

SMOKING FAGS ON A ROOFTOP

A playlet
By Craig Houk

PERUSAL

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Synopsis

On a smoke-choked London rooftop, three young, impeccably pink-clad men pass the time with cigarettes and brittle optimism while a new fascist regime cages others below and inexplicably spares them above. Convinced they are being preserved for their “usefulness” and cultural sparkle, Kemper, Logan, and Merrick rationalize their relative comfort even as the air grows hotter and the moral cost of their survival becomes harder to ignore. When Vince, an older outsider misplaced by a clerical error, joins them with a book and a blunt awareness of reality, their self-congratulatory logic begins to unravel. As smoke thickens and the truth becomes unavoidable, the playlet exposes the peril of complacency, the seduction of perceived exceptionalism, and the illusion that anyone can remain untouched while the world burns.

Characters

KEMPER Male, 20s, Any Race

LOGAN Male, 20s, Any Race

MERRICK Male, 20s, Any Race

VINCE Male/Trans Male, 40s, Any Race

Place

London, UK

Time

Present

Setting

A dreary rooftop somewhere in London.

Costuming Note

As noted, each character is dressed entirely in pink, but their outfits are not identical. Instead, each costume should reflect the character’s unique personality and individual sense of style.

Three very young men dressed head-to-toe in simple yet nicely fitted all pink outfits are smoking on a rooftop. The skyline behind them is drab, with plumes of smoke rising in the distance. Three velvet chairs are arranged around a small, ornate table topped with an elegant ashtray.

LOGAN

Things are looking bleak.

KEMPER

For the time being, yes. But there's not much we can do about it except to maybe just buckle up and see where this tyrannical trolley takes us, yeah?

MERRICK

At least we get some air up here.

LOGAN

Except there's nothing to keep us entertained. No mobile, no computer, no streaming, no posting...

MERRICK

As if I could forget. I've lost all one hundred thirty-nine thousand of my followers.

KEMPER

They've already shut down all social media platforms, so what difference does it make? For all we know, those platforms don't even exist anymore.

MERRICK

You had nearly a million followers, Kemper.

KEMPER

Yeah, but unlike you, I'm not going to stress over it. Honestly, I'm just thankful we can still smoke. A rooftop breeze and a fag. What more could you want?

LOGAN

Of course, you'd say that on the brink of doomsday, wouldn't you?

KEMPER

No need to exaggerate, Logan. We're not even close. I mean, look at us. We're still fabulous. And mostly free.

MERRICK

He's right, Logan. They won't touch us. I mean, sure, they've rounded up the others as well, but they're all packed away on the floors below. Locked in cages, stacked on top of one another,

barely room to breathe, let alone move. And here we are. Not exactly first-class amenities, but we've still got plenty of space, and the essentials. And a little bit of flair. Practically penthouse living if you ask me. Still, we've got a lot to offer, so I'm sure they plan to keep us around.

LOGAN

Except for the lesbians and the drag queens.

MERRICK

What do you mean? What about them?

LOGAN

Well, they're still out there. On the streets.

KEMPER

Yeah, of course they are. Holed up in empty bars, just waiting to pounce. Ready for a brawl, never stopping to think things through. Meanwhile, we've been pushing for radical change for years. The proper way. Demanding representation from leaders our age who openly share our views. Marching, protesting, lobbying, practically begging for an equal footing. And not just for us, but for everyone. And the rest of them? Overly cautious, as always. Outnumbering us in the end, electing leaders who tiptoe around progress, chase compromise, and only push for equality as far as it won't stir things up. Spineless bastards.

MERRICK

You're right. This was bound to happen. And honestly, I'm glad it did. This is what comes from not letting young liberals take the lead. I think that's why we're being shown some respect. I think that's why we're being spared. In some twisted way, I think they see a little of themselves in us. And that makes us useful.

KEMPER

That and fascist regimes need a little sparkle, don't they? A splash of pink to temper the flames. And who better to deliver that for them than the young and influential. If nothing else, we've got reach. Assuming, of course, we're given the opportunity to reach again.

