

# ALEXANDER AND THE UNITED SNAKES OF AMERICA

A Play in One Act  
For Young Audiences

*By Donald Lewis*

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## **DEDICATION**

*For Kadidja and Veronika*

Alexander and the United Snakes of America would not have been possible without the creative input of dozens of individuals who contributed to its development. For the sake of brevity, a short list: Russ Tutterow and the Resident Playwrights at Chicago Dramatists; Kathy Fletcher and David Wade at Bloomington Playwrights Project; Rhonda Lake and Rob McKercher at Lincoln Community Playhouse; Paul Gritton; the wonderfully insightful casts; my loving wife, Kadidja; and my creative spark plug of a daughter, Veronika. Thank you so much.

## **STORY OF THE PLAY**

Homeless Alexander and his dad board a boxcar and head west, in search of a new life. Unfortunately, they share the boxcar with a group of snakes on their way to the United Snakes of America Convention, organized to develop a national strategy for survival. Humans and snakes must overcome differences and find common ground -- or bite the big one!

## **ORIGINAL PRODUCTION CREDITS**

Alexander and the United Snakes of America received its premiere at Bloomington Playwrights Project (Kathy Fletcher, Artistic Director.) in Bloomington, Indiana, on April 11, 1997. It was directed by David Wade; the scenic design was by David Wade; the costume design was by Bernadette Kinzer; and the lighting design was by Damien J. Eversmann. The cast was as follows:

Alexander.....Joel Barker  
Dad.....Mark Pitman  
Polluter.....John T. Aney  
Garter.....Patrick Song  
Diamondback.....Alex Shotts  
Indigo.....Diane De Vore  
Watersnake.....Stepheny Anderson  
Rainbow.....Stefanie L. Weber

*Alexander and the United Snakes of America was developed, in part, at Chicago Dramatists.*

### **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

**ALEXANDER:** A bright, curious 12-year-old who loves his dad but often disagrees with him.

**DAD:** Alexander's father, proud, stubborn and independent.

**GARTER:** The intellectual voice of the snakes, as well as publicist for United Snakes of America. He is small and grey, with blue stripes. Hails from northern California.

**DIAMONDBACK:** The most antagonistic and militant of the snakes. He is heavy bodied and tan, with white-bordered dark diamonds on his back. Represents the Western Diamondback Rattlesnake family, from Texas.

**INDIGO:** Reserved but imposing, the largest of the snakes and the only one capable of standing up to Diamondback. She is black with much of her chin, throat and sides of her head suffused with cream. Florida-based.

**WATERSNAKE:** A whiner and complainer, eager to jump on the bandwagon that serves his purposes. He is a medium-sized snake, reddish-brown with a yellow belly. Northern subspecies, from New Jersey.

**RAINBOW:** A docile free-spirit. She promotes peace and harmony among all creatures, despite the alternative names ascribed to her - hoop snake and stinging snake. She is slight and slender, multi-colored, from Georgia.

**POLLUTER:** A threat to all.

The roles of the snakes may be played by either males or females. The designations assigned to them in the script are the author's preference. It may be helpful for the actors playing the snakes (particularly adults.) to have dance or athletic backgrounds due to the dexterity needed for the roles.

### **PRODUCTION NOTES**

**SCENE:** In and around a railroad boxcar, Midwestern United States.

**TIME:** Summer night, present.

**RUNNING TIME:** 60 minutes.

**SETTING:** An open railroad boxcar. Rays of moonlight pass through its slats. It is difficult to discern the boxcar's contents beyond several industrial spools and a pile of what appear to be cables.

The set and lighting do not need to be realistic. We only need to know that the snakes and humans are sharing limited quarters, and that it's late at night.

### **SOUND EFFECTS**

There are several needed to complement a full production: a train whistle; the sound of a train moving (gaining speed, slowing down, steady pace.); train crossing bells; and the sound of liquid being poured from a barrel. If you discover other effects that enhance the production, by all means use them.

It is suggested that an up-tempo railroad tune be heard at the end of the play, possibly extending through the curtain call. The choice of the song is left up to the production, though the author's personal favorite is "Choo-Choo Ch'Boogie" by Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five. Any recording, unless it is in the public domain, is protected by copyright; permission of the copyright owners must be obtained to use it.

