

Hands Off, We **BITE**

By Faith de Savigne

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... As an opener to her play, playwright Faith de Savigne asks, "What does it mean to be an animal lover?" If you think you know the answer, you may be in for a surprise. Hands Off. We Bite is about our relationships with animals and what tips the scales between appreciation and domination, but it doesn't stop with our four-legged friends or smiling porpoises. In this play, humans are included in the mix and how we treat other animals has everything to do with how we relate to each other as well as to our environment. Although the play goes right for the jugular of socio-political themes, it does so deftly and playfully, popping off the page in the context of a Zoom happy hour and a series of act-outs of animal tourism. The physical aspect of the play is impossibly entertaining but also serves an important purpose, allowing us to go to some incredibly dark places and come back out again.*

NATASHA

(She demonstrates as if she is a manatee by floating gently in space) The manatees are such shy gentle creatures. They're hard to find but our guide knew where to go.

STEVE

And off we went swimming with them.

STEVE THEN GRABS HER AS SHE TRIES TO MOVE AWAY BUT HE PULLS HER CLOSER AND ALMOST CHOKES HER LIKE HE'S SWIMMING ON HER BACK. HE HOLDS HER BY HER NECK AND IS ALMOST DRAGGING HER DOWN AS SHE TRIES TO IGNORE WHAT HE'S DOING.

NATASHA

They just eat plants, so they don't bite.

Watch out for this play – it's got teeth. (Spacing and format is playwright's own.)

HANDS OFF, WE BITE

By

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Characters:

STEVE

NATASHA

Setting: *STEVE AND NATASHA ARE ON A ZOOM CATCH-UP WITH FRIENDS. THEY ARE STANDING TOGETHER IN THEIR KITCHEN WITH DRINKS IN THEIR HANDS. HAPPY HOUR STARTED MUCH EARLIER.*

STEVE: *(To their friends)* Hey guys, I know you said you're animal lovers. But we prove it. Right, Natasha?

NATASHA: Well, I wouldn't say-

STEVE: We do it and go there! Like have you heard about some of our trip? We did this cool thing in Florida. As part of a kid's pool party, you can rent baby alligators to swim with!

NATASHA: *(Gestures with her hand to her nose)* They have their snouts taped shut, of course.

STEVE: Oh yeah, or else they'd take your skin off. Here, like this.

STEVE TAKES HOLD OF NATASHA AS SHE HOLDS HER LIPS SHUT. WITH BOTH HANDS ON HER MOUTH, SHE TRIES TO MOVE AWAY FROM STEVE TOSSING HER AROUND AS IF SHE IS IN THE POOL. SHE STRUGGLES TRYING TO GET AWAY FROM STEVE WHO IS HOLDING HER TOO HARD AND SHE LOOKS LIKE SHE IS DROWNING AND HAVING TROUBLE AS SHE SPEAKS.

NATASHA: *(Breathing heavily)* It's amazing swimming with them. I don't know how they feel about the chlorine, but they just swam for their lives. The pool was full of screaming kids, barking dogs going after them and we just-

STEVE: Wanted to have the experience of touching them.

NATASHA: *(She flicks Steve off of her and faces friends)* I know, you look how I felt. It was scary. I thought I was going to drown. Those poor little gators. Oh, tell them about the Everglades.

STEVE: Yeah, we drove down and got a guide who takes you to swim with the manatees.

NATASHA: They're protected so it's all hush, hush.

STEVE: But it's like a huge maze of mangroves and waterways, so the cops can't find you.

NATASHA: *(She demonstrates as if she is a manatee by floating gently in space)* The manatees are such shy, gentle creatures. They're hard to find but our guide knew where to go.

STEVE: And off we went swimming with them.

STEVE THEN GRABS NATASHA AS SHE TRIES TO MOVE AWAY BUT HE PULLS HER CLOSER AND ALMOST CHOKES HER LIKE HE'S SWIMMING ON HER BACK. HE HOLDS HER BY HER NECK AND IS ALMOST DRAGGING HER DOWN AS SHE TRIES TO IGNORE WHAT HE'S DOING.

NATASHA: They just eat plants, so they don't bite.

STEVE: Yeah, like a really big inflatable sausage. The one I held on to had a big propeller gash on its back.

NATASHA: Well, you know, the power boats just run right over them.

STEVE: Oh, and I posed with one holding out its flipper like we're dancing.
(They pose for a selfie) Cool.

NATASHA: *(To friends)* Um, yeah, I know what you're thinking.

STEVE: What? *(Turns to NATASHA)* What?

NATASHA: We kept that selfie to ourselves. We're not like those trophy hunters.

STEVE: How can you compare us?

NATASHA: You can see their point. We're using the animals to make us look good.

STEVE: But we're not killing them to do that.

NATASHA: *(To friends)* You think we're killing them with kindness?

STEVE: That's ridiculous. We just want to be with them. My favorite were the dolphins.

NATASHA: *(To friends)* It's amazing the stuff you can do with them.

STEVE: I just wanted to swim but they set you up to do this freaky thing where you can excite them, and they try to hump you like a dog. It was kinky.

