

PROPAGANDA ON WRY

A Short One-Act Play

By

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SCENE DESCRIPTION

It's wintertime 1950 in New York City's Lower East Side. Seated opposite one another at a table inside popular KATZ'S DELICATESSEN, history's two most influential "propagandists" are engaged in an animated conversation.

EDWARD L. BERNAYS, the world's foremost public relations counsellor, looks the consummate professional. In his late fifties with a distinguished gray and black mustache, dressed smartly in a bespoke three-piece suit, he is confident and inquisitive.

The other of the original social influencers is thoughtful and attentive. By contrast, he is thirtyish, with scruffy long hair and beard, wearing a seamless cloth robe and leather sandals. Point of fact, he's the ideal "JESUS" if ever there was one.

BERNAYS

How's your matzo ball soup? *(beat)* Forgive me, do you go by "Jesus"?

JESUS

Jesus of Nazareth. JESUS for short. Very flavorful. And your pastrami on --

BERNAYS

-- rye. The best, Jesus, best in the city. *(beat)* So ... saving humanity?

JESUS

(leans in to whisper)

Yes, though for now informally *and confidentially*. I come seeking counsel, yours, on how to proceed with the *saving*. Or to be totally candid, whether it's even worth the effort to return to earth, to interrupt my solitude.

BERNAYS

On a *recon* mission, are you?

JESUS

A mission, yes, of mercy, you could say.

BERNAYS

Tell me, how do you suppose I can help?

JESUS

I have witnessed your brilliant ideas and initiatives generate remarkable support for worthy causes. That is how I need you to help me, help humanity.

BERNAYS

You've got *chutzpah*, that I can see. *(beat)* In turn, you should know this of me. I'm naturally skeptical, an occupational imperative. Nonetheless, I'm obsessively curious, which I concede is why I'm here.

JESUS

Thank you for this. And, in advance, for your consideration.

BERNAYS

Speaking of consideration, all that biblical lore -- Adam and Eve? Noah's ark and two-by-two -- well, isn't it kind of farcical and ... inarguably incestuous? Were there no editors or proofers in olden days? And those titles of yours -- "Son of God," "Divine Savior of Humanity" -- kind of pretentious? No offense.

JESUS

I appreciate your candor, Edward. Four-by-four does make more sense. But that's OLD news, well before my time. To be fair, I believe those stories were meant to be more allegorical than historical. *(beat)* But who am I to judge? My disciples certainly took liberties with my, as you call it, "propaganda."

The hurried waitress -- ANGELA, mid-thirties, Latina, attractive behind the mussed hair and unflattering uniform -- stops to check on her table. Bernays is working on his monstrous sandwich while Jesus politely spoons his soup.

ANGELA

More coffee? Another water ... or you gonna turn that into wine?

(She gives Jesus's messianic garb the once over, then catches her attitude)

Sorry, it's been a brutal day and no doubt gonna be a brutal-er night.

BERNAYS

Good. I mean we're good. Thank you.

JESUS

(to Angela)

You seem troubled. May I ask what concerns you so?

ANGELA

As you may have gathered, we're short-staffed and super busy. So you'll excuse me, *your lordship*, if this isn't the time or place for confessional.

BERNAYS

That's alright. We're alright.

Angela sighs and hustles off.

JESUS

She's hurting, Edward.

BERNAYS

Right. You were saying ... about your reclamation project?

JESUS

Yes, my precarious situation. I am conflicted about my earthly reception and utility. The warring, oppression, cruelty, greed, prejudice. Utter disregard for virtues ... and Commandments. And how can religion produce all this hostility and divisiveness? I fear the multitudes are not ready. Nor am I.

BERNAYS

Some cross to bear. Though I can't disagree with your earthbound assessment.

JESUS

How to contend with all the misery and despair? And the unrestrained egotism? There appears to be little or no regard for "goodwill to all."

BERNAYS

You're asking me? Confronting self-centeredness is the constant, nearly insurmountable challenge for us endeavoring to gain public support.

JESUS

I believe your uncle, Dr. Freud, wrote on humankind's ... shortcomings.

BERNAYS

You've done your homework. Yes, *Uncle Freud* was *the* authority. Which is why the Nazis persecuted him so and publicly burned his books. Fascists!

JESUS

Such malevolence. Sociopathy, to be sure, the likes of which --

BERNAYS

-- You know before the war Herr Hitler's henchmen solicited my counsel? Can you believe that: me, a Jew? I told them to shove their swastika --

JESUS

-- Between us, that madman made a mockery of "forgive and forget."

BERNAYS

Never again!

