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CURRENT EVENTS



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written by

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Synopsis

On September eleventh, 2001, five teachers are making copies and drinking coffee in a break room. In a heartbeat, their world changes. Now they must figure out how to continue to teach while the entire nation grieves, using their own experiences of previous events in history to help their students make sense of it all. Based on interviews with real teachers.

Cast of Characters

MR. MERRILL	A middle-aged French teacher
MR. BRUSSLY	An older band teacher
MR. STRAUSBERG	A math teacher, a realist
MRS. NEWTON	An older, sassy math teacher
MS. STIVERS	A young English teacher
PRINCIPAL	off-stage voice

Director Notes

During the fugue sequences, the cast is facing upstage and reacting to the scene mostly in silent pantomime.

All roles can be cast as either gender.

Special thanks to my own teachers, Mr. Kerry Rittenhouse, Mrs. Carol Stroberg, Ms. Cindy Claxton, and Ms. Pearl Whitlock. who graciously allowed me to interview them for this project. I've given them more than a bit of a nod here. And to my other teachers, who made 9/11 a day of hope instead of fear. If you look hard enough and squint, you'll find yourself.

ACT I

Scene 1

Setting: Lights up on the morning of September 11, 2001. A teacher's lounge with some second hand padded chairs and a table or two, a coffee maker, telephone, television, maybe a microwave and refrigerator. On one side is a row of small cubbyholes that serve as mailboxes for the teachers.

At Rise: At rise, a slightly disheveled middle-aged teacher, MERRILL, is standing by the coffeemaker, waiting for it to finish brewing.

MR. MERRILL

C'mon.

(checks his watch)

C'mon, c'mon… hurry up.

(An automated "bell" signals the end of class.)

Great. Now I'm gonna be late. Thanks for nothing.

MR. BRUSSLY

(another teacher, though older and more put together; entering with a newspaper)

You talking to the coffee maker again, Merrill?

MR. MERRILL *(covering)*

No, just going over my lecture in my head before class starts.

MR. BRUSSLY

Oh, sure. Of course. Do that all the time.

(sits down and opens his paper to start reading)

Might help if you turn it off then on again, by the way.

MR. MERRILL

(does so)

Thanks.

MR. BRUSSLY

Don't know why you're so worried. You have a planning period next right?

MR. MERRILL

Yeah, but I have to make copies and we both know that if you're not there as soon as the bell rings, then you'll never get a shot at the copier.

MR. BRUSSLY

Right, the English department's "common planning" time.

MR. MERRILL

(as he pours cream and sugar into his coffee)

All nine English teachers with the same planning, all trying to make copies at the same time. Worse than traffic. If I didn't have to go over to the middle school during this period, I could use the time to make copies. I barely have time to make it back and get coffee.

MR. STRAUSBERG

(who has entered during the last bit and is checking his mail)

Why do you have to go over there again?

MR. MERRILL

Latest round of cutbacks means I'm now the middle school French teacher as well as our own. If you'll pardon moi, monsieurs… I have copies to make.

(exits)

MR. STRAUSBERG

Mr. Brussly, I wanted to ask you about a student we share.

MR. BRUSSLY

Mr. Strausberg, I wanted to avoid talking about said student.

MR. STRAUSBERG *(chuckling)*

Larry, he's failing algebra.

MR. BRUSSLY

Jim, he's my best player. I can't let him come to you every day for tutoring. Without him, my trumpet line is a total bust and I don't have anyone else who can solo.

MR. STRAUSBERG

He may not graduate if his grades don't improve.

(BRUSSLY sighs.)

MR. STRAUSBERG

Let's work something out. I already tutor him on days you don't rehearse, give me thirty minutes before practice. Look, it's that, or the administration steps in, and you know they won't let him play at all if…

MR. BRUSSLY

Yeah, I know. Ok, I'll tell him he has to bring me a progress report every week to be eligible to play on Friday nights at the games. That's worked pretty well in the past.

MR. STRAUSBERG

Thank you.

(sees NEWTON, an older woman, coming in)

MR. STRAUSBERG

Good morning, Julia. You look lovely as ever.

MRS. NEWTON *(saccharine)*

Aren't you sweet?

(coldly)

Stuff it in your coffee.

MR. BRUSSLY

Rough first period?

