

THE SIDE OF CAUTION

Ten minute play
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

BAO, a Vietnamese, Colonel Shaw's servant

PHIL, an Agency for International Development worker

COLONEL SHAW, an army officer

A Vietnamese laborer

JEANETTE, Phil's wife

Two soldiers (non-speaking)

Scene 1

South Vietnam, 1964. The sparsely furnished office of the commander of a small military base. A desk, left, faces right.

Scene 2

A month later. A house in Hanouphong, a town some distance from the base.

Scene 1

BAO is sitting on the desk. PHIL, a young man in civilian clothes, stands uncertainly nearby. A suitcase rests near him on the floor. Bao jumps off the desk as COLONEL SHAW, wearing fatigue cap, pants, and a T-shirt, strides rapidly onstage and kicks a waste basket into the wings. From a coat rack he takes a service cap covered with braid and puts it on, then does the same with a uniform jacket decked with ribbons and medals.

COLONEL

Get the fan. I'm burning up.

Taking a palm frond from a corner, Bao waves it over the colonel throughout the following scene. Adjusting his jacket, Shaw sits and composes himself to look fierce. He sees Phil for the first time.

COLONEL

Who are you?

(suddenly remembering, he bangs his head on the desk painfully)

Oh, no! The Peace Corps! Why did I get out of bed?

PHIL

No.. I'm from the Agency for International Development, and I'll be-

COLONEL

Trouble! That's what you'll be! And you'll have to wait in line.

Two soldiers enter, holding firmly onto a VIETNAMESE WORKER. The colonel glowers at him.

WORKER

I did not do it! I was walking to work only.

COLONEL

The patrol found a tire leaning against the perimeter fence, and you were in the bushes... If that tire is damaged, it comes out of your last paycheck.

WORKER

I must have this job.

COLONEL

We pay you thirty dollars a month. That's a middle-class salary here. It should have kept you honest.

WORKER

I must have this job. I have a family.

COLONEL

(exasperated)

Your whole town is one big family. One day I'll raid that town, and I bet I find half my inventory.

At his signal, the soldiers drag the worker off. As they exit, the colonel jumps up and strips off his coat and hat. Bao fans him.

PHIL

So... You caught a thief.

COLONEL

The country's full of thieves. They're stealing this post blind.

(to Bao)

Say, Bao. What've you stolen lately?

BAO

Nothing.

COLONEL

Full of liars, too. I keep telling them. They can steal from the mess hall and the dump, but not from the motor pool, hospital, armory, airfield, or my office.

PHIL

And your solution is to throw them in jail?

COLONEL

There's no jail within fifty miles. They'll just take him to the barracks and beat him up.

PHIL

(shocked)

Do you think that helps?

COLONEL

It makes me feel better. It's an impossible situation here. Let me orient you... Beat it, Bao.

Bao leaves.

COLONEL (cont'd)

Hanouphong is two hundred miles from Saigon. The government doesn't have much influence. But it does collect taxes. District is actually run by the prefect and the head of the monastery. The prefect collects his own taxes and pays off the Vietcong. And the Vietcong collects taxes... When that guy said he needed the job, he was right. They have taxation without representation twice over. No American would stand for it... It's not that hard on them. Prefect runs the black market, so anyone can pay his taxes in, say, gasoline or penicillin or tires. That's what I'm up against.

PHIL

It's that way in most provinces. These people don't like their government any more than you do. Their lives are hard. Aren't we here to help? We're going to have trouble winning this war unless-

COLONEL

Don't say it!... Winning the war... That's my job. Winning the hearts and minds of the people...
(tapping Phil on the chest)
...your job.

PHIL

It's both our jobs. That's U.S. policy.

COLONEL

Oh, no! Not mine!... I heard about you from Charlie, up in Pleiku. Making his men run around digging wells, hauling fertilizer. Passing out contraceptives to the women...

(calmer)

There'll be none of that here. Just build your schoolhouse. That's what you're doing, isn't it?

PHIL

Yes. My wife will join me. She'll teach, and I'll help the farmers.

COLONEL

Bringing your wife, eh? I hope she's over five feet. I'm tired of the tiny women in this country.

PHIL

I'll invite you to dinner, and you can measure her... Now, could I get a ride into town?

COLONEL

(picking up the phone)

By the way, I hope you don't plan to use my men to build that school.

PHIL

I don't. The villagers will help, but I will need a bulldozer to clear the site.

COLONEL

Not a chance. We use ours every day to keep the airfield drained.

PHIL

I assumed that, so I have a letter from General Westmoreland saying you're to loan us a bulldozer.

COLONEL

(keeping his temper)

You could be a real pain in the ass.

PHIL

I don't want to fight you, Colonel. You have so many ways you could help these people.

COLONEL

I don't have to help these people. They help themselves.

