

# Adjunkt: A Play with No Acts



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*University of Arizona*

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## Artist's Statement

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*

The more things change, the more they stay the same – Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, 1849

To chart the “Futures” of contingency and tenure, it can be useful to dig into the stratigraphy of the past. The initial version of the short play you are about to read came into being in 2015 during the lead-up to [National Adjunct Walkout Day](#). At the time, Tom Miller—whose white paper is the inspiration for this issue—and I were unlikely allies at the University of Arizona; he was the Vice Provost of Faculty Affairs and I was an adjunct in the same department. We often went back and forth in the media that year, such as in the following article:

“Our two main priorities are pay equity and the job security of multi-year contracts,” said Joel Smith, an adjunct and organizer in the University of Arizona English department. University of Arizona adjuncts participated in the walkout by taking their students to an on-campus plaza for a demonstration and discussions about adjuncts in higher education...Tom Miller, Vice Provost of Faculty Affairs at the University of Arizona, reaffirmed the spirit of collaboration, saying that the adjunct situation ‘is not experienced here as a conflict between administration and faculty. I think it is experienced here as a challenge facing all faculty’ (Mortazavi, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/adjunct-walkout>).

Looking back, those were heady days full of action—walking out and teaching-in—even though things often felt stuck, like we were waiting for something or someone who would never arrive, a la Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*. I should note that while UA President Ann Weaver-Hart was invited to our NAWD teach-in, she neither came nor acknowledged the invitation.

Working in higher education so often felt (and feels!) existential and absurd, and so out of those twin impulses emerged *Adjunkt: A Play with No Acts*. Perhaps Tom’s and my unintentional “odd couple” routine became linked in my subconscious to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two minor characters plucked from Shakespeare and immortalized by Tom Stoppard, who was playing firmly in Beckett’s own groove. In my small, winking homage to

such literary giants, I began to sketch out Odessa and Ulric, who in some not-too-distant future sit on their front porch processing the adjunctification of everything as they wait for the garbage collector. In all three plays, the two main characters play word games and interrupt each other endlessly, yet so much remains unsaid as they must—like all of us—accept their fates. So where do they/we go from here? This issue of *Academic Labor: Research and Artistry* is about Futures, after all, and what warnings might Odessa and Ulric offer us?

More than even Beckett or Stoppard, I actually count Eugène Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* as the main inspiration for *Adjunkt*. While the timely threat of incipient fascism runs through *Rhinoceros* just as in *Godot*, I am equally interested in the idea of contagion in *Rhinoceros*, where two quasi-lovers, Bérenger and Daisy, navigate a world where the townsfolk, inexplicably, begin turning into rhinoceroses, and the disease appears to be catching. In our own late capitalist moment, adjunctification speaks to the disposability of labor, to the tearing of our social fabric, turning us all into, what, exactly? *Adjunkt* is a tragicomic cautionary tale, and like Odessa and Ulric—despite all their human foibles and limitations—let us take comfort in each other.

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Joel Smith (he/him) is an Assistant Professor of Practice at the University of Arizona, where he teaches bookend seminars on reflection and ePortfolios so students have a more meaningful Gen Ed experience. Recently, he co-wrote a chapter “Times like These: Supporting First-Year Students and Contingent Faculty through a Campus Polycrisis,” which will appear in *The Campus Crisis Toolkit: Strategies and Solidarity for the Rest of Us* (SUNY Press, 2026). A long-time advocate for non-tenure track faculty in shared governance, Joel is currently serving a third term on UA’s Faculty Senate. For more of his creative writing, please check out *The Parish: An AmeriCorps Story*, a graphic novel set in post-Katrina New Orleans.

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*Adjunkt: A Play with No Acts*

**Scene**

**Exurban front porch.**

**Time**

**Soon.**

*Scene ∅*

(Curtains open. Couple sits on an electronic porch swing. They are of an indeterminate age. The front door is blocked by a pile of bagged trash. A rolled up brochure sits on top, like a short length of plastic pipe or a scroll in some almost forgotten language.)

**ODESSA**

The garbage collector is late.

**ULRIC**

Is pickup today?

**ODESSA**

They promised us an adjunkt this month.

**ULRIC**

No one has shown.

**ODESSA**

And they tell us we don't need full-clockers.

**ULRIC**

Not no one. I shouldn't say *no one* has shown.

**ODESSA**

Why shouldn't you?

**ULRIC**

Shouldn't I?

**ODESSA**

Say so.

**ULRIC**

Two inspector-administrators did walk by. Or rather, rode by, in their golf carts. One at a time, in short succession. The second administered the first. Said they were forming a search committee to hire a third. They left a pamphlet.

(ULRIC stretches out his legs, resting on the pile of black trash bags, and gestures at the rolled up brochure with his foot. ODESSA picks it up, flattens it out and begins to read.)

