

THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS

a play in one act

Greg Shelton

[The stage is bare excepting a park bench, right center.

All characters in the play except David, J. Alamand Moore, and the janitor are six foot cardboard cutouts moved by people dressed in black against the black backdrop.

The curtain rises, the janitor is sweeping the stage.]

Janitor: I am not really a character in the play,
But a mere device of the youthful author,
I serve no purpose but to introduce and explain
Adding a comment now and then
(Only for my personal amusement).
What I say, do not take seriously,
For I am but a banal employee of society
Sweeping up its waste and refuse.
I read not the magazines and-day-old papers
That have been discarded.
I once read papers, and that is all that is needed.
All the rest is but repetition.
It bores me.
Enough of that.
Now the author spurs me on to my rightful duty,
To introduce the main characters:
(There are only two)
Entering now from stage right is the youthful hero, David.
(I think the author identifies with him)
He carries under his arm a book of Poems

Composed by Noted Major Author.

Passages he has committed to memory.

David writes, also.

Poetry.

He is sensitive, intelligent

(I think the audience should like to identify with him.)

He now sits, crossing his legs.

He reads his favorite passages.

From Stage Left enters the anti-hero,

J. Alamand Moore.

All things good in society he sees in himself

All things bad in society he is.

Although he does not read books and plays

He religiously (crosses himself) reads the holy reviews in
all important magazines.

Amen.

He befuddles himself with wonderous meaning from all
things insignificant.

He impresses himself only.

Count, if you will, cliches that he tosses.

(It may prove diverting in the duller moments of the play.)

Well, that just about takes care of it.

Oh, you will see others pass

Mainly to add traffic to the almost barren stage.

Ah, but I almost forgot the most important part:

The setting!

For it is but twenty minutes before

The world does end

And all are so much aware of that fact,

Religion and drink seem outs for most,

Masses attend Mass

And Drunkards Drink.

Our hero and anti-hero search for Reason but

Alas! they, too, shall die in the end,

And at their destruction only one of them will know

The real reason for the end of the world.

(J. Alamand now crosses to David, looks with great
interest at the book, he clears his throat.)

Moore: Ahem.

- David: (goes on reading)
- Moore: Ahem!
- David: (no response)
- Moore: AHEM!
- David: (looks up, goes back to reading)
- Moore: Is this seat taken?
- Janitor: A truly insipid question.
- David: Are you speaking to me?
- Moore: Indeed.
- David: Oh. (goes back to book)
- Moore: (walks around bench, sits next to David.) (pauses) (looks at book) Ah, I see you're reading Poems by Noted Major Author. (waits for response. none comes. he continues) That is undoubtedly the greatest collection of the decade.
- Janitor: He once read in *Newsweek* or *Time*.
- Moore: Perhaps for all time.
- David: (looks up briefly) What?
- Moore: All time. Perhaps for all time. I mean, we are in a good position to judge—what with the world ending soon, you know. (forces laugh)
- David: (reads on)
- Moore: I say. Have you made preparation for the END?
- David: (slams book shut) Are you going to talk?
- Moore: Oh. I'm sorry.
- Janitor: He lies
- Moore: Am I disturbing you?
- David: (sarcastically) Oh, no. I can always read LATER. (smiles broadly)
- Moore: I say, that IS a bit of a joke. (titters) It must take some courage to joke at a time like this. What with the world ending and all. Courage my boy, you seem to have it. And wit. You are without question, the By the way I haven't introduced myself, I am J. Alamand More. . .
- Janitor: (For David's information only, inasmuch as I introduced him to the audience before.)
- Moore: . . financier extraordinary, *at your service*. (offers hand)
- David: REALLY? (Does not shake)

- Moore: Well, no, that's just a saying "at your service," you know.
Nothing more.
(Long pause)
(Moore grows impatient)
And your name?
- David: David.
- Moore: David—?
- David: David.
- Moore: And what is it you do David?
- David: Do? Do?
- Moore: In the way of gainful employment, you know.
- David: Oh, that. Well, actually I don't DO anything. I am a poet. That is I *was* a poet. But now there is no reason to write. Beauty and Truth long since disappeared from our society. And soon that wretched little spinning sphere shall cease. What good is a poet then?
- Moore: Well really! That's quite a defeatist's attitude. Poets should be optimistic. . .
- Janitor: He once read in his Introduction to Fine Literature class.
- Moore: . . . and look for good things in society. They are there, ripe for picking, if only one recognizes them.
- Janitor: IBID.
- Moore: There IS much beauty, truth, virtue, righteousness, (as his list grows longer, he slows down trying to think of other good things.) courage, honor, liberty, faith . . . beauty—or did I say that?
(at this time three characters enter from stage left—one, a soldier carrying a flag; another, a baker carrying an apple pie; the third, an aging Mother. They march, in time, around the park bench, then exit.)
- Moore: (continues). . . Umm, patriotism, apple pie, and MOTHERS. Don't you see? There is actually no reason to give up. After all, they could be wrong, you know. The world may still be here tomorrow. You can never tell!
- David: So what if it is?
- Moore: What if it is? Why. . .
- David: What has our society produced but hate, wars, and filth?

