A Taste of Buffalo: Staging the Lives of U.S. Cities

David J. Eshelman

Context

In the years between 1999 and 2002, I lived in Austin, Texas. At the time, Austin was one of the hippest, trendiest places in the United States. Magazines and television shows extolled its virtues. I constantly ran into people who echoed the mantra, “Austin’s cool.” But I hated it. The more Austin was pronounced a “cool” city, the more it seemed that new upwardly-mobile people moved to Austin. As a result the streets became clogged with traffic, creating a situation where a once quick trip to the grocery store became a forty-five minute journey. Rents skyrocketed. The only city park near my apartment had been fenced off because it was polluted with chemicals. And no one seemed to care.

Having grown up in Buffalo, New York, I was used to the benefits of all that Austin was not. I had come to love a city in its twilight years—the old, the cold, the cheap, and the empty—yet I remain keenly aware of its sufferings. A recent New York Times article entitled, “Vacant Houses, Scourge of a Beaten-Down Buffalo,” describes the pitiful state of parts of the city. With so much poverty and so many people leaving, many old neighborhoods are pockmarked with abandoned houses and vacant lots. Buffalo historian Mark Goldman likens much of the city to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (quoted in Belsen). Although I am enraged by this state of affairs, I nonetheless have great respect for the Queen of the

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Great Lakes—a city in its maturity or, perhaps, dotage.

It was only by living in Austin that I understood Buffalo. I saw in the Texan capital what Buffalo must have been at one time, back when people were racing to move there, when new businesses were opening daily, when millionaires built homes there, and when huge civic displays were part of the urban cultural fabric. Sadly, I saw Austin losing what Buffalo had lost long ago. The same spark that drew people to the city initiated a cycle that destroyed that very spark. The lure of the life promised by hippies, artists, and students caused an influx in business, which, in turn, increased the population, contributed to increased housing costs, and priced out the people who made Austin so exciting.

My experience in these two cities—Buffalo in its decline and Austin in its rise—prompted me to write a musical entitled *A Taste of Buffalo*, in which I explore the “life cycles” of U.S. cities. I am especially interested in the lure of prosperity; more specifically, I am interested in the sacrifices cities make in order to “succeed.” In its chronicling of the ebb and flow of city growth, the play concentrates on the relationships among U.S. cities, one to another. In order to emphasize these interactions, the cities are personified, each played by an actor. In this way, the national vying for status is concretized as a human conflict.

**The Play**

*A Taste of Buffalo* has a cast of six women. In addition to other roles, each actor plays a city: New York City, Los Angeles, Seattle, Austin, Buffalo, and Buffalo’s Suburbs. New York City and Los Angeles are the untouchable leaders in a modern-day Olympus: they sit on the “Council of Cities” and pass judgments regarding which regions will succeed and which will fail. They are both “global cities,” to use Saskia Sassen’s term. Both are key players on the global scale and, as a result, what happens in these cities has a profound effect on other U.S. cities. Seattle and Austin are the upstarts, both eager for

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1 The “global cities” that Sassen describes in her book, *The Global City*, are New York, London, and Tokyo. However, I believe that L.A. has a power near that of
recognition, desperately trying to distinguish themselves as they battle for the attention of the Council. Buffalo is the self-proclaimed “Queen of the Great Lakes;” dressed in shabby ermine and a paper crown, she is the senile cousin who shows up at the Council meeting and makes everyone uncomfortable. She cannot walk without the help of her Suburbs, who act as her nurses.

In this play, cities are represented generationally. Seattle and Austin are the young. Buffalo’s Suburbs are the middle-aged, saddled with the responsibility of caring for an aged parent, Buffalo. The generations of the play are represented in two parallel and interrelated plots. On one level, the play deals directly with cities: they are imagined like Greek gods, sitting and bickering in their “Council of Cities.” On another level, the play deals with the human residents of Buffalo. The character of Buffalo herself most clearly links these two worlds. The same actor who plays Buffalo also plays a woman named Eleanor, a ninety-year-old who is basically a human version of the city. Both characters, city and person, suffer from dementia. The metaphor of senility seemed to me particularly apt: Eleanor, like Buffalo, is very bad off—so bad off that she has no way of realizing just how bad off she is.

While Buffalo/Eleanor provides the thematic link between the two worlds of the play, the protagonist in A Taste of Buffalo is Seattle. At one point in recent history, Seattle had the most millionaires per capita in 2000; in 1900, that distinction was Buffalo’s. This illuminating fact caused me to see similarity in Seattle and Buffalo across the span of a century. A Taste of Buffalo, then, follows Seattle on her quest to learn what “prosperity” means.

