

**RUST**  
**A documentary play**  
**(excerpt)**  
by  
Austin Bunn with  
Working Group Theatre

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## CHARACTERS

The play is to be done by 7 “chorus” actors (3 women, 4 men) variable in race. They can be doubled how you want. The actor playing Austin should not double.

## SCENES

Show the work.

Consider using factory equipment: wheeled carts for costumes, toolboxes.

The floor has marked, with factory paint, a yellow square. This is the Hank and Leah space. All their scenes take place here.

Should flow simply and smoothly. Keep the set bare and feel free to use projections and sounds.

## SECTION 1: NOW WHAT

*SPOT ON AUSTIN. ACTORS IN CHAIRS, UPSTAGE.*

AUSTIN

When I was nineteen, my father bought me a car for \$200. A canary yellow 1978 Toyota Starlet. I called it “My Steed.” It wasn’t driveable. The clutch was blown, and it was so rusted out you could see the ground through a hole in the footwell.

Now my dad — maybe like your dad— was an avid car mechanic. He saw people on the side of the road with busted cars and actually pulled over. We had three VW vans parked, permanently, in our backyard, and he traded their organs back and forth. He took apart engines for fun. He’d lay out the parts on newspaper on the driveway or the kitchen table, and mark the pieces with Whiteout so he could put them back together exactly how they were.

*MUSIC: BEACH BOYS MUSIC PLAYS.*

That summer, when I was 19, we spent days in the garage, replacing that clutch. My parents got divorced when I was a kid and that was the longest I’d spent, alone in his company, in years. I handed him tools, flipped the Beach Boy tapes, and counted the minutes. Finally, we had all the parts of the clutch unbolted and laid out on the floor and he said...

*AN UPSTAGE ACTOR TURNS TO SPEAK.*

DAD

Now what?

AUSTIN

Huh?

DAD

What do we do now?

AUSTIN

(Shit). I tried to remember the order. The way things were supposed to go. I had watched it come apart and now I was supposed to know how to build it back up. And I had no idea. I hadn’t *paid attention*. To me, the car was this *magic carpet*, this miracle that I just wanted to drive. Come on, I was nineteen. I had better things to do than spending my summer in the garage with my father and *his* twenty year-old *tapes*. And he just sighed.

*DAD SIGHS. SADLY.*

AUSTIN

I'll never forget that.

*LIGHTS SHIFT*

REPORTER

GM informed workers this afternoon that the plant on 36<sup>th</sup> street in Wyoming, Michigan will close.

*(ALL ACTORS SIGH.)*

AUSTIN

I moved to Michigan for a teaching job and the close of this auto-plant was all over the news.

VOICE OF KNOWING BETTER

*Concentrate. This is about you.*

REPORTER

It came as a stunner for the 1,500 employees.

WORKER

It's like a funeral, a death in the family.

VOICE OF KNOWING BETTER

*The old jobs aren't there to go back to.*

AUSTIN

And I thought about my dad who got downsized from his job fifteen years ago. He hasn't had a full time job since.

GM SPOKESMAN

This has nothing to do with the employees, the leadership, or the community.

REPORTER

Said the GM spokesperson

VOICE OF KNOWING BETTER

*Surviving the loss will be hard work.*

GM SPOKESMAN

It's a great operation. We're trying to reduce pipeline inventories.

AUSTIN

And I thought about the meaning in work, and fixing things with our hands.

WORKER

(sarcastic) Business as fucking usual for The General

REPORTER

But neighbors have different concerns.

CITIZEN

This is going to *kill* this whole area!

AUSTIN

And this time, I wanted to pay attention.

VOICE OF KNOWING BETTER

*You will be starting over.*

*LIGHTS SHIFT. SFX: FACTORY NOISES.*

## **SECTION 2: HANK AND LEAH**

### **PROJECTION:**

**6.9 million American workers displaced between January 2007 to December 2009**

*PROJECTION: THE BUTT HUTT PHOTO*

*FEMALE CHORUS 3 (LEAH) RUNS ON STAGE INTO A MARKED YELLOW SQUARE ON THE FLOOR. THIS IS THE HANK AND LEAH SPACE.*

*IT'S BREAK TIME. SHE REMOVES EAR PLUGS. SHE LIGHTS A CIGARETTE. SEES SOMETHING IN THE LOT.*

*HANK FOLLOWS HER ON STAGE, STRETCHING HIS BACK. BIG STRETCHY NOISES. IT'S A LITTLE COLD.*

LEAH

Hank, what are you doing here? I thought you were on second.

HANK

Overtime. Carol wants a deck.  
(she offers a cigarette)

LEAH

Where do they have you?

HANK

(declining the cigarette) Racking sides. I was looking at the damage rack. And I just kept thinking, I want to crawl in.

LEAH

Don't do that.

HANK

Remember those Mexican stowaways, the ones that came blinking out of the boxcar up from Arlington? I'd be like that.

LEAH

At least they got to go to Grand Rapids. Crawl in the damage rack, you'd end up in *Flint*.

