

10-page excerpt

CAMERADOS

A documentary drama in one act by

ROY PROCTOR

NOTE ON DOCUMENTS: Except for the narrators, no speeches in "Camerados" are pulled out of thin air. All derive from the historical characters' written or reportedly spoken words, which often have been abridged, rearranged, nudged, pruned, embellished, tweaked or otherwise altered by the author to achieve theatrical ends. The speeches derive primarily from the 100 Walt Whitman letters and the Peter Doyle interview published in 1897 in "Calamus: A Series of Letters Written During the Years 1868-1880 by Walt Whitman to a Young Friend (Peter Doyle)," edited and with an introduction by Richard Maurice Bucke. They are in the public domain, as are the other quotations used in the play.

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CAMERADOS

TIME

Late 19th century

PLACE

Walt Whitman's America

CHARACTERS

WALT (Walt Whitman), American poet; bearded; comfortably built; ages 46-72

PETE (Peter Doyle), the love of Whitman's life; 25 years younger; fit; healthy Irish good looks

ABE (Abraham Lincoln), 16th president of the United States; ageless

NARRATORS 1 AND 2, female; any age; different vocal types; 21st century attire

UTILITY ACTOR 1 as Oscar Wilde, Henry B. Rankin, John Burroughs, William Douglas O'Connor and a waiter

UTILITY ACTOR 2 as Percival Wiksell, George Whitman, John Tindall, Rufus Wilmott Griswald, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Horace Traubel

SETTING

Bare stage furnished as sparsely as possible. At rise, a bench upstage center, which will be removed after the first scene, and, for ABE, a small table and chair down right, which will stay in place throughout the play.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE: "Camerados" can and should be designed, but the handling of furnishings, scenic elements, costume elements and props should be facilitated, as much as possible, by the actors.

(Bench up center; small table and chair, reminiscent of the carved chairs and tables in portraits of the seated Abraham Lincoln, down right. Bench will be removed after opening monologue; chair and table will remain in place throughout the play. Lights rise to reveal PETE down left.)

PETE

(addressing audience)

You ask how I met Walt Whitman. It's a curious story. I was the conductor on a horsecar that ran from Georgetown to the Navy Yard in Washington, DC. It was early 1865, shortly before President Lincoln was shot on Good Friday. The night was very stormy.

(PETE pauses to listen. A horse's hooves clop dully in the mud; the sound of rain is punctuated by thunder. Lightning illuminates WALT on bench up center with a heavy shawl around his shoulders. As sounds recede, lights rise slowly on WALT as PETE continues.)

That storm was awful. Walt was the only one in the car. He sat with a blanket around his shoulders. His long face seemed to melt into a mass of beard. He looked lonely, like an old sea captain. I didn't know who he was, but I wanted to go over and talk to him anyway.

(PETE takes several steps toward WALT, pauses, turns to audience again.)

Something in me made me do it. From the start, something in him drew me that way. Walt said later that there was something in me that had the same effect on him. Anyway, I walked through the car. I sat down beside him. *(sits on bench)* We were familiar at once.

(PETE and WALT glance at each other sheepishly and mime the following as PETE continues.)

I put my hand on his knee. He put his hand over mine. We understood. He didn't get off at the end of the line. He stayed in the car until I finished work. We left the car together. From that time on, we were the biggest sort of friends.

(WALT and PETE freeze in place. Lights rise on NARRATOR 1 and NARRATOR 2.)

NARRATOR 1

Walt Whitman was 46 years old.

NARRATOR 2

Peter Doyle was 21.

NARRATOR 1

Walt was already being called America's greatest – and most despicable -- poet. Ten years before he met Pete, he had published 12 poems in the first 94-page edition of "Leaves of Grass." By the third edition, in 1860, "Leaves of Grass" had grown to 178 poems in 456 pages.

NARRATOR 2

Pete was 8 when he immigrated to America from Ireland. He was 14 when his family moved from Alexandria to Richmond, Virginia, where his blacksmith father found a job at the Tredegar Iron Works. Three years later, one week after Virginia seceded from the Union, Pete enlisted in the Confederate army.