MRS. NEWTON

(pouring a cup of coffee)

Same old ignorance. "Mrs. Newton, I don't understand. Mrs. Newton, this is hard. Mrs. Newton, blah blah blah." This is not rocket science. It's just geometry. I tell them every day, "Geometry makes sense… you don't." And they act like I'm speaking Latin.

(turning on TV, which can't be heard)

Is the sound not working on this piece of junk?

MR. STRAUSBERG

Never has. You'd know that if you ever stayed down here for more than ten seconds during planning.

MRS. NEWTON

(changing channels)

We're not the english department, we don't have to plan together. Besides, don't need sound to check the weather.

(sips coffee, looks disgusted)

Who made this swill?

MR. BRUSSLY

Mr. Merrill.

MRS. NEWTON

Figures. Speaking of the Monsieur, where is your third musketeer?

MR. STRAUSBERG

Copies.

MRS. NEWTON

Boy is he going to be disappointed. English department was lined up at the copier like it was giving away cookies.

(A younger woman, MS. STIVERS enters to check her mail.)

MS. STIVERS

Good morning!

MRS. NEWTON

Speaking of cookies…

MR. STRAUSBERG

Not making copies with your English colleagues, Ms. Stivers?

MS. STIVERS

No, I make all of mine the day before. I like to be prepared.

MRS. NEWTON *(sarcastic)*

How cute. I bet you decorate your bulletin boards every month, too.

MS. STIVERS

No, just every quarter. Our educational psychology professor in college used to say that a fresh perspective-

MRS. NEWTON

Educational psychology? We used to just learn how to get through the day without killing a kid… Which I've contemplated a time or two.

MR. BRUSSLY

Don't let Newton get to you, Stivers. Education has changed a lot and it's harder for some of us who have been here a while to adapt. Did you need something?

MS. STIVERS

What do you mean?

MR. STRAUSBERG

It's just unusual to see a member of the English cult, I mean Department, here during your precious planning time.

MS. STIVERS

Oh, my room is being cleaned. A student vomited during this morning's discussion of poetry.

MR. STRAUSBERG

I've been known to do the same.

MRS. NEWTON

Flu season. Be sure to get yourself vaccinated, rookie. First year teachers are more likely to get sick. Your immune system is under attack from hundreds of little bacteria incubators called students.

MR. MERRILL

(running in)

Turn the television on. Hurry!

MR. BRUSSLY

It's already on. What's wrong?

MR. MERRILL

Why is it on the weather?!

(changing channels frantically)

These pages have been removed
for the preview.

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MRS. NEWTON

And no one is saying you should! Or maybe you've missed the point of what he just said! No one is going to pretend that this isn't happening! My god, it's going to be plastered all over the news, the papers, magazines, everything. But we show them that, yes, life will go on. It will be hard, but we will survive this, and be stronger for it! You memorialize it so you never forget, but you don't it define your life.

MS. STIVERS

That sounds a lot like some of my teachers when we…

(pauses to control her emotions)

MR. STRAUSBERG

Stivers? You ok?

(STIVERS nods.)

MR. STRAUSBERG

You don't have to tell us.

MS. STIVERS

No… You all sound like my teachers… after the shooting.

MR. STRAUSBERG

My god…

MRS. NEWTON

Oh gracious. I'm so sorry…

MR. BRUSSLY

You too, Stivers?

MR. MERRILL

Larry? What are you talking about?

MR. BRUSSLY

(to STIVERS)

When was it for you?

MS. STIVERS

Freshman year of high school.

MR. BRUSSLY *(nods)*

It was my tenth year teaching.

MR. MERRILL

Wait… Both of you went through a school shooting?

MR. BRUSSLY

It's hard to tell kids there's nothing to fear when they have to walk the same hallways everyday where their friends and teachers died.

MS. STIVERS

The safest place you know is now the most dangerous.

(As they both step forward on separate sides of the stage, there is no fugue behind them.)

MR. BRUSSLY

After ten years, I really thought I'd seen it all.

MS. STIVERS

Everything was still so new. High school was exciting, ya know?

MR. BRUSSLY

I finally felt like I was settled in.

MS. STIVERS

I had my schedule memorized, had started to navigate the maze of hallways and found shortcuts.

MR. BRUSSLY

Broken up fights, counseled kids through divorces and break-ups, even had a flute thrown at me.

