

The ‘Michaelson Model’ o o o

o o o By Alexis Kozak

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

The Michaelson Model by Alexis Kozak is a troubling play about the state of modern education and the state of human nature, both. There’s “veteran teacher” Fred, a cynical old hand who makes no secret of fudging the numbers on his S.G.O.’s (Student Growth Objectives in case you didn’t know) and Logan, a newly minted instructor who believes that he can mold young minds and change the world. You might expect the script to paint the good guy bad guy roles with broad brushstrokes, but then you haven’t experienced the nuance of Alexis Kozak’s writing. The underlying cynicism in young Logan’s worldview is topped off with a hubris that threatens to make the old guy the sympathetic character - if only for a microsecond – and then leaves us with the realization that we’re desperately searching for a hero that doesn’t seem exist in the world of this play, nor in our world either. What keeps the play buoyant is the humor with which Kozak imbues his characters and the conversation at large. For teachers it’s especially spot on. You may find yourself shaking your head, but you’ll also have to laugh at your own “Highly Effective ratings.”

Here’s a line for you –

FRED

“Data.” Ha, ha. When I started, you know what we used to call “data?” “Grades.” Ha, ha. “Grades.” Those were the days.

(Spacing is playwright’s own.)

THE MICHAELSON MODEL

a ten-minute play

by

Alexis Kozak

WINNER OF THE URBAN STAGES (NYC) ACRONYM PLAY FESTIVAL

SYNOPSIS:

When Mr. Dryser tries to educate Logan in the way of the American classroom,
will the student become the teacher?

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CHARACTERS

FRED male, 40's-60's. A veteran teacher.

LOGAN male, early-20's. A first-year teacher. Overtly sure
of himself.

NOTE: Like teachers do, both of these people are capable of charming someone to death, by tai chi-ing and twisting even the most serious of things into a joke. This “charm-and-joke” version of shock-and-awe can be used as both a defense and as a weapon. In fact, maybe it is the only way to survive.

TIME AND PLACE

An American classroom of the present.

SETTING: (High school classroom. FRED—a veteran teacher—sits at his desk, working on a computer. He wears glasses and looks over the tops of his lenses at his computer screen. After a moment, LOGAN—a first year teacher—pops his head in at the door. He is on his way out of the building: jacket, bag, and smart phone in hand.)

LOGAN

Burning the candle at both ends?

FRED

Just the person I wanted to see.

LOGAN

Be still my beating heart.

FRED

Come in here, kid.

LOGAN

Just popping in to say, “Have a nice afternoon.”

FRED

These Student Growth Objectives are killing me—you know how to do this, right?

LOGAN

The S.G.O.’s were due by lunch.

FRED

(Charming, a joke.)

Yeah, well, some of us teach for a living.

LOGAN

You are working with a basic spreadsheet?

FRED

I used to total it up by hand and make a table in a Word document.

LOGAN

A Word document? Jeez. Do they even *make* those anymore?

FRED

Everybody swears this will save me a couple of hours.

LOGAN

Oh, minimum.

FRED

The way this totals things up automatically, it makes me nervous. I don't even really know what it's doing.

LOGAN

You want me to take a look?

FRED

I signed on for coffee, summers off, not *this* crap.

LOGAN

You're using the one administration emailed out, right?

FRED

Trying to.

LOGAN

(Indicating Fred's chair, "sit?")

Can I...?

FRED

(Giving up his chair.)

Oh, sure, sure.

LOGAN

(Sort of to himself, while he looks over Fred's work.)

Okay. Looks like you've got your data columns *here*. Automatically breaks your students down into your three achievement groups—right, okay—low, medium, high—okay. It sorts the data—

FRED

"Data." Ha, ha. When I started, you know what we used to call "data"? "Grades." Ha, ha. "Grades." Those were the days.

LOGAN

Yeah, right? This all looks good so far...Wow.

FRED

What?

LOGAN

Every one of your students hit their goal. How'd you manage that?

FRED

Good teaching?

LOGAN

Every single *one*?

