

Christmas Play by the Faculty (2003)

There are two plays.

Someone (e.g., **Don**) should quiet the audience and announce that there will be two plays.

The first is a short skit, set in the very distant future.

The second is a major work of drama set in the present.

Antiques Roadshow 3003 (a short skit)

Characters: **Carl Heiles X**, **Appraiser**

[Enter the **Appraiser**.]

Appraiser: The year is 3003, and welcome to another episode of Antiques Roadshow. We're here at the San Francisco Moscone Convention Center to look at what treasures America has unknowingly hidden in its basement.

[Enter **Carl**, with club.]

Welcome to the show, Mr. Heiles. And what have you brought in to appraise?

Carl: (presents his billy club): This is something that's been in my family for as long as I can remember. My father gave it to me, and his father gave it to him before that. To be honest, no one knows quite what it is. All I know is that when the eldest Heiles male turns 18, it's been our tradition to hand over this stick.

App.: Well, Mr. Heiles, I think you'll be very pleased to know that this is no ordinary rod. It's called a *billy club*, and it dates back to at least the late 20th, early 21st centuries.

Carl: A billy club, is that right.

App.: Indeed. What we're looking at is a primitive weapon, held like so [demonstrating], used to bodily injure one's opponent. Naturally, it was employed in close quarters, and its main advantage was that it was easily concealable, because it was so small.

Carl: Well, that stands to reason.

App.: I must say, Mr. Heiles, I'm really very excited, because for a piece to hail from nearly a thousand years ago, it is supremely well preserved. Now I can provide you with some very *intimate* history regarding this particular object.

Carl: I'd be very interested to know this...*intimate* history.

App.: To begin with, our records indicate that only a handful of trained professionals used the billy club as their weapon of choice. These included remarkable figures from the late 20th century: Vladimir Putin, Barbara Bush, and curiously enough—for you—a certain American astronomer by the name of Carleton Heiles.

Carl: Well, that name certainly rings a bell.

App.: Unfortunately, among those 3 characters, Dr. Heiles' use of the club—almost

certainly this one, given your very personal connection—is the least well documented, and the reason for this, scholars believe, is that probably he silenced his critics with this very instrument.

Carl: Is that so?

App.: In fact, the evidence for habitual use is fairly clear to read in the faux bamboo wood. Do you see these tiny flecks of dark red?

Carl: I do. We always thought that was leftover paint from an original coating.

App.: A noble attempt, Mr. Heiles, but in fact, it's blood—human blood—almost certainly the blood of several students who worked in the same building as Carleton did.

Carl: Why would a grown man want to beat innocent young children?

App.: An excellent question. Our records are somewhat spotty on this point, but it is likely that he was goading them into an activity called [do the two fingers routine that Mike Myers does on Austin Powers] “Journal Club,” in which he forced students to give oral presentations on papers of little interest to any one but himself—and sometimes not even then.

Carl: That's shocking!

App.: Believe it or not, it gets even better. If you look more closely, you can even make out some hair lodged in the cracks, indicating the application of tremendous amounts of force.

Carl: Now that you mention it, I can even make out teeth marks.

App.: Most of these dental indentations are undoubtedly those of his victims as they struggled—in vain—to escape, but I would venture to say that *some* of the teeth marks—perhaps from these giant-sized bicuspid—are his own! Who knows what raged in that savage mind!

Carl: Wait till my wife hears about this.

App.: Mr. Heiles, do you have *any* idea what this piece is valued at in today's antiques market?

Carl: I can't say that I have the faintest clue.

App.: Mr. Heiles, despite the colorful history of this weapon, your late great ancestor, deservedly or not, died in relative obscurity as a scientist, and if one auctioned this piece today, it might fetch perhaps ... a \$1 ... possibly a \$1.50 if you went to Sotheby's. You might get more at the flea market.

But don't be disappointed. Its true value lies in the stories you can now tell your children, and in this respect, I hope it gives you many more years of pleasure.

Carl: "Spare the rod, and spoil the child." Thank you very much.