JESUS

We mustn't let history repeat. We must be virtuous and forever vigilant. Evil knows many disguises, and often masquerades as privilege and pleasure.

BERNAYS

Right. People are short on vision. And patience. Immediate gratification is the shinier focal point. Our goal must be to *illuminate* a brighter future.

JESUS

A ministry centered upon building ... a better future? I'm listening.

BERNAYS

Save atonement for another time. Also, the carnival tricks and optical illusions -- healing the blind and crippled, the walking on water -- hold that act for off, off Broadway.

JESUS

You're a tough audience, Edward. Though your authenticity is refreshing.

BERNAYS

This, too. Your appeal must be common, nonsectarian -- meaning it resonates with all tribes, not just Christians, but Jews, Muslims, Hindus, atheists.

JESUS

I could not agree more.

BERNAYS

There's a time and place for idealism but, and I cannot over-emphasize this, purpose and *intention* are key. We're talking behavior modification, mass manipulation of opinions and habits. All for "Goodness's" sake, of course.

JESUS

Hmm, I'm beginning to understand what it takes to change minds and actions.

BERNAYS

Don't ask what people want. Tell them what they'll need.

JESUS

Your reputation precedes you. Turning Americans' breakfast into a "baconfest." A Jew pitching pork. Now that is unifying and visionary. A true commitment to your art --

BERNAYS

-- Not only art, *science*. Call it "the science of artful communication."

JESUS

I see. Like your persuasive messaging that empowered women to smoke, calling cigarettes --

BERNAYS

-- ah yes, those magnificent "torches of freedom." Those fiery stereotypes were quite a sight. Thousands of women's rights marchers puffing with pride as they paraded so splendiferously down Fifth Avenue. *(beat)* Propaganda at its best --

Angela comes to the table, clearly upset, wiping away tears.

ANGELA

Refills for either of you? And looks like you can use more napkins.

JESUS

(gently taking Angela's hand)

Are you alright, my child? Please, sit down -- *(catching the name embroidered on her uniform)* ANGELA. Now breathe, tell me what distresses you so.

Angela sighs, then sits; Bernays hands her a handkerchief to wipe her tears.

ANGELA

It is time for my break, so I suppose ... Long story short, my mother's losing her mind, *dementia* they say. My apartment's got a leaky roof and absentee landlord --

JESUS

-- *Dementia* ... and a leaky roof? Good heavens --

ANGELA

-- and my night school tuition is past due. I'm studying gerontology -- to better care for folks like my mother. Then there's my lovely, patient, neglected daughter who wants a puppy for her birthday. *(glances from the mustard stain on her blouse to Bernays' sandwich)* Oh, and to top it all off, this!

JESUS

Oh my, Angela --

ANGELA

-- Sorry you asked? *(beat)* I shouldn't complain. Everybody's got problems, right? Anyways, thanks for listening and my apologies for interrupting your meal.

JESUS

No apology necessary. I asked, and you unburdened yourself. Know this child, adversity builds character, *and* strength *and* wisdom.

ANGELA

Well then, that's me. A poor, strong wiseass.

Angela shrugs, pirouettes and skips off)

JESUS

I think that went well.

BERNAYS

(impressed by Jesus's solicitude)

At least you listened. Often that's more than enough.

JESUS

Attention is the most authentic form of generosity. A providential gift.

BERNAYS

(after another bite of his sandwich)

So, where were we? Yes, *propaganda*, you see, can thwart tyranny; bring order out of chaos. When people are properly nudged, right *will* triumph over wrong.

JESUS

(between sips of soup)

Properly nudged. Right. I see --

BERNAYS

(adjusting the knot on his tie)

Moving forward on such a high-profile *campaign*, we'll have a couple of tactical considerations. There's the matter of your name, "Jesus." It's mere mention can be, well, polarizing and, you know, stir up undo passions. We don't need any distractions. Plus, and this is quite unfortunate, some people do tend to take your name in vain.

JESUS

So I've noticed. *(beat)* Haven't I been persecuted enough?

BERNAYS

(dabs at his mustache)

Just give some thought to a nickname, ideally something with broader appeal, like ... "J.C." or "Jeezy"? Plus then we'd be rid of the "s" apostrophe "s" situation.

(off Jesus's perplexed look)

You don't have to decide this today. We can *focus group* it. *(beat)* On to influence and persuasion. And my secret weapon, *indirection*.

JESUS

Indirection? I thought you said no trickery.

BERNAYS

That's *misdirection*. This is different. Think of it like playing billiards, how you subtly bank your shot off a cushion.

JESUS

Approaching an assembly indirectly, disguising your motive?

