

The Edge Of The World (Working Title)

A short play in the absurdist genre. It signifies nothing.
so please do not look for any hidden meaning!

By Lou Bisignani

The stage should be almost empty. Perhaps a few scraggly shrubs upstage center. A few boulders strewn about would be acceptable. At the very lip of the stage a few small turfs of grass would be good. There should be an accommodation for someone to be able to lie on the floor in front of the stage, unseen by the audience.

The Time: Indeterminate; Certainly post-industrial age.
The Place: The edge of the world. (The flat world!)

Cast of Characters: Colonel Amos Eglantine Richards (late forties to early fifties in age)
Aide de Camp, Sergeant Oliver Crump(20's to 30's)
General Dogsboddy, Janet Burnside-Biltwell(20's to 30's)
The Hottentot

(The lights come up slowly on the empty stage. The light should not be up full, and the stage should be backlit so that the sun can set upstage: It is late afternoon: After a moment, there is the sound of wind . It is desolate here. Then, strange noises are heard coming from behind the upstage bushes.)

Col.: (from behind bushes) What the blazes do you think you are doing, Sergeant?

> Sgt.: (from behind bushes) I won't go another step, Colonel! I can't! I don't believe anymore!

Col.: You don't believe? You don't believe?! Why, I should flog you to within an inch of your worthless life, you...you...spineless buffoon!

Janet: (from behind bushes) Oh, please, Colonel, Sir! Don't flog him! Not again! He's Just exhausted. We are both exhausted. Colonel, Sir! We haven't rested since last Wednesday! Can't we just make camp here and rest for a bit, Colonel, Sir?

Col.: (from behind bushes) Don't use your sympathy seeking speeches on me, girl! It won't work. Now pick up your gear, both of you and follow me! I can almost smell it! I know we're near it! (he plunges through -or around- upstage bushes) Come on! It can't be much farther! (He is wearing puttees and exotic headgear: Aviator goggles, a white scarf, a holstered sidearm and a short crop or whip would be a nice touch!)

> ^{VL}Sgt.: (entering through bushes; He is loaded down with a ridiculous amount of gear. Water jugs, a large roped bundle with stakes sticking out -a tent?- a backpack full of clanking technical gear, and last, but not least, a large rifle. He stands and looks about for a moment) Colonel...Sir...I must rest ...now! Just for a bit (he is dropping gear as he speaks) or I shall...I shall...(he slumps unconscious

to the ground)

Janet: (entering through the bushes; She is wearing a long skirt, short sleeve blouse, high boots, and a pith helmet; She carries a large back pack with an assortment of cooking and cleaning tools sticking out, and more pots and pans are hanging from her backpack; She carries an ax and has a compass on a cord around her neck.) Oh! Oh, Heavens! Oliver... what? (She drops her gear and kneels next to the fallen Oliver.) Oh, Colonel, Sir! He's...he's...(places her head against his chest to listen for a heart beat)

Col.: He's all right! Let him be, Biltwell! Just a bit of heat stroke, I'm sure! (He gazes over the terrain)

Janet: It's... Burnside-Biltwell, Colonel, Sir. Uhhh...he has a heart beat, Sir, so perhaps you're correct.

Col.: There's no 'perhaps' about it, Biltwell! I am always correct!

Janet: Uhhh...that's... Burnside-Biltwell, Colonel, Sir. Of course, Sir! Correct, Sir! (she stands and just manages the weakest salute)

Col.: Good! Now..as long as the Sergeant has insisted on taking a break, we might as well set up camp for the night. (He looks at her) Well...proceed! Proceed! (he turns away and continues gazing)

Janet: (picks up a camp stool or chair and runs to place it for him; He sits without looking and the placement is perfect; She puts small folding table at his side and quickly retrieves a glass and bottle of gin, pours a drink and places it in his outstretched hand; Again, he does not look) There you are, Colonel, Sir! I'll just set up the tent, now, Sir, if that's all right? Sir?