I should make one additional remark about the play. It is a musical written by a playwright, up to this point without collaboration. Therefore, music is key, but not pre-eminent. In this way, A Taste of Buffalo stands in contrast to most contemporary musicals—more similar to the work of Brecht. Readers may be

New York. Like New York, Los Angeles is a major producer of cultural products (e.g., films, television series, albums). As media powers, these cities help shape public perception in ways that are unique to global cities. Additionally, Los Angeles, like Sassen’s other global cities, is a major hub for immigrants; it is one of the most diverse cities in the world.

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surprised, at first, by the brevity of the musical numbers; however, apart from not knowing when to clap, audiences seem to accept them well.

Scene One

The setting is the late 1990s. The musical begins in the Council of Cities, with Austin and Seattle attempting to win the favor of New York City and Los Angeles. The two great ones insist that new cities must distinguish themselves in order to be recognized. Seattle makes the audacious claim that she is a city of philanthropy. She sings:

I want to be a Saint of the Cities!
I'm not happy just being me!
I want to bring my neat Seattle thing
To all the sad cities who are suffering.

In the midst of her song, Buffalo explodes onto the scene, blindly searching for a “nostalgia convention.” New York and L.A. see a chance to force Seattle to live up to her claim. They order Seattle to transform herself into a human being and to visit the city of Buffalo on the day of its annual culinary festival, A Taste of Buffalo. In order to travel, Seattle must partake in something Buffalonian—in this case, eating chicken wings and singing “Buffalo Gals, Won’t You Come Out Tonight?” Seattle embarks on a journey to locate Buffalo’s “faltering prosperity,” a task made difficult because of the uncertainty as to what constitutes “prosperity.”

Scene Two

Once in Buffalo, Seattle sets about her search. She encounters a number of Buffalonians who talk about their city but are unable to help her with her quest. The most noticeable citizen is the nonagenarian Eleanor. Played by the same performer who plays the city of Buffalo, Eleanor likewise suffers from dementia and must be led around by her daughter (played by the actor who plays Buffalo’s Suburbs). Eleanor’s memories have been whittled down to vague recollections of past sexual experiences. She insists on recounting
past abuse through song:

Under the viaducts,
Boys would try to hold me down.
“How much can you take?” they ask.
“How much can you take?”

Eleanor’s song makes those who hear it very uncomfortable, especially because of the matter-of-fact way in which she sings— briskly and with no great sadness. (This troubling image of past sexual trauma will recur in later scenes as a metaphor for the treatment of cities.) Seattle feels no closer to locating Buffalo’s faltering prosperity. She is about to give up her search, when she encounters Shani Bevilacqua, a young celebrity who is a self-proclaimed “angry-girl folk-rocker.” Because Shani is young and trendy, Seattle is immediately convinced that this young artist holds the key to prosperity. Eleanor appears and invites Seattle to go with her behind the Johnny-on-the-spots; however, convinced that her quest is over, Seattle instead grabs hold of Shani’s hand and whisks her back to the Council of Cities.

Scene Three

In the Council, Seattle discovers that she has been fooled: Shani is actually just Austin in disguise. In her ignorance, Seattle had mistaken for prosperity what most resembled her. New York and L.A. order the chagrined Seattle back to the A Taste of Buffalo. Seattle now realizes that she must look for fading prosperity in that which is old and unlike herself.

Scene Four

This time, Seattle accepts the aged Eleanor’s invitation to go behind the Johnny-on-the-spots, where they enter a magical world. Here, Eleanor undergoes a kind of cosmic lucidity: her unfocused mental state allows her to become a window to Buffalonian history. The rise and fall of the city Buffalo is mapped onto the century-long life of the woman Eleanor. Eleanor’s personal history and Buffalo’s civic
history become intertwined and inseparable. The city is shot dead with the 1901 assassination of McKinley; but, in the same way that it takes McKinley many days to die, it takes Buffalo many decades. The boys who pestered young Eleanor under the viaducts become the tycoons who approach Buffalo with offers of money and success. Buffalo/Eleanor dances her way through the decades of the twentieth century. As the old woman sees her prosperity slip away, Seattle finds herself approached by the same tycoons who pestered Buffalo and is forced into the same dance.

Scene Five

The play ends with Seattle’s sorrowful return to the Council of Cities, where she finds herself dressed in the shabby ermine and the paper crown that Buffalo wore in the first scene. The Council asks, “Once you’ve gotten a taste of Buffalo, / Whatcha gonna do about it?” Seattle tries to find hope in her situation, suggesting that she can form a committee or radically change her life. But her pleas sound desperate and hollow. The musical ends with the indomitable Buffalo wandering in and singing, “I was the Queen!”