(he begins to dial and then stops)

I better tell you about the black market.... Before the prefect ships out his contraband, he stores it in the monastery. It's the only place that's dry and out of sight, and we see lots of suspicious activity. I can't touch it without permission from Saigon, but the government's been on a religious freedom kick. I think the last coup brought in the right men.

PHIL

I don't have a good feeling about that.

COLONEL

Me neither. Vietnamese are fanatics about religion. If I raid that monastery, I'll give you an armed guard.

PHIL

Absolutely not. I don't want soldiers around.

COLONEL

Do you know what you're risking? Do you want your nose cut off?

(no response)

A little warning. When the natives hold a grudge, they like to take it out by cutting off your nose.

PHIL

You're not serious.

COLONEL
It's used for extreme cases. Ordinarily it wouldn't affect you.

PHIL
I've never heard of that.

COLONEL
It's not very common.

PHIL
Does it ever happen?

COLONEL
It's rare with foreigners, but they threaten me. I get nasty letters. About cutting off my nose.

PHIL
Could I see those letters?

COLONEL
I throw them away. I don't let it bother me.

PHIL
I'll risk it.

COLONEL
(shrugging, he dials the phone)
This is Shaw. Send over a jeep.

PHIL
Speaking of jeeps, didn't this post once drive the workers back and forth?

COLONEL
I stopped that. The road murders my trucks.

PHIL
The town must be five miles away. It's a hardship for the workers to walk.

COLONEL
Maybe so. But public relations is your job.

PHIL
Petty economies like that are counterproductive... Why don't you drive them?

COLONEL
Now, son..... You can cause me a lot of trouble. The Peace Corps is very big now.

PHIL
I'm with A.I.D.

COLONEL
But it's me you got to live with. Even though you're roughing it with the natives, you - and your wife - might need a few things. Mosquito netting. Toilet paper. Band-Aids.

They move toward the exit, right.

PHIL

I'd appreciate it. But I have a job. In case you haven't noticed, these people live a hard life. We'll be doing a lot if we raise them a little above the level of subsistence.

COLONEL

So what? They'll like you as long as you're doing favors, but they'll never change.

PHIL

(losing patience)

How can you tell? Americans like you are one reason this war is going so badly.

COLONEL

You think I'm prejudiced, don't you? You're wrong.

PHIL

I think the jeep is here.

COLONEL

Wait. I'll prove it. In 1943 I was with the Free French in Africa. One day I went to a whorehouse in Dakar with this colored sergeant major. He was a big guy, much stronger than me. We made this bet.

(With a dreamy smile, he pauses several beats, then snaps out of it).

No, that's not a good example. What I mean is: Vietnam isn't Africa. The people here aren't savages. They have an old, old civilization. I read a book on it. But it's a corrupt, lazy civilization. Way behind the times. Undemocratic. And they like it that way.

PHIL

It's nice to know you're not prejudiced.

COLONEL

I told you the prefect ran the black market. Why don't I get rid of him? I could. Because the next one would be just as bad. Why? In this culture, officials are supposed to enrich themselves. Another thing. You notice the whole country smells like a Kentucky outhouse. Why? The farmers shit in their fields. The US offered to build them privies. They didn't want them. They say they have to fertilize their fields.

(with contempt)

Now what can one skinny family do on a couple acres? I'll tell you what they can do: spread a lot of typhoid... I can give a dozen examples. You can't teach the natives anything because they're already civilized, and they think they know it all. You can't make them efficient because it's an inefficient civilization. You can't make them honest because anyone with any power steals.

PHIL

.....And besides that, they want to cut off your nose.

Blackout. End of Scene 1.

Scene 2

A month later. Phil's house in town. Phil and his wife, JEANETTE, stand at a low table, center. Bao is setting out dinner.

JEANETTE

That looks wonderful, Bao. You shouldn't have gone to so much trouble.

BAO

This is from the whole village, not me only. But we would wait a day if we knew the American colonel was coming to eat what we meant for our friends.

PHIL

He invited himself. He's hard to discourage.

BAO

It was terrible what they did in the monastery. They broke the doors and walked in the holy places and called the monks criminals.

JEANETTE

You almost wish they found something, considering the bad feeling it created.

PHIL

(a thought occurs to him)

Say, Bao... Are there any... violent customs in this part of the country? I've heard rumors of people getting their nose cut off. Is there any truth to that?

BAO

Under the French, there were feuds. But that was long ago.

JEANETTE

What are you talking about?

There is the growing roar of an engine followed by the squeal of brakes.

JEANETTE

Maybe he'll bring something from the post. We really need antiseptic.

PHIL

Don't get your hopes up.

Shaw
out.

Bao exits. There is a banging at the door. Phil opens it to reveal carrying a tire. Pushing past, he sets it against a wall then hurries

JEANETTE

He brought us a tire. You're not kidding he's got idiosyncrasies!

Shaw returns with a toolbox, seat cushions, and a rifle.

COLONEL

Never leave anything on my jeep when I'm in town. Vietnamese steal anything that's not nailed down.