END

The Recall Play (a major work of drama)

Characters: **Eugene, Yoram Lithwick, Arons, Alice Shapley, Don, Jesse Leaman, JohnJohn, Conor Laver, Carl, Imke, Chung-Pei, Todd Thompson, Kelley, Ryan Chornock**

[On stage: **Eugene** and **Yoram** eating from a huge plate of party food, reading Danielle Steele novels. **Narrator** enters.]

Narrator: We present for your viewing pleasure “The Famous Tragedy of King Jon the First,” known less formally as “The Recall Election,” and known in theater circles as “Who Stole My Cheese, You Punk?”

We regret to inform you that the actor who normally plays Jon Arons—Jon Arons—objects to playing himself. And who can blame him. The part of Jon Arons will be played by his understudy, Eliot Quataert.

[**Narrator** exits. **Arons** enters.]

Arons (monologue to audience):

Now is the winter of our discontent,
Made glorious summer by this sun of Backer;
And all the e-mails that I sent en masse
In deep inboxes lie unread.
I, that am so lame and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me when I look at them,

[Sound of dogs barking offstage. Dog puppets and assorted stuffed animals poking in from offstage.]

Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to sit idly by
While budgets fail and governors fall.
Therefore, since I cannot prove a chairman,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these holidays.
Plots will I lay, inductions dangerous,
To set my fellow faculty and Chairman Backer
In deadly hate against each other.

But soft, two of the house of theorists approach.

(**Arons** returns to normal speech from this point on. He notices **Eugene** and

Yoram.)

Arons: Yoram! Eugene! What are you doing here? Where did all this food come from?

Yoram: [continues eating] It's paid for by the T.A.C.

Eugene: [continues eating] You said it was OK.

Arons: I said it was OK to get free sandwiches for the graduate students, not to cater from Chez Panisse!

Yoram: Here, try the cheese, it's really not bad.

Arons: [Eats the cheese]. Hmm, you're right, it's rather tasty...[Takes a step back] Wait, what am I doing? This is an outrageous use of state funds!

Eugene: Relax, Jon. Really, aren't you tired by now of that lousy, second-rate deli on Euclid? Every day that I've been here at Berkeley, you get a salad from Stuffed Inn. Now you told me before I came here that the cuisine in Berkeley could not be surpassed at any other school. Yoram and I are just taking you at your word.

Arons: But what's that you're reading? Romance novels?! I thought this was supposed to be a reading seminar on classic works in the literature.

Yoram: [Keeps eating and reading] It doesn't get any more classic than Danielle Steele and The Heavenly Hot Bodies.

Arons: Don't engage with subterfuge with me, Dr. Lithwick. What about all those great papers you advertised on your e-mail? Goldreich & Lynden-Bell? Begelman, Blandford, and Rees? McKee & Ostriker? ARONS [take a self-inflationary moment] & Max? For goodness sake, even Shu et al. is more substantial than this fluff!

Eugene: Hey, now, let's not forget Quataert & Chiang. For awhile there, we had a little following going.

Yoram: Actually, all those great papers were mentioned just to scare people away, so we could get all the food for ourselves.

Eugene: I'll tell you what, Jon, now that you know our little secret, we'll let you in. 50/50.

Arons: But there's 3 of us.

Eugene: Yeah, I know, but I factored in our respective appetites.

Arons: I won't have any part of this farce, this misuse of public funds, this—

CHARADE!

Yoram: Well, you can complain to Don. You know he has the LAST WORD.

Yoram and Eugene whispering simultaneously: THE LAST WORD, THE LAST WORD, THE LAST WORD....

Arons: How infuriating! It wasn't that long ago when *I* had the last word!

[**Eugene** and **Yoram** exit. Enter **JohnJohn**, **Conor**, and **Jesse**, who sit down and start playing cards.]

JohnJohn: The name of the game is Texas Hold 'Em. Deuces are wild. Ante up.

Arons: Excuse me, but isn't this a school day?

Conor (anyone who can do an Irish accent): You heard the man. Ante up.

Arons: I don't think I need to remind you that you're gambling on school property.