FRED

Excellent teaching?

(Silence. Fred gives Logan a look.)

Are you trying to ask me if they are real? It's okay. You can ask me. "Mr. Dryser, are these S.G.O.'s real?" No. They are not real. I made them up. The only way I could get the kids to score like that would be if I gave them the answers.

LOGAN

But what if somebody questions it?

FRED

I have hard copies. I'm not an idiot. I have something they wrote their own names on. Just in case push comes to shove, but.

LOGAN

I can't believe you're faking their scores.

FRED

When you say it like that, it sounds bad. Hey, listen, if *my* kid—my *own* child—has a teacher that is not intelligent enough to figure out how to do this, then maybe that's not a person I want teaching my kid. You know what I mean? Who is gonna be dumb enough to put in some student growth numbers that are not gonna one hundred percent guarantee them a Highly Effective rating?

LOGAN

I'm just surprised, I guess.

FRED

Smoke and mirrors, kid. Smoke and mirrors.

LOGAN

But, if *I* noticed it...

FRED

You think our supervisors don't know? Believe me, they know. They *need* us to do good. *We* do good, *they* do good. *Their* scores are tied to *our* scores. It's like a sales structure. *You* make more if the guys *under* you make more. Except that in a sales structure, you want to *help* the guys under you, so they perform better. Not this observation "I-didn't-see-*this*, you're-a-two, I-*did*-see-*this*, you're-a-four" bullshit.

LOGAN

Were you a four last year?

FRED

My point is,—the guy who came up with this whole evaluation thing—Michaelson?—where’s he from?, California?—My point is, I’d respect this guy Michaelson if he was like, “Hey, that’s not how my evaluation model is supposed to be used. It was supposed to help teachers improve, not as a tool for school districts to evaluate how well you do your job. You can’t use it like that.” Stand up for the working man—he was a teacher, stand *up* for teachers. Not “you score *this, three* observations next year—you score *this, one* observation.”

LOGAN

He is a she.

FRED

Huh?

LOGAN

The observation paradigm you’re talking about. The Michaelson Model. Michaelson is a woman.

FRED

No shit? Figures. I guess *I’d* whore it out, too, if they paid me enough.

LOGAN

I think it’s actually a good model.

FRED

You drank the Kool Aid, huh?

LOGAN

You can’t turn this in. They’re gonna catch you. A hundred *percent* they’re gonna catch you.

FRED

I’m not doing anything wrong. Not really.

LOGAN

I think they might disagree.

FRED

I wasn’t looking for an ethics lecture. I just wanted you to check my numbers.

LOGAN

Why are you doing this to me?

FRED

What am I doing?

LOGAN

What is this?, a test? Is this some kind of a test?

FRED

Relax a second, kid.

LOGAN

“Check your numbers”? The numbers stink.

FRED

Alright, alright.

LOGAN

And why do you call me “kid” all the time? Why do you do that?

FRED

Hey, I’m just trying to give you some free advice. From somebody who has been around the block.

LOGAN

You called me “kid” in front of the whole school last week.

FRED

Did I?

LOGAN

At the faculty meeting. You said, “The kid’s real good.” You said that in front of everybody.

FRED

I was giving you a compliment.

LOGAN

What do you get out of putting me down?

FRED

“*Get* out of”?

LOGAN

You know the numbers give you away. You knew that before I walked in here. So you brought me in here to what?, to show off? To show me how smart you are?

FRED

Maybe I’m trying to teach you a little something, kid. Huh? Maybe you should just shut up and take the compliment.

LOGAN

Just don't do anything you wouldn't want to see in the newspaper tomorrow.

FRED

I'm not raping little kids. I'm making my job a little easier.

LOGAN

Anytime something goes wrong in this country, people blame the schools. All I'm saying is, don't give them another reason.

FRED

Why? Are you gonna *tell* on me?

LOGAN

No.

FRED

What are we?, adults?, or are we children? Is this the school yard? You gonna tell the playground monitor?

LOGAN

I just said, "No."

