make sweet love to your hand. Just like you chose to go online, post a misleading ad and have me here for ... why am I really here?

JULES. The future of humanity depends on it. (*Barbara dums the timpani.*)

JO. I have a final project for my magazine class: "Find a story in an unconventional place that uplifts you. Personally. Deeply. Truly."

JULES. Are we changing subjects?

JO. "The following topics and items may not be used in your uplifting story: the sick, disabled, whales or any animal with fur, sports, war, poor people getting rich, rich people getting morals, underdogs in general, or anything that could be celebrated on a card."

JULES. I used to send those to myself from across town.

JO. "In other words: no tricks. No lies. Find a story that makes you feel honest, genuine, hope."

JULES. Neat.

JO. I'm having a hard time with it.

JULES. So ... you went online to clear your head —

JO. This is the assignment.

JULES. Oh.

JO. Random sex as the last glimmer of hope in a decaying society. Everyone feels alone. Betrayed by their friends and families, their country, their dreams, their own selves. You know?

JULES. (*Doesn't know.*) Mmm.

JO. With nowhere to go in their normal depressing lives, people are forced to turn to the anonymous, the stranger. Alone, on laptops in isolated homes, a series of emails or an online chat brings two or more people together for a brief moment in time. No past. No future. All that matters is the moment.

They meet to fulfill each other's carnal needs, to find a moment of freedom, release, of sensory bliss that makes them forget how motherfucked up everything is. In no-strings sex, hope is still possible.

It's due Monday. (*Jo writes in her steno pad.*)

JULES. I could be uplifting.

JO. I should just make something up.

JULES. You can't do that.

JO. Why not?

JULES. You're a journalist. (*Beat.*)

JO. Where've you been the last few years?

JULES. On a desert island.

JO. 'Cause even *The New York Times* ...

Really?

JULES. Well, more like a spit of sand ...

JO. Really.

JULES. There was a volleyball net. That was nice. Of course there wasn't anyone else to —

JO. Sounds nice.

JULES. Very peaceful. Except when it rained. Corrugated tin.

JO. How long were you there?

JULES. Four years. Off and on. Nine months straight the last stretch. Lots and lots of data. Did you see *The Shining*?

JO. Yes.

JULES. It was much nicer solitude than that.

JO. Four years.

JULES. Yeah.

JO. Fish?

JULES. That's them.

JO. What about them?

JULES. Sleeping patterns. The significance of sunlight, radiation levels and extraterrestrial disturbances on diurnal fish activity, to be more specific. There are times of the year where storms come through in the morning, big fierce ones where the sky goes dark and it rains so hard that the first two feet of water is froth. It could be like ten A.M. and the fish will think it's time for bed. Time for bed, of course, is the wrong thing to say.

JO. Fascinating.

JULES. I've been researching this radical new sleeping pattern that's been taking place on this one reef I study. It's really really interesting.

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