

NEGLIGENCE
by Steven Gaultney

CAST:

Man

TIME:

the future, two generations after the near extinction of the human race

PLACE:

Chautauqua Institute

LOCATIONS:

- 1 – The Woods. The audience gathers in a clearing on the edge of the woods. They face the trees. Through the trees, a creek is visible. Behind the audience, across a street, is “Seaver Gym.”
- 2 – Seaver Gym. Man leads the audience into Seaver Gym, which is an indoor basketball gymnasium. The scene takes place on the basketball court. On each end of the basketball court are large barn-like double doors leading back outdoors. Behind and above one of the basketball hoops is a second story loft area where Man lives and keeps his supplies.
- 3 – The Dock. The audience faces a wooden dock. Where the dock meets the land a barricade has been formed by the canoes, paddles, and wooden benches. Man approaches via canoe from the lake.

NOTE:

This is a site-specific piece written for specific locations. As the geography and structures of Chautauqua Institute have been made integral to the text itself, *Negligence* cannot be performed elsewhere until the author has adapted the text to fit new locations.

(The Woods. The audience gathers across the street from "Seaver Gym" on the grass near the totem. Deep in the woods, axes can be heard chopping trees.

MAN approaches the audience wearing an "Old Man" mask. The mask is gnarled but not ghoulish, haggard but healthy. It gives the impression of a talking tree. MAN walks into the audience's midst. He performs as the "Old Man" mask.

MAN

(as the mask)

Once
 not so long ago
 when the world was still fit for gods to walk on
 the god of knowledge and destruction
 spying a path
 took a stroll between two neighbors' lawns.
 Later that day
 meeting at the local pub
 the neighbors discussed what they had seen.
 The first asked the second
 "Did you see that strange man who walked between our lawns at noon
 the one wearing that funny blue hat?"
 "Green hat,"
 said the second
 shooing off a fly.
 "What?"
 asked the first
 perhaps not quite hearing.
 "The strange man who walked between our houses"
 explained the second
 "his funny hat
 it wasn't blue
 it was green."
 "It was most definitely blue"
 replied the first
 his voice rising.
 The second neighbor cocked his head
 and grimace-grinned.
 They continued long into the night.

Now
the god of knowledge and destruction enjoyed this stroll between the lawns.
The way the sun burnt his neck made him smile.
So he took the same stroll each day
at noon
and each day each neighbor saw just what he'd seen the first time and that night told the other he
was wrong.
Witnesses were called to settle the dispute
but nothing was settled.
Those standing with the first man
every one
saw a blue hat
and those standing with the second saw green.
The witnesses called witnesses of their own to witness with them.
And so the argument grew.
Soon the whole town was enveloped in the feud
soon the country
soon the whole world.
Violence appeared
like a thunderbolt at night
before which gathered clouds had gone unnoticed.
War raged
every hour of the day
the terror
constant
except at noon
when all would stop to watch the god take his stroll.
Things went on this way until the war had run its course
and only one man was left alive.
Now
this last man in the world
being the last man in the world
had a lot of time to think
and eventually
he had a thought that surprised him.
Why
he wondered
had no one ever asked the strange man what color *he* thought his hat was?
So the next day at noon
instead of watching him pass by
the man approached the god of knowledge and destruction.

But as he neared the god's path the man felt that something had gone wrong and grew flustered and confused and instead of asking politely what color the hat was he demanded to see the hat right then that instant.

The god
without the least hesitation
held his hat out to the man
and smiled.

And his smile seemed to split his face in two.

When the man saw this smile he went cold and shuddered
his hands turned moist as clams
such a smile could not belong to a man.

But when he looked down at the hat the god continued to offer
his hands

no longer clams
froze completely
they sweat
like two blocks of ice.

He stared
horrified
wishing to will the sight away
of a hat
one side blue
one side green.

The god shook the hat:
it was purple.

Flipped it:
red.

Tossed it up and it was yellow in the sky.

The man
head bowed
trembled
waiting for some lesson
some secret for which all the world had died.

But nothing
the god was silent
speaking only with his smile
which pressed down on the man
on his neck
like rays from a hurtling sun.

Finally
sensing perhaps he was expected to speak
the man asked the god
“Why would you do this?”