Urban Decline

_A Taste of Buffalo_ participates in a broader discussion about the rise and decline of cities and about who benefits from, or is left behind by, this cycle. An exploration of urban decline is significant because it affects more cities than just those represented in _A Taste of Buffalo_. Many former industrial centers—such as Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis—share the same concerns over pollution, poverty, and unemployment. Likewise, Seattle and Austin are not the only boom-towns: Portland and San Francisco have experienced similar growth and popularity, and face similar pitfalls in the future.²

² Of course, San Francisco is an odd choice for a list of cities that have recently been deemed hip or cool, since it has long been associated with alternative (or bohemian) culture; however, unlike other major US cities that have experienced renewed interest and prosperity since the real estate boom in the mid-1990s, much
A Taste of Buffalo serves as a cautionary tale for the boom-towns. In keeping with a cautionary tale, relationships in the play are sexualized. There are repeated warnings of sexual dangers—ranging from Eleanor’s recollections of what happened under the viaducts, to the attack on Seattle at the end of Scene 4. The rise and fall of cities are depicted like the conquests of villainous rakes: the wealthy tycoons in Scene 4 woo Buffalo, win her over with gifts, “take advantage” of her, and leave her for someone younger and prettier (Seattle). It raises the question, though, of who these tycoons are. They are identified as wealthy. They are also identified as male. Lastly, the tycoons are played by the same actors who play New York and L.A.: they are in some way, then, connected to these powerful, global cities.

But how exactly do these tycoons “take advantage” of Buffalo and Seattle. What does that mean for a city? For the human characters, the result of the sexual abuse is psychological wounding. Like Eleanor, who has lost most of her mind to senility yet vividly remembers the viaducts, psychological wounds affect those who live in Buffalo. All characters marked as Buffalonian carry with them some trace of scarring. They are what Seattle calls “crazy.”

But, while the characters are scarred in their minds, the city of Buffalo is scarred in its landscape. Throughout the play, there are references to the environmental consequences of careless industrialization. In Scene 2, Seattle encounters two Buffalonians, the Retired Schoolteacher and the Greek Restaurant Proprietress, who reveal that they have both recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer. They seem rather certain that their illnesses are due to environmental causes. As the Schoolteacher says:

I knew it was coming. I'm part of this women's group—retired teachers. We all lived in the same neighborhood, and we all got cancer, one after the other. Tick tick tick. I knew it was my turn.

San Francisco’s fortunes have been tied to information age economies. Therefore, as speculators predict the bursting of the “dot com” bubble, they also imply that the city’s draw for the types of people who would in recent history choose to live in the suburbs is only temporary.
Seattle is shocked by the nonchalant resignation. She asks if they’re going to “do something about it.” “There already was one Love Canal,” the Schoolteacher responds, referring to the Buffalo-area neighborhood built on a toxic dump, a national news story in 1980. The Proprietress echoes her friend’s sentiments: “It’s been done before; and now no one cares.” Seattle tries to get the women to challenge their fate, to bring awareness to their problems. They dismiss her:

SCHOOLTEACHER
You wouldn’t understand.

PROPRIETRESS
You’re not from here.

The Schoolteacher and Proprietress, weary residents of a beaten city, lack Seattle’s faith in the efficacy of individual action.

Throughout the play, attention is drawn to those who are victimized by the cycles of cities. It is not just the cities themselves in the abstract, but also the inhabitants. For the most part, these inhabitants are depicted as old. The play could also be used, though, to spark discussion about how other factors—such as race, ethnicity, and class—play into the cycles of cities.

Urban development and industrialization are presented as synonymous and as a force that comes from outside the city—a swarm of locusts that arrives with a pervasive fervor and leaves when all has been decimated. But cities like Buffalo are not left empty, like old Western ghost towns. People remain. But who?

Race is a key factor in urban decline, as Gregory Squires asserts in *Capital and Communities in Black and White*. Race plays a role in who can leave a city and who must stay. Because of discrimination and an uneven distribution of wealth, people of color often have limited educational and career choices (Squires 3). In industrialized cities, the flight of the tycoons to Seattle is like the “white flight” from the old industrial centers. As Squires puts it, “When corporations seek out greener pastures they tend to seek out whiter ones as well” (3). A discussion of who’s who in the play can yield a fruitful look at the social and cultural factors that make up the lives of the people who
hide behind the allegorical figures in *A Taste of Buffalo*.