STEVE THEN GETS OVERLY EXCITED WITH NATASHA. SHE PULLS AWAY BUT HE DOES WHAT THE DOLPHIN DID, A DRY HUMPH.

NATASHA: He just kept going at you.

STEVE: Yeah, endurance man. Wish I could last like that, eh?

NATASHA: *(Disappointingly agreeing)* Yeah, It was a lot of effort for him, right Steve?

STEVE: He got his rocks off, for sure.

NATASHA: Talking about rocks, did we tell you about seeing turtles laying their eggs?

STEVE: We were up all night, but it was worth it.

STEVE GESTURES TO NATASHA TO ACT LIKE A HEAVILY PREGNANT TURTLE. SHE HOLDS ONTO HER BELLY AND MOVES HER ARMS LIKE FLIPPERS AS SHE

THEN FLOPS UPON THE COUNTER TOP WHILE STEVE OPENS HER LEGS AND SHINES AN IMAGINGERY FLASH LIGHT BETWEEN THEM.

NATASHA: Well we all had these lights on our heads as well and when they hauled themselves on to the shore, we ran around them.

STEVE: Then they started to lay the eggs after they dug a hole.

NATASHA: That took a while. They were heavy and ready to burst.

STEVE: We were all excited, trying to touch the eggs as they came out.

NATASHA: Yeah, squishy. I wouldn't want to give birth that way. The crowds and noise-

STEVE: Anyways, the guides did the eggs up later and place them in a more protected area.

NATASHA: Being endangered and all.

NATASHA COMES DOWN FROM THE COUNTER TOP.

STEVE: Nothing beats the call of the wild. That primal instinct-

NATASHA: It was very commercial. Like that one where you can touch the sting rays.

STEVE: I wanted to go out in the open sea but Natasha said-

NATASHA: No. I told him. 'Steve, don't do a Steve.'

STEVE: Yeah, well I hope our next trip could be Thailand.

NATASHA: Um, I was talking to them (*points*) about that. I don't think we should go.

STEVE: Why? (*Facing friends*) What did you say?

NATASHA: Now Steve. Hold on. They make a lot of sense.

STEVE: What? How?

NATASHA: It's not just them. I've been looking into this. It's really awful. That tiger place? They're drugged, bred like a puppy mill, then sold to be kept in cages by the rich.

STEVE: What? That can't be right. They said they do it for conservation.

NATASHA: And the elephants?

STEVE: C'mon, that's cultural.

SHE JUMPS ON STEVE'S BACK AND STARTS TO PULL HIS EARS AND DIG IN HER HEELS. THEN SHE SLAPS HIM.

NATASHA: Move! Oh yeah, that's what elephants do in the wild. Have people ride their back. (*She gets off*) To do that you have to break the animal's spirit.

STEVE: What's going on? Just because they're (*points to friends*) here?

NATASHA: No, hey, show them your missing fingertip. That was from an otter he tried to feed through a hole.

STEVE: *(Holds up his finger tip)* Well I just went to touch it in that zoo and man, those teeth are sharp. Nipped the tip off.

NATASHA: Steve got mad and banged the whole exhibit. They were petrified.

STEVE: I just wanted to touch him. Then I wanted to wring its neck.

NATASHA: I'm always yelling, "Steve, don't do a Steve." You know, Irwin, the guy that got speared by a sting ray?

STEVE: Would you just stop?

NATASHA: You don't see Attenborough getting bit.

STEVE: He doesn't have half the fun. Wrestling, jumping, clutching them. That's how you get close to nature. The one that caught me by surprise was that goose. I didn't know they could be so vicious. Worse than a pit bull.

NATASHA: He was just defending his flock.

STEVE: Why are you defending them? Look what he did to my leg. Clear through my pants.

NATASHA: Maybe they don't want to be groped. No one does.

STEVE: They just don't understand someone trying to help them. Stupid animals.

NATASHA: No, you're not the one getting it. A wild animal shouldn't have to obey you.

STEVE: I'm bigger and I paid for it.

NATASHA: They don't want to be manhandled by you and neither do I.

STEVE: You don't mean that. *(Comes towards her)*

NATASHA: Yeah, I do. Enough. You're too needy. Can't you understand? They can live their lives without you. Without performing, begging or licking your fragile ego!

STEVE: What? No. Hey! *(Tries to come towards her again)*

NATASHA: Don't touch me! Or I'll bite! *(Shows teeth then growls as she leaves)*

STEVE: *(To friends)* See the trouble you caused! *(Runs after her)*

THE END

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *This play is an exploration of people's blind spots. I have heard many people claim they are animal lovers but their actions can be as suspect as those of the Tiger King.*

The character Natasha starts to realise the reality of her animal interactions as she bears the brunt of Steve acting out their adventures on her.

She feels what the animals have gone through.

I was inspired to write this using true examples of what people do in order to have hands-on contact. Animal tourism is a cruel big business.

It's something I have become aware of in my travels and try not to contribute to.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Faith de Savigné has had her plays produced in the U.S.A, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Recent zoom productions: The Religionistas- BelievAbility, N.Y and Are We Doing Christmas? Open Door Playhouse, L.A.*