MS. STIVERS

I had arrived.

MR. BRUSSLY

The first ten years are the toughest, they say.

MS. STIVERS

It was a regular day. I went to first and second period…

MR. BRUSSLY

First class had been a little rough. Struggled through a tough section of a Holst military suite…

MS. STIVERS

We were in the hallway on the way to third period.

MR. BRUSSLY

I was just about to take role for second block.

MS. STIVERS

My locker was open and I was trying to talk to my friends while wrangling an armload of books.

MR. BRUSSLY

The band was tuning their instruments.

MS. STIVERS

Then someone slammed my locker door into me, almost knocked me down.

MR. BRUSSLY

With all the noise, it was a wonder I heard anything at all.

MS. STIVERS

Then everyone was running the opposite way, screaming.

MR. BRUSSLY

There were loud bangs in the hallway.

MS. STIVERS

I thought it was a fight…

MR. BRUSSLY

Figured some kids set off firecrackers…

MS. STIVERS

Then I… saw them… pointing their…

(she mimes a gun with her hand)

…right at me…

MR. BRUSSLY

I stormed out and saw another teacher… laying there… gone.

MS. STIVERS

I ran as hard as I could…

MR. BRUSSLY

There were students in the hallway… I could hear more shots…

MS. STIVERS

People around me were bleeding, still running, but bleeding…

MR. BRUSSLY

I grabbed as many kids as I could and yanked them into the bandroom.

MS. STIVERS

I got to the lunchroom and ducked behind a table with some others.

MR. BRUSSLY

I got all the kids against a wall and locked the door.

MS. STIVERS

I covered myself with my bag…

MR. BRUSSLY

I put my whole body against the door…

MS. STIVERS

All I could hear was screaming and crying…

MR. BRUSSLY

I've never seen so many students so quiet…

MS. STIVERS

The girl next to me was bleeding really badly.

MR. BRUSSLY

My heart was thumping out of my chest.

MS. STIVERS

I used my own scarf to try to stop the blood.

MR. BRUSSLY

The only thing stopping any more bullets would be the thin door and my body.

MS. STIVERS

We could hear commotion from other parts of the school but couldn't see a thing.

MR. BRUSSLY

The only thing I could think to do was shut my eyes and pray.

MS. STIVERS

It seemed like forever…

MR. BRUSSLY

I waited for someone, anyone… to announce it was over.

MS. STIVERS

When the police finally came, I couldn't move, I was so terrified.

MR. BRUSSLY

The SWAT team knocked on the door, but I refused to believe it was actually them…

MS. STIVERS

I don't remember anything until late that night at home, huddled on our couch with my mom.

MR. BRUSSLY

I helped the students get out and follow directions.

MS. STIVERS

I cried for days.

MR. BRUSSLY

I broke down right there on the curb afterwards.

MS. STIVERS

Walking back in that school a few weeks later took everything I had.

MR. BRUSSLY

I avoided that hallway as much as I could.

MS. STIVERS

Three students, one teacher.

MR. BRUSSLY

Two teachers. I barely even knew them.

(the fugue state fades)

MS. STIVERS

We had a lot of extra guidance counselors at school for a while… and extra security.

MR. BRUSSLY

I could barely stand up in front of my students, much less try and teach them.

MS. STIVERS

They painted the walls and cleaned the floor, but there are some stains that you can’t remove.

MR. BRUSSLY

From the front of the room, right over their heads, I could see that door I had guarded with my body.

MS. STIVERS

We had a few teachers try to address it…

MR. BRUSSLY

How do you even begin to talk about something like that?

MS. STIVERS

As best as they could at least. There were a lot of tears and hugs.

MR. BRUSSLY

The only thing that got me through was the music.

MS. STIVERS

They encouraged us to keep being brave and to show each other and ourselves when things got to be too much.

MR. BRUSSLY

The music bonded us together, gave us a way to express our grief.

MS. STIVERS

A memorial was held at the football field, every single student came. I've never seen that before.

MR. BRUSSLY

I left that school a few years later and came here. There were just too many… ghosts.

MS. STIVERS

We left their seats vacant at graduation. Put their caps in their seats. We've never had a class reunion. I don't think we will.

MRS. NEWTON

(as the moment passes)

And you still chose to be a teacher… bless you child.