While the play has serious messages to deliver about the environment and tolerance, it is intended to be fun. Be as creative as you like with the costumes, set, lighting and sound. The inventiveness you employ will also serve any post-performance discussions, which you may want to have with audiences. Talking about the design and technical elements is often a good lead-in to a discussion of the broader issues.

Enjoy and have fun!

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*(AT RISE: Night. A train whistle blows, signaling that it is about to leave the freight yard. ALEXANDER and his DAD cautiously enter, walking along the boxcar. The boy has an old Boy Scout knapsack on his back. His grizzled father carries a shopping bag, stuffed with clothes. They speak in hushed tones.)*

ALEXANDER: Are you sure this is it?

DAD: That's what the old man said.

ALEXANDER: I don't think it's going west.

DAD: You see the moon?

ALEXANDER: That's east.

DAD: That's west.

ALEXANDER: Dad ...

DAD: You're afraid.

ALEXANDER: I am not. I saw some men down there.

DAD: Where?

ALEXANDER: *(Pointing.)* Down -

*(ALEXANDER and his DAD see someone coming. They quickly and quietly exit. A POLLUTER enters from the opposite direction, shining a flashlight. He flashes the light in and around the boxcar, and through the audience.)*

POLLUTER: *(Calling to his fellow workers.)* I don't see no one. Nothin' here. Let's get goin' 'fore the sun gets up. We gotta night full of pay dirt 'head of us. *(Makes his way toward the exit. To himself.)* Paranoid. As if someone's gonna catch us. As if we're doin' the devil's work.

*(The POLLUTER exits. ALEXANDER and his DAD enter through the audience, looking around to see if the coast is clear.)*

ALEXANDER: Is he gone?

DAD: I don't see him.

ALEXANDER: You sure?

DAD: C'mon. *(The TWO approach the boxcar.)*

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ALEXANDER: If we had taken a shower at that campground-

DAD: C'mon, Alex.

ALEXANDER: Maybe a car would have stopped and picked us up.

DAD: I don't trust greasy strangers in fancy cars.

*(ALEXANDER takes off his knapsack and throws it inside the boxcar.)*

DAD: *(Cont'd.)* I only take rides in flatbeds and I didn't see no flatbeds.

*(ALEXANDER tries to hoist himself up but has a difficult time. DAD attempts to help, the boy shrugging him off.)*

DAD: Hurry!

ALEXANDER: I am.

DAD: The train's gonna leave any minute!

ALEXANDER: I'm going as fast as I -

*(The train jerks, heaving ALEXANDER inside.)*

DAD: You all right? *(The train WHISTLE blows again. DAD tosses the shopping bag inside.)* Alexander?

ALEXANDER: It smells like slime in here.

DAD: You all right?

ALEXANDER: It's wet.

DAD: I didn't promise the California Zephyr.

ALEXANDER: It's gross.

*(DAD tries to climb up. He has an even more difficult time.)*

DAD: Uhhhhh ...

ALEXANDER: Need some help?

DAD: Nooooo ...

*(The train begins to move. DAD moves alongside the boxcar, trying to get a grip. ALEXANDER hurries over.)*

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ALEXANDER: *(Extending his hand.)* Grab my hand.

DAD: Get outta the way. *(He swings a leg up onto the boxcar. ALEXANDER grabs it.)* Leggo!

*(The train begins to pick up speed. DAD continues to struggle, ALEXANDER trying to pull him in. The train approaches a railroad signal.)*

ALEXANDER: Hurry!

DAD: I am!

ALEXANDER: There's a railroad signal -

DAD: Move!

ALEXANDER: Look out!

DAD: Leggo!

*(ALEXANDER manages to pull him in just in time, avoiding collision with the signal. DAD is out of breath.)*

DAD: *(Cont'd.)* I ... I almost had my lunch, Alex.

ALEXANDER: I know.

DAD: Next time I tell you move, you move.

ALEXANDER: I was just trying -

DAD: Understand?

ALEXANDER: Dad -

DAD: You understand?

ALEXANDER: Yes, sir.

*(DAD slowly gets up and walks over to the shopping bag, staring at ALEXANDER. The boy shies away from his gaze.)*

DAD: I know how to ride the rails.

ALEXANDER: Yes, sir.

DAD: When I was your age, I was up across the country and back in one of these. I knew every small town burg between Gary and Morro Bay. What I need right now is more shut-eye and less back-talk. We got a long day ahead.

ALEXANDER: Then we'll be in California?

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