FRED

Goddamn right, "No."

(Logan stands and tries to maneuver out from behind the desk. Fred corners him in.)

LOGAN

Get out of my way.

FRED

Sit down.

LOGAN

I'm asking you nicely.

FRED

Oh, "you're asking me nicely"?

LOGAN

What is this?, "Meet me behind the football field after school"?

FRED

I said, "Sit down."

LOGAN

What's wrong with you?

FRED

I'm the guy who might just save your ass.

LOGAN

What the hell are you talking about?

FRED

"Loves New Wave Jazz music, especially trumpet. Binge watches *Scooby Doo*. But only the new episodes."

(Logan is surprised.)

"A passion for good quinoa with spinach."

(Logan becomes slowly mortified.)

Hey, relax kid. Your secret is safe with me. "Quinoa." What even is that?

LOGAN

It's a grain.

FRED

I know what it is.

LOGAN

Because not everybody knows.

FRED

"Quinoa"? Really? And *those* are just the *few* things that are fit to talk about in mixed company. Back in *my* day, the rest of those things were things we wouldn't talk about it public, much less post on the internet for the whole world to see.

LOGAN

What are you doing?

FRED

Wait a second. Did I say "secret"? Can something be "secret" if everybody knows about it?

LOGAN

Why did you look up my dating profile?

FRED

Me?! Jesus Christ. I can't even work a spreadsheet, you think I'm—? The kids! The kids looked it up. They *found* you.

LOGAN

Not possible.

FRED

Mister High Tech, Mister Computer, Mister Online Lessons, Mister Spreadsheet. So much smarter, so much savvier—what's it like?, dating a computer? Kids found your profile?

LOGAN

I'm telling you, kids did not find my profile. I have so many privacy settings, it's like Fort Knox. Like, *I* can barely find it.

FRED

That guy you're talking to? "Bryan" is it?, with a "Y"?

(Logan—terror.)

Is one of the girls in my class. She's pretending to be him. Hey, it's alright. It happens to the best of us. You walk around here like your shit don't stink. Like you're cock of the walk. You think you're pretty smart. You went to State. Yeah, well guess who else went to State? Yeah, that's right. And look where we are now. Right in the same wing, right next door to each other.

LOGAN

I'm allowed to have a dating profile.

FRED

Oh sure. You're allowed to have a lot of things.

LOGAN

Who I am out there, and who I am in here, that's two different things.

FRED

Once you're a teacher, you're a teacher. And that person that lived out there?, that was a human being?, they are in the past.

(A long beat.)

LOGAN

They tell you not to eat in the teachers' lunchroom.

FRED

"They"?

LOGAN

"They," common wisdom. Because eventually we are going to meet somebody like you.

FRED

Good looking, charming, full of snarky war stories?

LOGAN

A teacher whose goal in life is to bring the world down and *us* with it.

FRED

(This stings. This misunderstanding is embarrassing.)

That's not what I'm doing.

LOGAN

Pushing kids to get my dating profile?

FRED

Hey, hey, hold on now.

LOGAN

There are plenty of other ways you could have said what you had to say.

FRED

Alright. Maybe you're right. Look, I like you. You're a bright young man. I'm not trying to knock you down. I'm trying to open your eyes. Common Wisdom never taught in the American public school system. This isn't "a mind is a terrible thing to waste" and "we are the world" and "go out and make a difference." This is get chewed up and spit out and wake up the next day and come in and do it all over again and keep your eye on the prize of retirement and the free luncheon the union throws for you at the end of a career full of disappointments.

LOGAN

I'm not looking to make a career full of disappointments.

FRED

Nobody *is*.

LOGAN

I'm looking to make successes.

FRED

The successes only stand out because of how many disappointments there are. Look, I'm trying to help you.

(Genuinely hurt, at being so misconstrued.)

Come on, Logan. Mr. Crane...

(Pause.)

You're angry at me. You're actually *angry* at me.

LOGAN

You *are* what the data *says* you are. You can't B.S. it your whole life.