Col.: Haven't you forgotten something, Dogsboddy? Think, girl, think! (snaps fingers)

Janet: Ohhh! Oh, I am sorry, Sir! Here you are! (She retrieves cigarettes and matches from her backpack. Places cigarette in his hand and proceeds to light it when he puts it in his mouth; A suggestion for a bit of business – let him take his time putting the cigarette in his mouth so that Janet must wait, and in the process burns her fingers with the match) Uhhh...I'll just set up your tent, now, Sir! (she proceeds to do so)

Sgt. (coming to) Ohhh...Oh...where...what...how...

Janet: (drops tent) and starts toward the Sgt.) Ohhh, Oliver, let me...

Col.: Ah,Ah,Ah! He's fine Biltwell! Tell her you're fine, Sergeant!

> Sgt.: Uhhh...I'm fine, Sir! I'm...fine, Biltwell. (He manages to sit up)

Janet: (she has picked up tent stakes and is back at it; She speaks under her breath, to no one in particular) Sigh...It's Burnside-Biltwell.

Col.: Well, Sergeant, now that you're rested, I suppose you'd like a drink. Biltwell!!

Janet: Sir! (drops tent and runs to his side and salutes) Yes, Sir!?

Col.: The Sergeant needs a drink!

> Sgt.: That's alright, sir! I'm quite capable...(He struggles to his feet)

Col.: Sergeant! You will maintain discipline and follow protocol at all times! Do you understand?!

> Sgt.: Uhhh. Yes...Sir. (He glances at Janet; she glances back before pouring his drink) Thank you, Ja...Biltwell. (Their eyes meet and their hands linger a moment during the drink handover)

Col.: No need to thank her, Sergeant. She is, after all, our Dogsboddy. What are you standing about for, Biltwell? Get back to work on my tent.

Janet: (scurries back to the tent stakes) Yes, Colonel! Yes, of course, Sir! (During the following conversation between the Colonel and the Sergeant, she struggles with erecting the small pup tent. The tent need never be finished. It is the attempt that is important. It would be difficult to overplay her struggle with the tent pieces. It can be as physical as you like. The only codicil is to keep it entirely quiet! Also, the sun should set, almost imperceptibly, until the stage is lit in a bluish light.)

Col.: Well, my boy, feeling up to the task! I sense that we shall reach our objective tomorrow! Therefore it is of the utmost importance that you gather your strength for the final push! We will forget the regrettable failure of will you exhibited just now. You're young! You haven't developed the strength of body and mind which only comes with experience and hardship! That's the ticket! Hardship! And plenty of it! I must admit that perhaps I've tried too hard to accelerate the process in you. But that is because I have a genuine regard for you. Someday, I hope that you will understand everything I've done for you! And, come to appreciate it!

> Sgt.: Even the floggings, Sir? (this is asked hesitantly)

Col.: Yes, by George! Even the floggings! You're a product of a private school education, with, I imagine, a rather libertarian attitude toward corporal punishment, while I am an Etonian! Let me tell you, Sergeant...we were flogged

to a fair thee well! Everyday! And for no discernible reason! Gad!! Those were the days! (He instinctively brings his crop down into his palm, HARD!, and winces.) Some day you'll thank me, Sergeant! Thank me for making a man out of you!

> Sgt.: I...I hope so, Sir. In fact...I thank you now, Sir! I do! Thank you, Sir!

Col.: Think nothing of it. Just doing what I can to help. Now, Sergeant, hand me my glass.

> Sgt.: (runs to backpack and retrieves a small telescope.) Here you are, Sir!

Col.: (Stands and puts glass to his eye) Well...well...well. Ah hah! Ummm...Yes. (holds glass out for Sergeant to take back)

> Sgt.: What did you see, Sir? Are we there?

Col.: Nothing! Not a bloody thing! No, Sergeant, we are not there yet. But, we are close! So close that I dare say we are within striking distance if only we knew which direction to take! Biltwell!! What the bloody Hell are you doing with my tent?! Don't tell me it's not up yet!! (He is not looking at her. He stares out over the audience. By now, Janet is totally caught up in the tent, and is lying on the ground; He turns and sees her situation) Biltwell! Stop that nonsense and bring my compass!