Possessiveness, property, and money. Nationalism turns but to conceit. Meaningless wars are fought over impractical ideologies where young men who know nothing of life are. . . .

David: . . . hopelessly sliced and gutted for the sake of flag. Can there be glory in this? Potential artists, poets, philosophers, destroyed in their budding youth by power-hungry madmen. Shameless, wicked murders that make past atrocities humane. ALL FOR FLAG!

Moore: (holding his ears, starts singing rapidly, almost a chant.)
O, beautiful for spacious skys

For amber waves of grain.

For purple mountains' majesty

Above the fruited plain.

America! America!

God shed his grace on thee.

And crown thy good with brotherhood. . .

(takes hands from ears, hears no more arguing. Stops song.)

[Note: by the time Moore has reached "brotherhood", David's speech has been completed a full two or three seconds]

(soldier re-enters. A shot is heard. He falls dead. Janitor goes over to body, puts foot on chest of soldier, sings: "from sea to shining sea." Then sweeps body from stage.)

Janitor: For those who think David a bit extreme
And beg to differ with his stand
The author would like to offer this, his first opportunity
For those among us who have since changed their opinion
From the beginning of the play
And now wish to dissociate themselves from David,
His hero.
Please feel free to vacillate.

David: There is your sacred patriotism
A mere device of power
To bend those to its will,
Those who have not a will of their own.

Moore: Yes, but we are the greatest nation that ever was—in
the complete history of the world. . . .

Janitor: His history book said.

Moore: . . . We should have pride. What are a few lives compared to the great things we have accomplished?

David: (No answer)

Moore: Well?

David: (disgusted—no answer)

(A watermelon man carrying a watermelon painted as a flag centers, drops the watermelon on stage. It bursts. The janitor now cleans up the watermelon mess.)

Janitor: If I were scorekeeper

I think I would undoubtedly

Give round one to David.

J. Alamand's arguments seem, oh! so thin

Besides, I don't like the general appearance of him.

Moore: (pouting) Well, it is obvious that we disagree about nationalism—but what about the others—apple pie and mothers?

How can you degrade apple pie?

David: Oh, I like apple pie. I like cherry pie better.

Moore: So do I.

David: It is not apple pie that is bad,

But what is done in the Name

Of Apple Pie!

Apple Pie that to you is so sweet

Is pure profit for bakers, and that is all they care of.

Have you noticed in the past few years how

The apples are fewer, the crust thinner,

The pie pan a full inch shorter?

This is American ENTERPRISE!

Moore: But money is the foundation of our society. . . .

David: Yes! Money, that sacred silver that causes hatred, greed, and envy.

Half of your life is wasted gathering it,

The other half sitting guard over it

So no one else may partake of *your* shiny metal.

Moore: A penny saved is a penny earned!

David: I once knew a chap who was, in every sense, industrious . . .
"An American Enterprise Story."

(holds pose)

Janitor: This is going to be a rather long speech

So please make yourselves comfortable.
 Parts are rather amusing, (in a sadistic way)
 But if you don't know where to laugh and such,
 Please watch me. . .

- I've seen it many a time and know where and how much.
- David: One day he decided to build a guillotine in his back yard.
 It was a masterfully constructed device patterned after the
 famed guillotine that beheaded important figures
en France circa 1790's. Well, after he completed it
 (a mammoth construction it was, almost twenty
 feet high), he searched the neighborhood for stray
 dogs. On Saturday mornings he would decapitate
 them. At first only curious neighbors watched the
 spectacle, but the news soon spread and hundreds
 were crowding his lawn. Now he began charging
 admission. Later he added a night show with colored
 lights producing a new, glorious effect.
- He sold small song and chant books so that during the
 proceedings the audience could take part. He offered
 a free ticket for him who was first to wash his hands
 in the still warm blood from lopped-off head.
 He did this not because he disliked dogs, but because
 he liked money better. And money such as he had
 never seen before came his way now. Toy manu-
 facturers produced miniature guillotines and dolls
 with removable heads to be sold at the gala Saturday
 event.
- But it was all in the name of sacred profit, so who
 could complain?
- His enterprise soon grew. He started a chain of guillotines
 throughout the country performing the same beau-
 tiful spectacle.
- The heads rolled, the people were amused, *and the chap
 made money.*
- "An American enterprise story"—finis.
- Moore: Why, why that's nauseating! (about ready to vomit)
- David: I should agree. (coolly)
 But money, greed and affluence
 Find a warmer place in the heart of man
 Than love and compassion.

(A baker carrying a single pie enters stage left, crosses to center stage where the pie falls from his hand. But inside the crust are coins that spill over the stage. The janitor crosses, sweeps up the mess, throwing it all away.)