BERNAYS

Exactly. For example, book publishers asked us to increase slumping sales. In our research people complained about the lack of space to keep books. So we encouraged homebuilders to feature built-in bookshelves. *That's indirection!*

JESUS

Clever. Sneaky, even.

BERNAYS

Another time, we had Ivory Soap sponsor a *bar sculpting* competition for kids. It increased soap sales *and* helped moms get children to take more baths.

JESUS

I am beginning to understand, Edward. The Bible testifies to my *not-so-indirect* miracles, such as feeding the masses with loaves and fishes --

BERNAYS

And a lovely story, it is. But can you prove it with quantifiable results?

JESUS

-- So that's a *no* to scripture and holy writings?

BERNAYS

Folklorish imagery! Again, no offense. This is about truth and trust. I'll tell you what I have told presidents, business titans, inventors and entertainers, even Siggy. Public support -- like soul-saving? -- is not something you deserve. It must be earned. In my judgement --

JESUS

-- which you masterfully convey in your gospel, *Crystallizing Public Opinion!*

BERNAYS

Thank you. Now, let's take that *crystallizing* for a spin. I suspect you already have some thoughts.

JESUS

Well ... obviously this is not my forte. But, okay, what about ... some kind of new annual celebration? After all, there's Mother's Day, Father's Day, even All Hallow's Eve? *(beat)* What if we recognize everyone else ... with ... I don't know, "Other's Day"?

BERNAYS

Hmm, a bit abstract, although I like the inclusivity of it --

JESUS

-- Right? "K-n-o-w more others"? As in, get to know each and all others.

BERNAYS

Positive, actionable. But *unclear*. Still, clever. Let's put a pin in that.

JESUS

This is exhilarating!

BERNAYS

Exhilarating and consequential. Attempting to correct preconceptions, modify primal instincts. Create positive stereotypes. We've got to think BIG picture, *epochal*. How can we do ... a world of good --

Off-stage, there's the loud clatter of breaking dishes, followed by a smattering of clapping.

ANGELA

(from off-stage)

AY, ;DIOS MIO!

BERNAYS

(startled by the commotion)

Jesus Christ --

JESUS

-- What'd I do?

BERNAYS

-- Not you. The clappers. *(distracted)* Speaking of BIG, how about the Giants!

JESUS

Goliath? --

BERNAYS

-- New York! They made the playoffs ... on a wing and a prayer.

JESUS

You're welcome ...?

ANGELA

(stops to check on table, obviously flustered)

Still good here fellas? *(beat)* Sorry about the commotion. She backed her chair right into me. And didn't even say sorry. What is wrong with people?

BERNAYS

That's what we're trying to figure out.

ANGELA

And the clappers?! So sadistic. Like I don't have feelings.

JESUS

A pox on the clappers.

Angela smirks and leaves; Bernays turns to gaze at wall light fixture, then turns to Jesus.

BERNAYS

Are you familiar with "Light's Golden Jubilee"? To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Edison's invention of the light bulb? All at once, people across the country turned on their lights. It was spectacular!

JESUS

(in a solemn tone)

And the Lord said, "Let there be light. And there was light."

BERNAYS

(glares at Jesus)

You know what else is *golden*? THE GOLDEN RULE. It's *the* social contract, the common thread through all religions. Why not a campaign to inspire *empathy*? To reintroduce "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"?

JESUS

I'm familiar with the sentiment. "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

BERNAYS

Yes, and no. We do a righteous campaign, not a platitude. Again, no offense.

JESUS

None taken, *again*. So, how would we commence this righteousness?

BERNAYS

With research by renowned social scientists to prove the inherent value of empathy, of being a good role model, and of your --

JESUS

-- "Second coming."

BERNAYS

Yes, a "second helping," so to speak, for your comeback, as THE goodwill ambassador. The research will earn *independent validation* -- for VIP support.

JESUS

From your Uncle Sigmund?

BERNAYS

Indeed, of the good doctor's stature, but alive. And scholars and scientists. Einstein. World leaders. Key influencers. Princess Grace, Elvis, Lucy, the glitterati. And sports: DiMaggio, Robinson, *Hammerin' Hank* Greenberg --

JESUS

-- and Pope Pius the Twelfth, I respectfully submit.

BERNAYS

(Bernays sketches the steps on the back of a napkin as Jesus follows along)

Absolutely, all religious leaders. Next we'll develop creative themes and appeals; then outline strategies and tactics, organization, schedule, and so on. I call it "*The Engineering of Consent.*"

JESUS

Ingenious! This *(taps at the napkin)* my friend is why you're called the "king of propaganda" ... "minister of manipulation" ... "prince of persuasion" --

BERNAYS

-- don't forget "spin doctor," "puppet master" and my favorite, "agent of the devil." Not that I care, but I prefer "counsellor on public relations."