Janet: (struggles up and quickly runs to Colonel with the compass which hangs from her neck) Here you are, Sir! Right, Sir, Colonel, Sir! (salutes, tries to untangle piece of tent caught around her foot) I'll finish...with your...tent now, Sir! (She is out of breath from the struggle)

> Sgt.: I can help her, Sir! With your tent, Sir!

Col.: Never mind the bloody tent! I've a mind to flog both of you! Now be quiet and let me read this bloody compass! (He studies the compass and it is evident that he does not know how it works) Here! Make yourself useful, Sergeant! Tell me which direction we should take! (handing compass to Sergeant)

> Sgt.: Ummm...well, Sir, according to the compass that way is East! (He points out over the audience; Note that by now, the sun has set. It is a well-lit night.) It's a little hard to read in this light, Sir! But that is East! (pointing out toward audience)

Col.: Then that is the direction we shall take in the morning. Biltwell! How is dinner coming?

Janet: (After handing over the compass, she has 'lit' a few sticks to make a fire

and has hung a small pot over the flames; She stirs the pot and answers)
It's coming along, Colonel, Sir! It should be ready in just a bit, Sir!

Col.: Good! I'm famished as a bloody cape buffalo! Sit down Sergeant! Relax! Hurry it up, will you, Biltwell?! (He sits in his camp chair, while the Sergeant sits on the ground, or on a boulder if one is handy; Janet brings the pot toward them as the lights dim to 'moonlight blue'; She spoons some into a metal bowl and hands it to the Colonel. She sits beside Oliver and they eat from the pot with their spoons; Note: 'sharing' the single pot for their bowl, offers an opportunity for shy, tentative- dare I say embarrassing- moments between them. But, do not overplay this!)

Col.: Rather good, Dogsbody!

Janet: Thank you, Colonel, Sir.

> Sgt.: It's rather a splendid night, don't you think, Sir? The stars and all. Sir?

Col.: Yes, yes it is, Sargent. Reminds me of my youth living amongst the Hottentots. In deepest Kenya. Ahhh. The night skies there, Sergeant! Incredible. Well, It's best we be off to sleep. We have a big day ahead of us, tomorrow. (They each retreat to their sleeping places. The Colonel pulls the unfinished tent over him, while Janet and Oliver lie on the ground, each with a rather skimpy blanket. The lights should go almost to black. After a count of perhaps five or ten beats we hear the following)

> Sgt.: Good night, Sir.

Janet: Yes, Good night, Colonel, Sir. Good night...Sergeant Crump.

> Sgt.: Ummm...yes. Good night, Biltwell.

Colonel.: Enough falderol, you two. Get to Sleep! Harumph!

(After a count of twenty or thirty beats, during which we hear the wind again, the Sun begins to rise slowly in the East. That is, from behind the audience. As the stage brightens, the three explorers stir and struggle to awakedness.)

Janet: (stands, stretches and folds her blanket) Ohhh... Yawwwn! Good morning, Colonel, Sir. Good Morning, Sergeant Crump. I'll just make some coffee. (She proceeds to 'light' the fire, and cook a pot of coffee)

> Sgt.: (rising and folding his blanket) Good morning, Biltwell. Good Morning Colonel. It would appear to be a splendid day, Sir. Not a cloud in the sky.

Colonel.: (struggles to his feet; tosses the 'tent' to one side.) Spendid! Just the ticket!

I feel that we're on the verge of the greatest discovery of the last one hundred years! Hurry up with that coffee will you, Biltwell. Don't take all day! Sergeant! My glass!

> Sgt.: Certainly, Sir! Here you are Sir!

Janet: And here's your coffee, Sir! (He is standing with the glass to his eye, looking 'Eastward'; Janet stands at his side with his cup of coffee.