The best use for this play is as a vehicle for discussing broader social issues surrounding the rise and decline of the city. Although the cities in the play are represented as god-like figures, it is important to remember that each one stands for an actual place populated by flesh-and-blood human beings. It would be fitting, then, to supplement any performances of the play with dramaturgical materials such as posters, post-play discussions, and guest speakers, as ways to address the broader implications of the work.

Seattle repeatedly suggests that those around her can better their situation through their own effort. The play suggests otherwise. Seattle finds herself part of a brutal cycle that she is not able to stop. In the last scene, when she sings, “I’m gonna change!,” it seems that even she is not able to keep up her optimism. However, if this play runs the risk of effacing the material existence and efficacy of individual people, it also suggests the complexity of the issues presented. The cycles of cities cannot be broken by individual willpower. Instead, they can only be approached when the “problems of progress” are faced in all their complexity—and, only then, can change happen, small step by small step.

Production History

*A Taste of Buffalo* had a reading at the Missouri Playwrights Workshop in December 2002. It had concert readings, with music, as part of the Mizzou New Play Series (March 2003) and the Missouri Summer Repertory’s Summer Comedies in Concert Series (July 2003). Both concert readings were directed by David R. Kilpatrick and produced by David A. Crespy.

About the Scene Presented

I have chosen to present Scene 4, the “Behind the Johnny-on-the-Spots” Scene, because it represents the play’s climax and most clearly presents the mixing of civic and human history found throughout the play. Because of its location near the end, this scene is able to repeat and connect many songs from earlier in the play. This is true, for
example, in the case of “Buffalo’s Prosperity Medley.” The lyrics, “I am so lucky, / I sit at the top of the nation . . . ,” are a reprise of a song that Seattle sings at the top of the play, only this time it is Buffalo singing. At the end of the scene, actors return as the characters that they play at the A Taste of Buffalo festival. Seattle sings, “Buffalo Gals,” in order to transport herself back to the Council of Cities.

Works Cited


SCENE FOUR

SETTING: Main Street, Downtown Buffalo, A Taste of Buffalo.

AT RISE: The stage is black. A spotlight shines on SEATTLE.

SEATTLE

My first trip to Buffalo was less than successful. I wasn’t really clear on what prosperity was, so I can’t be blamed for not finding it; can I? I decided then that, this time, I would do the exact opposite of what I had done before. I would probe whatever seemed old and disgusting.
After all, if I was going to be the next New York, I needed to make sacrifices.

(Lights up on the A Taste of Buffalo booths from Scene 2. SEATTLE is at the center. We are picking up in the middle of Scene 2. Eerie music. Light shift. Enter ELEANOR. She wears the orange coat from Scene 2, along with the same odd hat, resembling a top hat.)

ELEANOR

You with the hair.

SEATTLE

What do you want, Eleanor?

ELEANOR

Come with me.

SEATTLE

Where are we going?

“Behind the Johnny-on-the-Spots”

ELEANOR

COME WITH ME.

WE’LL GO BEHIND THE JOHNNY-ON-THE-SPOTS.

COME WITH ME.

WE’LL GO BEHIND THE JOHNNY-ON-THE-SPOTS.

(Song ends. ELEANOR leads SEATTLE to a strange and fantastic place. Light change. Dance number. Dreamy dreamy. The ACTRESSES WHO PLAY NEW YORK CITY, LOS ANGELES, AUSTIN, and SUBURBS dance by, in big plumed hats. In front of them, they hold giant chicken wings, as though they were canes.)

SEATTLE

What are those?
ELEANOR
Buffalo gals. They’ve come out tonight.

SEATTLE
Where are we? What’s behind the Johnny-on-the-Spots?

“Traces of Love Canal”

ELEANOR
Every time you turn around, in all the cracks and fissures, there’s a little bit of Love Canal. Love Canal. (Her last two spoken lines constitute the first lines of the song; sung)
TRACES OF LOVE CANAL.
LOVE CANAL. LOVE CANAL.
TRACES OF LOVE CANAL.

WE CAN NEVER ESCAPE IT
LOVE IS IN THE MUD.
LOVE SEEPS INTO OUR BASEMENTS.
LOVE IS IN OUR BLOOD.

(BUFFALO GALS attach horrible tumors to themselves.)

BUFFALO GALS
LOVE CANAL. LOVE CANAL.
TRACES OF LOVE CANAL.

SEATTLE
Okay, nutcase, if you’ve taken me to this strange place, then there must be some reason. What is it?