Jesse: Actually, Curt Manning says that all of this land used to belong to the Ohlone Indians. I'm sure they would approve. Now are you in, or are you out?

Arons: Oh, all right, I'm in. [Throws in a buck.] I can't believe I'm doing this.

JohnJohn: You worry too much, Jon. Poker is an extremely instructive game. I've learned more about probability in one hand of Follow the Queen than I have in any math class I've ever taken in Evans....not that I've taken any.

Jesse: That's right. And isn't astronomy by its very nature a statistical science?

[Following question is directed at the audience.]

I mean, what are the odds that any of us will graduate in 5 years?

Arons: (sarcastically) That's too easy a question.

Conor: I think you're being too pessimistic. Entire theses were written about a few photons. And these days, who needs real data anyway? Look at Renbin—he wrote a whole paper about MOCK catalogs of redshift surveys!

Jesse: Not a single photon there.

JohnJohn: Real data. How 1970s.

Conor: I'll take a Monte Carlo simulation over real data any day. At least there I understand the errors. And you can do it all in IDL.

[**Jesse, Conor,** and **JohnJohn** stand up simultaneously in militant fashion and perform a mock Nazi salute together.] (**Simultaneously:**)

Long live IDL! It's all you ever need in life! Who needs algebra!

[They sit down again and continue to play cards as if nothing happened.]

JohnJohn: Really, Jon, as far as graduate student productivity goes, you're ignoring the historical record. Look at all the great astronomers this department has produced over the years. Look at Doug Finkbeiner!

Jesse: And Wayne Hu!

Conor: Eve Ostriker!

JohnJohn: Mike Brown!

Jesse: Shri Kulkarni!

Conor: And how could we forget Anatoly Spitkovsky?

Arons: I'm not forgetting Spitkovsky, and let me tell you, MISTER Laver, you're no Spitkovsky. I've had it with you slackers. I'm reporting your illicit activities to Don.

JohnJohn: But we went to him first for permission. We thought he had the LAST WORD.

JohnJohn, Conor, Jesse whispering simultaneously: THE LAST WORD, THE LAST WORD, THE LAST WORD.... [The dog puppets re-appear from offstage.]

Arons: Enough! This settles it. This is not the Campbell Hall I remember—it's degenerated into a den of vice and ... stuffed animals! Out you slackers! Out!

[**JohnJohn, Conor,** and **Jesse** cower off the stage.]

Where is that chairman of ours? Don? Where are you? Don? DON!

[Enter **Alice Shapley**, with wet hair and headphones.]

Alice: God, what is all this racket? I can't even hear my own headphones! Jon, Jon, is that you screaming? What is all this *fuss* about? Are you *OK*?

Arons: I'm not OK. Where is Don?

Alice: (can hardly hear, through her giant headphones): Don? *Don?* You mean our chairman? DON? DON *Backer?* Let me think...Oh! I know! I know where he is! He's at...he's at the Coliseum! Yeah!

Arons: At the Coliseum?

Alice: That's right, at the Coliseum!

Arons: What in heaven's name is he doing at the Coliseum?

Alice: What's he doing? Don't you *know*? Why...there's a Radiohead concert there! That's right! Can you *believe* it? Don Backer is a Radiohead!

Arons: Dereliction of duty! That's the last straw.

The truth is, I was the best chairman this department ever saw, and I'm not going to have some ... *Radiohead* undo eight years of my legacy. I'm going to use my intimate and wholly irreproducible knowledge of the Bureaucracy of the University of California and invoke Article 13 of the Board of Regents' Constitution, Section 5, Paragraph 22, Sentence 6723, Footnote 244,821:

[Grabs a piece of paper from his pocket and reads.]

"A recall election for the Chairmanship of the Department of Astronomy may be held if sufficient signatures are assembled for such a recall. Sufficient means either one signature from one member of the department, or two paw prints from any pets that belong to said members, excluding parakeets. The Candidate who receives a plurality of votes is the Successor to the Chair, and will receive, in addition to the Chairmanship, a 1-week, all-expenses-paid trip for 2 to the Bahamas to visit Juliane Monroe in her retirement. Ms. Monroe will then advise the Chairman-Elect on how things really get done."