NARRATOR 1

Walt nursed Union soldiers in Washington during the Civil War. He idolized Abraham Lincoln. He wrote poems about Lincoln and lectured on Lincoln the rest of his life.

NARRATOR 2

Before Pete was injured in battle and sent to a hospital in Richmond, he fought against everything Walt and Lincoln stood for.

NARRATOR 2

Pete would become the great love of Walt's life.

NARRATOR 1

Walt was Pete's great love as well.

NARRATOR 2

They were, in Walt's coined term, camerados.

(Lights fade to black. A gunshot shatters the stillness. Sounds of scuffling, shouting and general pandemonium. Lights rise on PETE down center as chaos fades.)

PETE

(to audience)

Walt was not at Ford's Theatre that night. He was visiting his mother in Brooklyn, New York. I was at Ford's. I told Walt all about it when he came back to Washington.

NARRATOR 1

From an Interview with Pete in "Calamus: A Series of Letters Written During the Years 1868-1880 by Walt Whitman to a Young Friend (Peter Doyle)," published in 1897, five years after Walt died.

PETE

I had heard the President and his wife would be at Ford's, so I made up my mind to go. The theater was crowded. I found a seat in the second gallery. There was nothing extraordinary in the performance. I could see everything on the stage. I was in a good position to see the President's box. Then I heard the pistol shot. I had no idea what it was, what it meant. It was sort of muffled. I knew nothing of what had occurred until Mrs. Lincoln leaned out of the box and cried, "The President is shot!" I was stunned. I saw John Wilkes Booth on the cushion of the box. I saw him jump. I saw him fall on the stage. He got up. He cried out something I couldn't hear for all the hubbub. Then he disappeared. I lingered. I was almost the last person to leave. A soldier came in the gallery and saw me. He yelled, "Get out of here! We're going to burn this damn building down!" I said, "If that is so, I'll get out."

NARRATOR 1

Lincoln and Walt never met, but they were intensely aware of each other and their impact on America.

NARRATOR 2

Lincoln became an early Whitman fan. He often mulled “Leaves of Grass” and read aloud from a copy in his law office in Springfield, Illinois. Henry B. Rankin was a student in Lincoln’s law office in 1857.

HENRY B. RANKIN

Readers today can hardly comprehend the shock Whitman’s first book gave the public.

NARRATOR 1

From Rankin’s reminiscences, published in 1916:

HENRY B. RANKIN

From the first, Lincoln appreciated Whitman’s peculiar poetic genius, but he lamented his rude, coarse naturalness. Work in the office stopped while Lincoln read us verse after verse. His rendering revealed a charm of new life in Whitman’s versification. He praised the new poet’s verses for their virility, their freshness, their unconventional sentiments and unique forms of expression. He said that Whitman gave promise of a new school of poetry.

NARRATOR 2

Lincoln’s defense of Whitman was as fearless as it was rare.

NARRATOR 1

Walt was writing for an era in which bodies didn’t have functions, at least not mentionable ones. To call an arm an arm or a leg a leg was considered indecent. Manners dictated that they be called limbs.

NARRATOR 2

Walt’s boss at the Bureau of Indian Affairs was incensed when he began to read a copy of “Leaves of Grass” he found in Walt’s desk. He fired Walt, and he wasn’t alone in his indignation.

NARRATOR 1

Rufus Wilmot Griswold in *The Criterion*:

RUFUS WILMOTT GRISWOLD

“Leaves of Grass” is a mass of stupid filth. Its author is a filthy free lover guilty of that horrible sin not to be mentioned among Christians.

NARRATOR 2

Ralph Waldo Emerson praised “Leaves of Grass” after Walt sent him a copy, but only in an 1855 letter meant for Walt’s eyes only:

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Dear Sir: I am not blind to the worth of your wonderful gift of “Leaves of Grass.” It’s the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet produced. I greet you at the

beginning of a great career. I rub my eyes to make sure the sunbeam you represent is no illusion.

NARRATOR 2

From Lincoln's first encounter with "Leaves of Grass," his oratory seemed to owe an increasing debt to Whitman's epic free-verse flights.

NARRATOR 1

Just as Whitman's poetry owed a debt to the soaring flights of song in the grand opera he loved so much.