ELEANOR
I remember when the Goundry Street trolley derailed, and there were human limbs all over the road. Young girls came out with baskets and gathered up the arms, feet, and heads, as if they were flowers or mushrooms. I made myself a pretty bouquet.
BUFFALO GALS hand ELEANOR a basket of severed limbs. She throws the limbs at SEATTLE, who reacts.

BUFFALO GALS
LOVE CANAL. LOVE CANAL.
TRACES OF LOVE CANAL.

SEATTLE
Oh god! I can still feel the hands touching me!

(One of the BUFFALO GALS [AUSTIN] takes the hat from ELEANOR's head and dons it. She becomes McKinley.)

ELEANOR
President McKinley, we're happy you've made it.

McKINLEY (AUSTIN)
You know how we Presidents are. We insist on cities that matter.

ELEANOR
Did you hear that, girls? We matter. Shall we put you in a barrel and send you over the Falls? For sport.

McKINLEY
Ha ha. The pleasantries. No; but I would like to put this whole grand city—this Buffalo—into a barrel and preserve her like a pickle.

ELEANOR
Oh, thank you.

(BUFFALO GALS waltz as ELEANOR and McKinley sing.)

BUFFALO GALS
LOVE CANAL. LOVE CANAL.
TRACES OF LOVE CANAL.
(Two of the other BUFFALO GALS [NEW YORK CITY and LOS ANGELES] put on fur coats or other signs of riches and become tycoons.)

TYCOON 1 (NEW YORK CITY)
Lovely place. There’s McKinley.

TYCOON 2 (LOS ANGELES)
Let’s invest money.

(They look at each other and laugh maliciously. They give money to ELEANOR.)

ELEANOR
Oh, thank you. So much money.

TYCOON 1
We’re not done.

TYCOON 2
Have some more.

(They begin to throw more and more money at ELEANOR. She can barely hold it. Dollar bills fly everywhere. McKinley laughs.)

ELEANOR
Oh, thank you. But I can’t hold much more.

TYCOONS
How much can you take?

ELEANOR
They ask.

TYCOONS
How much can you take?
ELEANOR
Now, really; stop stuffing me full of money.

SEATTLE
Count your blessings, is what I say.

ELEANOR
A little is a blessing. When it’s too much, you know they expect something in return.

TYCOONS
How much can you take?

ELEANOR
They ask.

TYCOONS
How much can you take?

McKINLEY
Eleanor, with all that money sticking out of you, I can only love you. Let me come from Washington to kiss you.

(SUBURBS as LEON CZOLGOSZ comes forward with a gun. He shoots McKinley.)

McKINLEY (Continued)
Oh, I'm shot.

(McKINLEY sinks down, only to rise up again. CZOLGOSZ shoots again.)

McKINLEY (Continued)
Oh, I'm shot.
A Taste Of Buffalo

(McKINLEY sinks, rises, and is shot again.)

McKINLEY (Continued)
Oh, I'm shot.

(McKINLEY sinks. Instead of rising, he walks surreptitiously, in a slumped posture, to ELEANOR.)

McKINLEY (Continued)
(Whispers)
I don’t know how to say this. I think my visit to Buffalo is ill-fated.

(CZOLGOSZ shoots again.)

McKINLEY (Continued)
Oh, I'm shot.

(This time McKINLEY falls on the ground.)

ELEANOR
Tycoons, help me! The president's been shot!

TYCOON 1
Oh, yes. What a marvelous sign!

TYCOON 2
Marvelous!

TYCOON 1
So few cities have taken the lives of presidents. And we have.

TYCOON 2
What an elite group! Oh, marvelous fun!

SEATTLE
Hey, I don’t think he’s dead.
McKINLEY
Well, of course, he’s not. Not like these newfangled presidents who
die right away or don’t die at all. McKinley lingered for a week before
he passed on. And the nation held its breath.

TYCOON 1
What if he lives? Then we’ll be like everyone else.

TYCOON 2
Oh, but look what the shooting has done for the tourist trade.

TYCOON 1
Dying president! Get your tickets!

SEATTLE
I don’t like seeing him writhe in pain. Can’t something be done?

TYCOON 1
(Echoes of SCHOOLTEACHER)
Obviously not. McKinley died. If you knew your history book you’d
know that.

SEATTLE
It’s just pitiful to see him clinging to life like that. It would be better
if he’d just die.

CZOLGOSZ
You would say that, wouldn’t you?

McKINLEY
Eleanor . . .