Col.: He takes the cup and sips.) AHH!!! What the bloody hell! That's too bloody HOT! You clumsy girl! You know I like my morning coffee ICED!

Janet: Ohhh! I'm so sorry, Sir! We've no ice, Sir! It melted a few days ago!... Sir!

> Sgt.: She's right, Sir! There being no way to transport ice, I don't see how you can fault Biltwell...

Col.: She should have warned me. Am I to understand that you are taking her position against me, Sergeant? (Looks threateningly at Sergeant, puts cup down on table, and picks up his whip)

Janet: Oh, Colonel, Sir, he didn't mean it, I'm sure! Please don't flog him! If anyone is at fault, it's me, Sir!

Col.: Out of the way, Biltwell! This doesn't concern you! It's the maintainance of discipline I care about. Take off your shirt, Sargent! (The Sgt. starts to unbutton his shirt, but is stopped when a cry is heard from below the lip of the stage)

⊗ Hott.: Hallo! Up There! Give us a hand, would you? (Best if the Hottentot can manage some sort of Anglicized-Indian accent)

Col.: What the deuce!! (to Sergeant) Did you hear that, Crump?!

> Sgt.: Yes, Sir! I did indeed, Sir!

Janet: But what... who... can it be, Colonel, Sir?

Col.: (strides to the lip of the stage and looks straight down) What! Whaaat? Ohhh...(He begins to sway. His view of the World's edge makes him dizzy)

> Sgt.: (rushes and grabs the Colonel. He pulls him back from the edge) Are you quite all right, Colonel?

Col.: Yes... Yes, blast you! I'm quite all right! Just a momentary... well, look for yourself! But be careful!

> Sgt.: (moves to the edge carefully: looks down) My God! What a sight! Quiet splendid, Sir!

Janet: Oh! May I look, too, Colonel, Sir?

Col.: Oh, all right! But I should cling to the Sergeant, Dogsboddy! After all, you're only a woman! And the sight can be quiet...unnerving...in...those who...lack...nerve! Harumph! Harumph!

> Sgt.: Come on, Jan...Biltwell. I'll hang on to you. Come and look! It's really a splendid sight!

Janet: All right. But do hold me...Sergeant. Tight! (He does and they stand at the Lip and look down together. Then they gaze outward over the audience.)

Hott: (from below) Well? Will you help me? I can hear you talking, so I know you are there!

> Sgt.: (He and Janet look down at the voice; this dialogue should be shouted) What Do you want of us? And who...or what...are you? And what are you doing down...there?

Hott: Just throw me a rope, would you? I can't climb any farther, and it's getting a bit tiresome, hanging on to this root!

> Sgt.: Sir! You heard him! He wants us to throw him a rope! What do you think, Sir?

Col.: Could be a bloody savage. Likely to eat us while we slept! We must proceed with caution! And what's he doing down there? I ask you that!

Janet: We can't just let him fall, can we Sir? I looked and there doesn't seem to be a bottom. Colonel, Sir. It wouldn't be Christian, Sir.

Col.: Oh, for bloody sake! All right, all right! Throw him a rope!

> Sgt. I'll fetch the rope. (runs back to backpack and retrieves rope)

Janet: Thank you, Sir! I know you won't be sorry, Sir.

Col.: I hope you're right, Dogsboddy! But I just wish I knew what he was doing down there.

> Sgt.: There you go! (throws rope over lip of stage, and ties other end around his middle) I hope it's long enough. Can you reach it?

Ⓟ Hott.: Got it! That will do! Well here I come! (The rope should move a bit, and after a count of ten or so, the Hottentot's hands appear then he slowly, and with some difficulty, pulls himself up to and over the stage lip) Ahhh! That was quite a climb! I must thank you!

Col.: Never mind about that! Who are you? And what were you doing down there?

Ⓟ Hott.: Why, I'm a Hottentot! And I live 'down there', as you put it! What I want to know is...who are you? And what are you doing 'up here'?