MS. STIVERS

If I can save one student from the same fate, or somehow prevent another tragedy…

MR. STRAUSBERG

Larry, I never knew you-

MR. BRUSSLY

(interrupting him)

Some things you just lock away, Jim. Deal with it, lock it up, and make sure it never happens again. But, given the chance, I'd throw myself in front of that door again.

MR. MERRILL

Guys… the tower… it's…

MRS. NEWTON

Oh my god…

(she starts tearing up)

…It just… crumpled…

(she sits hard)

…All those people…

MR. STRAUSBERG

…those firefighters…

MR. BRUSSLY

…I… I… can't even start to imagine…

MS. STIVERS

Do you think… the other tower…

MR. MERRILL

More than likely it'll fall later… I'm sorry.

MR. STRAUSBERG

(starting to seethe)

Whoever did this… they're gonna pay.

(The group sits in silence for a few moments, dealing with their various emotions, shock, sadness, anger, etc…)

MR. BRUSSLY

Geez, the bell is going to ring any minute… brace yourselves.

MS. STIVERS

(comforting NEWTON)

Julia, you gonna be ok?

MRS. NEWTON

(visibly pulling herself together)

I will. Thank you. I can do this.

MR. MERRILL

How?!? How do you expect us to go back in there and teach these kids like everything is ok when the world has gone to…

MR. BRUSSLY

Because we have to, that's how! Those students need us to be strong and show them how to handle a tragedy like this.

MR. MERRILL

Keep strong and carry on? That's your solution? This isn't 1940's Great Britain!

MRS. NEWTON

Maybe not, but this isn't the first time we've had to do this.

MR. STRAUSBERG

There will be a lot of people who are going to stop today. And who can blame them? But, you've heard of a "teachable moment?" You've just been handed one. A big one.

MS. STIVERS

Those kids are going to be so scared…

MRS. NEWTON

You think we're not terrified? Heck, I've got two kids in college who are hundreds of miles away that I won't be able to call until after school. A few years ago, I would have been that teacher stopping class to watch the TV all day. I still might keep it on mute in the background, I don't know yet. But I AM scared. Terrified. But where I can't take care of my two kids right now, I can take care of the twenty five that are about to walk in my classroom.

MR. BRUSSLY

And that's the point. We've taught through wars, assassinations, terrorists, deaths, riots… Terrible, frightening things happen. It's not that we don't feel these things, we do! But we use these fears and we make them part of our lesson. If my students only learn how to read music, then I am a poor teacher indeed. We must teach these kids to not run when we are terrified about what life is about to hold, but to face life head on with courage and hope.

MR. MERRILL

So, you're gonna march into your band room down there and give some big patriotic speech? Want me to come down there and wave an American flag behind you?

MR. BRUSSLY

No, I'm going to be honest with them. Tell them what happened. They deserve to know. But also tell them there's nothing we can do about it. I'll tell them that these are the times for which music, and all art, are made for. To inspire, to heal, to build up.

(to STRAUSBERG)

What was it your teacher said, Jim? That we should…

MR. STRAUSBERG

"Continue on so that days like this will not keep happening."

MR. BRUSSLY

I like that. You mind if I borrow it?

MR. STRAUSBERG

Feel free. I'll probably say something similar. Then on to math. I just have to change my lesson plans.

MR. BRUSSLY

Why?

MR. STRAUSBERG

One of the examples we were working on was a plane's trajectory.

MRS. NEWTON

Yup, that's gonna have to change.

MR. MERRILL

You two are seriously going to go teach math right now…

MRS. NEWTON

Last I checked, that's our job.

(to STIVERS)

Hey rookie.

(STIVERS snaps out of the trance she was in.)

MRS. NEWTON

You gonna be ok?

MS. STIVERS

I… I may find an appropriate poem for the day that we will analyze to start. Some Yeats perhaps… or some Angelou.

MRS. NEWTON

There ya go, kid. Merrill, I believe they're expecting you at the middle school soon?

MR. MERRILL

New York is burning! People are dying! I'm not about to try to teach some adolescent ingrates to speak French when the greatest national tragedy in decades is occurring!

MR. BRUSSLY

The worst is over, there's nothing more to be learned from this.

(He turns the TV off.)