JESUS

You are too humble. You're the *progenitor*, nay, the *biographer* of ideas.

BERNAYS

And a consummate pragmatist. All great ideas gradually deteriorate into work.

JESUS

Fear not, I am a carpenter by trade. I know hard work. Let's *make believe* --

BERNAYS

-- built on reciprocity, mutual respect. Compassion. Humility --

JESUS

-- I am your humble servant. Tell me, how do we generate such affirmation?

BERNAYS

With something dramatic. *(beat)* I'm just *spitballing* now, we could forecast some sort of worldwide crisis. Potentially so calamitous that to survive the entire human race must act responsibly, as one, and ... *Do unto others?*

JESUS

Like a global flood?

BERNAYS

Again with the flood? Anyhow, we could get a coalition of top scientists to warn of a looming natural disaster that'll impact all life on the planet? A harbinger of self-destruction, due to humans destroying or polluting or wasting or whatever. By our own hands, a climactic meltdown --

JESUS

-- an ultimate equalizer? Beyond faith or prayer? *(beat)* Although, and I'm only playing devil's advocate, could something so hellish be too risky?

BERNAYS

Your concern is noted. Still, the bigger the risk the greater the reward.

JESUS

So it is said. Though such a colossal feat could take a century.

BERNAYS

Or not. Humans are responsible for too many atrocities to count. Face it, we're damn good troublemakers.

JESUS

Transgressors. Souls too blinded by arrogance to see their own ignorance.

BERNAYS

All we'll have to do is amplify the horrific consequences of inaction. And meanwhile stand ready to prevail with our splendidly *harmonious* response.

JESUS

Go on. I'm loving this. And for my big reveal?

BERNAYS

This! You'll ARISE as the catalyst, unifier-in-chief ... the HIGHEST AUTHORITY with the GOLDEN answer, to save the day ... and civilization!

JESUS

The starring role in the revival, my return engagement as *The Savior*.

BERNAYS

From behind the scenes my team will ensure you're anointed "THE GOLDEN RULER." A media sensation. The lead on all three networks. International wires. Life and Time covers. *THE* propaganda phenomenon of the century!

JESUS

Of the millennium!

BERNAYS

(switches to a more professional tone)

There is the matter of financing. A production of this scale will require substantial funding. And my counsel isn't cheap, either. Not to question your commitment, but I've found that advice is valued more when it is paid for --

JESUS

-- I indeed value your role. My loyal patrons will raise whatever it takes.

BERNAYS

(wipes his mouth a final time)

Excellent. We're on the same page.

JESUS

Like singing to the choir --

BERNAYS

-- Preaching to the converted --

JESUS

-- God willing.

ANGELA

(drops the Katz's ticket on table and extends a tentative smile)

Thanks ... for listening. *Do come again.*

BERNAYS

(off nod to Angela)

You know, and again I'm spitballing, we could try a dry run? Cultivate a groundswell, *blitzkrieg*, if you will, to spread a healthy contagion --

JESUS

-- of caring and kindness? As in one good turn deserves another and another, and another. *Indirection?* *(beat)* How did you put it: *Let's pin that?*

BERNAYS

(self-satisfied, he gathers his scarf and overcoat, and stands to leave)

My thinking exactly. *(beat)* Until we meet again --

JESUS

(stands to leave, holds up his glass as if to toast)

-- Sometime soon?

BERNAYS

(chomps the last chunk of his kosher pickle spear)

Sometime.

SCENE DESCRIPTION

Bernays removes his wallet from his coat pocket and extracts a large wad of bills; Jesus opens a leather pouch attached to his rope belt and grabs a big handful of gold stones; both place their currency atop the ticket as they stand to leave

JESUS

Very well. Keep the faith!

BERNAYS

Mazel tov.

Jesus and Bernays depart together; Angela arrives at the table, stunned by the tip piled atop the ticket.

ANGELA

Oh ... Dios Mío.

(performs "sign of the cross" and shifts gaze toward exit)

THANK YOU!

About the author: Stuart Greenbaum is a public relations counsellor with more than four decades experience representing statewide and national public-interest initiatives. He is the author of the fictional novella *Humble Sky* and editor of the text *Longevity Rules*, as well as frequent contributor to multiple blogs and journals.

Edward L. Bernays, the "father of modern public relations," served as his mentor and collaborator on numerous projects, including the book *Educated Public Relations* and The Golden Rule Campaign.

That Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax rank among his favorite baseball players is admittedly the extent of his Jewishness.

He lives in Sacramento, California.