

Tucumcari Tonite!

A Play by

Philip Middleton Williams

Contact:

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CHARACTERS:

TONY: Mob accountant under witness protection. Mid-thirties, pudgy.

ALEX: Bail bondsman. Mid-thirties, athletic build.

PLACE AND TIME:

The shoulder of the frontage road that runs parallel to Interstate 40 in eastern New Mexico. Mid-July.

PRODUCTION NOTE:

A handgun is displayed briefly. It is a prop and is never discharged.

TUCUMCARI TONITE! was first presented in a reading at the Valdez Theatre Conference, Valdez, Alaska, on June 14, 2022. It was directed by Cody Goulder with the following cast:

TONY.....	Ian McEwen
ALEX.....	Skyler Ray Benson Davis
Stage Directions.....	Tamar Shai Bolkvadze

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The scene is the shoulder of frontage road that runs parallel to Interstate 40 in eastern New Mexico. Clumps of sagebrush and rocks cover the ground, and a decrepit barbed-wire fence strung between old iron posts runs along the back from Stage Right to Stage Left. Litter, papers, and tumbleweeds are scattered along the fence-line. There are four large stumps of telephone poles that run in a straight line from Upstage Left to Downstage Right. They are about two feet high and sawed-off raggedly that make them available for sitting, but not too comfortably. In the background, the sky is clear with a distant ridge of dark mountains far off in the distance.

At rise, the stage is nearly dark except for the first indications of dawn approaching from Stage Left. The sky does not lighten quickly; the first few moments of the play are played in near darkness, and the rest of the play is done with the lights slowly brightening. Crickets and other insect sounds are audible, as is the occasional hum of distant tires on the interstate. In the center of the stage between the posts are two sleeping bags lying close to each other. They are occupied, but there is no movement. After a few moments, the occupant of the downstage bag moves and starts to emerge from the bag, but he seems to be restrained. He mutters a curse, kicks off the bag, and prods the other sleeping bag with his foot.

TONY (*groggily*): Hey.

(TONY gets no response. Prods again, a little harder. Still no response. This time he gives the bag a full-fledged kick.)

TONY (*cont'd*): Hey, wake up!

(Movement and mumbling from the other bag, and a head emerges.)

ALEX: What the fuck?

TONY: Wake up.

ALEX: What time is it?

TONY: Pull your arm out.

ALEX: Why?

TONY: I gotta take a piss! Come on, man, unlock these things, willya?

(ALEX pushes off the sleeping bag, revealing the fact that he and TONY are handcuffed together. ALEX struggles for a moment, apparently digging in his pants pocket for the key, with TONY getting more and more impatient.)

TONY: Hurry up, man.

ALEX (*finding the key*): Don't piss yourself. If you hadn't been chugging all those Cokes yesterday you could make it through the night.

TONY: We're driving through the goddam desert in the middle of July in a car with no goddam air conditioning.

TONY: Drink water, then. Coke's nothing but sugar, caffeine, and a bunch of cancer-causing initials. No wonder you gotta piss every ten minutes.

(ALEX unlocks the handcuffs. TONY kicks off the sleeping bag, struggles to his feet, and trots off Stage Left. ALEX gets up. He is in his thirties, lean, and wearing scruffy jeans and a T-shirt. He unlocks the handcuffs from his own wrist and shoves them in his pocket, then pulls out cowboy boots from his sleeping bag. He inverts each one and shakes it before putting them on, then stands up and starts to put away the sleeping bag. TONY, in his stocking feet, limps back on stage, cursing as he does. He is about the same age as ALEX, but stockier and less equipped to deal with the outdoors. He is wearing rumpled slacks and a button-down shirt that was once neat but now looks decidedly dirty and wrinkled.)

TONY: Ow, ow, ow, shit.

(He sits on one of the stumps and picks burrs out of his feet.)

ALEX: I warned you about those.

TONY: Yeah, yeah, well, I really had to go. I ain't gonna pull on my shoes just to go, y'know? *(Pulls a burr out of his sock and examines it.)* Whaddaya call these little bastards?

ALEX: Goat-heads.

TONY: They hurt like a motherfucker.

ALEX: They're everywhere.

(TONY plucks the last one, then gingerly goes over to his sleeping bag and finds his shoes. He starts to put them on.)

ALEX: Hold it. Shake them out.

TONY: Huh?

(ALEX takes one of the shoes and turns it over and shakes it. Something falls out and ALEX kicks it away.)

TONY: What the hell was that?

ALEX: Scorpion. They crawl in shoes at night sometimes. That's why I told you to keep them in your sleeping bag.

TONY: I thought you were kidding! Holy shit!

ALEX: I told you, the desert is a dangerous place.

(TONY picks up the other shoe and pounds it mercilessly before slowly pulling it on.)