The god's smile expanded
surged –
his face
like a great dam
bursting.
“Why not?”
the god replied.
“Why not?”
he grimace-grinned.
“Spreading strife is the greatest joy I know.”
At that
hearing these words
the man
collapsing
turned to dust
subsided
all at once
into a mound.
The god
no less surprised than the man
kicked the mound.
Perhaps
he thought
his eyes betrayed him.
But just as he kicked
a great wind blew
and the dust the god had kicked rushed to his face.
His hands leapt up
his eyes burned
his mouth was filled with grit.
His smile disappeared.
He rubbed his eyes and spit
he cursed the man
he cursed the wind
he stomped on what remained of the mound.
When
at last
the god regained his composure
eyes red
throat dry
he proclaimed the earth unfit to bring him pleasure.
And so the god walked to the edge of the earth
and past it

never to return
all the while cursing the earth
the creatures on it
the dust still stuck between his teeth.

(Just as he finishes his story, MAN notices, in front of the totem: a bundle the size of an infant. He strides past it at first, into the audience, then stops - a double-take.

He lifts the mask, hesitates. He looks to the audience, then back to the bundle.)

MAN
(to the bundle)

Psst.
Are you a baby?
Are you a bomb?

(He lowers the mask. He moves through the audience towards the bundle.)

MAN
(to audience members)

Excuse me.
Excuse me.
If you're a baby, cry.
Did you see who - ?

(raises the mask, to the bundle)
(no response, to an audience member)

(He lowers the mask, darts his eyes about to see if anyone other than the audience might have seen him.)

MAN
(to the whole audience)

Did anyone see who left the bundle?
No one?
It wasn't one of you?
You just happened to gather all together all at once and a baby-sized bundle just *appeared?*

(nodding to himself)

Helpful.

(He scans the distance. He walks to the beaten path that leads into the woods, looks down it. He returns.)

MAN

(to the youngest audience member)

If it turns out you did this...

(He approaches the bundle, as close as he dares. He tries to see inside the cloth, can't. He takes a deep breath.)

MAN

(shouts to the distance, to the woods, to the windows)

If this is a baby
and you're out there
waiting to see if I'll take it
you should know I have no idea what babies need
so if maybe you could leave me some instructions...
No...?

(no response)

If it's a bomb you've made to look like a baby
and you're out there
waiting for me to explode
so you can pick through my remains for things to use
you should know I don't have much
I'd be a waste of your bomb
you should probably stop me from picking it up so you can save it for someone with more
somethings in their pockets.

(no response)

If you don't care about pockets
and just want something to eat
and so intend to make a meal of my post-explosion carcass
you should know I have every disease you've ever heard of!

(to the audience)

I don't.

(shouts)

I have them all!
Leprosy, HIV, HPV
Hepatitis "A" through every letter
swine flu, bird flu, cat flu, trout flu, West Nile, Rio Grande
mumps.

It's bad.
Trust me
you want no part of this
so
again
you might as well save yourself the bomb.
(no response, to the bundle)
Asleep?

(He approaches the bundle, again as close as he dares. He claps. No response. He claps louder. No response.)

MAN
(shouts)
Show yourself right now or I'll kill you!
You're new here
aren't you?
with whoever's chopping trees?
So:
you know where I live!
(of the bundle)
You put it there so I would see it
you from my window
you found me.
Bravo!

(He claps. He takes off the mask.)

MAN
(shouts, of the mask)
No point in this
is there?
you've seen my face already
you must have
you've been watching!
(to the audience)
Clap for them!
Clap!
(shouts)
We're impressed!
(to the audience)

Applaud!

(He claps vigorously, builds the audience applause.)

MAN

(shouts, clapping)

You're so impressive!

(over the audience applause)

Doesn't mean you have the upper hand!

I know this place

every building!

every tree!

I can see this spot from more windows than one!

If you refuse to come out now

I'll disappear!

I'll keep watch you won't know where I am!

If it's a baby

it will get hungry and cry and you'll give in and take it back and when you do I'm going to see

you

see *your* face!

and if it's a bomb...

you'll wait and you'll wait but no one else will come

who else would?