HANK

Hey. Carol's from there.

LEAH

You married her. Bar later?

HANK

Can't. Jamie's got a wrestling match in Hudsonville.

LEAH

He get you to the ground yet?

HANK

Nah, he tries though. *(BEAT)*. Lotta cars in the lot today.

LEAH

Check out the Escalades.

HANK

Good eyes.

LEAH

*(nervous)* Must be from the Eastside.

HANK

Suits. Great. *(BEAT)* Hey how's your dad?

LEAH

He's good.

HANK

Still at the VA?

LEAH

Oh yeah, he's not going anywhere. It's nice. They have art classes now, for the guys. If you want a painting of a tree and a house and a floating red witch that's supposed to be me, let me know. I've got like nine of them.

HANK

*Floating*, woulda never said *floating*.

(she punches him.)

Okay, I've got a question for you.

LEAH

Ok, but I get to pick the guys: Gerard Butler in *P.S. I Love You*, Brad Pitt in *Thelma and Louise*, and Brad Pitt in *Benjamin Button*.

HANK

What are you talking about?

LEAH

I thought this was that marry fuck or kill game. That's what Shep was talking about...

HANK

Wait you'd fuck AND kill Brad Pitt?

LEAH

It's a complicated feeling.

HANK

No, listen: Your last meal on earth.

LEAH

Death row kind of thing?

HANK

Like your favorite food. Like Red Velvet Cake, beef stroganoff....

LEAH

You want to spend our break on this?

HANK

It's a personality test.

LEAH

Marry fuck or kill is a personality test. This will just make me hungry.

HANK

Come on. It'll give me something to think about til the end of the shift.

LEAH

The fish sandwich from Culver's. How's that. Food is fuel, Hank.

*HANK REGISTERS A NEW SILENCE.*

HANK

You hear that? The lines stopped.

*FACTORY P.A. COMES TO LIFE.*

FEMALE CHORUS 2 (VOICE FROM ABOVE)

All employees gather for a company announcement at the center complex, thank you.

*LONG LOOK BETWEEN THEM.*

*HANK HEADS IN.*

HANK

On break, figures.

*LEAH DOESN'T MOVE. CONTINUES SMOKING.*

LEAH

I was up in the hall, Hank. I saw all the union guys heading into the conference room.

HANK

It's another Go Fast thing.

LEAH

They were with Cathy whatsherface.

HANK

From Detroit?

LEAH

Smoke this with me. I got a bad feeling.

HANK

You got too many feelings.

*HANK TAKES HER CIGARETTE. SMOKES ONE PUFF. IT'S UNPLEASANT. PUTS IT OUT.*

HANK

Come on, you're paranoid.

### SECTION 3: HISTORY LESSON

**PROJECTION: "DAWN TO SUNSET" 1937 GM FILM ABOUT THE HALCYON DAYS.**

**[song begins 4:28**

**<http://www.archive.org/details/FromDawn1937>  
match over factory work at various American cities]**

*LIGHTS SHIFT.*

*ENTER ACADEMIC. SHE IS ENTHUSIASTIC IN A SPINNY  
CHAIR WITH COFFEE. SHE OBSERVES THE FILM.*

*AUSTIN ENTERS WITH NOTEPAD.*

ACADEMIC

General Motors made this film in 1937, a year after your plant in Wyoming opened.

AUSTIN (into recorder)

First interview for RUST project. Labor historian.

ACADEMIC

And 1937 is a very interesting year for General Motors. See, GM policy was to decentralize. Push plants out of Detroit and into smaller cities. Like your film: Tarrytown, Baltimore, Kansas City... It's one of their legacies. Sloan played it like an "investment" in the community, spread the wealth —

AUSTIN

I'm sorry, Sloan?

ACADEMIC

Alfred P. Sloan, GM president and chairman... (off Austin's look) Did you do any research before you came and talked to me?

AUSTIN

Yes.

ACADEMIC

On the internet.

AUSTIN

Yes.

ACADEMIC

This morning.

AUSTIN

Maybe?

ACADEMIC

Look, I tend to see this in terms of people. The car industry creates the middle class in Michigan, in America. In 1914, Henry Ford institutes the five-dollar workday. (Of course, workers could only *get* the five dollars *if* they complied with a *home investigation* by the company to make sure they were sober, thrifty, etc..., but that's neither here nor there)

Ford's decision ushers in a new era. Countless numbers of people move to higher living standard. And this is not just about money. By the twenties, every family that wants a car, has a car. And the car changes everything.

*THE CHORUS MEMBERS ASSEMBLE.*

AUSTIN

Just to break that down a little bit

ACADEMIC

The car opens up American culture – like the evolution of *courtship* rituals.

FEMALE CHORUS 1

Who we can *love*.

(flirts with Male Chorus 3)

ACADEMIC

Because the car shrinks distances

MALE CHORUS 2

How we date.

ACADEMIC

It creates new privacy

MALE CHORUS 2

(Sings out) "Paradise by the dash board light!"

