

MISREADINGS

by
Neena Beber

Directed by **Jennifer Hubbard**

Presented by special arrangement with William Morris Agency, Inc.
 Commissioned by Actors Theatre of Louisville

RuthMaryann Urbano
 SimoneJennifer London

Scenic Designer **Paul Owen**
 Costume Designer **Kevin R. McLeod**
 Lighting Designer **Ed McCarthy**
 Sound Designer **Martin R. Desjardins**
 Properties Designer **Ron Riall**
 Stage Manager **Julie A. Richardson**
 Assistant Stage Manager **Andrew Scheer**
 Dramaturg **Liz Engelman**

MISREADINGS

(Lights up on SIMONE.)

SIMONE. It's important to dress right. I want to look slick. To look sleek. To look like a fresh thing. I've got a message. I'm the message. Study me, baby, because in ten minutes, I'm outta here.

(SIMONE lights a cigarette. Lights up on RUTH. A stack of blue exam composition books on her desk.)

RUTH. What are the issues for which you would kill? I like to ask my students this on their first day of class. I assign novels where the hero or heroine kills, or is killed. I try to bring it home. They tell me they would kill to defend their family. They'd kill to defend their friends. I ask them if they would kill for their country... for their freedom... what would it take?

SIMONE. I'd kill for a pair of Prada velvet platforms in deep plum. *Those* are to die for.

RUTH. Simone. I didn't know what she was doing in my class. Neither did she, apparently. *(To SIMONE.)* Nice segue, Simone; would we be willing to die for the same things we'd kill for? *(Out.)* She usually sat in the back, rarely spoke, wore too much lipstick and some costume straight out of, what, Vogue. When she did speak, it was always—disruptive.

SIMONE. I'd die for love except there ain't no Romeos, not that I've seen; I'd take a bullet for my daddy but he's already dead; I'd die of boredom if it were lethal, but I guess it isn't.

RUTH. If I couldn't inspire her, I wanted her gone. I'd asked her to come to my office hours. I asked her several times. She was failing, obviously. I would have let her drop the class, but it was too late

for that. She never bothered to come see me. Not until the day before the final exam. She wanted me to give her a passing grade. (*RUTH turns to SIMONE.*) How can I do that, Simone? You haven't even read the material. Have you read *any* of the material?

SIMONE. I don't find it relevant.

RUTH. If you haven't read it, how do you know? You may find yourself surprised. *Anna Karenina* is wonderful.

SIMONE. It's long.

RUTH. Why not give it a shot?

SIMONE. The books you assign are depressing. I don't want to be depressed. Why read stuff that brings you down? Kafka, Jesus Christ—I started it, okay? The guy was ██████████ crazy

RUTH. So you were moved at least.

SIMONE. Moved to shut the book and find something more interesting to do.

RUTH. That's too bad; you might have found one of these books getting under your skin, if you stuck with it. Haven't you ever read something that's really moved you?

SIMONE. Nothing moves me, Dr. Ruth.

RUTH. I'm going to have to have to ask you to put out that cigarette.

SIMONE. Okay, ask. (*But she puts it out.*) See art or be art. I choose the latter.

RUTH. Somebody must be paying for this education of yours. I imagine they expect a certain return for their money.

SIMONE. How do you know I'm not the one paying for it?

RUTH. I don't believe someone who was spending their own money would waste it so flagrantly.

SIMONE. Okay, Dad chips in.

RUTH. Would that be the same father you said was dead?

SIMONE. That was a joke or a lie, take your pick.

RUTH. You're frustrating ██████████ me, Simone.

SIMONE. I don't consider it a waste, you know. I like the socialization part.

RUTH. If you fail out of this school, you won't be doing any more "socialization."

SIMONE. You assume that I'm failing the others.

RUTH. So it's just this class, then? That you have a problem with?

SIMONE. (*Referring to her grammar.*) Dangling. (*Beat.*) Do you enjoy being a teacher?

RUTH. Yes, I do.

SIMONE. So I'm paying for your enjoyment.

RUTH. It's not a sin to enjoy one's work, Simone.

SIMONE. I just don't think you should charge me, if it's more for your pleasure than for mine.

RUTH. I didn't say that.

SIMONE. Did you ever want to teach at a real school, not some second-rate institution like this?

RUTH. I like my job. You're not going to convince me otherwise.

SIMONE. Four-thousand two-hundred and ninety-eight.

RUTH. That is—?

SIMONE. Dollars. That's a lot of money. Do you think you're worth it? Do you think *this class* is worth it? Because I figured it out: this is a four credit class, I broke it down. Four-thousand two-hundred and ninety-eight. Big ones. Well, do you think that what you have to teach me is worth that? Come on, start talking and we'll amortize for each word.

RUTH. You're clearly a bright girl. You can't expect an education to be broken down into monetary terms.

SIMONE. You just did. That's a lot of money, right? It's, like, food for a starving family in a fifth-world country for a year at least. It's a car. Well, a used one, anyway. Minus the insurance. Suddenly this number doesn't sound so huge. It's a couple of Armani suits at most. I don't even like Armani. So hey, come on, can't you even say "Yes, Simone, I am worth two Armani suits. I have that to offer you..."

RUTH. I can't say that, no.

SIMONE. No useful skills to be had here.

RUTH. The money doesn't go into my pocket, by the way.

SIMONE. I think it should. It would be more direct that way; you'd feel more of a responsibility. To me. Personally. Don't you think, Dr. Ruth?

RUTH. I'd prefer that you not call me that.

SIMONE. Wrong kind of doctor, man. All you're interested in is a bunch of books written a hundred years ago, and the books written

about those books; you're probably writing a book about a book written about a book right now, am I right?