TONY: Goddam. This place is trying to kill me. And it's cold! I'm freezing! Yesterday it was a hundred and ten, now my teeth are chattering.

ALEX: I told you it got cool at night.

TONY: I thought you meant cool like, y'know, indoors with air conditioning. Like a nice cool room in a nice hotel somewhere with a nice bed and maybe a nice bathroom with a shower and towels and a sit-down toilet.

ALEX: We've been through all that. We can't. How many times do I have to tell you that?

TONY: Aw, c'mon. We passed a hundred Motel Sixes last night. I counted five in... whaddaya call it...

ALEX: Albuquerque.

TONY: Yeah, there. Al – buh – qwirky.

ALEX: Shut up and roll up your sleeping bag. Sun'll be up soon and we should get going.

(ALEX has rolled his bag into a neat bundle, and he carries it off Stage Right. Sound of car door opening. TONY tries to roll up his bag, struggles with it, gets frustrated, and finally wrestles it into a wad and sits on it. ALEX re-enters with a knapsack. With a sigh of exasperation, he drops the knapsack, pushes TONY off the sleeping bag, shakes it out, quickly rolls it into a neat bundle, ties it up, and hands it to TONY.)

ALEX: Let me guess, you were never in the Boy Scouts.

TONY: Fuck no.

ALEX: Never went camping as a kid?

TONY: I grew up in Brooklyn. Wasn't until I was twelve years old that I found out that trees didn't grow up without those iron fences around them.

ALEX: Too bad.

TONY: Were you a Boy Scout?

ALEX: Sure.

TONY: No kiddin'.

ALEX: Yup.

TONY: The whole thing? Building fires, camping out, helping little old ladies across the street?

ALEX: Yeah, the whole thing.

TONY: Did you get to...whatchacallit...Eagle?

ALEX: Eagle Scout? Not quite.

TONY: How come?

ALEX: Ah...just didn't. Lost interest. (*Opens knapsack.*) You want something to eat?

TONY: Whaddaya got?

ALEX: Couple of granola bars. There's a couple of Diet Dr. Peppers still in the cooler.

TONY: How about two eggs over easy, bacon, rye toast lightly buttered and a coffee regular?

ALEX: Yeah right. Chow down.

(ALEX tosses TONY a granola bar. TONY unwraps the bar, takes a bite, makes a face. ALEX eats his quietly.)

TONY: Can't we stop like at a Seven-Eleven and get something real? Hell, I'd settle for a day-old Danish and weak coffee.

ALEX: No. You know we can't.

TONY: Goddam, if I knew that this was the kinda shit I was gonna get into, I'd have kept my goddam mouth shut.

ALEX: Damn right. And you'd also be dead.

TONY: Yeah, I keep hearing that. But who knows? The guy ain't that smart. I mean, if he was, he wouldn't be under indictment, now would he?

ALEX: I don't know. I don't care. I don't even know the guy.

TONY: But you've heard of him.

ALEX: Yeah, big deal.

TONY: So, you know he's not Mr. Clean.

ALEX: Who is?

TONY: And he's got friends.

ALEX: That's nice.

TONY: Friends who would like to see their friend stay out of trouble.

ALEX: You blew the whistle on a pyramid scheme. The guy screwed a bunch of little old ladies out of a hundred grand each. You make it sound like something out of The Godfather.

TONY: A hundred grand is a lot of money!

ALEX: Sure, for a guy who drives a ten-year-old Cadillac. It barely got the attention of the Feds, and if it hadn't been the fact that the scheme crossed state lines, it wouldn't even have gotten that.

TONY: I still got protection.

ALEX: Oh, shit, don't flatter yourself! Look at us. We're driving across country in an old Pontiac station wagon, eating granola bars and sleeping on an old billboard site. You are not the top dog in the federal witness protection program, Don Corleone. This is two guys on the lam.

TONY: So, what the hell are you doing here? And what's with the handcuffs?

ALEX: I got a friend who works for your bail bond guy who's hooked up with the U.S. marshals. He calls up and says, "Hey, you want to make a little extra dough? Drop this snitch off in Kansas." I got an ex-wife and kid who still collects child support. Do the math. And the cuffs are my insurance that you won't skip out and leave me holding the bag and out my fee.

(Off Stage Right we hear a car approaching on the frontage road. TONY tenses up and motions to ALEX to be quiet while he looks around for a place to hide. Before they can move, the car passes, the sound fading. TONY lets out a sigh of relief.)

TONY: Are you carrying?

ALEX: What do you think?

TONY: What is it?

ALEX (*Captain Obvious*): A gun.

TONY: Yeah, I got that. What kind?

ALEX: The kind that shoots bullets.

TONY: Glock? Smith and Wesson?

ALEX: Something like that

TONY: Where is it?

ALEX: None of your fuckin' business.

TONY: Are you a good shot?

ALEX: Keep asking me these questions and you'll find out.