Setting his load near the tire, he takes off his jacket and pistol belt.

COLONEL (cont'd)

I wonder if the jeep is safe, even stripped down. Bunch of natives threw rocks when I came in.

PHIL

You drive awfully fast.

COLONEL

They can hear me coming a mile away. They just stand in the road 'cause they know it makes me mad... So this is Jeanette. Why are you wasting your life in this miserable country?

She smiles and accepts his handshake. The colonel looks around.

COLONEL

Good job.... High quality work. Like those wood screws. They come from the shop on post.

PHIL

They do not. I ordered them from Saigon.

COLONEL

Then they took the long way around. But it's a drop in my bucket... That's nice looking food.

They sit. Jeanette serves.

COLONEL

Hope this meat's been cooked long enough. Lots of worms in the pigs around here.

No response. Bao enters with a bowl. The colonel looks up in surprise.

COLONEL

Long time, no see! You got a week's pay coming, and I'm curious what you did with the paper clips.

Bao puts the bowl on the table and exits. The colonel calls after him.

COLONEL

See your relatives stay off my jeep. I don't want to keep running out.

JEANETTE

What did you say he took?

COLONEL

Paper clips. Twenty four boxes disappeared the day he left.

JEANETTE

Why would he take those?

COLONEL

Sell 'em to the Vietcong. Good for shrapnel in booby traps... What a war! I have to post an armed guard over office supplies... But you're doing OK. I hear you're very popular.

JEANETTE

It's easy for an American to be popular. There are so many ways we can help. You could help.

COLONEL

I am helping. I'm trying to save their necks. Vietcong walked into a village thirty miles from here. Murdered a dozen people. Do you think they care here? Not till it's their throats being cut.

JEANETTE

They have plenty to care about now. Like where their next meal's coming from.

COLONEL

It's part of their civilization to be insecure. And not care about anything outside their village.

(pauses to eat, then addresses Jeanette)

How do you like it here? A little primitive?

JEANETTE

They told us we could get household supplies from the base. Like toilet paper.

COLONEL

Do you know I've been trucking the workers back and forth? That should make you happy.

JEANETTE

I bet they appreciate it.

COLONEL

They give you all the credit. I got a letter from Westmoreland telling me to do it. When I get a letter like that, it means a black mark on my record.

PHIL

We're sorry to hear that.

COLONEL

It cancels out the letter I got last month praising me for saving money.

JEANETTE

Do you think you could spare some mosquito netting?

Bao enters.

BAO

Excuse me. Some people are outside who need help.

PHIL

Who are they?

BAO

I don't know. From another town. They would like a ride home on the jeep.

Shaw snorts but continues eating.

BAO

I told them no. They said one is very sick. A baby.

Bao waits a beat then leaves.

COLONEL

Even if I were charitably inclined, I couldn't take a hitchhiker. I wouldn't be safe.

PHIL

Because of that raid on the monastery? That was a disaster.

COLONEL

From your point of view, maybe. But it had to be done.

PHIL

Why? You didn't find anything.

COLONEL

Not true. We found a whole room.

PHIL

What was in it?

COLONEL

Nothing.

PHIL

That's some find!

COLONEL

Don't get sarcastic. What's an empty room doing in that crowded monastery? Someone tipped them off, and they cleaned it out.

PHIL

Even if that were true, nobody'd believe it.

COLONEL

It sure dropped my popularity out of sight. I bet you're writing to Westmoreland. I hear the prefect's offered a reward for my nose.

JEANETTE

Your what?

PHIL

The colonel thinks the people are out to mutilate him.

JEANETTE

But they're Buddhists.

Six beeps of a car horn sound offstage. The colonel bridles.
Bao reenters.

BAO

Excuse me. The people outside would like to speak to the colonel.

COLONEL

No they wouldn't! They wouldn't like to speak to me at all!

JEANETTE

They can stay with us. Tell them to come in.

COLONEL

Then I better take off.

Bao exits as Shaw stands and collects his equipment.

COLONEL (cont'd)

Thanks for the hospitality. The food was good, and it was nice looking at a pretty white woman.

There are several more blasts of the horn. Enraged, Shaw grabs his pistol and marches toward the door. Phil blocks the way.

COLONEL

They gotta be strangers if they got guts to do that! I bet they're sitting right in my jeep!

PHIL

Oh, no! You're not going out with that.

COLONEL

I probably won't shoot anybody. But they got to learn not to fuck with my property.

PHIL

Stay. I'll take care of it.

He exits. Shaw and Jeanette stare at each other a beat.

JEANETTE

Why do you hate these people?

COLONEL

I don't hate them. I just don't trust them. They don't like me.

JEANETTE

I can see why... It's easy to make them like you.

COLONEL

Easy for you. I'd hate me if I was them.

(A pause; he peers out the open door)

Where's your guests?... Can you see anything out there?

Phil screams, offstage. Blackout. He screams several more times.

THE END