

UNMANNED

a stage play
by Robert Myers

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CAST:

LT. COLONEL CASEY BORDEN - Pilot

AIRMAN LINA ASFOUR - Sensor

THE SET: The play takes place principally in a single-wide trailer painted with desert camouflage in the desert in the American West. Other scenes take place in an automobile and in other locations, which should be created with music and light. The play is written so that it may be staged with two office chairs. The set should be minimal. There is no reason to create a realistic "cockpit" since the flyers are not really in a cockpit and they are not flying. Their workspace resembles the cubicles of millions of other office workers. Outside the trailer, Stage Left, is a sign with a series of crudely painted arrows, which say: Kandahar 6792, Las Vegas 473, Mogadishu 5712, Phoenix 173, etc. Several actual props are introduced in the course of the play—a couple of unmarked white milk shake cups with straws, a fox stole etc.—and the two characters could wear minimalist headsets with microphones so as not to create confusion about when they are talking to Central Command. However, since the play is - among other things - about the relationship between the real world and the virtual world, all other machines, including phones, computers, navigational equipment, monitors should be mimed and/or created with light.

SCENE ONE

MUSIC UP: "STARS FELL ON ALABAMA." LIGHTS SLOWLY FADE UP on TWO PILOTS. At the controls in their "cockpit," in a single-wide trailer in the desert in the American West, sits RETIRED LT. COLONEL CASEY BORDEN, a handsome, 60ish former fighter pilot from Alabama. Beside him sits his co-pilot, AIRMAN LINA ASFOUR, an attractive 20-something young woman from Cleveland. Her job, as the co-pilot and sensor, is to operate onboard systems, scan the horizon for targets and fire the weapons from their unmanned vehicle. AS LIGHTS GO UP, UNSEEN COMPUTER SCREENS displaying maps, their flight paths on a GPS, and images from the camera in the nose of the drone, GLOW ABOVE THEM. COLONEL BORDEN remotely pilots the drone they are operating, which is 8,000 miles away, above another desert.

BORDEN

Check out those chicks there in the garden.

ASFOUR

They look awfully happy about something. Must be some sort of party.

BORDEN

All girls, at eight AM?

ASFOUR

Seems like they've been at it all night.

BORDEN

What's that red stuff on their hands?

ASFOUR

You think it's...

BORDEN

Let's take a peek.

(Pause)

What do you think?

ASFOUR

Fabric?

BORDEN

Looks like red ink.

ASFOUR

(Pause as she looks closely)

Henna! They do it in the East before the wedding. They paint each other's hands. We've stumbled on a bachelorette party, Colonel.

BORDEN

Wonder which one's the bride.

ASFOUR

There, in front of the fountain. Putting the sweet in the other girl's mouth...

BORDEN

The one with the big smile on her face?

ASFOUR

Beautiful eyes.

BORDEN

They sure know how to wiggle their pectorals.

(Mimics their movements)

Reminds me of a sock hop at Talladega High in 1965.

ASFOUR

Look at her hands on monitor three. She has tulips on her wrists. Totally cool tattoo.

BORDEN

Check out the white-haired guy in the blue suit who's crashing the party. Look, the ol' coot's kissing her.

ASFOUR

(Dismissing him)

It's her father!

BORDEN

We better go back to surveilling the street.

(She rapidly and surreptitiously writes a text message)

Can you come in tighter on those guys in the Nissan pickup? In front of the vegetable stand.

(He sees her quickly slide the phone into her pocket and look up. She quickly scans the monitors but is unable to immediately find the truck he is referring to)

Texting while flying again? Keep that up you'll get yourself grounded.

ASFOUR

The subject is staring you in the face, Colonel.

BORDEN

Wonder if grounding even counts as punishment in this outfit.

ASFOUR

Monitor three, CU, in HDTV.

(He looks at her, impressed by how quickly she has found the subject)

BORDEN

Pretty quick on the draw, Airman. Can we go a little closer on the one with the beard and glasses?

(She adjusts the camera angles. He looks up)

What do you think?

ASFOUR

He doesn't appear to be purchasing produce.

BORDEN

Let's take a look at that wooden crate in the back of the bed.

ASFOUR

That's maximum zoom on high res.

BORDEN

Strange shape those green gizmos.

ASFOUR

Could be artichokes.

BORDEN

Or something that looks like artichokes.

ASFOUR

RPGs?

BORDEN

We'll drop down to eight thousand and check the view from there.

