

IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE  
BY SINCLAIR LEWIS

ADAPTED BY  
TONY TACCONE AND BENNETT COHEN

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Joyce Ketay @ Gersh  
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Adaptors' note:

This play is meant to be performed by an ensemble of 12-14 actors. Every actor plays multiple characters with the exception of the actor playing Doremus Jessup.

All narrated speeches begin with the notation: \*\*

In narrated sections, line breaks and paragraph demarcations indicate a change in speaker (i.e. a different actor assumes the role of Narrator).

Specific crowd responses in certain scenes will be elicited from the audience by the ensemble. This participation will be set up in a prologue not included in this text, during which the actors will “train” the audience. These are meant to be simple and fun, even though audience members will be asked to cheer and applaud characters whose political positions they may loathe.

In Act One, the audience participates actively in two scenes:

- Act One Scene 1, the Rotary Club meeting
- Act Two Scene 2, the rally for Buzz Windrip

We have adapted this novel with enormous respect and admiration for its author, Sinclair Lewis. Even when taking liberties with both content and form, we have tried to retain the intent and ambition of the original text.

Mr. Lewis was a singular artist, and his ability to grasp the complexity and underpinnings of American society and to re-imagine the world continues to be a source of inspiration. With this play, we hope to sustain his artistic legacy and to translate his overreaching vision into a compelling piece of theatre.

Tony Taccone  
Bennett Cohen

**SET:**

**PART ONE**

**Act One**

1. Rotary Club, Fort Beulah, Vermont.
2. Rotary Club, continued.
3. Doremus' study.
4. Doremus' study, then outdoors at a picnic.
5. The Jessup family parlor.

**Act Two**

1. The streets of Fort Beulah.
2. Campaign rally.
3. Auto repair shop.

**Act Three**

1. A church, then Lorinda Pike's home, and then outside.
2. *The Daily Informer* newspaper office.
3. Newspaper office, then a jail cell, and then a courtroom.

**PART TWO**

**Act Four**

1. Jessup family dining room.
2. Dining room, continued.
3. Buck's car.
4. The White House, then the newspaper office, then Buck's basement.
5. Doremus' study, then a courtroom.

**Act Five**

1. Trianon Concentration Camp – cycles through four settings:
  - Work detail.
  - Cell.
  - Lineup.
  - Yard.
2. Police station.
3. Doremus in jail; Lorinda/Sissy and Buzz elsewhere.
4. Various.
5. Train station, then a farmer's house.

**TIME:** May 1936 – mid-1938.

**NOTES:** A slash / indicates a point of interruption. Text in red indicates speech that does not overlap (used only in Act One, Scene 5).

## **CHARACTERS:**

ADELAIDE TARR GIMMITCH  
LORINDA PIKE  
CROWD MEMBER 1  
CROWD MEMBER 2  
DOREMUS JESSUP  
FRANK TASBROUGH  
R.C. CROWLEY  
DAVID GREENHILL (o.s.)  
EMMA JESSUP  
MARY JESSUP GREENHILL  
SISSY JESSUP  
JULIAN FALCK  
PHILIP JESSUP  
DR. FOWLER GREENHILL  
RADIO ANNOUNCER (o.s.)  
BISHOP PRANG  
BUCK TITUS  
SHAD LEDUE  
MAN 1  
MAN 2  
MAN 3  
MAN 4  
MAN 5  
WOMAN 1  
WOMAN 2  
MINUTE MEN (multiple; n/s)  
PRIVATE WILLIAM DOOLEY (n/s)  
EMCEE  
BUZZ WINDRIP  
HECKLER  
KARL PASCAL  
JAIME JOHNSON  
JOHN POLLIKOP  
PRIEST  
VOICE (o.s.)  
EFFINGHAM SWAN  
GUARDS (multiple; n/s)  
FIRST MINUTE MAN  
SECOND MINUTE MAN  
DIMICK/PRESIDENTIAL AIDE  
DOCTOR  
VOICE 1  
VOICE 2  
VOICE 3

SERGEANT  
PRISON GUARD  
WALTER TROWBRIDGE  
FARMER  
MAN MOVING PRESS 1 (n/s)  
MAN MOVING PRESS 2 (n/s)

## Prologue.

\*\*Good evening ladies and gentlemen and welcome to Berkeley Rep.

*The cast all says hi...the audience says hi back.*

\*\*A few small things before we begin.

\*\*First, please turn off your cell phones.

\*\*And at the risk of insulting your intelligence, the state of California wants you to know that in case of an emergency, you can use the entrance nearest to you as an exit.

\*\*Next, those of you who go to the theatre have undoubtedly suffered through a lot of crowd scenes. You know, where a few actors are yelling and screaming trying to make up for the absence of a real crowd. Never works, right? So tonight, we're asking you to help us overcome that problem.

All we need from you are a few simple reactions.

Applause... *(an actor shows an 'applause' sign)*

Cheers ... *(an actor shows a 'cheers' sign)*

And Boos. *(an actor shows a 'boos' sign)*

When the time comes, we'll be holding up these signs to signal your cue.

Now I know this is Berkeley so you guys are game. But why don't we give it a quick try....

*(he does so)*... Okay... applause. Good... Cheers. Excellent. And Boos. Wow! Great boos.