TONY: Okay, okay. I just wanna know in case we run into... y'know –

ALEX: Listen, if your ex-boss's goons track you down here in the middle of fuckin' nowhere, they're smarter than you think.

(Beat.)

TONY: Kansas.

ALEX: That's right. Kansas.

TONY: Never been there.

ALEX: It's flat.

TONY: Whatta they got there, in Kansas?

ALEX: Cows. Farms. Judging by their license plates, wheat.

TONY: Wheat?

ALEX: A lot of wheat.

TONY: Fuck, I'm screwed. I don't know from wheat.

ALEX: Who says you gotta know anything about wheat?

(ALEX pulls a paper out of the knapsack and reads it.)

ALEX (*cont'd*): Here's your new life. Says you're going to be a night auditor at a hotel.

TONY: I know, I know.

ALEX: Yeah? So, let's hear it.

TONY: What?

ALEX: Your life. Tell me who you are now.

TONY: Fuck that.

ALEX: Hey, you're supposed to know this shit by heart. You gotta be able to rattle this shit off without even thinking about it. C'mon, tell me who you really are now.

TONY: Why do you give a shit?

ALEX: Because if they find you, they'll come after me. And until your boss is behind bars permanently, my ass is as much on the line as yours. So, tell me.

TONY (*after some grumbling hesitation*): My name is Lloyd Neederhouse. Born in Toledo, Ohio. Thirty-five years old. Son of Vernon and Lorraine Neederhouse. Grew up in Toledo. Went to Whitmer High School. Got my first job as a night clerk at the Toledo Turnpike Motel on Reynolds Road. Met a girl from Kansas, got married, and moved there ten years ago. Divorced two years. Belong to the Rotary Club and the Methodist church. Do I have to be a Methodist?

ALEX: That's what it says here.

TONY: Never been there. I stopped going to Mass when I was in high school.

ALEX: It's the same thing...sit and listen. Okay. Tell me about your dad.

TONY: He ran a metal shop out on Long Island. He and Mom bought a place near Delray Beach a couple of years ago.

ALEX: Not your real dad, you idiot. Vernon!

TONY: Oh, shit. Okay. Born in Fremont, Ohio. Served in Vietnam, belonged to the American Legion and the VFW. He worked at the Jeep plant. Died of a stroke last summer.

ALEX: And your mom?

TONY: She's real busted up about it.

ALEX: Yeah, I figured. What about her?

TONY (*straining to remember*): Ah...born in Woe-see-on, Ohio. Worked as a secretary at the Jeep plant. That's how she met my dad.

ALEX: It's Wauseon.

TONY: Huh?

ALEX: It's pronounced "Wah-see-on," not "WOE-see-on."

TONY: Big deal.

ALEX: It is if you're from Wauseon. What's your Social Security number?

TONY: Two-seven-eight...something. It's in my wallet.

ALEX: All right.

TONY: So, how'd I do?

ALEX: Huh. You look about as much like a Lloyd Neederhouse from Toledo as Tony Soprano looks like Elon Musk. What's your new address?

TONY: Fifteen-oh-three Laurel Avenue, Independence, Kansas, six-seven-three-oh-one.

ALEX: And your job?

TONY: Night clerk at the Apple Tree Inn. (*Buries his face in his hands.*) Oh, God, this is going to be a dismal life.

ALEX: It ain't Vegas, that's for sure.

TONY: So, where are we?

ALEX: About eighty miles east of Albuquerque.

(*TONY looks off Stage Left.*)

TONY: Tucumcari tonight.

ALEX: Yeah, very good, you can read a billboard.

TONY: Did I pronounce it right? Too-cum-carry?

ALEX: I guess. Sounds right.

TONY: I thought you were from around here.

ALEX: Hell, no.

TONY: Where are you from?

ALEX: Why do you care?

TONY: Just curious. Is it some deep dark secret?

ALEX: Nah. Grew up in Miami.

TONY: Born and raised?

ALEX: Yeah.

TONY: I never met anyone who was from there. Retired there, moved there, yeah, but a native? Wow. So, how'd you end up in Vegas?

ALEX: I was a backup singer for Lola Falana.

TONY: Come on.

ALEX: I dunno, just did. I was in the Army, and after my hitch I ended up there working security for one of those little casinos off the strip. Place went broke and I ended up working for Eddie at Vegas Bail Bonds.

TONY: How does a casino go broke?

ALEX: Shit happens. Ask Trump. They tore it down and put up a Marriott.

TONY: The Carousel?

ALEX: Yeah. You know it?

TONY: Little mom-and-pop shop. Ten slots, no waiting.

ALEX: That's it. It was owned by the family of an Army buddy. Nothing fancy, and when the big boys came along and waved a shitload of money under their nose, they took it and lit out for some trailer park south of Tucson.