I've had this whole place to myself now for a year!

from the water to the gates!

no one will come you'll be forced to give up and

dead of night

hoping I'm not watching

that I've fallen asleep

you'll come sneaking here

hoping to collect your bomb

but no!

I won't be asleep

I'll see you from my window

or a tree

I'll see you from the ground beneath your feet!

Do you know what human tastes like?

I do!

because I've eaten them!

(to an audience member)

I haven't.

(shouts)

I'll eat you alive!

I'll cut off pieces but make sure the rest of you stays living so the meat can stay fresh for that
much longer

then when there's nothing left of you but torso and head

I'll flay you alive

then fillet you alive

why?

because you didn't come out right now this instant!

You have ten seconds

so what's it going to be?

(He waits ten seconds, nothing.)

MAN

Ten more seconds!

(He waits ten more seconds, nothing.)

MAN

If you're too far away to get here
you can shout.

If you're on your way

I'll give you more time.

(He waits, more nothing.)

MAN

If it's a baby I need those instructions!

The closest thing I've ever seen to a baby was myself as a child in a mirror!

that and one we found

it was dead

we didn't touch it

so.

Is it safe to pick it up?

I don't know how to hold them!

If you don't want me to kill it

accidentally kill it

you really need to tell me what to do!

(He waits, more nothing. He clinches his fists. Unclenches.)

MAN

(of the baby)

Maybe it's dead.

(shouts)

Is it dead?

(no response, to the audience)

Wait here.

(He runs to "Seaver Gym." A moment passes. He comes back out of the gym with a knotted climbing rope. As he re-approaches, he speaks.)

MAN

(shouts)

There's still time to come to your senses!

Come out before I disarm your bomb and I promise I'll let everything go!

I won't kill you and eat you

none of that

we'll just talk

(to the audience, in case they don't believe him)

Really.

(shouts)

I'm not lying!

I've been wanting to talk ever since I heard your axes

to say

I don't know why you're chopping trees!

there are so many houses!

look!

chop *them!*

at least then they're good for something.

(MAN has retrieved a long, straight branch from the woods and placed both it and the rope near the bundle. As he speaks the following, he ties one end of the rope to each end of the branch so that the rope forms a giant handle with which he can drag the branch horizontally along the ground like a plow without teeth. Before he begins, he examines the bundle yet again, then looks out to the distance.)

MAN

(as he ties the rope, shouts)

You're making a mistake!

I'd understand if it were crowded.

It's not!

Not a city

plenty of room!

(to the audience)

Do you know what that is?

a city?

Bob was born not long after whatever happened happened -

Bob

he was my friend -

he told me all about them

cities

they're these places with lots of tall buildings

way taller than that one -

(points to a single story building)

or that -

(points to Seaver Gym)

taller than anything here

and they had *thousands* of people

the cities

can you imagine?

Thousands.

People told Bob there used to be even more

more people

more than thousands.

They were lying

that's what we decided

playing tricks since he was still a boy.

Not a boy anymore

Bob

no

he's old

and dead.

If Bob found a baby he would know what to do

he found me

when I was like that

(points to the bundle)

that big

and look:

(of himself)

now I'm this.

Bob did that.

(He has finished attaching the rope to the branch. He considers.)

MAN

(shouts)

I'm going to tell you a story.

It's about my friend Bob.

(He waits, nothing.)

MAN

Now's the time to voice your objections!

None?

If you want the story:

bark.

(He waits, nothing.)

MAN

If you don't want it:

bark louder!

(He waits, nothing.)

MAN

(to the audience)

They want the story.

(to himself)

So.

(shouts)

Once

forty years ago

Bob came here with his family

his mother

his brother

and a woman they had met along the way
the woman had a baby
an infant

(gestures with his hands)

this small.

They were traveling together
found this place and thought it would be safe
and it was
safe
no one here.

Until
one night
Bob -

(MAN lowers the mask to his face, becomes the mask.)

MAN

(as the mask)

Bob

(He bows to his audience, introducing himself as "Bob.")

MAN

left the house where they were staying
went searching for food and supplies
and while he was searching he felt that something had gone wrong
but kept searching
and searching
found soup
kept searching
until:
wind off the lake
which that night had been severe
ceased
and the chattering leaves fell to whispers.
Bob listened
listened
began moving back towards his home
listened
until:
a smell:
smoke.