- Janitor: Money that once made a man a king
Will be so much debris
In a matter of minutes
(If my watch is accurate only four)
Then, perhaps, we shall see the place
That money should hold.
Well, this second and last opportunity
Is now offered for those who disagree with David
On the matters of finance and enterprise
To hereby reject him as their hero.
Also, an invitation is extended
To those who took advantage of the first opportunity
To reclaim him
If you so desire.
- Janitor: (Continues) So there sits our hero
Less than four minutes remaining in his life.
Patriotism and Apple Pies discussed
Mothers are all that remain.
Here J. Alamand knows David has to admit
That if the world is otherwise rotted Mothers and Mothers
will be
A point on which they both can agree.
- Moore: Now what about mothers—you can't defame them. Surely
they must be sacred—even to you. (assuming, of
course, you had one.) (he laughs)
- Janitor: That last line, though mildly amusing,
Was not an invention of J. Alamand.
He heard it last night
On T.V.
- David: I think I should like to discuss Mothers as a symbol of love.
- Janitor: And he may, too, since he is the hero.
- David: A love that often turns to possessiveness, then jealousy,
then suspicion, then hatred.
- Moore: (Irate) Now just a minute, you can't take love in (counts
on fingers) four short steps into hatred!

- David: But I can and It does.
For humans have the knack of perverting that which
is good into its opposite.
The pure, simple, warm love of a mother
Soon is directed toward a desire to keep the child a
baby of her own.
She wants to do everything for it
So it needs her and her only.
But the child must grow.
And as it does, it develops
New loves of its own.
The mother soon hates the object of her child's affection.
She perceives it as EVIL since it interrupts her secure
relationship.
But the child must mature and go its own way.
The mother can no longer shield her baby.
The mother's jealousy turns to suspicion
As she thinks the worst of her child who has developed Will.
Her child—an extension of herself—has now turned its
back on its mother.
It tries to grow and mature but
The unseen placenta still nourishes it,
And the umbilical cord is not yet cut.
The mother tries harder and harder to force the child back
to its secure place in her womb.
But it is too late.
The child has lived and loved.
The twisted love of the mother
Now turns to hate.
She cannot stand to see her baby "misused" by a stranger.
She hates and hates and hates.
- Moore: (in mock sympathy) Oh, where did she go wrong?
- David: But this is not the true misfortune,
For without love on an individual level
How could there have been hope for love among mankind?
Don't you see, it is pure folly to believe that man can love
in scope without depth.
That is why religion has turned into farce.
A true, pure love—without the possessiveness—was the
only hope. . . but now is no more.

- Moore: But all the people who are now at church praying—
David: For what?
Understanding?
Love?
More time?
One can never hope to believe that. . . .
Janitor: (Blows whistle and holds up hand)
I should like to warn all those present
That there are but two minutes left.
(faces other direction)
This is your two minute warning.
Please heed.
(figures come in from all sides, both the drunks and the religious, and in time it becomes difficult to determine which is which.)
(to David) Uh, you may continue.
David: Where was I?
Janitor: "One can never hope to believe that."
David: Yes, one can never hope to believe that man can solve his problems on a grand scale, in mass, without settling it within himself first.
Moore: (looks around frantically, begins to panic.) How can you talk philosophy or religion or whatever you're talking about *now*? WE HAVE LESS THAN TWO MINUTES TO LIVE. WHY SHOULD WE DIE? WHY SHOULD I DIE?
David: Death was going to come anyway. It is just that we are all going together, this time.
Moore: But I can't die now. I CAN CONTRIBUTE TO MANKIND!
David: Too late now.
Moore: I COULD BE BENEFICIAL. THERE ARE LOTS OF THINGS I COULD DO. LOTS. (falls to knees.)
God, I don't want to die *now*. PLEASE!
David: (goes back to reading book.)
Moore: God! Do you hear me? I don't want to die. I can't. I haven't done what I need to yet. The world needs me. (Janitor holds up a sign, saying, IRONY. The crowd starts chanting, counting off the 1st few seconds. They get louder and louder . . .)

Crowd: 20

19

18

Moore: I can do things for mankind.

I can. I promise I will.

PLEASE SPARE ME. PLEASE!

Crowd: 17

16

15

14

13

12

11

10

9

8

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2

1

Moore: I'LL BUILD AN ARK!

ANYTHING.

PLEASE GOD!

PLEASE!

GOOOOOOOOOOOOD

PLEEEEEEEEEEEASE

(all the characters fall down, dead, excepting the janitor.

There is no noise as the world ends but an obvious lack of
it.

Is is quiet.

The janitor picks up his broom to sweep off the bodies.

As he does, he quotes:)

Janitor: "This is the way the world ends,

This is the way the world ends,

This is the way the world ends,

Not with a bang, with a whimper."

(The curtain falls)