(Lights fade on NARRATORS 1 and 2, rise on ABE seated beside a small circular table down right. He's dressed in black. His stovepipe top hat sits on the table along with a copy of "Leaves of Grass." He puts on his reading glasses, lifts the book, finds his place and begins to read.)

ABE

I sing the body electric.

(pause)

The expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face;

It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists;

It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees – dress does not hide him;

The strong, sweet supple quality he has, strikes through the cotton and flannel;

To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more.

You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side.

(pause)

I sing the body electric.

(Lights fade on ABE and rise on WALT, who is standing center stage beside a rocking chair.)

WALT

Dear Boy. I received your second letter yesterday. It is a real comfort to get letters from you, dear friend. Every word does me good.

NARRATOR 1

Walt's first surviving letter to Pete, New York, 1868:

WALT

I'm doing a little literary work. On the whole, though, I don't do much. I eat my rations. I sleep like a top. I'm having a good time, so far, in a quiet way. I'm enjoying New York and the society of my mother and lots of friends. I think of you often, dearest comrade. I find it first-rate to think of you, Pete, and to know that you are all right and that I'll return to Washington and we will be together again. I don't know what I would do if I didn't have you to think of and look forward to.

NARRATOR 1

Pete saved 100 letters Walt wrote to him. They ended up in "Calamus."

NARRATOR 2

Walt apparently saved none of Pete's letters, but nine survived anyway, seven from 1868. They're filled with errors in punctuation and spelling. They show no literary flair. But they're earnest. They're heartfelt. Pete proudly signed one of them Pete the Great.

NARRATOR 1

Walt's lifelong friend, the naturalist John Burroughs:

JOHN BURROUGHS

Pete was the mute inglorious Whitman.

NARRATOR 2

Pete's surviving letters to Walt may be semiliterate, but the long "Calamus" interview offers insight into what Pete might have written if his education hadn't stopped with St. Mary's Sunday School for Boys in Alexandria.

PETE

Walt rode the horsecar with me. Often at noon. Always at night.

NARRATOR 1

From "Calamus."

PETE

He rode round with me on the last trip, sometimes on several trips before that. Everybody knew him. He saluted the men on the other cars as we passed, threw up his hand. They

shouted, "Hullo, Walt!" and he would shout back "Ah, there!" or "Howdy!" Walt was as welcome as the flowers in May. Everybody appreciated his attentions. He appreciated us as well.

NARRATOR 2

John Burroughs in "Birds and Poets," published in 1877:

JOHN BURROUGHS (UA 1)

I'll never forget Walt resting against the dash, by the side of the young conductor, Peter Doyle, his intimate friend.

NARRATOR 1

John Tindall, another friend, addressing the Columbia Historical Society in 1917:

JOHN TINDALL (UA 2)

Whitman preferred to ride on the front platform of a car where the conductor, Peter Doyle, was a young man with light curly hair. Whitman would get on Doyle's car at the Treasury Department and ride toward the Navy yard. Whitman and Doyle's conversation consisted of less than 50 words. It was the most taciturn mutual admiration society I ever attended. The young Apollo was generally as uninformed as he was handsome. Whitman's intellectual attitude was too far beyond Doyle's understanding to be expressed by Doyle's vocabulary. Their fellowship manifested the unconscious deference that mediocrity pays to genius, but also the restfulness which genius sometimes finds in the companionship of an opposite type of mentality. The youthful grace of the conductor and the mature personality of the poet were oddly matched.

PETE

Walt's mood was usually very even, but he was as mad as a March hare one night. He was on the hind end of my car near an old fellow, a carpet-bag senator, I think. They rubbed against each other. It turned into a rumpus. "Get out of my way!" the old man shouted, and Walt shouted back, "Damn you!" The old man raised a stick and would have struck Walt, maybe killed him, if I hadn't come between them just in time. They were in the street by then, and I cried, "Get back in the car, Walt." He did, and all effects of the affair soon vanished from Walt's face and manner. Walt wasn't meek, but neither was he a fighting cock.

NARRATOR 2

Pete's effect on Walt was profound.

WILLIAM DOUGLAS O'CONNOR

A change came over Walt.

