BECALMED: A modest contribution to the vast literature on cannibalism

gene washington, Utah State University
BECALMED

A modest contribution to the vast literature on cannibalism

***
Gene Washington
gene.washington@usu.edu
435 752 4141
566 E, 600 N. Logan, UT
84321

CAST: X, Y and Z.; m/f or mix; can be played by anyone over 20-something.
SCENE: On the rolling sea. The action of the sea may be indicated by the cast, arms linked, shifting back and back. The vessel, a yacht, is in a race to win a prize.
PROPS: 2 chairs or something to sit on; other props can be simulated.
ASIDE: Occasionally a character will "break the fourth wall" and address us, the audience.
AT RISE: Off stage we hear, "haul out…" "make fast…" "reeve clear…"; X, Y and Z enter stumbling and rocking back and forth.

X
Good, we've entered Cape of Storms. It's a shortcut to our destination. We're certain to win the prize this year.

All roll back and forth a few seconds.

Y
The Cape of Storms!
(Aside)
We're in the roughest seas in the world. The Southern Sea…graveyards of anyone who goes down to the seas in a ship…or whatever else.
(To X; gesturing wildly)
Quick! Furl the fore and mizzen top sails…goose wing the main top sail…see to the deadeyes, secure the rat lines on the poop!

All freeze. Yacht's in a dead calm.

Y (cont)
We're not moving skipper. We're becalmed. ..look at our flag. It's not moving.

Z
I hate to point this out skipper but the storm washed all our food at to sea.

X
What? How could that happen? Were the leeward, aft and forecastle hatches secured…doors of the poop closed….the…I've forgotten its name…just a minute…

Z
(Interrupting)
Well, if you recall, the storm did blow the yacht upside down for an hour or so. That might explain it.

X
What? Why wasn't I informed?
(Pause)
Well, not to worry.
(Points)
Look in that box.

Y
I looked. There's nothing in it.

X
(Pointing.)
I remember seeing bread and cheese in it.
(Looking at Y and Z)
Did any of you eat it?

Y
Not me

Z
Not me…neither…well, we have to eat something. I'm starving.
(To X)
You're the skipper. So, suggest something.

Y
He's right, it's your boat.

X
Correction. It my racing yacht. We're sailing on, not looking back. We're going flat out until we make landfall…at…somewhere…at 2700 hours.
(Pause. Taking flight.)
But there are other issues involved here. We are fulfilling an act that is not without a certain poetry of its own, an act which belongs only to a crew specially selected, inspired, pierced right through to the marrow of their bones with the spirit of adventure. This is what motivated me to invite you along on this historic race. I saw in each of you the fire of adventure, something that is rare even among the best of the men who go down into the seas in racing yachts.
Z
I can't last much longer.
(Pause; to X)
What are you looking for?

X
I'm looking for the camera crew I hired. They're going to make a video of us on the yacht. It'll prove to the people back home we're for real. Trust me. We're making history here.

Y
I'm weak. I can't hold my head up.
(Holds hands up.)
My hands are trembling. I'm going to take a nap. I'll help steady my nerves
(Starts to lie down)

X
You can't take a nap. Remember your responsibility as an able-bodied sailor. Now act like it. What if the video crew, or a swimmer, comes up alongside and saw you napping. It's embarrassing to think about.
(Pause)
Now pull yourself together. Go aft and haul in the helm. And while you're there reef the foresail…wait a minute! Go tell the cook to stop rattling the dishes. The noise disturbs my naps.

Y
(Staggers.)
I'm dizzy. The boat, and a lot of the sky, are spinning.

X
Yacht, you dummy, yacht!
(Pause)
When I invited you to come along I thought it would be just the right touch. Us all standing tall …eyes out toward the horizon looking into the future. Now I 'm beginning to wonder.

Z
We need a solution. Who knows when we will become un-becalmed…or whatever.

Z and X look off in
Different directions; Y sits down
And begins to write.

Y
(Writing in a notebook.)
What rhymes with sarcophagus?
X
What are you doing?

Y
I'm writing my obituary. All I can think of is esophagus. But it doesn't seem to fit somehow. ..especially in this kind of document.

X
Would you please, please, pay attention. We're all hungry. We have no food. I don't know about you two, but I'm a realist. We'll have to eat one of us. It's the only way.