RUTH. If you don't see the connection between books and life, you aren't reading very well. I want you to try. Can you do that? Books might even show you a way to live.

SIMONE. I'm already living, Dr. Ruth. Are you? Because it looks like you haven't changed your hair style in twenty-five years.

RUTH. You weren't even born then, Simone.

SIMONE. Stuck in your best year? Because I see you in a close-cropped, spiky thing.

RUTH. That's enough.

SIMONE. P. S.: You might want to do something about the way you dress.

RUTH. Have you been in therapy?

SIMONE. Don't think that's an original suggestion.

RUTH. I'm not suggesting anything. I simply want to point out that this is not therapy. I am a teacher, not your therapist. You can't just waltz into my office and say whatever hateful thing you please.

SIMONE. I don't know how to waltz.

RUTH. I'm giving up here, Simone. You don't like my class, you don't like me, you want to fail out, I can't stop you. (*RUTH goes back to her work. SIMONE doesn't budge.*) What?

SIMONE. Drew Barrymore would move me.

RUTH. Who?

SIMONE. I think Drew would do it. Getting to meet Drew.

RUTH. Who is Drew Barrymore?

SIMONE. ██████████ you really should know these things. She's extremely famous. She's been famous since she was, like, born. I saw her on TV yesterday and she was so real. She connected. You know? You really might relate to your students better if you got a little more up to date.

RUTH. You might be right. But you might not be so behind in class if you spent a little less time watching television.

SIMONE. Drew is a *film* star, she's in *films*.

RUTH. You said you saw her on television.

SIMONE. Don't you even go to the movies? Probably only the ones that are totally L-Seven. And I know you don't know what that means. (*She makes an "L" and a "7" with her fingers.*) Square? Any-

way, Drew was on TV because she was being interviewed. They have these daytime talk shows nowadays?

RUTH. I've heard of them.

SIMONE. And this chick was in the audience and she started to cry. Because she couldn't believe she was there in the same room with Drew, who's been famous forever, right? She was just, like, sitting there sobbing. And this chick, she had her bleached blond hair pasted down real flat, and she was wearing a rhinestone barrette just like Drew used to, but that whole look is so old Drew, so ten-minutes-ago Drew. The new Drew is sleek and sophisticated and coiffed and this girl, this girl who wanted to be Drew so bad, she wasn't even *current*.

RUTH. I don't think we're getting anywhere.

SIMONE. And that is so sad. Because the thing about Drew is, she's always changing. It's a constant thing with her, the change. And that is, like, what you've got to do... keep moving or you die. Drew knows that. How to invent yourself again and again so you can keep being someone that you like, the someone that you want to be. And once you're it, you've got to move on. Now where was it you were hoping we'd get to?

RUTH. The exam is tomorrow morning at 9AM. If you read the material, any of the material, I might actually be able to give you a passing grade. But right now I don't think we need to waste any more of each other's time.

SIMONE. (*Starts to go.*) You might have said that I go to the movies the way you read books. I would have pointed that out, Dr. Ruth.

RUTH. Well, I suspect we don't think very much alike.

(*SIMONE turns back.*)

SIMONE. A wall between our souls? (*RUTH looks at her, about to say something, about to reach out.*) I'm sorry if I've been rude. I'm sure a lot of people like your class. Maybe I wasn't raised well. I'm sure somebody's to blame.

(*SIMONE goes.*)

RUTH. The next day she showed up at nine on the dot. I felt a certain pride that I had somehow managed to reach her, that she was finally going to make a real effort, but she handed in her blue book after a matter of minutes. I was rather disgusted and let it sit there, until a pile formed on top of it, a pile of blue books filled with the scrawling, down-to-the-last-second pages of my other more eager, or at least more dutiful, students. Later I began to read them straight through from the top, in the order they were stacked in. I wasn't looking forward to Simone's.

In answering my essay question about how the novel *Anna Karenina* moves inevitably toward Anna's final tragic act, my students were, for the most part, thorough and precise. They cited all of the events that led to Anna's throwing herself in front of the train, touching on the many parallel plots and the broader social context. I was satisfied. I felt I had taught well this last semester. My students had learned.

In the blue book she had written, "All happy people resemble one another, but each unhappy person is unhappy in their own way." So I guess she had read *Anna K*; the opening sentence, at least. My first instinct was to correct the grammar of her little variation. There was nothing else on the page. I flipped through the book; she'd written one more line on the last page: "Any world that I'm welcome to is better than the one that I come from." I'm told it's a rock lyric. Something from the seventies. *Anna* was written in the seventies, too, funnily enough, a century earlier.

I would have given Simone an F, but I noticed she had already marked down the failing grade herself, on the back of the book. Or maybe the grade was for me.

By the time I came to it, days had passed. I didn't leap to conclusions. Come to think of it, Anna's suicide always takes me by surprise as well, though I've read the novel many times and can map its inexorable progression.

(SIMONE, just as before...)

SIMONE. That's a lot of money. Do you think you're worth it? Do you think *this class* is worth it?

(RUTH turns to her.)

RUTH. I live in worlds made by words. Worlds where the dead can speak, and conversations can be replayed, altered past the moment of regret, held over and over until they are bent into new possibilities.

(RUTH tries to reach out...)

SIMONE. Do you think I'm worth it? Am I? Am I? Am I?

RUTH. I live there, where death is as impermanent as an anesthesia, and the moment of obliteration is only... a black-out.

(SIMONE lights a cigarette as lights black out.)

SIMONE. Ten minutes, time's up—told you I'd be gone by now, baby.

(The flame illuminates her for a moment, darkness again.)

THE END