NARRATOR 1

Walt's friend, William Douglas O'Connor, reminiscing in 1897:

WILLIAM DOUGLAS O'CONNOR

Because of Pete, the usual rosy color faded from Walt's face. It was replaced by a clear splendor. Walt's form, commanding and masculine, was swathed with inspiration at the very thought of Pete. Walt would lift his clear face, bright with smiling, wet with sweet tears, and explain to me the transformation:

WALT

Love, love, love! That includes all. There is nothing in the world but that – nothing in all the world. Better than all is love. Love is better than all.

(Lights fade on WALT, rise on ABE in his accustomed chair.)

ABE

(reading from "Leaves of Grass")

Camerado, I give you my hand!
 I give you my love more precious than money,
 I give you myself before preaching or law;
 Will you give me yourself? Will you come travel with me?
 Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?

(Lights fade on ABE, rise on PETE.)

PETE

In the afternoon I'd go to the Treasury building to wait for Walt after work.

NARRATOR 2

From "Calumus":

PETE

We'd stroll out together. We'd take great walks, often without any plan, going wherever we happened to get. This occurred day in, day out, months running. Often by day, sometimes at night, frequently toward Alexandria. We went plodding along the road. Walt was always whistling or singing. We would talk of ordinary matters. Walt would recite poetry, especially Shakespeare, or he would hum airs or shout in the woods. He was always happy, cheerful,

good-natured. Walt never seemed to tire. When we got to the ferry opposite Alexandria, I would say, "I'll draw the line here, I won't go a step farther." But Walt would have none of it. We'd cross the Potomac and walk back home on the other side.

NARRATOR 1

Sometimes, after a long workday, Pete and Walt would retreat to the bar at the Union Hotel in Georgetown.

PETE

Walt was a very moderate drinker.

NARRATOR 2

From "Calumus":

PETE

You might have thought something different when you saw the ruddiness of his complexion, but Walt's complexion had no whisky in it. We might take a drink occasionally, nothing more. I remember that bar in Georgetown well. Like as not I'd go to sleep, laying my hands on the table. Walt would stay there, wait, watch, keep me undisturbed, waking me only when the bar was closing.

(Lights fade on PETE, rise on ABE in his accustomed chair.)

ABE

(reading from "Leaves of Grass")

A glimpse . . .

Of a crowd of women and drivers in a bar-room around the stove late of a winter night, and I
unremarked seated in a corner,

Of a youth who loves me and whom I love, silently approaching and seating himself near, that
he may hold me by the hand,

A long while amid the noises of coming and going, of drinking and oath and smutty jest,
There we two, content, happy in being together, speaking little, perhaps not a word.

(Lights fade on ABE, rise on NARRATORS 1 and 2 and WALT.)

NARRATOR 1

Pete was always comfortable in his skin. Walt wasn't. He celebrated love between camarados in "Leaves of Grass," but he sometimes struggled against his attraction to men, which he called adhesiveness.

WALT

Always preserve a kind spirit and demeanor to Pete, but pursue him no more.

NARRATOR 2

From an 1870 entry in Walt's notebook:

WALT

Avoid seeing Pete or meeting him or any talk whatsoever. From this hour forth, for life, depress the adhesive nature. It is in excess, making life a torment. All this diseased, feverish, disproportionate adhesiveness has got to end.

NARRATOR 1

Two weeks later:

WALT

Dear Pete. Well, here I am home again with my mother, writing to you from Brooklyn once more. I've thought a lot about how we parted at the corner of 7th Street on Tuesday night. Pete, there was something in that hour from 10 to 11 o'clock that has left me comfort and pleasure for good. I never dreamed that you made so much of having me with you, nor that you could feel so downcast at losing me. I foolishly thought it was all on the other side. I now see clearly that I was wrong. Love to you, dear Pete. I won't be so long again writing to my darling boy.

NARRATOR 2

Then there was the matter of the rash that peppered Pete's face.

NARRATOR 1

Pete was sure he had syphilis – or worse.

NARRATOR 2

He told Walt he wanted to kill himself.

NARRATOR 1

Walt to Pete, writing from Brooklyn, 1869: