

How to Live in a House on Fire

A play to guide us through panic
In the face of climate grief

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“We live in a perpetually burning building,
and what we must save from it, all the time, is love.”
--Tennessee Williams

“I love you like a house on fire, if the fire were building the house.”
--Alexander Chee

The Characters

BENNY – daydreamer looking for a partner, 20s, all bravado and no bite

JEREMY – a loner looking for belonging, 20s, new to queer community

DREW – grad student looking to care for others, 30s, uses a wheelchair or another aid for mobility, Benny’s housemate

ANAND – an activist looking for purpose, 30s or 40s, always trying to organize his peers, Benny’s housemate

BENNY and JEREMY, 50 years later, played by different actors

Setting

A queer commune in Berkeley, California, 1970 and 2020

Principles for Managing a Western Pine Forest (and for Managing This Play)

1. **Keep the forest thinned out.** Overcrowding creates dangerous conditions. Leave the trees space to breathe. Monitor the logs—dead logs can create fire, but they also harbor beneficial microorganisms. Know how much density is too much.
2. **Save the big old trees.** Older and larger trees are integral for the survival of younger ones. Elders are central, not marginal, within a forest habitat. Honor the elders. They need protection if they are to support the young.
3. **Periodic burns are crucial.** In the right doses, fire helps revive a forest, and even wildfires can have beneficial effects. Before colonialism and still today, many Native nations have burned forests in cycles. Each burn is necessary for new growth. When handling challenging material, take it on in the doses you can manage.
4. **Monoculture cannot last.** Ecosystems with only one species are boring and artificial, and they quickly burn themselves out. A variety of trees makes a forest more resilient. Assemble a diverse creative team or risk disaster.
5. **The only lasting truth is change.** In the Americas, tree species have migrated great distances with each change of climate. There is no return to a “before times.” One can only adapt to changing circumstances, mourn what is lost, and imagine a new future.
6. **There is no going back.**

Scene One

A threshold with a doorway. A curtain is drawn over the playing space. ANAND enters.

ANAND

Back in 1970, my house was constantly on fire. I mean this literally. Drew was always leaving the oven on. Benny had a lethal obsession with witchcraft that expressed itself through candles. And here I was with my two best friends trying to hold down the fort—until one day I couldn't. I left for the woods and never came back. When I first got to the forest, I took a lot of trips on psychedelic mushrooms and tried not to think about my friends, but I still wonder what would have happened if I stayed. I remember one time I was on a mushroom trip, and I was trying to turn off the radio in my backyard. And I swear this took me ten minutes to get to the dial because I got caught up staring at rocks. Seeing shades of purple and silver, a whole starscape on the surface of a stone. And I was so connected with these rocks that I forgot about the radio. I didn't have any big profound realization. I just looked at some rocks. But maybe that's what mushrooms are about—a feeling that can't be put into words where you're part of something bigger. I think about theater the same way. It's an empathy drug. It makes you pay attention. Now, in California, we're known for our psychedelics. We're not known for our theater. Maybe it's the giant temples of nature that already make you feel small—the redwoods, the ocean, the sierras. Or maybe it's that we're so enraptured by Hollywood, the American dream factory. But I've always loved and believed in theater. Second only to psychedelics. In the 70s, we believed that psychedelics could change the world. I don't know if I still think that theater can change the world. I'm going to offer you a trip today. I can't promise you whether it'll be a good trip or a bad trip. But it's a story about people I care about deeply. Here's Benny and Jeremy. They're on a date. It's 1970, the U.S. has invaded Vietnam, and we just celebrated the first Earth Day. It's a time that seemed equal parts magnificent and disastrous, with a million lamps burning bright.

Two men, JEREMY and BENNY, enter and kiss at the doorway. ANAND watches them then exits. JEREMY and BENNY break away from the kiss, giddy with adrenalin.

JEREMY

You gonna invite me in?

BENNY

Not yet. I want to kiss you here where everyone can see.

JEREMY

Come on.

BENNY

What? You're scared J. Edgar Hoover is gonna find us?

JEREMY

Fine. But make it quick. One more kiss.

BENNY kisses JEREMY, who's nervous at first, then loves it. They come up for breath, then BENNY kisses JEREMY again.

JEREMY

That was two, idiot.

BENNY

What can I say? I'm greedy.

JEREMY

I can tell.

BENNY

Cause a bit of scandal. Shake up our slice of Berkeley.

JEREMY

Come on. Let's go in. You know what happened to [Frank].

BENNY

I know. I know.

Sobered, BENNY pulls out his keys. He notices a sheet of paper on the door and takes it down without visible concern.

JEREMY

Everything good?

BENNY

Yeah. It's fine. Just our landlord.

JEREMY looks concerned. BENNY takes his hand and leads him through the door.

A curtain is drawn to reveal the interior of BENNY's house, a grand if somewhat disorganized Victorian-style house built in the 1920s. A table at center holds a corded phone and a slew of pamphlets, political posters, and rolodexes. Around it are couches, armchairs, and a living room that has clearly been used for group gatherings. Bookshelves

and a window line the upstage playing space. The walls have exposed wood, and a hallway up left leads to the kitchen, bedrooms, and bath. Notable fixtures are a pink flamingo-shaped lamp, an artful painting of a nude man, a record player, an "Impeach Nixon" poster, and a framed photo of the housemates.

JEREMY

Wow.

BENNY

Welcome to the Chateau Homosexuel.

JEREMY

You don't actually call it that.

BENNY

We absolutely do.

JEREMY

You live here with your . . .

BENNY

Roommates. Anand is out, but I think Drew is somewhere around here.

JEREMY

Look, I can leave if you want.

BENNY

Oh, Drew doesn't mind.

JEREMY

No. I saw that. It was definitely an eviction notice.

BENNY

Don't worry about it. Our landlord hates our guts since we're unrepentant homosexuals, and we hate his guts since he doesn't make any repairs on this place. The roof is leaking. We didn't have heat all winter. I know it's California, but still.

JEREMY

All I'm saying is if you need some time alone.

BENNY

No. No. He talks big, but at the end of the day he needs our money.

It said final notice.

JEREMY

No it didn't.

BENNY

BENNY takes the notice out of his pocket. JEREMY takes it and points at it.

Right there.

JEREMY

WAIT WHAT?

BENNY

BENNY takes the paper back and reads it intently.

Oh, god, this is so embarrassing.

BENNY

You still want to have sex? I can go.

JEREMY

No. No. Stay. You came all the way out here.

BENNY

JEREMY looks unconvinced. BENNY puts the paper down.

I have something that can make it better.

BENNY

Oh my.

JEREMY

BENNY kisses along his neck then straddles him. The sound of the shower starting down the hall. They kiss on the lips. There's a scream from the shower. JEREMY pops up with a start.

BENNY
(easing JEREMY back down)

That's just Drew.

JEREMY

Is he okay?

BENNY

Yeah. He screams in the shower sometimes.

JEREMY

Uhhh.

BENNY

He thinks because the water is on that we can't hear him.

JEREMY

Oh.

BENNY

He's a grad student. He has a lot of anger.

JEREMY

Have you told him you can [hear him]?

BENNY

No. I don't want to make him self-conscious. It's good for him to get in touch with his throat chakra.

DREW screams again.

BENNY

Hey. Come here.

BENNY kisses JEREMY again. Another scream. They keep kissing, punctuated by DREW's screaming. JEREMY gets startled, until he pulls away from BENNY.

JEREMY

I don't think I can do this.

BENNY

Okay.

JEREMY

It's very distracting. Could we head to your room?

BENNY

Do we have to move so fast? I like what we're doing here.

The water shuts off and the screaming stops.

BENNY

See. All better.

BENNY touches JEREMY. JEREMY relaxes a bit.

BENNY

You seem nervous. Are you good?

JEREMY

I'm kind of new at this.

BENNY

How new?

JEREMY

I haven't had a lot of sex with men before.

BENNY

Who ever said we were having sex?

JEREMY

Uh.

BENNY

Do you want to?

JEREMY nods.

BENNY

Yeah?

JEREMY

I'm so lonely.

DREW

(from off)

Hey Benny?

What? BENNY

DREW rolls in from the hall in a wheelchair. Coming in from the shower, he has a towel around his waist and is comfortable in his body. DREW should be played by an actor with a disability. If the actor playing DREW doesn't use a wheelchair, let's adapt the role to reflect the actor's experience and access needs.

Could I get a hand? DREW

Ahem. BENNY

DREW notices JEREMY.

Hi. DREW

Hi. JEREMY

This is Jeremy. Jeremy, this is Drew. BENNY

Nice to meet you. JEREMY

He's cute. DREW

I agree. BENNY

Thanks. JEREMY

I'm gonna steal Benny for a sec. If you can spare him. DREW

I'll be back. Sit tight. BENNY

BENNY and DREW exit down the hallway. JEREMY looks around the living room. He goes to the papers at the desk center stage. His eye locks on the pink flamingo lamp.

BENNY returns and sees Jeremy eyeing the lamp.

BENNY

So where were we?

JEREMY

Are you sure you're okay?

BENNY

Yeah. Why?

JEREMY

Like, where are you gonna live if your landlord kicks you out?

BENNY

I'm sure we'll make it work. And if not, who knows, maybe I'll have to find a rich sugar daddy?

JEREMY

If you need a place to stay, you can stay with me.

BENNY

You're a little young for a sugar daddy.

JEREMY

No. I'm not [a sugar daddy]—My place isn't nearly as nice as this. All I'm saying is if you need some place to go, you can stay with me.

BENNY

Thanks.

JEREMY

I know we just met.

BENNY

You're way too nice.

JEREMY

What did Drew say?

I didn't tell him yet.

BENNY

The phone at the center table rings.

Can you get it?

DREW
(from off)

Yeah.

BENNY

It might be someone in the lab, so . . .

DREW
(still off)

He picks up.

Hello, you've reached the chateau, Benny on the line. Yeah. Hi, Linda. Ahh. Sure. I can help. It's five four eight, two five seven zero.

BENNY

DREW enters.

No prob. You take care.

BENNY

He hangs up.

All good?

DREW

All good.

BENNY

BENNY gives JEREMY a look to keep his mouth shut about the eviction.

Just someone calling to check about medics for the protest.

BENNY

Okay good. And hey, leave it plugged in for the night. I'm expecting a call later.

DREW