

BACKGROUND NOISES

by
Grady Smith

BOOKER BROWN. Black, late forties. Enlisted in the Navy when he was 18, proud of having risen through the ranks to chief petty officer before retiring.

ESTELLE. White, mid-fifties. Does a current affairs background feature for shipboard radio. Has been a civilian employee in Armed Forces Radio/TV since they started stringing wire.

VIC VOX. AKA Voice of God, Voz de Dios. The military boss, lieutenant commander. Loudspeaker voice, never seen.

JUAN. Latino, early twenties, gay. Sound technician for the recording session.

SETTING: A recording studio. A couple of microphones, maybe at desks. Audio console, where JUAN works. Control booth is behind the audience, where COMMANDER VIC VOX is located; he is never seen, only heard via loudspeaker.

The reports that Estelle refers to are real. Her quotations come from the Crittenden Report (U.S. Navy, 1957) and “Nonconforming Sexual Orientations and Military Suitability” (Government Report, 1988). *New Republic*, February 19, 1990, p. 21 and the *National Journal*, November 11, 1989, p. 2785 provide specific insights.

BACKGROUND NOISES

SETTING: A U.S. Navy sound recording studio. COMMANDER VIC VOX is in control booth behind audience and is never seen.

AT THE RISE: BOOKER and ESTELLE, both civilians, enter.

BOOKER

Hey, what's happening?

ESTELLE

All set today?

COMMANDER VOX

Okay. Commander Vox here. Let's do it. They want this recording session for shipboard radio next week. Where's Sean?

(JUAN enters. Civilian. Pink neck scarf. Gay.)

JUAN

That's Juan, Baby, not Sean. Sean is Jewish. Like Tiffany.

COMMANDER VOX

Give me an up when the sound levels are ready.

JUAN

They're up, Baby.

ESTELLE

Where's Betty Hasegawa this week?

COMMANDER VOX

Couldn't make it, sick kid.

BOOKER

Your rainbow coalition is greyin' out, Commander Vox, sir.

(to JUAN)

Hey, nice outfit.

JUAN

(grouchy)
Don't ruin my day, man.

BOOKER

What'd I say?

ESTELLE

Touchy, touchy, Juan.

JUAN

(flourishing the scarf)
Was it the scarf? You can have it.

BOOKER

Get outta my face, Felipe.

COMMANDER VOX

Hey. Calibrate your ethnicities on your own time.

JUAN

Si, voz de dios.

ESTELLE

What is wrong with you?

JUAN

He thinks these clothes bespeak an ethnic solidarity. Man, this is gender a-go-go, how my libido leans, you comprende?

BOOKER

Look, I like you, Juan.

JUAN

(very fairy)
Oh, Booker, I'm so fond of you.

BOOKER

Will you cut that shit out?

JUAN

You light my fire. Oh, besame, Booker Babe.

BOOKER

How the hell did you get your clearance?

JUAN

I don't have a clearance.

COMMANDER VOX

We never use classified material around here.

JUAN

Hear no evil, clear no evil.

ESTELLE

(to VIC VOX behind audience:)

Are we going to get this show on the road?

COMMANDER VOX

Beats the hell out of me.

JUAN

Hey, you're la voz de dios, Baby, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. If you don't know, who does?

COMMANDER VOX

How do you know I'm a WASP? I never leave the control room.

JUAN

All you have to do is talk, Baby. I can hear white.

BOOKER

Oh, bull shit.

JUAN

Hey, when you talk I hear black.

BOOKER

Stay offa my toes, Tomás.

ESTELLE

That's why they hired you.

BOOKER

Not! They hired me cause I'm a retired chief petty officer.

JUAN

The bro's hear Booker, they hear black.

COMMANDER VOX

What's wrong with that?

JUAN

Nada, boss, nada. Just a fact of life.

BOOKER

The bro's see Juan, they see fairy.

JUAN

Oho, we ratchet things a little tighter now, do we?

ESTELLE

Well, you are rather...

JUAN

What's wrong with that?

BOOKER

Nada, boss, nada.

ESTELLE

There's nothing wrong, it's just --

JUAN

How limp does my wrist have to get for bad taste to set in?

COMMANDER VOX

Ladies and gentlemen, please --

JUAN

(looking toward VIC's booth behind audience)
I smell white.

ESTELLE

Really? And what does white smell like?

JUAN

Brut behind the ears, and granola on the breath.

BOOKER

Hah!

JUAN

Hey, voz de dios, what you have for breakfast today?

COMMANDER VOX

Never mind!

BOOKER

So -- white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, right?

JUAN

Claramente.

COMMANDER VOX

Wrong. I'm agnostic.

BOOKER

Cop-out, Commander.

JUAN

El agnóstico dios. Can't know himself.

BOOKER

That is white male.

JUAN

(HE & BOOKER laugh and high five)
Hey, man, all right.

COMMANDER VOX

Estelle, what are you covering out of current affairs?

ESTELLE

First, some government reports on homosexuals in the military, then I'm --

BOOKER

Oh my God . . .

COMMANDER VOX

You civilians have no concept of --

JUAN

Hey, we cover white stuff and black stuff. Why not pink stuff?

ESTELLE

This is not minorities. This is mission accomplishment.

BOOKER

Oh, yeah?

ESTELLE

Yeah. Then I've got a summary on a gay sailor incident.

BOOKER

Commander Vox!

COMMANDER VOX

Let's get on with it.

JUAN

Hey, voz de dios, you really gonna do it?

COMMANDER VOX

Absolutely, full take. Then we cut what won't fly.

