

TWENTY FIRST CENTURY STOMP

(A Rap in Two Acts)

by Jack Moskovitz

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Twenty First Century Stomp

(A Rap in Two Acts)

By

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2-F, 3-M

Set:

A table, chairs, coffee dispenser on an otherwise bare stage.

Time:

A few days in the present.

Place:

Two offices

Story:

A "last gasp" economy plunges four desperate adults into dangerous territory.

Cast:

David Jacks: Unemployed police officer.

Joan Jacks: Unemployed teacher. David's wife.

HARRY Johns: Cab driver.

SARA Johns: Bartender. Dancer. HARRY's wife.

The Johns and Jacks are friends.

KEITH WELDON: Owner, Weldon Employment Agency.

Production Note:

Only one. For the performers (to quote the French) "HUIS-CLOS". No exit(s).

ACT I

Lights up on neatly arranged folding chairs and a folding table. The table is angled toward the chairs. Nearby: a coffee pot on a small table.

Other locations throughout the play are suggested but never shown.

The JACKS and JOHNS enter, rapping.

DAVE AND HARRY

Two husbands

JOAN AND SARA

And their wives

ALL

We had it all.

Then the economy took a fall.

The economy's taking its last breath

JOAN

A final, futile cough,

SARA

And it's smothered to death.

DAVE

Took all we had.

HARRY

That wasn't nice.

JOAN

You said it once. Don't say it twice.

SARA

If coffee were free, we wouldn't have the price.

DAVE

What's a last gasp from friend to friend?

HARRY

Not worth a groan at the end.

JOAN

Damn near starving is what we are.

SARA

Can't afford a candy bar.

ALL

We're all damn near dead so what's the rush?

Our bones are dirt;

Our brains are mush.

Alive once,

Yes, we were.

A future once clear

Now a blur.

DAVE

I was a cop –

A good one, too;

Ate prime steak,

Drank imported brew.

Getting by now

On canned meat;

Watery tea

Not a treat.

DAVE (Continued)

The bank came North;

The house went South;

They took the house and the bread

Right out of our mouth.

Boarded the window;

Locked the door;

Pulled the rug

Right off the floor.

Miss us when we are gone?

The old shingles say;

Go, and we will see

Any old day, I say.

Dust, a spider's web,

A roach's rump, crumbs.

Mosquitoes, a moth,

Termites, bums.

My wife taught school. Did it well.

JOAN

Counter clerk now in yawn till

dawn hell;

But I don't mind;

Work is work;

The pay is okay;

That's the only perk.

DAVE & JOAN

We're not alone;

We've all been hurt.

HARRY & SARA

Lost our house;

Almost lost our shirt.

HARRY

Penny labor,

If we're lucky.

SARA

The unemployment line;

Isn't that ducky?

ALL

We need good jobs;

But not-so-good's okay.

What's so bad?

Damn few jobs to be had.

(KEITH WELDON enters)

ALL

We're here

To see a man;

Finding jobs

Is his plan.

Jobs for all

Is his claim;

Alive or dead;

It's all the same.

KEITH

Want to work?

Come see me;

I'll fix you up;

But not for free.

ALL

So here we are;

Enough said.

What's the rush?

We're all dead.

Damn near.

KEITH

Shaking your fist

At Heaven

Is a waste of time;

Like anchoring

Your ankles

When you need

To climb.

JACKS & JOHNS

We ride the bus;

It costs a dime.

KEITH

On the bus line's

Where the jobs

Are at;

They pay daily;

I know you will

Like that.

ALL

When do we start?

KEITH

First things first. Sound off.

(They identify themselves)

KEITH

(Consults a sheet of paper)

Out of work eleven months, DAVE?

DAVE

Weekends I'm on the door at the Fan Tan Club. Minimum wage. No insurance.

KEITH

Job skills?

DAVE

Only what I learned at the police academy. Not much call for crowd control.

KEITH

Were you good with a gun?

DAVE

My medals are in the front window at the Hawkins Downtown Jewelry and Loan.

KEITH

Do you own your cab, HARRY?

HARRY

Me and the bank. Like DAVE, I was in the Army Reserves. Active duty right out of high school.