TONY: But you stuck around.

ALEX: No place to go.

TONY: You got family there.

ALEX: Who says I do?

TONY: You did. You said something about a wife.

ALEX: Ex-wife.

TONY: Okay, ex-wife.

ALEX: Why do you give a shit?

TONY: Hey, if I'm gonna go halfway across the country chained to a guy, I like to know who's on the other end. Kinda like that movie with Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier where they're escaped cons shackled together and have to get along in order to survive.

ALEX: Never saw it. And you're no Sidney Poitier.

TONY: Hey, you're no Tony Curtis, either.

ALEX: You some kind of movie nut?

TONY: Yeah, there was a movie house down the block from where I grew up and they showed a lot of the old classics. Spent a lot of Saturday afternoons there. And Turner Classic Movies was free on the cable system. Hope it still is in... Independence. Assuming they have cable. Assuming they have TV. *(Beat.)* So, you have a kid.

ALEX: Who says I do?

TONY: You did. Before. When I asked about your family. Why are you so defensive?

ALEX: I'm not!

TONY: Yeah, okay, it's not like I'm gonna do something with knowing the deep dark secrets of your life that you only share with the U.S. Census Bureau. Sheesh. C'mon. Boy or girl?

(ALEX scowls, kicks a clod of dirt. He wanders over to the fence.)

ALEX: A son.

TONY: That's nice. What's his name? How old is he?

ALEX: Justin. Sixteen.

TONY: Okay, so now was that so hard? Spend much time with him?

ALEX: Every other weekend and some school vacation time. Look, what's the big deal? So, I got a son. C'mon, we gotta get going.

TONY: Yeah, okay, although I'm in no big rush. Not like they're gonna move the town on me. Are we gonna stop in... what is it, Tucumcari?

ALEX: For gas, maybe. Why?

TONY: The billboard says they got twelve hundred motel rooms.

ALEX: So what? We're not stopping. Who checks into a motel in the middle of the morning?

TONY: Jesus, how long did you live in Vegas? They got places there with hourly rates.

ALEX: Well, we're not stopping for more than gas. Maybe a candy bar. C'mon, get a move on.

(ALEX picks up knapsack, exits Right, followed by TONY. Silence for a moment.)

ALEX *(off)*: FUCK!

(More silence for another moment.)

ALEX *(off)*: Oh, FUCK!

(ALEX re-enters with the knapsack, pulls out his phone, sits on one of the stumps. Looks at the phone.)

ALEX: And no signal. Fuck me to tears.

(TONY re-enters holding his phone.)

TONY: I got a signal.

ALEX: You're supposed to have turned that off.

TONY: Big deal.

ALEX: They can track you with your GPS.

TONY: Those dopes couldn't track an elephant through the subway. Look, I got the Triple A app on my phone. You want to me call them?

ALEX: No, because Lloyd Neederhouse of Independence, Kansas does not have a Triple A membership from Las Vegas.

TONY: Oh, like the tow truck driver in Buttfuck, New Mexico is gonna be a button man for the mob. C'mon, let me call them.

ALEX: Gimme your phone. I'll call them and use my membership.

TONY (*handing ALEX the phone*): Okay. And tell 'em to bring some air for the spare, too. Who drives around with a flat spare?

ALEX: What do you want from me? I paid like nine hundred bucks for it at Señor Crédito "WE FINANCE" Used Cars. It runs.

TONY: Not too well with a flat spare.

ALEX: Shut up.

(*ALEX starts to exit Right.*)

TONY: Where're you going?

ALEX: My Triple A card's in the glove compartment. Play with the scorpions.

TONY: Ha ha.

(*ALEX exits Right. TONY sits on a stump, then furtively looks around at his feet. Kicks some dirt and stomps.*)

TONY: Stay away from me, you little fuckers. (*Looks around and shudders.*) "The Great Outdoors." Feh. Who needs it?

ALEX (*off*): Who're you talking to?

TONY: No one. Myself.

ALEX (*off*): Good company.

(*Off Left a coyote barks in the near distance; far enough away to indicate it is not close, but close enough to be heard above the other sounds. TONY reacts.*)

TONY: What the fuck was that?

ALEX (*entering from Right carrying the phone and a small cooler*): What was what?

TONY: Over there. It sounded like a dog. Or a wolf.

ALEX: You ever heard a wolf?

TONY: Well, no, but....

ALEX: Probably a coyote.

TONY: A coyote? Are they dangerous?

ALEX: Only if you're a roadrunner and the coyote is carrying a big box from Acme.

TONY: Funny. No, seriously, do they attack people?

ALEX: Only people who rat out their mob boss. No, they don't attack. Hell, they're probably more afraid of you than you are of them.

TONY: Well, that one must be scared shitless.

The play is not over. To find out how it ends, contact the playwright at pmw@barkbarkwoofwoof.com.