LOGAN

You make us sound like throw pillows in a death camp.

KEMPER

That's what we are, aren't we? And so, what? One day, all of this will come to an end. And when it does, everyone will have learned a painful lesson; one we've been warning them about for a very long time. And then the pendulum will of course swing all the way to the left. And we'll have won.

MERRICK

And then all of us – every one of us – will be back to enjoying all the comforts that make life worth living. As equals, of course.

LOGAN

Except those who will have died along the way.

MERRICK

(He sniffs the air.)

What brand do you smoke, Kemper?

KEMPER

What's that?

MERRICK

Your cigarettes. What brand are they?

KEMPER

I roll my own.

MERRICK

So, what tobacco do you use?

KEMPER

Why do you ask?

MERRICK

Well, it smells awful.

KEMPER

Funny. I was just thinking the same thing about yours, Merrick.

MERRICK

It's certainly not mine. What brand do you smoke, Logan?

LOGAN

Oh. Erm, well... normally, Paramount. But admittedly, I'm out. So, I, erm... I pinched one from your pack, Merrick.

MERRICK

You what?

LOGAN

I lifted one of yours.

MERRICK

You did?

LOGAN

Yeah.

MERRICK

I see. Well, that's a bit rude, isn't it?

LOGAN

I'm sorry, Merrick. I guess I was desperate. And as it turns out, I'm not very good at rationing it seems.

MERRICK

I suggest you be careful moving forward. If you want something, ask for it. If I've got it, I'll share it with you. But I won't tolerate a cheat and a thief.

KEMPER

Neither will I.

LOGAN

Of course. And I really am sorry. Honestly, I am. You see, I, erm... I tend to panic sometimes – especially when I'm craving a fag – and I generally overthink things. My thoughts, they, erm... they just take off, and before I know it, I've done something wrong, something incredibly stupid. I won't let it happen again. I swear.

MERRICK

Good to hear.

LOGAN

It's odd to me, you know, how my mind never completely stops racing. Thoughts flooding in almost every second... persistent and overwhelming. Sometimes, I feel like they'll never let up. But then they do. Sort of, I guess. At least for a while. And just when I think I'm free, they come back again, like a hammer... relentless, pounding. Until it feels like my head might crack open. And you know, sometimes... sometimes I think so much it feels like I could think the entire world away. And in those dark moments, I consider giving up completely. But for some reason I

can't. I guess it's because I'm as afraid of living as I am of dying. I wish there was some place in between life and death, a quiet refuge where I might disappear and wait to see if anyone notices I'm gone.

(A quiet moment and then...)

MERRICK

For fuck's sake, Logan. It was just one fag.

KEMPER

Good God. That was something else. Maybe you should go ahead and accept his apology, Merrick.

MERRICK

Yeah, yeah, of course. Apology accepted, Logan.

KEMPER

Is it just me, or is it getting warmer?

MERRICK

What's that?

KEMPER

Feels like the temperature's rising.

LOGAN

The air's definitely heating up, yeah.

MERRICK

Were we expecting warmer weather?

KEMPER

I'm not even sure what time of year it is.

LOGAN

It's Autumn.

MERRICK

How do you know?

LOGAN

I've been keeping a tally on the wall in my room to track the days.

KEMPER

Right. It seems unusually warm for Autumn, though.

MERRICK

Agreed.

KEMPER

It's sad.

LOGAN

What is?

KEMPER

That it's Autumn, except it doesn't feel like Autumn. Normally, it's my favorite time of year. The cool wind moving through the city, that distinct smell in the air, the leaves changing colors, the sun low in the sky, and everyone gearing up for the holidays, before the rush, before the pressures settle in. Before everything goes to sleep.

MERRICK

Global warming.

LOGAN

Sorry, what?

MERRICK

That's why we're having this warm weather. Global warming.