HARRY

Take you where

You want to go;

Safe and fast;

Safe and slow;

Tell me where to go.

Up the street;

Or across town;

Never an accident

In all the years around.

From here to there

For a small fare.

A sober ride;

No need for prayer.

I carry insurance;

A coffee thermos, too.

To sober you up on;

Turn your red eyes blue.

JOAN

I taught high school drama
With an advanced degree;
Teacher of the year twice;
Going for three.

Love to teach;
Love the theory;
Sometimes the kids
Make me weary.

Coaxing Shakespeare
From a rock
Is easy and funny.

Coaxing "to be"
From these students,
Well it paid good money.

JOAN

Six months ago I was fired. I "yawn to dawn" at Highway Hanks now.

SARA

I work the same shift at the same joint.

Tend bar till closing. Mop and pail brigade after. Here's my story:

SARA

I got through high school

On my own sweat;

Worked lots of hours

Without regret.

Had some fun

In between;

Had some friends,

If you know

What I mean.

A hard-working honey;

Doing it for the money;

On cloudy days or sunny;

Doing honest labor for the money.

SARA (Continued)

Never picked fruit that was rotten;

Did other labor best forgotten;

Ate cheese sandwiches during harvest time;

Voided in a barrel for a dime.

KEITH

I'm KEITH WELDON. And I am: well done. Done well, I should say. Honors graduate. Business administration.

DAVE

From that Oriental University: Foo Ling U?

KEITH

From that University up the street that doesn't fool anyone. Now where were we?

HARRY

Nowhere.

JOAN

About to give us jobs.

SARA

We hope and, brother, we sure hope.

DAVE

Hope is small change at the check-out counter. We aren't paying for smoke and mirrors, MR. WELDON. We want results.

KEITH

Results keep me in business. Agency registration is one-hundred dollars each. Up front.

SARA

We have just enough to cover that.

KEITH

Cash or money orders. No personal checks.

JOAN

Trusting sort of a dude, aren't you?

KEITH

I have a wife who gets hunger pains. If she misses a meal, my singing won't satisfy her. Like to hear *The Hotel Song*?

ALL

No!

KEITH

It goes like this:

Hotel me pretty maiden,
Are there anymore at home
Like you?

ALL

(Groans)

KEITH

That's her response if there's no meat in the freezer. No other treats to please her.

DAVE

The bank's got my treats.

JOAN

What tasted good's now sickening sweet.

SARA

A cold shower when I'm in heat.

HARRY

Local banker owns the street.

KEITH

They have to eat. The bankers.

ALL

Who says so?

Banks, banks;

We give thanks

For turning the world

Into a toilet tank.

For pulling the chain –

Say it plain –

They wave goodbye

As we go down the drain.

KEITH

Stop bitching;

Start pitching;

Your attitude –

Start switching.

KEITH (Continues)

Self-pity is the poison

That starts you itching.

DAVE

Bank's philosophy was bewitching.

HARRY

Loans to everyone was a virus

That was catching.

JOAN

A door to Hell that needs shutting.

SARA

And latching.

KEITH

Outbound, outbound;

Don't make a sound;

Penny for penny;

Pound for pound;

KEITH (Continued)

It's a good deal –
The only one around.

Job security
If you show up sober.
Eleven dollars an hour –
Straight time – no over.

What else is there?
Convenience stores;
Seven-fifty an hour;
Ten hours a day;
Falling arches
That won't go away.

SARA

And all the danger you could want.

Joan

(To KEITH)

Can we discuss this?

SARA

Let's take it. If it doesn't work, we won't either.

KEITH

Take your time. Not too much, though.

(Lights slowly down)

(The couples cross toward the coffee machine, leaving WELDON in the dark)

SARA

Well, kids, I gotta see a man about a dog.

JOAN

Me, as well.

(The women move upstage. The men remain near the coffee dispenser)

SARA

(To JOAN)

Our off-the-job lives might improve with him and me working.

JOAN

That bad, huh?

SARA

We want kids. The bank wanted the cab and the crib. We still have our fantasies. Last summer me and mine were riding the "DIME EXPRESS" from downtown. A young mother and her baby sat across the aisle. This full-figured woman got on. She wasn't wearing and didn't need a bra. Ninety degrees on the street; a hundred and ten on the bus. HARRY and the baby reacted to this woman. For different reasons. I rhymed the baby's behavior. HARRY kept his opinions to himself.