Col.: Of all the impertinence! I should flog you to an inch of your... (he raises his arm to strike; The Hottentot does not flinch; Janet grabs his arm and stops him) What the bloody hell! What do you think you are doing, Dogsboddy? Let go!

Janet: I can't let you flog him, Sir! I can't!

> Sgt.: She doesn't mean any disrespect, Sir! But I think she's right!

Col.: (pulls arm away) All right. I'll settle with you two later. Now, you! You called yourself a Hottentot. Well, I lived amongst the Hottentots in deepest Kenya, in my youth. And yet you claim that you live ...down there?!

Ⓟ Hott.: That's very exciting to hear! One of our ancient stories tells of some of our people leaving our country and climbing up to another world! Of course we never really believed in it. It was just a story to tell children around the fire, at night. Recently, I became lost while I was hunting the flying lizards, and I came to the edge of an immense cliff. I looked down and saw no bottom, but I decided to climb down to see what was there. I climbed down for days. My food and water ran out. Then, somehow, it seemed that I was climbing up, instead of down. I hadn't turned around, because I left small scraps of cloth to mark my way, and now they were below me instead of above me. Most curious. I continued until, near the top, I heard voices. Your voices! And here I am.

> Sgt.: What a marvelous tale!

Janet: Oh, yes! Quite extraordinary! Don't you think, Sir?

Col.: I think this... 'man'... is a bloody liar! I never heard such claptrap in my life!

Ⓟ Hott.: Oh, I assure you that it is the truth! I can take you and show you, if you like. I must get back to my wife and children soon. They will be worried about me. But if you would like to come, I will take you. The way is well marked and the rope was only needed over that last bit. All in all it was a relatively easy climb.

Col.: I'm tempted to take this fellow up on his offer! Can you imagine the honors I'd receive at the next Explorers Club meeting? Sergeant, remain here and keep the rope secure. I'll wager that even you can do a simple thing like that. When I return we shall see to your discipline! All right, you wog, let's go!

Hott.: If I might have just a swallow of water, please? (Janet hands him a canteen) Ahhh! Now I am ready. Let us descend! (He holds the rope, which is still around the Sergeant's waist and clammers over the edge and disappears.)

Col.: Well, over I go! I'll see you in a few days, Sergeant (He clammers over the lip and disappears)

➤ Sgt.: (Sits on lip of stage with legs dangling over the edge) It is a splendid sight, isn't it, Biltwell?

Janet: (Sits beside him and takes his arm. Snuggles up to him tightly.) I hope you don't mind me holding your arm like this. I still find it a rather unnerving sight.

➤ Sgt.: Oh, no, Biltwell. Actually, I rather...like it. I mean, because it is such a daunting sight, and all. That is, I am rather comforted by having someone here with me, is all.

Janet: Is that all, Sergeant? What I mean is... is it only that you want some human companionship sitting here on the World's edge?

➤ Sgt.: Well, that's part of it, I suppose. But you see, it's more than that. I am rather fond of you, Biltwell. But I guess you know that.

Janet: But you always call me Biltwell. And it's Burnside-Biltwell! But really, I would answer to... Janet.

➤ Sgt.: But I call you Biltwell out of respect for your...husband. Although why he would let his charming little wife go off on a crazy expedition...

Janet: Husband?! I'm not married, Sergeant! Why...

➤ Sgt.: But...Burnside-Biltwell...isn't that your maiden name and your marriage name separated by a hyphen, as it were?

Janet: Oh, no, Sergeant. Oliver...Burnside is my mother's maiden name and Biltwell is her marriage name, and I choose to use both because I am a strong willed woman who refuses to allow any man to treat me like a...well...a Dogsboddy! (As she speaks she unties the rope around the Sergeant's waist; She hands him the now-loosened end)

➤ Sgt.: (He takes the rope and looks first at her and then at the rope. He drops the

rope over the edge) Well, Janet...how would Burnside-Biltwell-Crump suit you? (He leans in and kisses her as the light fades to black)

FIN