This is perfect! All I need to do is get my hands on Snezana's dog, provided it doesn't bite my leg off.

[**Arons** exits.]

Alice: Hey, and don't forget to come to the post-doc social afterwards! It'll be the *best* one ever!!

[**Alice** exits.]

[Enter the candidates one at a time upon announcement: **Don, Arons, Chung-Pei, Imke, Ryan Chornock**, and **Carl**, in that order. Ryan is wearing trademark T-shirt and shorts, and eating chips from a big bag.]

[**Todd Thompson** is the reporter interviewing the candidates. He wields a microphone.]

Todd: Reporting for BERK news, this is Todd Thompson. Well, here we are folks. The recall election. Before the Berkeley department of astronomy casts its vote, we have

time for some final last remarks by the candidates.

In the left corner, we have the incumbent Donald C. Backer. How do you feel about this election, Professor Backer?

Don: (searching for the right words in characteristic, measured way, with long pauses between words)*Good....bad....*

Todd: That's very interesting. I imagine you must feel betrayed by your fellow faculty members. If you do win the election, how will you treat them?

Don: (musing) ... *Interesting ... hard to say ... need time to ... stew ... back burner ... heat on medium ... simmer ... add salt and dash of vinegar ... don't boil over ...* (especially long pause) ... *yes.*

Todd: That was fascinating and well put. Thanks for your time, and good luck.

Next to Don, we have the master engineer behind this historic special election, Jon Arons. Professor Arons, if you had to describe what motivated you to begin this process in a single word, what would that word be?

Arons: I'm sorry, but I don't speak in single words; I have a strict requirement for every one of my sentences, that they contain at least 2, preferably 3, but not exceeding 5 ideas, whose sum effect should be to jog the mind and stir the soul, grammar being quite a tertiary consideration.

Todd: I see ... I think.

Arons: (grabs the mike violently, and speaks with urgency and desperation as if his life depended on it): Look, the truth of the matter is, after Don became chairman, I didn't have any opportunity to send the faculty my 20-page action item e-mails! I need an outlet for my overwhelming administrative creativity! Help me, all these ideas for new committees and new ways to increase paperwork, it's all getting bottled up inside and... [stopped by **Todd**, who grabs the mike back]

Todd: OK! Thank you very much!

Next, we have a new recruit on the faculty, Chung-Pei Ma. What would the department look like under your chairpersonship, Professor Ma?

Chung-Pei: That's an interesting question. I would begin by shortening this unbearable 15-week long semester by at least 3 weeks. Where I come from, we have 12 week semesters, with maximum observance of Jewish holidays. Think about it—it's a win-win situation! The students would be more free to do whatever they want, and I would be more free to pursue the balanced and artistic life that so few faculty enjoy—even know how to! (aside to Todd:) Between you and me, none of these people have

any life! It's absolutely pathetic!

Todd: An interesting perspective, and I don't doubt it. And you Professor de Pater? What new programs would you suggest?

Imke: That's a good question. There are so many things that I can imagine changing, but at the top of my list, I have to say that it would be really nice if we all...dressed more sexily. Every day we see the same styles, the same colors, the same comfortable, inoffensive, but ultimately unexciting outer wear. I know several people who wear the same thing every day for an entire week! Franck Marchis is the exception, and he has taught me a lot in recent years: we should outlaw sweatshirts, sneakers, and make all our jeans one size smaller. I hate to say it, but look at Don: how long has he been wearing that sweater anyway?

To lead by example, I would begin by changing my own wardrobe. There's so much to work on! So let's do it together! Vote for me!

Todd: Thanks Imke. We come now to our youngest candidate, Mr. Ryan Chornock. Ryan, what led you to throw your name into the ring?

Ryan: It was simple, really. I think they're mostly idiots.

Todd: Strong words from someone so junior. What would Chairman Chornock do to promote astronomy in the greater Bay area?