SARA (Continued)

The other day we took our feet for a walk;
This baby in a diaper she wanted to talk;
We stayed and listened long as we could,
About her ride to this neighborhood.

"I was riding this bus, mama and me,
And what do you suppose, suppose I did see?
This big, big lady in a t-shirt, no less;
All aboard the snack-time express.

I jabbered, I drooled – I was hungry again;
I hadn't been fed since along about ten;
The woman ignored me – I couldn't believe it;
No snacks for a baby? I couldn't conceive it.

SARA (Continued)

Mama turned me around to stare at the cars;

The lady left the bus – my cries reached the stars.

So that's my story – I'm learning early;

I only hope I don't grow up squirrel-ly.

This baby kept talking, all red in the face;

We gave her a yawn – we had to get out of her space.

We left her there in her self-pity;

Our dinner waited in another part o f the city.

So what did we learn from that fat baby?

A guaranteed feed is more like a maybe.

(PAUSE)

SARA

(To JOAN)

We wanted kids.

JOAN

I guessed that much.

SARA

If things don't improve

HARRY might revisit his first lady love: Madam Whiskey.

JOAN

I'm concerned about DAVE. Same reason. What keeps him sober is no money.

(The women start toward the men)

DAVE

Bankers!

They left me with a curse;

Don't know what is worse;

Their evil mouths – so big, so loud;

Or my cold house – too cold to be proud.

Got no heat;

Got no heat;

Can't sit on the toilet seat;

Got no heat.

HARRY

Winter follows us all year long;
No heat – what did we do wrong?
Got no heat;
A little warmth would be a treat.

DAVE

Are the bankers heartless:
You decide;
This old life
Is one cold ride.

DAVE & HARRY

Got no heat;
A polar treat;
Got no heat;
Got no heat.

JOAN

(To the Audience)

When you're married to an elbow-bender . . .

SARA

(To the Audience)

You worry he might find a booze-a-tor-ium that extends credit.

JOAN

That's our story.

SARA

Here's our worry.

SARA

Two good old boys they got together.

To do some drinking, not talk about the weather.

JOAN

The drink that night was

Hemlock and Vine;

Two thirds lighter fluid;

One third wine.

SARA & JOAN

Hemlock and Vine;

Hemlock and Vine;

Makes a dead man
Feel almost fine;
Hemlock and Vine;
Hemlock and Vine.

JOAN

Two good old boys
They did their drinking;
As they fell, dead,
What were they thinking?

SARA

We're dying, sure;
No more shoes to lace;
No more smiles
For the face.

JOAN

One last drink
For the road;
That's the end
Of these horny toads.

SARA

One last drink
Of Hemlock and Vine;
Hemlock and Vine.

JOAN

Peels bark;
Makes a dead man
Almost fine.

JOAN & SARA

Hemlock and Vine;
Hemlock and Vine.

(They cross to their husbands)

DAVE

(To the audience)

JOANY and I almost got it right.

DAVE

We shared a bus seat;
That night a dinner treat;
Hadn't known her very long
Before we were singing
Love's old sweet song.

Then, one day:

She had news for me;
Could it be?
Could it be?

I waited for her call;
I paced the apartment hall;
When it came was I glad?
Maybe a lassie, maybe a lad.

She had news for me;
Great new for me.

(PAUSE)

DAVE

False alarm.

HARRY

In the romance department, I had two "roll overs in the clovers." SARA was the second. The first was VICKI. For a long time after VICKI my orgasms were no-gasms.

HARRY

I lost my libido in a bar in Toledo;
She seduced me in her Speedos, in a bar, in Toledo.

Tricky VICKI was her name;
Had an act, wild or tame;
Was the huntress after game;
In a bar, in a bar, in Toledo.

I went looking – it has been so long;
Just one night – how could that be wrong?
VICKI sang her siren's song in a bar, in Toledo.

When VICKI was done,
I staggered, studded;
Howled my loss
To the setting sun.

Lost my libido in a bar in Toledo.
She wore my libido

HARRY (Continued)

On a belt on her Speedos;

The libido I lost in a bar, in Toledo.