ACADEMIC

Enough with the sex! Speaking personally for a moment, the car changes the role of women in society

FEMALE CHORUS 1

We can finally get out of the goddamn house!

(she flirts with Male Chorus 1)

ACADEMIC

Women become independent, they go from *producers* of food and clothing to *consumers* of food and clothing

MALE CHORUS 3

Sweetheart, what's for dinner?

FEMALE CHORUS 1

What was that?

(she's still flirting)

ACADEMIC

By the 50s, you have the interstate highway system, one of the most successful federal programs ever.

MALE CHORUS 2

The freeway!

ACADEMIC

And people, just, go. Think about everything that comes with roads: jobs making the roads, *remaking* the roads,

MALE CHORUS 3

No really, Sweetheart, what's for dinner?

AUSTIN

gas stations, gas, food —

ACADEMIC + FEMALE CHORUS

McDonald's!

ACADEMIC

--creates the idea of a *drive-in* restaurant--

FEMALE CHORUS 1

Isn't there a Panera at this exit?

MALE CHORUS 2 (TORY)

They got a Hooters.

ACADEMIC

— despite blight on the face of the earth, fast food *does* employ a lot of people.

AUSTIN

I get it. Cars create opportunity, growth, jobs...

ACADEMIC

But even more than that: the car industry, and here I mean General Motors specifically, creates...*dissatisfaction*.

*THE CHORUS WHINES WITH DISAPPOINTMENT, ALL DEPART.*

AUSTIN

Let me make sure I get this right: the automobile creates unhappiness.

ACADEMIC

No, *dissatisfaction*. Ford says consumers could get any color car they wanted as long as it was black. But General Motors is different – GM is a bunch of different car companies, bundled together by Billy Durant. And Durant’s successor, Alfred Sloan, says “a car for every purse and purpose.” Splinter the market.

*MALE CHORUS 1 (SLOAN) ENTERS. (CHORUS MEMBER IN HIGH COLLAR SHIRT, HAT IN HAND.)*

SLOAN

*Many wonder why the automobile industry brings out a new model every year.*

ACADEMIC

from *Adventures of a White Collar Man* by Alfred P. Sloan.

SLOAN

*The reason is simple. We want to make you dissatisfied.*

ACADEMIC

GM becomes the biggest company in the most important industry in the world because of this: *planned obsolescence*. Once everybody has a car, the trick is to get people to want *another* one. Sloan knew this. And we’ve been living in his world since.

By the way, I worked for GM on the eastside for a summer. Worst job of my life. Write that down.

*MALE CHORUS 1 (SLOAN) HRRMPHS.*

AUSTIN

So what I wanted to understand was how the GM plant got *here*. To Wyoming.

ACADEMIC

Right, so as the car industry grows on the east side, so do worker complaints.

SLOAN

*There is no one so hopeless as a worker exiled from his family, surrounded factory after factory.*

ACADEMIC

Slowdowns, shut-downs had become so common— Hell in Flint they took over the plant in 1936, started the United Auto Workers. This film comes the year after.

SLOAN

*We must take the work out of the industrial centers and into America!*

ACADEMIC

So Sloan pushes GM west to Wyoming to *avoid* the unions.

SLOAN

*I call it another epic American migration.*

ACADEMIC

He played it like a “gift.” That’s what they called the plant. A gift.

SLOAN

*Towards homeowners and small towns, where people have a stake in our nation’s welfare. That is what I mean by decentralization.*

ACADEMIC

But it was strategic: scatter production. Two ways around any stoppage. They didn’t want the west to unionize. That’s why GM made this film. Get around Us vs. Them. Convince people their futures are inextricably linked to GM. But...

SLOAN

*There is one mistake we must not make: overreach, losing the center.*

ACADEMIC

They got their Union. Local 730.

SLOAN

*Lest this migration get away from us...*

ACADEMIC

You should talk to them. They’ll be your way in.

*SLOAN EXITS. GIVES AUSTIN THE HAIRY  
EYEBALL.*

ACADEMIC

So I gotta ask- what is this project about?

AUSTIN

I'm trying to understand what happens after a plant closes. Who closes it, why. What happens to the people that worked there...

ACADEMIC

No, I mean, why are *you* doing *this*?

AUSTIN

This'll sound crazy but you ever think your hands are soft?

ACADEMIC

Not really.

AUSTIN

Well, I just moved here

ACADEMIC

From where?

AUSTIN

I'm from the East Coast, New York, more or less and I feel like Michigan is this place where people know how to work with their hands, you know, guys with callouses and beat up jeans, oil underneath their eyes like warpaint-

ACADEMIC

Warpaint. You realize the person you're describing is an advertisement.

AUSTIN

I'm a teacher now, and I've been thinking a lot about work. *Real work*. I want to explore and celebrate that.

ACADEMIC

Look, if you're going to interview these union guys...You might want to think about how you dress.

AUSTIN

What do you mean?

ACADEMIC

It's just a lot of corduroy. What kind of car do you drive?

AUSTIN

A Honda Accord.

ACADEMIC

These interviews should be really eye opening.