(He maneuvers the plane)

You see any money change hands?

ASFOUR

Negative.

BORDEN

Maybe they're giving away artichokes today.

ASFOUR

Or he prepaid with his debit card. The fat one just looked up.

BORDEN

Think he saw something?

ASFOUR

Us?

BORDEN

We're sitting in a sea of goo. Only thing those guys can see is two cumulus clouds.

ASFOUR

Your friend with the glasses is staring straight up our nose.

BORDEN

Probably forgot to bring his umbrella to work this morning.

ASFOUR

Maybe he heard us.

BORDEN

Any traffic in the vicinity?

ASFOUR

(Rapidly types in a coordinate and looks
at screen)

Civilian aircraft, twenty miles northeast.

BORDEN

Could think that purring sound's a pussycat taking a snooze
in the stratosphere.

ASFOUR

They know what that noise means.

BORDEN

If he's got nothing to hide, he's got nothing to fear.
Let's bring up that wanted poster.

(She brings up an image on the monitor,
which they both compare to the face of the
man with glasses looking up at their ship)

What do you think?

ASFOUR

It's hard to tell with the beard.

BORDEN

There's a definite resemblance.

ASFOUR

Handsome guy. I mean... he used to be.

(He looks at her. She looks up at another
monitor)

Look, they're headed somewhere in a hurry.

BORDEN

Must be an emergency vegetable delivery.

ASFOUR

I think they're trying to lose us, Colonel.

BORDEN

Shit!

ASFOUR

What is it?

BORDEN

Something's sticking. Feels like the ailerons.

ASFOUR

Design flaw?

BORDEN

No. This particular bird. Our Peregrine turned out to be a turkey today.

ASFOUR

Tell 'em we need another one tomorrow.

BORDEN

You'd think they could give us the same goddamn machine every day.

ASFOUR

They fly seventy-five missions a week out of here. They can't give every crew the same UAV for each flight.

BORDEN

It's like playing with rented clubs. You never get a feel for 'em. Pilot needs a relationship with his plane.

ASFOUR

If you'd like, we can pick one out and paint a blonde on the fuselage and give it a nickname.

BORDEN

That's not the sort of relationship I had in mind.

(Glances at the screen)

What are they doing down there?

ASFOUR

A one-eighty.

BORDEN

Ever seen a pick-up do a u-turn in the middle of the desert?

ASFOUR

(She types quickly and adjusts the camera)

There's a house just over the ridge. Two-point-three miles.

BORDEN

You do have quick hands, don't you?

ASFOUR

I told you, you're sitting next to an ace gamer. Ohio point-total record-holder for *Bellicose Bees*.

BORDEN

Bellicose Bees?

ASFOUR

Vintage Japanese game from the '80s. The enemy employs swarm tactics, enraged projectiles flying at you fast and furious from all directions. The more you kill, the quicker they multiply. The ultimate test in manual dexterity.

BORDEN

Truck's stopping.

ASFOUR

Right in front of the house.

BORDEN

Guess I need to play more video games.

(Pause)

You know Guynemer had great hands.

ASFOUR

Guynemer?

BORDEN

The most decorated French pilot in World War One. Over 50 confirmed kills.

(As he speaks, she looks quickly at a text message and types rapidly)

They say the Parisian women went wild over him. When they heard how chilly it was up in the air they donated their furs to him. He flew his missions in mink stoles. When the Germans shot him down, the whole country went into mourning.

(She tries to hide her box, but he sees her texting)

You still texting and flying, Airman?

ASF0UR

Sorry... car trouble. The mechanic said he'd bring it to me at eight, but they have to order a part from California. He thinks it'll take a week.

BORDEN

I'll give you a ride home if you need.

ASF0UR

Thank you, Colonel.

(She continues texting)

BORDEN

They never did find his body, so they told all the French schoolchildren he flew his Spad so high he couldn't come back down. *Si vous n'avez pas tout donné, vous avez donné rien.* "If you haven't given everything, you've given nothing." That was his motto.

(Sees that she is still texting)

You still on with that car mechanic?

ASF0UR

No, it's somebody else... Like a friend.

BORDEN

Like a friend?

ASF0UR

A friend.

BORDEN

Tell your friend you gotta sign off. You know unofficial communications are banned in here.

(She puts away the box. They stare up at the screen)

Taking their sweet time, aren't they?

ASF0UR

I wonder what they're doing in there.

BORDEN

Making artichoke dip? Why don't you get Centcom on the horn and find out what they know about Mr. Bushybeard.