Of course, it's Berkeley...I should have known. Boos are like the native language here, right?

And full disclosure: you may be asked to cheer for a character whose opinions you may disagree with. Wildly disagree with. But we're all in this together, right? Are you with me? *(Audience: Yes!)* I said are you with me?! *(YES!)* ... Beautiful.

\*\*You should also know that the creative team for this play insisted that the racial makeup of the cast reflect the modern world, and so some of the roles tonight are being played by people who would never have played them in 1936. For the few of you who may have a problem with this, we suggest that you talk to those members of the audience who have been to Berkeley Rep before, who will tell you that they have seen a lot worse, and that you'll get used to it.

\*\*And finally, the management of the theatre wants you to know that any resemblance of the events in the play to current events is purely coincidental. It is true that in 1936 there were race riots in our cities, a vast income gap between the rich and the poor,

\*\*A major drought in several states,

\*\*A right-wing extremist running for president,

\*\*Millions of new immigrants,

\*\*And foreign wars creating global terror...

\*\*But that's where the similarities end.

\*\*We urge you to reserve judgment before making any hasty historical parallels.

\*\*And now, ladies and gentlemen, it is our great pleasure to present, Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*.

## PART ONE

### ACT ONE

#### Scene 1.

May 1, 1936. A meeting of the Rotary Club in Fort Beulah, Vermont. A small platform with a podium with chairs on either side. Seated nearby is FRANK TASBROUGH, president of the Rotary Club. Patriotic music.

\*\*May First, 1936. Fort Beulah, Vermont.

\*\*Six months before the presidential election.

\*\*Excitement rippled through Town Hall, the scene of this month's meeting of the Fort Beulah Rotary Club.

\*\*For this evening's featured speaker was that great patriot and proud Daughter of the American Revolution, Mrs. Adelaide Gimmitch.

\*\*Among the audience was Lorinda Pike, whose political views differed from every other member of the Rotary Club, with the sole exception of...

\*\*Doremus Jessup, editor and proprietor of Fort Beulah's only newspaper. There to report on the passionate ejaculations of Mrs. Gimmitch.

GIMMITCH

The truth, my friends, that's what we demand, the unadulterated truth! Now this will shock you but I want you to listen to one woman who won't waste your time with a lot of sentimental taffy. What this country needs is a real war! Because when a country has gone so mad that the thrifty and industrious have to pay for the shiftless ne'er-do-wells, then maybe, to save their lazy souls and get some iron into them, a war might be a good thing. And Senator Buzz Windrip is the only candidate who has the courage to speak the truth about this matter!

*(shouts of support and some applause)*

LORINDA *(standing, angry)*

Look here, Mrs. Gimmitch, if you think/that—

TASBROUGH

You are out of order Mrs. Pike.

LORINDA

I want to register my/objection—



CROWD MEMBER 1

Sit down, Lorinda!

LORINDA

This woman is using the election to provoke/people—

CROWD MEMBER 2

Save it for your bohemian friends!

LORINDA

She's stigmatizing the poor/ to create a mob

TASBROUGH

We are all familiar with your political opinions, Mrs. Pike. But it is my duty as Chairman to remind you that it's Mrs. Gimmitch who has been invited to address us.

*"Here, here!" and "Sit down!"*

Please take your seat. Thank you, madam.  
I'm so sorry, Mrs. Gimmitch. You were saying?

GIMMITCH

Thank you, Mr. Tasbrough, and to all of you who believe in freedom of speech. Let me leave you now with some very good news. At this moment, Minute Men Marching clubs made up of volunteers are springing up all over this country. Young Christians learning warlike skills, that they may help to rid our country of its undesirable elements. A new generation of American patriots, armed with the Sword and the Gospel, ready to reclaim the future and lead our nation towards its God-given destiny!

*Cheering, handshakes, drumming... the meeting breaks up, leaving Lorinda and Doremus on one side. Tasbrough, a businessman, and R.C. CROWLEY, a banker, approach them.*

## ACT ONE

### Scene 2.

Following directly from the previous scene.

CROWLEY

So what did you think of Mrs. Gimmitch, Doremus?

DOREMUS

I confess, R.C, that I will never understand the Daughters of the American Revolution. They spend half their time boasting of being descended from the revolutionaries of 1776, and the other, more ardent half attacking anyone who believes in precisely the principles for which those ancestors struggled.

TASBROUGH

So you learned nothing from her talk?

DOREMUS

On the contrary, Frank, her defense of freedom of speech gave me a whole new understanding of the word “ironic”.

TASBROUGH

Why don't you take a tumble to yourself, Doremus? All these years at the Daily Informer... you've had a lot of fun, haven't you, posing as the Liberal voice of Beulah Valley.

DOREMUS

I hadn't realized I was posing.

TASBROUGH

You're out of touch with your readers.

CROWLEY

These are serious times, Jessup. This next election will be critical to the future of our country. With Buzz Windrip running for president we finally have a real choice.

DOREMUS

I rather think Mr. Windrip should be on the vaudeville circuit than stumping for the nomination.

CROWLEY

How long have we all known each other, Remus? Fifty years? Have you ever seen discontent like this before? Senator Windrip's got a good feel for people and a great head for business. I assure you, he has an excellent chance of taking the Democratic nomination away from Roosevelt.