Ryan: Well, we can start by eliminating classes. They're mostly a waste of time. The faculty are constantly complaining about their teaching load, and the students are scared stiff of their oral qualifying exams—me most of all. So it's a zero sum game. Forget the classes, get rid of the quals, and put the money instead into a General Pretzel and Chip Fund. By having free bags of pretzels and chips available for any one who's hungry, not only could we avoid the chronic thefts from the refrigerator, but my guess is that the publication rate of this department would skyrocket.

Todd: A novel proposal. Best of luck to you.

Finally, we have the famous Professor Carl Heiles. Carl, you've campaigned for years under the banner of the Chaos Party. But as far as we can tell, you're its only member. Honestly, what chances do you think you have in this multi-candidate election?

Carl: I'm the only one among these jokers who understands anything about non-Gaussian statistics.

Todd: And what exactly is the message of the Chaos Party?

Carl: (Unleashes his billy club): Live free or die! Long live IDL!

Todd: There you have it, folks. I can't remember an election in which every candidate's position was so clearly well defined..

[**Kelley** enters, with fake laptop made of cardboard.]

Todd: And here comes Kelley McDonald, the department's chief systems administrator. He's bringing with him what looks like a laptop. Kelley has been assigned the task of counting all the votes. Are all the votes in, Kelley?

Kelley: [sets the laptop down on the table]. Indeed they are. The result is in this laptop. All I have to do is pop it open and show the world the breakdown.

Don: [runs forward and takes command of the stage]: Wait, before you do that, could I have a final last word regarding this whole election?

Arons: Much as I hate to say it, according to Article 13, Section 6, Paragraph 54, Sentence 766, Footnote 124,988, your potentially last act as Chairman can be to have the last word before the votes are counted.

Don: Thank you.

This moment in history parallels another time, a time when the forces of good and evil were arrayed against each other with unusual clarity, when there was no middle ground. No fence to sit on.

I am reminded of a time that is so well portrayed in a movie that just recently came out.

[Directs following questions at everyone in the room, audience and candidates]

Does anyone know what that movie is?

Ryan: (after a bit of time) "Lord of the Rings" ?

Don: No, the movie I am thinking of is "The Untouchables." It just came out on DVD.

[Text from here on is cribbed from Robert de Niro's speech as Chicago boss Al Capone at the dinner table before he clubs someone to death. When **Don** asks questions, he asks everyone in the room, the candidates plus the audience.]

Life goes on. A man becomes pre-eminent. He is expected to have ... enthusiasms.

Enthusiasms. What are mine? What draws my admiration? What is that which gives me joy?

Everyone: (hubbub): Ummmm, radio astronomy, pulsars, interstellar medium,

advising, scintillation, LIGO, gravity waves, ...

Don: (waits for hubbub to die): *Baseball.*

[**Kelley** hands him a baseball bat. From this point on, Don can use the bat to menace (delicately).]

Baseball.

A man. A man stands alone at the plate. This is the time for what?

For individual achievement.

There he stands alone. But if he stands in the field—what is he?

Part of a team.

Everyone: (hubbub): Yes, right, teamwork, team spirit, important to work together, let's all just get along, ...

Don: (alternately points to the candidates, perhaps with the bat):

He *looks*, she *catches*, she *hustles*, he *throws*, he *slides*, each person is part of one big team. Bats himself the live long day. Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, and so on.

If he's not part of a team, what is he?

Everyone: (hubbub): No one, nobody, worthless, junk, jerk, loser, ...

Don: (on the heels of the hubbub): You follow me? No one!

Sunny day. Stands are full of fans ... What does this player have to say?

"I'm going out there for myself!"

But he gets nowhere, unless the team wins.

And to this player, selfish as he is, this is all I have to say.

[With sudden violence, he slams the bat down on the fake laptop, which collapses. **Everyone** is silent with shock.]

Ryan: (after some time) Whoa! You don't like him when he's mad.

Don: Any questions? (threatens with bat)

[Everyone runs out of the room except **Carl**.]

Carl: Actually, Don, I have one question.

Don: Go ahead.

Carl: What does the “C” in your middle name stand for anyway?

Don: It stands for “Corleone.” But you can just call me “The Don.”

END