A new plot for America

The 1936 play ‘It Can’t Happen Here’ is adapted for our times.

By Renée Loth Contributor, Updated June 14, 2024

It is 1936. Fascism is on the rise in Europe as demagogues gain control in Germany, Italy, and Spain. In the United States, the Ku Klux Klan is recruiting briskly. The Rev. Charles Coughlin’s antisemitic radio broadcasts are attracting millions of listeners, and Coughlin himself is running for president as a third-party candidate against Franklin D. Roosevelt. The country is in the teeth of the Great Depression, a time ripe for despots.
Into this perilous scene steps Sinclair Lewis, the first American to be awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. Under the auspices of the New Deal’s Federal Theatre Project, he adapts “It Can’t Happen Here,” his dystopian novel about a fascist takeover of America, into a play. On Oct. 27, 1936, it is performed simultaneously in 21 cities, from Boston to Seattle. Some productions are in Spanish, or Yiddish, or have racially integrated casts. Thousands attend. One week later, Roosevelt is reelected in a landslide, winning 98 percent of the Electoral College vote.

It is 2024, and the parallels are uncanny. Nativism, economic grievance, and disinformation are again threats to democracy. Hearing that echo, the group Writers for Democratic Action has adapted the cautionary Lewis play for our times. On July 19 — the day after Donald Trump presumably accepts the Republican nomination for president at his party’s convention in Milwaukee — actors organized by WDA will mount free staged readings of “It Can’t Happen Here — Again” in more than 40 locations across the country.

With just five people reading from a scaled-down script lasting roughly 35 minutes, “It Can’t Happen Here — Again” is designed to be performed by ordinary citizens, in backyards and bookstores, church halls and living rooms. Anyone can sign up. Some of the readings will be in Spanish. At least one will be staged overseas. Boston’s
well-regarded Poets Theatre plans a reading, venue to be determined. Some, like the one directed on Cape Cod by Jeff Zinn, the former artistic director of the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theatre, will be professional stagings (reservations required). But all can be powerful antidotes to despair.

“It’s a literal expression of collective action,” author and poet Rachel DeWoskin, chair of WDA’s Michigan chapter, said in an interview. DeWoskin hopes the productions will motivate Americans to shake off their political exhaustion and get involved. “That’s what art does.”

As of this writing, “It Can’t Happen Here — Again” already is slated in more states than the 1936 version. “It’s kind of magnificent what’s starting to happen,” said author James Carroll, who is on the WDA steering committee and co-wrote the adaptation with DeWoskin and Wesley Savick of Suffolk University’s theatre department. “It’s citizens finding a way to do something, rather than jump off the roof.”

In New York City, the July 19 reading will be performed at The Lambs, the oldest professional theater club in the country. Lewis himself strode the halls of its original location late in his career, after a film production of “It Can’t Happen Here” was canceled by skittish executives at MGM Studios. “I feel like everything we do now as artists needs to help make people aware,” said Tony-nominated actor and
director Walter Willison, who will be producing and acting in the New York event.

Willison’s production will be professionally filmed and uploaded to social media so that even more people can absorb its message. The hope is that another round of readings, including student productions in high schools and colleges, will be staged in late October, just before the election. “The whole idea is ‘seed to the wind,’ ” Carroll said.

Lewis was inspired to write “It Can’t Happen Here” by his wife, Dorothy Thompson, a pioneering journalist. She spoke fluent German and interviewed Adolf Hitler in 1931, becoming the first US correspondent expelled from Germany after she described the Nazi leader as “inconsequent and voluble, ill-poised, insecure … the very prototype of the Little Man.”

Thompson is given perhaps the most chilling lines in the new play, taken from her published writings about the danger of fascism. “When liberty is taken away by force, it can be restored by force,” her character says. “[But] when it is relinquished by default, it can never be recovered.”

In other words, complacency is the real danger. Ultimately, the staged readings are efforts to get out the vote — to combat the apathy, or sheer ignorance, that has led too many Americans to shrug off the existential
threat posed by Donald Trump. An informed electorate is a prerequisite of participatory democracy, and “It Can’t Happen Here — Again” is a provocation, a call to action, a lesson in a history we can’t afford to repeat.

Renée Loth’s column appears regularly in the Globe.