ASFOUR

(Into headset)

This is Airman Asfour with Daedalus LLC in Arizona. We've got a bead on four subjects in a White Nissan pickup twelve miles south-southeast of the international airport.

BORDEN

Damn. This aileron, or whatever it is, is still grabbing every time we head up.

ASFOUR

They're looking at the same feed we are, Colonel.

BORDEN

They got an ID on him?

ASFOUR

(Into headset)

We think the one with the glasses is a person of interest.

BORDEN

This contraption's ready for the glue factory.

ASFOUR

(Into headset)

We may need authorization for an LGM strike.

(To BORDEN)

The house they're in has been pegged as an arms depot. Centcom's sending over some images of our friend.

BORDEN

You know who had a real relationship with his plane was Lindbergh. Know what he called his ship?

ASFOUR

The Spirit of St. Louis.

BORDEN

We.

ASFOUR

It was the name of the movie too. With the old skinny guy.

BORDEN

Jimmy Stewart's now "the old skinny guy"?

ASFOUR

I saw it online.

BORDEN

We. Lindbergh called his plane "we."

ASFOUR

Oh, you mean like a pet name?

BORDEN

I mean like his left arm. It was part of him. He oversaw every aspect of its construction, and when he landed at Le Bourget, a hundred thousand people surrounded him screaming "*Cette fois ça va.*" This time you did it! They lifted him out of the cockpit and ran him around the airfield for fifteen minutes like he was riding a tidal wave. And the whole time all he was thinking about was how to protect his plane.

ASFOUR

(Typing in coordinates)

I don't remember that part of the movie.

BORDEN

I'm not talking about a movie. I'm talking about reality.

ASFOUR

You were in Paris when Lindbergh landed?

BORDEN

I read it in his book.

ASFOUR

You have this thing about France, don't you, Colonel?

BORDEN

What about it?

ASFOUR

Nothing. I just noticed you're really into the French.

BORDEN

It's a fascinating country. The food, the culture, the language. You know the French invented the hot air balloon.

ASFOUR

Really?

BORDEN

Pilatre De Rozier. Seventeen eighty-five. He sent up a sheep, a duck and a rooster for fifteen minutes.

ASF0UR

Did he go up himself?

BORDEN

Yeah, he tried to cross the Channel in it, but the balloon blew up on takeoff.

ASF0UR

(Looking up at the screen)

Look, the fat one just popped out the back door.

BORDEN

What's that he's carrying?

ASF0UR

Some kind of case.

BORDEN

Can you do the dimensions on it?

ASF0UR

(Types quickly)

Just under four feet. What do you think?

BORDEN

Maybe he was serenading his cohorts on the trombone while they were making the dip.

ASF0UR

Here come two more. With the same size cases.

BORDEN

And Mr. Bushybeard bringing up the rear.

ASF0UR

Grenade launchers?

BORDEN

Either that or they're starting a jazz quartet.

ASF0UR

The photos Centcom sent over are on monitor three.

(They both look up at the monitor, comparing

Centcom's photo with the man on the ground)

BORDEN

More than a passing resemblance, wouldn't you say?

ASFOUR

Intelligence just ID'd him. He's the number three guy in *Al Shirkee*.

BORDEN

(Into headset)

This is Lieutenant Colonel Borden, Centcom. Do we have a greenlight to take a potshot at this pickup?

ASFOUR

They're headed straight for the airport.

BORDEN

(Into the headset)

What would you like us to do? Follow 'em into the terminal and see if they take the night flight to the Maldives?

(Pause)

We'd appreciate a decision... pronto.

(PHONE RINGS. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and removes his headset)

I'm sorry. I gotta take this. It's my daughter.

(Into phone)

Hey, honey.

(Voice drops in disappointment)

Oh, hello, Louise.

(Pause)

I'm in the middle of something.

(Pause)

I know it matters. I'm her father.

(Pause)

I never said it was a farce. I said ours turned into one, which it did

(Pause)

Do we have to go through this whole *mea culpa* routine every time we talk? I'm aware I wasn't the world's most steadfast spouse.

(To ASFOUR, in a low voice, hand over the cell phone)

This is gonna take a second. If Centcom calls, you pick up.

BORDEN (Contd)

(Pause, into the phone)

What do you mean, you and *Deborah* decided? Amanda ain't her kid. She doesn't have a thing to do with this.

ASF0UR

Two panel trucks just turned in behind the pickup.