(ELEANOR gets down on her knees to be with the president.)

ELEANOR
Yes, Mr. President.
McKINLEY
Let me give you my hat.

ELEANOR
But you need it.

McKINLEY
I'm dying. You can only wear this hat when you're healthy. Take it.

(ELEANOR puts on McKINLEY's hat.)

ELEANOR
Thank you.

(She poses with the hat.)

McKINLEY
This city’s been very hospitable, even though I’m dead.

ELEANOR
Thank you.

(TYCOONS and CZOLGOSZ dance in the background.)

CZOLGOSZ and TYCOONS
LOVE CANAL. LOVE CANAL.
TRACES OF LOVE CANAL.

(McKINLEY and ELEANOR speak over the music.)

McKINLEY
That’s a special hat.

ELEANOR
Oh?
McKINLEY
I call it “hat of prosperity.”

ELEANOR
Do I look prosperous?

McKINLEY
You are prosperous. Let me tell you a secret.

(ELEANOR leans in close.)

McKINLEY (Continued)
In 1900, Buffalo had more millionaires per capita than any city in the nation.

ELEANOR
Really?

(McKINLEY nods.)

ELEANOR (Continued)
Then no wonder all my old buildings are so lovely. The richest city in the nation.

McKINLEY
Per capita.

ELEANOR
More bucks per person.

“Buffalo’s Prosperity Medley”

ELEANOR (Continued)
(Sings)
I AM SO LUCKY!
I SIT AT THE TOP OF THE NATION!
MY SKYLINE IN BEAUTIFUL ZIGZAGS!
I'M LUCKY, SO LUCKY TO BE
ME.

I AM SO LUCKY!
THE RICH COME IN STREAMING WITH BUSINESS!

TYCOONS

(Throwing money)
Here we are!

ELEANOR
MY COFFERS ARE BURSTING WITH MONEY!
I'M LUCKY, SO LUCKY TO BE
ME.

I AM THE QUEEN OF THE GREAT LAKES!
I AM THE QUEEN OF THE GREAT LAKES!

CZOLGOSZ
GEE, QUEEN CITY, CAN'T YOU SEE HOW THINGS ARE –
SUCCESS IS A ROLLING BALL.
IN ITS TRACKS, IT BRINGS ONLY DEATH,
THAT WAITS TO SMASH YOU WHEN YOU TRIP AND FALL.

ELEANOR
Yeah? Yeah? Well, that was other cities before me. Like Carthage and
Alexandria and Atlantis and Sodom and Gomorrah. Stupid cities. But
I'm different. I'm hep.

CZOLGOSZ
PROSPERITY'S A BOULDER.
IT'LL SMASH YOU UP, AND YOUR GUTS WILL SMOLDER.

ELEANOR
I don't believe you. I have a special hat.
CZOLGOSZ
THE BOULDER WILL GET YOU;
YOU CAN'T GET OUT OF THE WAY.

ELEANOR
WELL, IT'S GONNA GET ME,
IT MIGHT'S WELL BE TODAY.

(Song ends.)

CZOLGOSZ
No. City time is different from people time. When McKinley was shot, he lingered for a week.

McKINLEY
Linger. Linger. Gone.

(McKINLEY dies.)

CZOLGOSZ
A week is a long time, if you're a murdered president. A murdered city—well, that can take ages.

(CZOLGOSZ points his gun at ELEANOR.)

ELEANOR
Don't shoot!

CZOLGOSZ
I already did. A long time ago.

(CZOLGOSZ shoots ELEANOR.)

"One Hundred Years Are Passing"
ELEANOR

ONE HUNDRED YEARS ARE PASSING,
WHISKING AS THEY GO.
BRISKLY, OH SO BRISKLY—
WHY CAN’T TIME BE SLOW?

(Dance number. ELEANOR and TYCOONS dance through the
decades of the twentieth century, doing representative dance moves and
wearing costumes for each decade—1900s, 1910s, 1920s, 1930s,
1940s. One of them holds a placard with the decade on it—or this
placard is on an easel. A gong rings at the 1950s.)

ELEANOR (Continued)
What is it about the number five? Like “The Twelve Days of
Christmas,” with its five golden rings, we always stop and wail on the
fifth day. What is it? Over-the-hill? It must be. Finally, we can see
where we’ve been and where we’re going. It’s all down hill from here.

FIFTY YEARS ARE PASSING,
WHISKING AS THEY GO.
BRISKLY, OH SO BRISKLY—
WHY CAN’T TIME BE SLOW?