He ran and he ran and it was *worse* than he'd imagined
it wasn't the house that was on fire
there were men *around* a fire they'd built *beside* his house
cooking his family.
He saw their eyes
lifeless
lit only by the fire.
There was nothing he could do.
They ate
left on boats and never returned.
All they left were bones
cracked
for the marrow
bones

(He approaches the bundle.)

MAN

and a baby
the infant:
me.

(He turns away from the bundle, raises the mask, becomes himself.)

MAN

See?
All of this has happened before!
I'm the baby
the baby's the fire
and you're here to crack my bones!
But last time
you didn't!
why not?
you must have had your reasons
I must be good for something!
You don't know this place!
there are bears!
I'll tell you where they are!
I'll show you where the fish are and share my food and tell you stories
and you can do things too

things for me
and I...
the point...

(to the audience)

Not my best story.

(shouts)

The point is maybe there's a possible chance you might eventually decide that just like before
there are better things you could do besides kill me!

(No response. He stands there, dejected.)

MAN

(shouts)

Listen

could you at least make some sort of sound?

All that I said about cutting you up

I won't do that

I wouldn't

I wouldn't ever!

I don't know what human tastes like!

and I don't have diseases!

none!

I'm completely safe to eat!

See that?

I'm being honest!

I'm exposing myself to potential danger and harm in an effort to evoke a reciprocal disclosure!
anything!

a whistle!

do you know how to whistle?

a sneeze!

All I want to know is you're a living set of ears!

that's it!

nothing else!

that you *heard* me!

(He waits, nothing. He looks at the bundle. He barks at the
bundle. Like a dog, a big one. No response.)

MAN

(to the audience)

Bomb.

(MAN picks up the rope and uses it to drag the branch slowly towards the bundle. The rope is long enough that he is further away from the bundle than is at least part of the audience.)

MAN

(to the audience)

Maybe take a step back.

Maybe another.

(shouts)

There's still time to save your bomb!

Less time...

less time...

(to the audience)

One more

maybe.

(The bundle cries. MAN whirls around, stunned.)

MAN

(shouts)

But -

I didn't touch it!

(MAN rushes to the bundle to make sure. He's correct: the branch has not touched the bundle.)

MAN

Look!

(He picks up the stick, indicates the space between the stick and the bundle.)

MAN

Nothing!

air!

(to the audience)

Who did this?!

It didn't cry when I *barked!*
now it's crying for no reason at all?
because none of you did anything?

(to himself)

It's crying?

(a realization)

It's a baby?

(He takes a step towards the baby, stops.)

MAN

It could still be a bomb
a bomb strapped to a baby a
living baby!
If I die it's not because you tricked me!
it's because you're disgusting and it's a baby and I...
I'm not...

(MAN decides to take the chance. He pulls on the exterior
cloth and exposes a baby, still crying, tangled in the cloth.)

MAN

Your arm's caught
hold still
your leg.

(He untangles the baby, notices something. From the bundle
he produces a piece of duct tape.)

MAN

(shouts)

You taped its mouth?

(to the audience)

It's tears undid the glue.

Look:

it's been crying all the time.

(He puts the tape in his pocket. He picks up the baby, holds
it with his arms outstretched, the baby's legs dangling in the
air.)

MAN

(shouts)

Is this right?

(He shifts the baby about in his arms, attempts several ways of holding it, all unsuccessful. The baby is still crying.)

MAN

I don't know how to hold it!

(He slings the baby over his shoulder, one hand gripping each of its ankles. He sniffs.)

MAN

It smells funny!

(The baby cries directly into his ear. MAN winces.)

MAN

(to the baby)

Yes!

I can hear you.

I can hear you...

(He shifts the baby so that he is once again holding it with his arms outstretched, the baby's legs dangling in the air. The baby's crying subsides.)

MAN

They know where I live and they left you here for me.

Why?

(He scans the area one last time.)

MAN

(shouts)

Hello?

(No response. He glances at the audience. Then, abruptly, he EXITS as quickly as possible, the baby held in front of him, to the front doors of "Seaver Gym.")

THIS PLAY IS FAR FROM OVER!

Email steven@stevengaultney.com to request the full script.