BORDEN

I gotta go, Louise.

(Pause)

I'm at work!

(Pause)

Flying. I'm sitting in the cockpit. Arizona. I can't go into the details. Tell Amanda to call me herself.

(Pause)

Reason she won't call is the two of you brainwashed her.

(He looks up at screen, slips his headset on)

I really have to go.

(Hangs up, to ASF0UR)

What's goin' on down there?

ASF0UR

They're six miles from the airport and closing fast.

BORDEN

(Into headset)

You watching our live feed, Centcom?

(Pause)

Looks like a convoy to us.

(Pause)

That's an affirmative on all three?

ASF0UR

Talons are loaded and ready to fire, Colonel.

BORDEN

Lock onto the Nissan, and get one ready for their friends the plumbers.

(They are staring up at the screen above them)

ASF0UR

See the blue station wagon that just turned onto the highway?

BORDEN

(Exasperated)

Jesus! These people have impeccable timing, don't they?
What's that thing tied to the top? A table?

ASFOUR

I believe it's a mattress, sir.

BORDEN

Oh, good. A sleepover party in the desert.

ASFOUR

Heat sensors indicate occupants in the backseat. They could
be kids, Colonel.

BORDEN

(Into the headset)

We're waiting on the station wagon, Centcom.

(Into the headset)

It's not a table. It's a mattress.

(Into the headset)

We will not engage until the vehicle has vacated the
vicinity.

(He speaks to the screen they are watching.

She holds the joystick tight, ready to fire)

Come on. Come on! Get a move on.

(To ASFOUR)

Okay, Miss *Bellicose Bees*. Fifty more meters and it's your
turn to shine. Show us what you got.

(She FIRES. Long pause)

Bingo! Goodbye, Mr. Bushybeard.

ASFOUR

(Into headset)

Panel trucks moving west in tandem at rapid speed. Request
permission to engage, Centcom.

(She FIRES again. She and BORDEN watch
the monitor. Another long pause)

BORDEN

Two for the price of one, Airman. Let's do a drive-by on
the other side of the highway.

ASFOUR

(Into the headset)

Three squirters are running toward the date grove, Centcom.

(She FIRES. A tense pause)

BORDEN

(As they watch the missile she's fired)
And then... there... were... none! Hope nobody around here needs their pipes repaired. You just vaporized every plumber in the province.

(Into headset)

We're gonna hover here for a couple of minutes, Centcom.

(To ASFOUR)

You alright?

ASFOUR

I'm fine.

BORDEN

You sure?

ASFOUR

I'm okay. What about you?

BORDEN

Me? I'm... great.

ASFOUR

You think we got them all, Colonel?

BORDEN

Oh, yeah. You have eight more notches on your joystick, Airman. Keep this up, you're gonna give Guynemer a run for his money.

ASFOUR

You're sweating, Colonel.

BORDEN

So I am. Looks like Secret *ain't* strong enough for a man, after all.

ASFOUR

I'm serious, sir. You're soaking wet, and your hands are shaking. It upset you, didn't it... the call?

BORDEN

The call? Naw, me and Louise have been going around like that for decades.

ASF0UR

That's why I hate phones. You say this stuff and then you can't unsay it. It's like... firing one of these...

(Looks at her hand on the joystick)

Once you punch the button there's no calling it back.

BORDEN

That's a strange comparison. Aren't you the one that was just texting like a madwoman?

ASF0UR

I'm talking about conversations. Voice. You say this stuff you don't mean, and so do they, and then pretty soon there's no way you can correct it even if you want to.

BORDEN

I do know a couple of people I'd like to delete from the hard drive.

ASF0UR

You're sure we got them Colonel?

BORDEN

Positive. You racked up a perfect score today, Airman.

(Into headset)

That should be enough pictures to fill up your photo album, Centcom. We're heading back to the mother ship.

(She notices his hands are shaking)

ASF0UR

Tell me, what *is* wrong with your hands?

BORDEN

Nothing. Must be this piece of junk they pawned off on us today. Thing's shaking like a leaf.

(She slides out her box and begins a text message. He sees her texting)

ASF0UR

You really don't mind giving me a lift?

BORDEN

Be a pleasure. Soon as we touch down, I'll hit the shower.
I don't want my perspiration problem to undermine *unit cohesion*.

(Referring to the texting)

That the car mechanic again?

ASFOUR

No, it's...

BORDEN

...like a friend?

(MUSIC UP: "MY LITTLE GTO")