

A Substantial Risk

by Joe Rizzo

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Dedication

To Paulene, who makes everything possible, and to Chris and Carla for their tremendous support and friendship.

Story of the Play

How far will one student go to ensure the safety of his school? Alex Baxter, the student body president, tries to implement a plan to improve the safety of his high school. When his principal refuses to support his plan, Alex stages a phony shooting to show how vulnerable his school is. Several teachers think the squirt gun he is using is real, and he is charged with fourth-degree assault. Because the crime is a misdemeanor, he is tried by a youth court. The action begins as the judge raps her gavel, and Alex's story unwinds through the skillful and often dramatic questioning of witnesses by clever student attorneys. Some of the witnesses include the controlling school principal; the politically-correct vice principal; Alex's sympathetic girlfriend and others. In a climactic scene, Mike, an at-risk student with few friends, jumps up from his seat in the courtroom demanding to tell his story of what happened--and what could have happened--that day. A tense, topical drama.

History of the Production

"A Substantial Risk" was originally written as a fund-raiser for the youth court organization in Kenai, Alaska. The original performances, June 26 - 29, 2002, were held in the courtroom that is normally used by the youth court program when holding trials. The play attempts to capture the spirit of youth court and show that youth empowerment is a powerful force. (Some procedures and common policies of most youth court programs have been slightly altered in this script for dramatic purposes.)

Cast of Characters

(Approximate 5 m, 5 w, 2 flexible, 7 optional)

- BAILIFF: Large and somewhat intimidating. Only has intermediate amount of dialogue but is onstage during the entire play.
- JUDGE ELIZABETH CONNERS: A strong person but fair and compassionate.
- PROSECUTING ATTORNEY PORTER: Smart and a little bit of a jerk with an edge, making the audience feel some sympathy for the other characters. More experienced than the others, but with his own ax to grind.
- DEFENSE ATTORNEY CLARKSTON: Strong with great compassion. Concerned with what is right, not just getting her client off. Trained by Porter, but trying to prove herself as much as trying to prove her client's innocence.
- ALEX BAXTER: Defendant. Sincere, strong, but somewhat impulsive. Has a history with Porter that builds the tension.
- MR. CLINE: School principal. Has contempt for the youth court because he believes in top-down management and control. He is unethical and a bully.
- MRS. SIMMS: School secretary. A soft, middle-aged motherly type who has no malice for anyone.
- MR. RILEY: Vice-principal with great integrity. Gives politically-correct answers, but is a professional whose innermost convictions guide his actions.
- SUSAN WILLIAMS: Alex's girlfriend, perhaps the most sympathetic character in the play. She is sensitive and forthright.
- MRS. BAKER: Social studies teacher, a "soldier." A team player who likes Cline's top-down management because it gives structure and order to the school. She likes Alex but she is bound to do her duty by her principal and school.
- OFFICER MEYER: Police officer. Since a great deal of his or her testimony comes from his police report, the actor can use a cheat sheet to remember lines. (In the original production an actual police officer who played the part did not come to rehearsals until two days before opening.)

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MIKE GRAHAM: An at-risk student but also a victim. The audience must feel for him, or the message is not as profound.

SEVEN JURORS: High school students. The play can be done without the jury, but they help to cue the audience to appropriate reactions and they also help to build tension at certain times such as Mike's outburst and entrance.

(Optional: Adult actors can play the roles of Cline, Simms, Riley, Baker and Meyer.)

Set Construction

The best place to hold this play is in an actual courtroom. A real courtroom lends to the realism and the mood of the production. Most courts finish their business by five o'clock. If rehearsals and shows are held in the evenings, you can usually avoid scheduling conflicts. However, in the event that a real courtroom cannot be used, a simple set can be constructed just using tables and chairs for the judge, bailiff, defense and prosecution. The most important thing is to get the audience as close to the action as possible. The witnesses should be seated behind the prosecution's table and the defense's table.

Costuming

This show is easy to costume. Most of the characters should be formally dressed. The boys should wear suits and girls dresses or business suits. Officer Meyer should wear a policeman's uniform and the Judge should wear a traditional judge's robe. The Bailiff should be given some kind of official looking uniform: a button up shirt, perhaps some patch or insignia and black shoes and pants. Mike should wear a black T-shirt, jeans and perhaps a camouflages or black leather jacket.

ACT I

(AT RISE: The courtroom. When LIGHTS fade up, WITNESSES should be seated behind the PROSECUTING ATTORNEY who is sitting at a table facing the bench and the DEFENSE ATTORNEY who is sitting at her own table with the DEFENDANT. The BAILIFF enters the room and announces the JUDGE.)

BAILIFF: Hear ye, Hear ye. This Youth Court being authorized to hear the case of the State of _____ vs. Alex A Baxter is now in session. The honorable Elizabeth Connors will preside over these proceedings. All rise.

JUDGE: *(Entering, sitting down.)* You may be seated. Mr. Baxter, you are charged with forth-degree assault. How do you plead?

BAXTER: Not guilty, Your Honor.

JUDGE: The clerk will enter a plea of not guilty. Mr. Baxter, I will explain to you the parameters of this court. Since its establishment, youth court, being comprised of youth between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, has tried over two hundred cases. Because you have no previous criminal record and because you have chosen this option, you are at the mercy of this court. The verdict of guilty or not guilty will be recognized by this state as will my authority to sentence you if you are convicted of the charges against you. You have been assigned an attorney and have the right at anytime to dismiss this court and enter a Juvenile Court. However, if found guilty in such a court you will maintain a criminal record. If you are found guilty by this court, and complete your sentence, no criminal record will be logged or kept. Do you understand your rights and this court's conditions as I have explained them to you?

BAXTER: I do, Your Honor.

JUDGE: You may be seated. Mr. Porter, you have been assigned as prosecution of this case?

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PORTER: I have, Your Honor.

JUDGE: And Ms. Clarkston, you have been assigned as defense counsel?

CLARKSTON: I have, Your Honor.

JUDGE: Very well. Proceed with your opening statement, Mr. Porter.

(The DEFENSE and PROSECUTION should play to the audience rather than the "jury." The delivery of their opening lines is also important. They can not speed through it or the audience will not understand the premise of the play. However, they must keep their pacing up so that the audience doesn't get bored.)

PORTER: *(Addressing the audience.)* Ladies and gentleman of the jury, we the prosecution will prove to this court that the defendant, while serving in the influential position of student body president, did willfully enter the teachers' lounge during lunch, brandish what appeared to be a semi-automatic pistol, and, pointing it at four staff members, exclaimed, "Bang, you're dead," to each one. Then, turning the gun on himself, he simulated suicide. He violated not only the law but used very poor judgment. His behavior and irresponsible leadership could quite easily lead to real violence and real deaths. Mr. Baxter is dangerous and deserves to be brought to justice for his crime. No matter what justification the defense puts forth in Alex Baxter's behalf, you must determine his guilt or innocence by the law. And by law, a person commits assault in the fourth degree when by words or other conduct that person recklessly places another person in fear of imminent physical injury. According to the law, recklessly is defined as an act committed by a person when that person is aware of and consciously disregards a substantial and unjustifiable risk that the result of their actions will put others in fear of their lives. It constitutes a gross deviation from the standard of conduct that a reasonable person would observe in the situation.

End of Freeview

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