(Dance number for the rest of the decades. ELEANOR attempts to
move with the 1960s, but her age shows. She desperately tries to keep the
attention of the TYCOONS, but ends up exhausted. In the 70s, one of
the TYCOONS is dipping her, but loses interest and drops her.
ELEANOR cries, then attempts to recover herself with dignity. The
TYCOONS are now with SEATTLE, flirting and offering gifts. The
music continues, but ELEANOR can no longer dance to it—finally
too old to keep it up. Instead, she sits in a chair and slowly changes her
clothes to fit the decades. As she does this, she speaks.)

ELEANOR (Continued)
The Fifties and Sixties and Seventies were the hardest. The Fifties,
when I first foresaw that it would all end. The Sixties, when I tried to
keep it up, though it almost killed me. By the Seventies, I couldn’t do
it anymore. I just couldn’t. I wept when I discovered there was finally no way to hide my age. But the Eighties—well, they’re never as bad as you feared. It hurts a little to think of what you were; but you’re too old to shed many tears. And, by the Nineties—well, all is forgotten.

TYCOON 1
Seattle, you’re so beautiful.

TYCOON 2
I’ve never met anyone like you.

TYCOON 1
Let us give you money.

TYCOON 2
Here’s money.

(TYCOONS pour money on SEATTLE.)

SEATTLE
Oh, boys. You’re so nice to me. Just so nice.

CZOLGOSZ
That was you, Eleanor.

ELEANOR
Don’t I know it.

CZOLGOSZ
Well, think what happened to you. Tell her to resist. Stop the problem before it starts.

ELEANOR
I’m old and crazy. No one listens to me.
TYCOONS

(To SEATTLE)
How much can you take?

SEATTLE
They ask.

TYCOONS
How much can you take?

SEATTLE
So much money. Too much, really. I feel like you’re going to ask for something in return.

TYCOON 1
Us?

TYCOON 2
Nonsense.

TYCOON 1
We only—

BOTH TYCOONS
(Finishing TYCOON 1’s thought)
Give give give.

(TYCOON 2 brings an armload of computers.)

TYCOON 2
Here you go, friend.

SEATTLE
What is it?

TYCOON 2
Computers. The high-tech industry will make you rich rich rich for a long, long time.
(TYCOON 1 goes to ELEANOR and takes her hat.)

TYCOON 1
I'll take this. Your tired face makes it look shabby.

ELEANOR
(Resigned)
What can I do?

(TYCOON 1 goes to SEATTLE.)

TYCOON 1
And, here, Seattle. The grandest gift of all. The hat of prosperity. Glorious success comes to all who wear it.

CZOLGOSZ
(To ELEANOR)
History repeats itself.

ELEANOR
(Growing ever more senile)
That’s what you say. Bah.

SEATTLE
What a lovely hat. It looks a little worn.

TYCOON 1
It’s grunge, Seattle.

TYCOON 2
Yep; that’s the new fashion. Wearing the old, but differently.

TYCOON 1
By wearing old clothes and dressing like a pauper, you laugh in the face of poverty and insist that it will never come.
TYCOON 2

Try it on.

ELEANOR

I had a hat like that.

SEATTLE

I doubt it.

ELEANOR

No, really; I had a hat just like that.

SEATTLE

You must have worn it wrong.

(SEATTLE puts on the hat and poses.)

SEATTLE (Continued)

How do I look?

(McKINLEY pokes his head up.)

McKINLEY

Seattle, a word with you.

SEATTLE

The ghost of McKinley!

(SEATTLE kneels beside McKinley.)

McKINLEY

Let me tell you a secret. In the year 2000, Seattle had more millionaires per capita than any city in the nation.

SEATTLE

Really? More bucks per person.
TYCOON 1
Seattle, you’re so wonderful.

TYCOON 2
That hat really suits you.

SEATTLE
I feel like it does.

CZOLGOSZ
Why don’t you look in the mirror?

SEATTLE
Yes, a mirror. Why don’t I?

(CZOLGOSZ holds out a hand mirror. It is nothing but a frame without the glass. As SEATTLE looks into it, ELEANOR stands on the other side. SEATTLE is horrified.)

SEATTLE (Continued)
Oh my God. Is that really me?

ELEANOR
Ha. You’re crazy.

SEATTLE
Let me take it off! Off!

(SEATTLE tries to pull the hat off.)

TYCOON 1
But it looks so nice—

SEATTLE
It’s stuck!
TYCOON 2
I love you in it. You remind me of someone I used to know.

CZOLGOSZ
Buffalo wore a hat like that.

ELEANOR
It must have been a bad dream.