(HARRY)

(To the Audience)

If I'd met SARA first

My SARA paid her way through bartender's college by doing the "shake-shake." Her stage name was Shake Dancing Donna. Worked the Bittersweet, The Back Room, Club 15 and the Up and Down Lounge. Maybe you saw her.

HARRY

I nicked the jukebox,

Dimed the telephone;

Called Shake Dancing Donna

To see if she was home.

She answered on the first ring,

Mad as can be!

Why did I call so late?

It was almost after three.

HARRY (Continued)

How did it go today?

I wanted to know;

It was all my fault she said,

You were too darn low;

Your pilot light's lit,

No heat coming up.

Got a full coffee pot,

But nothing's in the cup.

She said: got a thumb in your ear?

Listen to what I say;

Got a thumb in your ear?

No rabbit's died today.

I said I was sorry,

Before I said goodnight;

I said: we will keep doing it, dear,

Until we get it right.

(Pause)

HARRY:

That's what we were working on before the economy turned sour.

ALL

The bankers came on to any man;
Cheating us was their plan,
They're apples, rotten to the core;
Evil bastards always wanting more.

KEITH

When did you corner the market on deceit?

KEITH

Dr. Lah-VEEN
Had a dream
That Dr. Lah-VINE
Drank Autumn wine.

Dr. Lah-VEEN
Woke with a scream
While Lah-VINE
Drank his wine.

Feeling fine,
Said Lah-VINE;
In bed at nine

KEITH (Continued)

With wife and wine.

And that's a good sign.

All because of Autumn wine.

Dr. Lah-VEEN

In his dream

Lost wife, Noreen

When Lah-VINE

Offered Autumn wine.

Took what's mine

That swine, Lah-VINE

Took Noreen, and she was fine,

And she was mine.

Autumn wine, Autumn wine,

Turns a man's wine

Into brine.

A solo drink, and I'm not lyin'.

Autumn wine,

Autumn wine.

KEITH

That's deceit, folks. Only the names were changed to avoid a libel suit.

DAVE

Own your home, KEITH?

KEITH

Uh, yes.

DAVE

Free and clear?

KEITH

(Softly)

Free and clear.

HARRY

Well?

JOAN

How do the poor people survive?

SARA

Without.

(Pause)

(The two couples turn toward KEITH)

KEITH

Ready?

ALL

(Softly)

Yes.

KEITH

Good.

(He exchanged receipts for their cash.)

(He gives each an agency information packet which includes the Weldon Agency rap: *Twenty First Century*)

KEITH (Continues)

I'm placing you with Everdur Magazine Promotions. In business forty years. Never missed a payday. Outbound stoop labor's the job description. Expect to do it till the old man with the bones grabs your Jones. Another thing: be pleasant but don't be a wise donkey. A smart ass. Check the jokes at the door. One more heads up. This is an assembly line. Lunch. Potty breaks. And the same sales pitch, call after call. To survive you switch off portions of your brain. Don't think, do, in other words. Treat the grind as a treat, and not a treatment. That's how you survive. That's about it. Join voices with me for the Weldon Agency's hymn to forced determination. The lyric sheets are in the packets I just gave you.

(He begins.)

(They join in.)

ALL

Twenty First Century;

Twenty First Century;

Time just slips on by.

All we can do is try.

Peace. Famine. Land grabbin';

Love. Business. Bank stabbin';

ALL (Continued)

Birth. Death.

Take a breath.

Paper on the porch;

News of the world;

Someone lights a torch;

War flags unfurled.

Show biz and menopause;

Parents try to fill hungry jaws;

Perfect people show their flaws.

Twenty First Century;

Twenty First Century;

Time just slips on by;

But we can whip it if we try.

Whip it if we try.

(Lights down)

END: Act One

ACT II

(One month later.)

(Everdur Promotions: A "boiler room" furnished with a conference table.)

(The two couples are seated, side by side, selling magazine subscriptions over the phone. The sound level rises to high volume.)

DAVE

Mrs. Hawkins? This is Larry Blaine of Magazine Consultants, Incorporated, and, Mrs. Hawkins, I have a surprise for you.