(BOOKER laughs)

JUAN

So the long knives are waiting.

ESTELLE

These reports tell how to get maximum effectiveness out of navy personnel, regardless of orientation. Does that *threaten* anybody?

(beat)

Isn't that special.

COMMANDER VOX

This is a take.

BOOKER

Right.

JUAN

(at the console)

Recording.

COMMANDER VOX

Go, Estelle.

ESTELLE

A report entitled "Nonconforming Sexual Orientations . . .

JUAN

What??

ESTELLE

. . . and Military Suitability" states that . . .

JUAN

Nonconforming to what?

BOOKER

The Uniform Code of Military Justice.

JUAN

Well, change the goddam Code!!

BOOKER

Hey, Vic? These reports may be okay after all.

COMMANDER VOX

Go ahead, Estelle. We'll edit out the, uh -- background noises.

ESTELLE

You always do. Nonconforming Sexual . . .

COMMANDER VOX

Cut to the chase.

ESTELLE (flips copy)

Homosexuals show preservice suitability-related adjustment as good as, or better than, the average heterosexual. They are no more of a security risk, and often less, than alcoholics and those who must brag of their knowledge of secret information and disclose it to gain stature.

COMMANDER VOX

Lovely. Next report.

ESTELLE

(flips copy)
The concept that homosexuals pose a security risk is unsupported by any factual data.

BOOKER

What service is that from?

ESTELLE

Navy.

BOOKER

(incredulous)
Shit!

COMMANDER VOX

Next.

ESTELLE (flips copy)

The military cannot indefinitely isolate itself from the changes occurring in the wider society.

JUAN

Wanna bet, Baby?

COMMANDER VOX

We're wasting our time, Estelle -- putting gays in the military will never work.

ESTELLE

It's already working.

COMMANDER VOX

You're kidding. Where?

ESTELLE

In the armed forces of Germany, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, The Netherlands, France, Australia....

COMMANDER VOX

All right! Let's just wrap this up, shall we?

EXTELLE

Oh, there's lots more on the subject.

BOOKER

Whoever wrote those reports needs a boot up their ass.

JUAN

Well, you know how to have a good time.

BOOKER

I'm warning you, Juan.

ESTELLE

Did anybody hear what I just read?

JUAN

Me, mamacita, I did.

(playing with the rhyme:)

Baby, the gay / will have his day.

ESTELLE

Lesbians, too.

JUAN

(fairy:)

Why, Estelle babee . . . !

ESTELLE

Oh, don't be silly. I've got three kids.

JUAN

I shall not cast a stone on your lifestyle.

COMMANDER VOX

That's it. We'll do this Huntley-Brinkley, co-anchor style. I can use it like that or patch it into solo takes. Booker, you got the copy I wrote?

BOOKER

Yeah, but man, this copy isn't worth . . .

COMMANDER VOX

What else, Estelle? Gay sailor incident?

ESTELLE

Right.

COMMANDER VOX

I don't think it'll fly.

ESTELLE

It'll fly or I'll hold a press conference.

JUAN

Mamacita!

ESTELLE

(big grin:)
Just kidding.

COMMANDER VOX

Very funny. Roll the tape! Go!

BOOKER

On December 7, 1941, black Messman Dorie Miller was collecting laundry on the battleship Arizona.

ESTELLE

In 1992 Seaman Allen R. Schindler was stationed aboard the Belleau Wood.

BOOKER

When the bombs started falling, Miller rushed up on deck just in time to rescue his wounded captain.

ESTELLE

In September Seaman Schindler publicly acknowledged he was a homosexual.

BOOKER

Miller started firing a machine gun he had never been trained on, and shot down four zeroes.

ESTELLE

Schindler was subjected to continuous harassment by his shipmates because he was gay. He was desperate to be transferred.

BOOKER

On 7 May 1942, Admiral Nimitz awarded Miller the Navy Cross.

ESTELLE

On 27 October 1992, Schindler was beaten to death near the U.S. Naval Base at Sasebo, Japan.

BOOKER

After helping to sell war bonds in Harlem, Miller was reassigned to the Liscombe Bay. It went down with all hands on 25 November 1944.

ESTELLE

Because of multiple blunt force injuries, Schindler's mother could only identify him from tattoos. All of his ribs except one were broken, and there were lacerations on his penis.

COMMANDER VOX

(Silence. THEY look toward VOX, who clears throat)
Two sailors, home from the sea -- at peace.

JUAN

NOT!

COMMANDER VOX

What?

JUAN

Peace not! Not yet.

COMMANDER VOX

Well. Shall we just pause a moment for, uh -- for those in peril on the sea?

BOOKER

Commander Vox, baby, you know what? This copy of yours is a crock.

COMMANDER VOX

What?

BOOKER

Miller didn't go down with the ship, he was lost overboard a coupla days before. They thought the nigger got too uppity with that medal. Went on deck late one night and vanished.

COMMANDER VOX

That's just a rumor.

BOOKER

And his name wasn't Dorie, it was Doris. They changed it when he got the medal cause it sounded too --

JUAN

Too fruity?

BOOKER

Exactly, my man.

COMMANDER VOX

Booker --

JUAN

Dropped him over the side? Uppity nigger named Doris?

BOOKER

That they did.

JUAN

Come on, Booker, let's you and me get some coffee.

BOOKER

Right on.

COMMANDER VOX

Hey, you two --

JUAN

Commander Vox, sir?
(throwing VOX the bird)
Fuck you.

(JUAN & BOOKER exit. ESTELLE squints at booth. Smiles, shrugs, exits.)

END OF PLAY