(CZOLGOSZ points his gun at SEATTLE.)

SEATTLE
Don’t point that gun at me! I have done nothing to deserve this!

McKINLEY
(Rising)
And I did?

ELEANOR
I did.

SEATTLE
What did I do?

CZOLGOSZ
You put on the hat.

(CZOLGOSZ shoots SEATTLE.)

ELEANOR
ONE HUNDRED YEARS ARE PASSING,
WHISKING AS THEY GO.
BRISKLY, OH SO BRISKLY—
WHY CAN’T TIME BE SLOW?
(TYCOONS start to take SEATTLE through the decades of the twenty-first century, beginning with the 2000s.)

SEATTLE
Stop! I know where this is leading!

(TYCOONS force her into a line dance.)

SEATTLE (Continued)
My arms are moving, but it’s not me moving them!

TYCOON 1
Sure it is.

TYCOON 2
It feels so good. Why shouldn’t you do it?

TYCOON 1
Have some money.

SEATTLE
Eleanor, save me!

(ELEANOR wanders off stage.)

SEATTLE (Continued)
Eleanor, where are you going?

CZOLGOSZ
She doesn’t know what she’s doing anymore.

(By now, it’s the 2010s.)

SEATTLE
I won’t do it! My computers will save me!

(SEATTLE breaks free from the dance trance and rushes to the
computers, gathering them in her arms.)

SEATTLE (Continued)
Anything! I'll cling to anything to stop the rush of time!

(TYCOONS go up to SEATTLE. They take the high-tech equipment from her and begin beating her with it. Again and again. Horrifying violence. SEATTLE screams.)

TYCOON 1
You wanted our business!

TYCOON 2
You put on the hat!

SEATTLE
How much can I take? I ask. How much can I take?

(Light shift. Those on stage leave SEATTLE alone, whimpering, in a spotlight. After a moment, the lights come up full. ELEANOR enters. She sees SEATTLE lying in a heap, wearing the hat. She goes up to SEATTLE and kicks her slightly, to see whether or not she’s dead. Enter Eleanor’s daughter, JEANNETTE [played by BUFFALO’S SUBURBS].)

JEANNETTE
Mother!
(Sees SEATTLE)
Oh my goodness—

ELEANOR
She had a lot of hair.

JEANNETTE
What happened?
ELEANOR
She’s dead.

JEANNETTE
Somebody, help! Help!

(Enter other Buffalonians—the GREEK RESTAURANT PROPRIETRESS, the RETIRED SCHOOLTEACHER, and SHANI, the folk-rocker.)

GREEK RESTAURANT PROPRIETRESS
What’s going on?

JEANNETTE
Call an ambulance! She’s bleeding!

(Exit SHANI, to get help. SCHOOLTEACHER and PROPRIETRESS tend to SEATTLE.)

PROPRIETRESS
(To SEATTLE)
Are you okay?

(Seeing that SEATTLE is being tended to, JEANNETTE goes to her mother.)

JEANNETTE
Mother—

(JEANNETTE hugs ELEANOR.)

ELEANOR
There’s a dead woman over there. Dead.

SCHOOLTEACHER
No. I think she’s alive. Yes; she’s alive.
SEATTLE

(Coming to)
What?

PROPRIETRESS
What happened to you?

SEATTLE
Huh? Where’s the Council?

PROPRIETRESS
You’ll be okay. What happened?

SEATTLE
I followed that woman—

(To JEANNETTE)
—your mother—behind the Johnny-on-the-spots. But there were
people there. Awful people.

ELEANOR
They tried to hold her down.

SEATTLE
But I made it.

(Enter SHANI.)

SHANI
The ambulance is coming.

SEATTLE
I don’t need one.

(She attempts to rise, but cannot. She feels the hat on her head and is
barrified.)
SEATTLE (Continued)
Is the hat still on my head? Why is it still on?

JEANNETTE
It looks like my mother’s.

ELEANOR
You’re crazy.

SEATTLE
I don’t want it!

JEANNETTE
She’s had it such a long time.

SCHOOLTEACHER
As long as I can remember.

SEATTLE
She can have it back!

(SEATTLE tries to get the hat off, but cannot. She exhausts herself.)

JEANNETTE
Don’t worry, honey; you can keep the hat.

SHANI
It looks good on you.

SEATTLE
No . . . No . . .

(Softly singing)

BUFFALO GALS, WON’T YOU COME OUT TONIGHT?
COME OUT TO- . . .

(SEATTLE passes out. BLACKOUT.)

END OF SCENE FOUR