JOAN

Mr. Watkins? I'm Brenda Brantom, calling from Magazines Are Us. I have a favor I need to ask you.

HARRY

Miss Fishdale! This is your lucky day!

SARA

Ms. Swain, I'm not a gambler, but I'd bet anything you will thank me for calling you.

(The calls are completed at the same time.)

(DAVE stands. They stare at him as he stumbles toward the door.)

JOAN

Mid-morning potty break?

DAVE

Escape break.

(JOAN blocks his exit.)

(His depression is etched in his face.)

(HARRY and SARA exchange looks.)

JOAN

I know, hon. This is no picnic in the park.

DAVE

What's frustrating

JOAN

I know what's frustrating.

DAVE

I'm no help.

JOAN

What can you do?

DAVE

What I haven't done.

JOAN

Are you

DAVE

What else can I do?

JOAN

Don't decide anything.

DAVE

Already have.

JOAN

I make this plea:

Think of us – think of me.

DAVE

I do. Always.

DAVE

I'm a ship without a sail;

Old Ahab without his whale'

Don't want much, and I still fail

A sailboat caught in a gale.

But I'm O.K.

I will run the race

On feet of clay;

Fall and die

Where I lay.

JOAN

Don't need a ticket to the Fireman's ball;

Got people to sell to, numbers to call.

Warm me with your smile

When I stumble on that cold mile.

DAVE

Smiles are cheap. I can afford that much.

JOAN

Buy you a coffee?

DAVE

Got to use the comforts.

(JOAN returns to the table)

(HARRY & SARA pantomime pitching on the phone.)

(DAVE moves upstage, using his cell phone.)

DAVE

MR. WELDON. DAVE JACKS. Got a few minutes for me?

(Lights up on WELDON at his desk.)

(DAVE sits across from WELDON.)

DAVE

It's all coming down around me.

DAVE

Need some aid;

My future unmade;

Glass, not jade;

Can't be what I want

With the bills unpaid.

In the deep end –

Too deep to wade.

Asked me once

If I was a good shot;

Was I cold?

Was I hot?

I blind the bull's eye

Each time I draw;

Missing the target

Is not my flaw

I use the gun

For business, not fun.

DAVE (Continued)

My thirty-eight

Right out of the crate

Can gouge a hole

In Heaven's gate.

The thirty- eight's

A threat, no more;

Not interested

In settling scores.

Not interested

In doing chain-gang time.

Organized butt burns

The size of dimes.

Dangling from a rope

Is also not for me.

KEITH

Get caught, and you will pay a price;

Nothing for free.

DAVE

If I get caught

Take care of JOAN

While I'm away

Is what I want;

What I pray.

KEITH

If you do the time

She will be okay;

On money you stole

One fine day.

DAVE

That's what I say.

KEITH

You're very loyal.

DAVE

That goes both ways.

DAVE

JOAN and me:

We've been lovers since we were teens.

Stayed together, fat times and lean.

Popped together, like a pressure-cooking machine.

I gave her gifts galore;

On the bed, on the floor;

Did it till my back was sore;

Afraid she'd throw me out the door.

She was kind in her fashion.

Gave what she got of our passion.

Said in bed I was dashin'.

My checks she kept cashin'.

So we go, day and night;

A married couple – what a sight.

Give the young-un's a fright,

While we work out our delight.

DAVE (Continued)

When our clothes we do drop;
When we get ready to "be" the "bop",
I worry my heart will stop
Before I deliver the final drop.

She said: "Daddy, don't fret."
"But baby," I said, "I'm not there yet."
"So negative – worst I met,"
As she helped finish our set.

She calls me her man of brawn.
I call her my doe-like fawn,
While we celebrate on the lawn.

When we go, our stones will read:
They gave each other what they need.
Just a pair of crazy kids.
Two pressure cookers without lids.

DAVE

Yeah, MR. WELDON, I'm loyal. And desperate.

KEITH

Also, no Shakespeare.

DAVE

Especially not him.

KEITH

Do you drink?

DAVE

Why?

KEITH

You have that dead-in-the eyes expression that alky's have.

DAVE

I also have a hole in my gut large enough for a truck to drive through.

KEITH

Doesn't take much to push a drunk into the bottle.