FRED

It's just data. It's just numbers. Flip them this way, flip them that way. You can make them say whatever you want.

LOGAN

You can't fake data. Maybe you could, back in the day of the dinosaur. But not anymore.

FRED

You're angry, because I'm right. And you *know* I'm right.

(Referring again to the dating profile.)

"Six foot one, a hundred eighty pounds." Oh, please.

LOGAN

That's not the same thing.

FRED

"Yale pre-med"? That's not the same thing? How can you say you were "Yale pre-med" if you weren't "Yale pre-med"?

LOGAN

Because that is a whole made up world, and everybody knows that. Everybody agrees. Out there is make believe. But in here? In here, this is supposed to be the real world. This is supposed to be real preparation for what it's really gonna *be* like out there.

FRED

"You can be President of the United States. You can be an astronaut. You can be anything you want to be." That's *real* to you? Good luck in *this* profession.

LOGAN

Nobody has wanted to be an astronaut in twenty years, Fred. Who'd want to? I can make a bigger difference with my phone. I can *run* America from my phone. And make a hell of a lot of money doing it, too. And I don't need to be President or go to space to do it. If you stopped and looked at what was really going on in here, maybe you'd understand that.

FRED

(Fred scoffs, shakes his head.)

You've got it all figured out, huh?

LOGAN

Don't take it too hard. You'll catch on eventually.

(Logan gathers his belongings. He stops at the door.)

I'll see you tomorrow morning, kid.

(Logan exits. Fred is left sitting behind his desk.)

LIGHTS DOWN

END PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *Despite many plastic waterproof file boxes overflowing with unfinished plays, I continue to do exactly what you are not supposed to do: write with no idea where you are headed.*

However, at the time of writing this play, I found myself halfway through a rather wonderful book that purported to lay out the steps to writing a fail-proof short play, including knowing the theme one is going to write about and creating character backstories.

“What the hey?” I said to myself. “It’s been a long time since I have planned out characters with backstories and chosen a theme to write about.” That’s usually the last thing on my mind. It’s usually much more like trying to transcribe the dialogue being provided by the schizophrenic muses living right outside of my ear.

So. “Choose something that is important to you or that you feel strongly about.” Check. “Create backstories for your characters.” Check. Alright, enough planning; I had to start writing.

I come from a family of teachers. My mother was a junior college French and English professor. My wife is in early childhood education. My father-in-law was a teacher in his Greek village. While at the end of the day, the work teachers do is joyful, fulfilling, and life-affirming, there are so many things saddled on them/us that try their darndest to diminish as much of that joy as possible. Enter the SGO (a.k.a. Student Growth Objective), the bane of any teacher’s existence. “What is an SGO?” you ask. In a nut shell, a teacher makes a plan to teach X to a set number of students. What follows is a stressful, oftentimes completely fabricated, yearlong game of playing with data to prove that we did what we set out to do. The result of this data manipulation contributes to a teacher being deemed either highly effective, ineffective, or somewhere in between. “You live in ‘effective;’ you only visit ‘highly effective.’” Ooof, doesn’t that just make your skin crawl?

Finally, a student finding the young teacher’s profile on the dating app? Yeah, really happened.

In terms of what appeals to me as far as dramatic literature goes, I love the plays of Bertolt Brecht and Sam Shepard. And as of late, I have been reading classic Irish dramas. I watch a lot of trash TV and NBA basketball. I don’t think any of them have had any influence on me.

AUTHOR BIO: I studied Theatre Arts and English at Rutgers University. I spent my early 20s in Los Angeles, chasing the dream. Sometime after that, I got an MFA in Playwriting from Boston University, and now teach high school theatre in Middletown, NJ, where I often write the fall play. I have published *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz*, the only current dramatic adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s eponymous short story. I also have a scene book for high school actors called *The Greatest of All Time*, carried by Eldridge Publishing. Applause Books is publishing two of my monologues this year in their *Monologues from New Plays of...* series. I love theatre, soccer, reading, and my family...in no particular order.

Visit my website at www.alexiskozak.com