Z
(Aside)
Eat one of us. Why didn't I think of that earlier, me a seasoned voyager, a scholar of all things nautical.

Y
How are we going to do this? I mean, who's going to be IT?

X
Well, we first have to agree to be polite…use good table manners. Don't just grab the food and stuff it down your throat…if you want another serving, you will have to say 'please pass me the liver,' or 'could I please have another serving of thigh?' And that means not belching or passing the meat with your hands.

Z
I'm glad you said that. Although we are not at present able to control external events, we must make every effort to preserve our dignity and our inner balance. We are starving. We have made a decision to eat one of us. But our essential humanity must remain unchanged.

Y
I would prefer to eat alone.

Z
Then I refuse to dine with the un-chosen. Only the criminal, the glutton or the outlaw dines alone.

X
I too refuse to eat with such a person. Solitary dining transgresses against the solidarity of community which all the citizens of the universe hold dear.

Y
(Taking flight.)
Wait! I've changed my mind. I agree to eat as a family. Who knows how a vital role families will play in my future, in our foreign policies…who knows….
(Interrupting)
Will you shut up!

Z
We have a problem. How are we going to choose the one we eat. I suggest we draw straws…or flip a coin.

Y
(Looking around)
Good idea. It's the best way. It better be coins. I don't see any straw around here.

Z
I don't either.

Y
Flipping a coin. Isn't that a lot like a lottery?

Z
Of course.

Y
(In a stiff manner.)
Then I can't participate in it. It's gambling. I don't approve of that. Look at what that's causing in our country. Gambling is destroying family values and our place in history.

X
I know what. Let's stage an election. We each cast a secret ballot. We can use my hat as a ballot box.

Z
Good. I have a pen. Here's some paper.
   (Simulates tearing paper in strips)
Take one of these. We can write our votes on them.
   (Pause)
Now there has to be electioneering.

X
Of course. It's part of the democratic process.

Y
Wait! I'm the only Democrat here. I'm bound to be the one chosen.

Z
Nonsense. Everyone knows that we're not dealing in personalities here and that we have to campaign before we vote. We may be starving but we still know how to follow the
rules of a democratic election. After everyone presents his case, we'll vote on who has the weakest case for not being eaten.

X

I agree.

Y

I agree. On the condition I go first.

X

Agreed.

While each candidate makes h/h case For not being eaten the others sit.

Y

Brother and sisters. We are neither Republicans or Democrats here. We are neither male or female. We are simple, ordinary, able-bodied sailors. ..in desperate need of food…we are …wait a minute!

Z

What!

Y

Has everyone registered to vote?

Z

Get on with it!

X

Get to the point! I'm starving.

Y

I have a family. It would be wrong for you to eat me. I have a lovely wife and nine lovely children. Every evening, we sit in our backyard and read *Moby Dick* and the Congressional Record We count our blessings for the life of a family that sails, skipping merrily over he rolling waves…we….

Z

(Interrupting)
Keep your family and the Congressional Record out of this. We know you're not sincere.

X

Yes, talk about real issues here…what's the best part to eat…a leg? Thigh? Arm? (Pause)
Next!

Z
My fellow shipmates.

X
Get to the point. What's your argument for not being our choice?

Z
My friends! Wait a minute! Shouldn't I have a running mate?

Y
Stop stalling!

Z
My friends! When I was young I planned on being someone important. But I never achieved my goal. Maybe I didn't work hard enough. Maybe I failed in my church duties. Still, it's not too late. I will improve. I can still become somebody…I will set new goals.

X
That's not what I heard.

Z
I will give up the sea and become a university professor. I will teach our youth how to give up sex, improve their grades and cease making mistakes.

Y
That's not going to persuade me. Now sit down and give the next candidate a chance to speak.

X gets up to speak

X
My fellow shipmates! My speech will be brief. You must decide for yourselves who will be chosen. I will eat whoever is selected. I will eat whatever cut you give me. No kidney is too small for me or thigh too big.

Y
Make your speech short! I'm hungry.

X
I have to tell you the truth. I may look succulent and nutritious but my flesh has been toughened by salt water. In addition, I have a Mallory total hip device and craniomaxillofacial replacement made out of the hardest steel. I'm indigestible.

Y
That's not going to keep us from eating you.

X
My left shoulder looks normal. But it is an inedible bio-modular plastic fixation system.
Z

(Aside)
Do any of you out there know what that is?
(To Z)
I can eat that.