MR. MERRILL

Barry…

(the bell rings, they all look up)

MR. BRUSSLY

Alright, teachers. Parents have entrusted us with the care of their children today. As far we're concerned, this is just another day. Let's get to it.

(STIVERS exits past him. He pats her on the shoulder. STRAUSBERG shakes his hand on the way out.)

MRS. NEWTON

(as she passes, only partially sarcastic)

Nice speech, Barry. You gonna be a principal when you grow up?

MR. BRUSSLY

Not on your life.

(to MERRILL)

You coming, Merrill?

(MERRILL ignores him, turns the TV back on and plants himself in front of it.)

MR. BRUSSLY

Suit yourself.

(BRUSSLY exits, leaving MERRILL staring at the television. After a beat, the voice of the PRINCIPAL is heard over the speakers.)

PRINCIPAL

Students and teachers, may I have your attention, please. As some of you may have already heard, terrorist have attacked World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Their motives are unknown, but for now, we can safely assume that there will be no more attacks on American soil. I inform you all of this, not to alarm you, but to arm you with knowledge against rumors and hearsay that undoubtedly has already begun. Students, let me assure you, as I have already assured many of your parents, that you are in the safest place possible right now. The guidance counselors are available for those who wish to speak to them. A wise man once said that "all that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing ." Today, it will feel like you are doing nothing. But I am expecting each teacher to continue in your education as a means to prepare you to do good in the near future.

(STIVERS steps out to face us.)

MS. STIVERS

I know something terrible happened today. I know right now you feel much like I do, scared and uncertain. I have a poem for you from Maya Angelou about hope and while it doesn't pertain to this situation exactly, I think it…

(She continue to teach in a fugue state as NEWTON steps out.)

MRS. NEWTON

I don't have any answers for you right now. I wish I did. I don't know why they attacked us, I don't know what's going to happen next. But we still have math to do. I'll leave the

MRS. NEWTON (CONT)

TV on silent in case anything else develops, but go ahead and open your book to page…

(She continues teaching in a fugue state as BRUSSLY steps out.)

MR. BRUSSLY

I am truly sorry that you have to experience this today. And that this will be the turning point of your lives. The world has changed. And not for the better. But the best thing we can do is to go about our day. This is how we show that we are not bent or broken by trauma. We will choose to be defined in how we overcome adversity rather than let the adversity define us. We will have one small change. I'm changing the last song in our halftime show to a patriotic medley and some kind of memorial. Still working on the details on that. Let's tune up and get started…

(He continues his lesson in fugue as STRAUSBERG steps out.)

MR. STRAUSBERG

My grandmother told me stories about a similar attack when she was young. On Pearl Harbor. She understood that it was part of the war, and the Japanese became our allies later, but she never forgave them for that. I never understood how she could foster such hate against someone for so long… until today. I don´t know who did this, and I don´t know if I will ever be able to forgive them, but I won't forget and neither should any of you.

(a beat)

For now, we must… continue in our education… to ensure these things do not continue to happen.

(beat)

Now, if you would, turn to page 76 and look at the problem presented to us…

(As the other TEACHERS teach in a fugue state, MERRILL, spotlit, is still staring at the

television, before breaking down and sobbing as the lights fade to black.)

(Lights Out)

ALTERNATE ENDING

(This ending takes place after STRAUSBERG's final monologue.)

(As the other TEACHERS continue to teach in a fugue state, MERRILL takes a moment, turns off the TV, collects himself and steps forward.)

MR. MERRILL

Pardonne moi, mes amis. Forgive my tardiness to class today. I had pressing matters I thought I had to attend to… Um, I want to share a story to start our French lesson. What would you say is the most famous landmark in America?… That's correct, the Statue of Liberty. Interestingly enough, it was a gift to America by the French. La Liberte was built in the 1880's and given to the U.S. as a gift. She represents… well she represents a lot of things to a lot of people. Especially to the people of New York, who gaze upon her every day and are reminded that they are… free… to be who they want and do what they want. If you look closely at La Liberte, a broken chain lies at her feet as she strides forward, reminding us that no act of tyranny or aggression shall ever bind us as Americans again. So today, she stands in New York harbor, striding amidst the smoke and turmoil of possibly the greatest act of aggression of this generation, holding high her torch, reminding us that we still have hope…

(Lights Out)



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