LOGAN

That's... No. No. That's not exactly how global warming works, Merrick. You do know that, right?

MERRICK

How many followers did you have, Logan? On social media?

LOGAN

I don't see how that's relevant.

MERRICK

How many?

LOGAN

Ninety-two.

MERRICK

Thousand?

LOGAN

No. Just Ninety-two.

MERRICK

There you go then. Oh, and speaking of distinct smells in the air, it's getting worse. I don't think I've ever encountered anything quite like it. It's downright disgusting.

(Vince enters carrying a book.)

Ah, there he is. The legendary man of mystery. He speaks only in whispers, if he speaks at all. What might he be hiding, we're all left to wonder.

LOGAN

What are you doing, Vincent? You know the rule: only three people up here at a time. Our turn's almost over anyway, and then you and two others can have the rooftop to yourselves.

KEMPER

Leave it alone, Logan. I'm sure it's fine.

LOGAN

We could be really in for it if someone finds out.

VINCE

Vince.

KEMPER

Sorry, what?

VINCE

My name's Vince, not Vincent. If that's alright with you lot.

KEMPER

Well, of course... Vince.

VINCE

(Vince points to an empty chair.)

Do you mind?

KEMPER

Not at all. Have a seat.

(Vince sits and opens his book to read. A quiet moment and then...)

MERRICK

Just to be clear... Your name isn't actually Vince. I mean, I know you prefer to go by Vince – a shortened version, a nickname of sorts – but your real name is Vincent, right? That's what it says on your birth certificate, yeah?

VINCE

No.

MERRICK

No?

VINCE

No. And with all due respect, what's on my birth certificate is none of your business really. I'd just like to read my book if that's not too much trouble. Just a few pages left.

MERRICK

Right.

(A quiet moment and then...)

Listen, I'm not being funny but, well, you don't quite match the profile around here. What I mean to say is – and again I'm not trying to be funny – you come across as a bit older and a bit more conservative, which I suspect might be linked to your age, whatever age that may be, though I'd guess you're in your forties.

VINCE

A clerical error.

MERRICK

What do you mean?

VINCE

What I mean is, you're right. I shouldn't be on this floor. I'd be a better fit for one of the lower floors, likely street level, or the basement if I'm to be honest. But there was a mistake and so here I am.

MERRICK

I see.

KEMPER

Why didn't you speak up? That would've been the right thing to do, yeah?

VINCE

I did.

LOGAN

I don't understand. So, what happened then?

VINCE

Listen, I'm on a bit of a tight schedule, so I'd prefer to get back to it. I'm really looking forward to seeing how things turn out here.

(He goes back to his book. A quiet moment and then...)

MERRICK

We're not supposed to have books.

VINCE

Not sure that matters at this point.

KEMPER

And why wouldn't it matter?

VINCE

(He sighs and closes his book.)

Okay, I'll try to make this quick. Right, so... yes, there was a cock-up with the paperwork and yes, they uncovered it. Except instead of correcting it, they figured it might be a fun idea to just go ahead and chuck me in with the rest of you. Apparently, I looked like a real hard arse to them, so they thought maybe I might shake things up a bit on the top floor; thought maybe you lot might get a little miffed having someone like me in the mix. Piss everyone off and then sit back to see how quickly it all goes to shit. Problem being, I'm an introvert. And a pacifist to boot. And anyway, I figure you're all more than capable of imploding on your own without my assistance. So, what do you reckon? Have I managed to answer all your questions, then?

KEMPER

Erm, uh... I believe you have, / yes.

KEMPER

/ Yes.

KEMPER

/ Yes.

VINCE

Good. And with that, I'll be getting back to my book. I'd really like to finish this before the fire reaches us.

(The others are dumbfounded. Logan moves to the edge of the rooftop and looks down. His eyes widen. Vince read on, eyes fixed on the page, not looking up...)

I wager you lot wish you were hiding out with those lesbians and drag queens right about now.

(Vince touches his index finger to his tongue and then turns the page. End of playlet.)