X
All my artificial parts are covered with a sour tasting proprietary porous plasma spray coating. One thing more, if I'm not eaten, I will give the others the best cuts, the sirloin and the prime rib.

Y
So what? I've willed my body to General Motors to be used as a crash-test dummy. The stipulation in our contract is that the body be in one piece.

Z
Time to vote.

Y
Right! We've heard all the candidates. We've weighed all the arguments...we have searched our hearts and opened our minds.

They cast their ballots. Z counts them.

Z
My fellow shipmates! The election is spoiled! We must call the election off.
(Displaying voting slips.)
Only two votes were cast. The names written on them are illegible. The third slip is blank.

Y
We can't call it off. I'm hungry.

X
I'm hungry too. Let's have a second ballot.

They take a second ballot.
Z counts the ballots.

Z
Another spoiled election! There are too many ballots. Someone has voted more than once.

Y
I never trusted the democratic process. It's messy and unreliable. Then there's only one thing to do. We must nominate one of us.
Z
Good idea! I will do the nominating.

X
I'm a butcher and a cook. I will do the nominating.

Y
O, no! Don't listen to him! I have tasted his sauces. Awful. I will do the nominating.

Z
How can we decide?

X
We can't. We can't vote on it. We can't agree on who will do the nominating. There is only one thing left to do.

Y
What's that?

X
One of us must volunteer to be eaten.

Y
Not me.

Z
Not me either.

X
Nor me. I have too much to lose...like the prize I am winning with this yacht race.

Z
I tell you what. We've been neglecting our audience. Let it decide who should be eaten.

(Pause; gesturing to X and Y; pointing to front and center stage)
Line up here.

(Aside, to the audience)
Now please take your time and examine each candidate carefully. Pay particular attention to weight, color, posture, skin tone...remember we are in a historic race. In order to win the prize we must make landfall at 2700 hours...or something...tomorrow evening, or night, on the coast of Outer Mongolia....or somewhere.

(Pause; thinking, turning to address X)
By the way, where are we going?

X
(Shrugs h/h shoulders)
Z

(Aside to audience again)
Please keep in mind that after one of us is consumed we will be a reduced to a two-
person crew. They will need to be well nourished…plumb full of protein…able to reef
the foresails on time, hand to the capstan and position the yacht in the right sea room in
order for it to wear bravely.

(Gestures)
Just look how rough the sea is…wow!

(Pause)
Now all this requires that the flesh of the chosen one must not only be tasty, easy to
swallow and digest, but also nutritious.

(Long pause; pointing)
Before we went down to the sea in our yacht, I made arrangement with our director back
there (pointing) if a situation like this arose…it happens a lot, especially in a becalmed
situation, that h/s would pass out ballots for a final vote.

(Another long pause)
Ready? Everyone has a ballot? Okay, please cast your vote.

(Thinking)
Wait a minute. We're on a long journey here…becalmed…we've lost our navigational
equipment…better make that two choices, your first and second picks of who should be
eaten.

X and Y form a line. Z stands
Stands back and apart from them.
X and Y motion for h/h to join them.
After hesitating Z reluctantly joins them. They wait for the vote.

FADEOUT
You heard ne. Now go aft and do it.

X

(Looking around)

Aft?

Y

Yes, aft! If I had meant leeward…or even windward…I would have said so.

X

All right, all right. But first I need some relevant information…you know the kind you use to avoid radical errors.

Y

Why didn't you say so earlier. I take it you're referring to the intersection of epistemology and staying afloat in a heavy storm?

X

Yes, that's it. You have just made the claim that the fore and mizzen top sails need to be furled and the main top sail goose winged.

Y

So?

(Pause)

Don't forget securing the ratlines on the poop.

X

Doesn't it then follow from your claim that assurances have to be made that the claim is true. If not forthcoming, I see a high probability, given radical error, of falling into radical skepticism.

(Pause)

This is not to say that I don't admire in what I take to be an influential addition to the language of yachting.

Yacht rolls

Z enters
Skipper! The crew are about to mutiny!

Y

Mutiny? Mutiny?
ASIDE: I was afraid this might happen. Me, a seasoned skipper out to win a prize. Me, taking a short cut through Southern Waters…in winter weather me…

X

I am hungry skipper.