**ODESSA**

"Seeking purpose? Waiting on the arbiter? You, too, can collect garbage. One day per month, free from contracts, the work therewith, its own reward."

**ULRIC**

Who do they take us for?

(ODESSA sighs, rolls the brochure up, and sets it back on the bagged pile of trash.)

**ODESSA**

It is urgent and necessary work.

**ULRIC**

An adjunkt should never refuse refuse. Especially on a pleasant day such as this. All we can do is wait, I suppose.

(ULRIC sets his feet on the porch floor.)

So efficient, this new swing. Outstanding.

**ODESSA**

Shall we turn it on?

**ULRIC**

What else can we do?

(ULRIC moves bags aside to reach the ON switch. The electronic swing starts up. A generator whirs unevenly.)

Minimal exertion. No wasted leg or torso movement.

**ODESSA**

But at what cost? It seems—

**ULRIC**

Seems, madam? No, it is. I know not seems.

**ODESSA**

You steal from the Bard who wrote that line.

**ULRIC**

Or else one of his adjunkt playwrights.

**ODESSA**

Indeed, the poets were first to go.

**ULRIC**

Nurses next, if you recall. Then comics, like myself.

**ODESSA**

Corpora College could have tried harder to stop it. They could have hired more full-clockers.

(The porch swing lurches into a higher gear and knocks over a trash bag. Yellowed newspapers and broken e-readers tumble out. A path to the front door is cleared.)

**ULRIC**

What about the METAheads and Xcels? They bear responsibility, too, no?

**ODESSA**

The Rankers could have changed their algos. Instead, they rewarded Corpora College for paying low, firing at whim.

**ULRIC**

The elites got rich and student debt mushroomed.

**ODESSA**

Ranking spread to all parts of life.

**ULRIC**

Negative externalities be damned.

**ODESSA**

Negative eternalities. This all happened so long ago, now.

**ULRIC**

The futurists should have thought about us, far downriver from them.

**ODESSA**

Adjunktivitis is a downriver syndrome.

**ULRIC**

Worse than down—

**ODESSA**

Hush, Ulric. That joke is in poor taste, even for a “comic” such as yourself. The garbage collector may still come.

**ULRIC**

With less debt, we might’ve had children, you and I. Now it is too late.

**ODESSA**

And our interest is yet unpaid. We will die before that happens.

(ULRIC becomes silent, downcast. He stands, climbs over the pile of trash, goes inside the house offstage. There is a shuffling of papers. The generator emits a spark, and the swing belches smoke.)

**ULRIC**

Here I am.

**ODESSA**

Where did you go?

**ULRIC**

To check the pickup schedule.

**ODESSA**

And?

**ULRIC**

It is difficult to parse.

**ODESSA**

Try.

**ULRIC**

The new adjunkt arrives in a fortnight, to replace the current. The current was fired the week before last, so as not to become benefit-eligible. The interim suspects they will not be paid, and so doesn't clock in at all.

(As ULRIC speaks, the swing revs faster and louder. It knocks aside bags of trash. ODESSA stands.)

**ODESSA**

Speak up, I cannot hear.

(The swing makes a horrible whirring. Ulric continues.)

**ULRIC**

(yelling, now)

Starting between the 1st and 5th, the new hire will drive their own truck in the morning and Corpora's at night, to split overhead. No verbal agreements. There is much daylight between the parties.

(ODESSA shuts off the swing. The smoke dissipates and trash bags settle.)

**ODESSA**

Was that verbatim?

**ULRIC**

Hardly a word.

**ODESSA**

Then how do you know what adjunkt garbage collectors face?

**ULRIC**

You want to talk of faces? The aims of Corpora College have become naked, plain to read. It reminds me of what the Spanish painter said: are we to paint what's on the face, what's inside the face, or what's behind it?

**ODESSA**

That is quite astute, for an out-of-work comic. Your value always exceeded your pay.

**ULRIC**

My kinderadjunkts taught me well.

**ODESSA**

I've heard that bit already. Each day, they hired a new teacher, fresh from the academy, to teach one single lesson.

**ULRIC**

"All were occupied," they said.

**ODESSA**

"Ergo, efficient," they said. Ulric, tell me one I haven't heard before.

**ULRIC**

As you wish, Odessa. This story comes from my Maw Maw's childhood. At the intersection of two roads stood a hardware store.

**ODESSA**

A what?

**ULRIC**

A depot for goods, until 3D printers. And all day long at this crossroads waited professors, of Rumi and Quantum States, desperate for work.

**ODESSA**

With no contracts to speak of?

**ULRIC**

None. Day laborers, they. Maw Maw hoped to see one jump onto the back of a self-driving truck. Funny thing was, no truck ever came.

**ODESSA**

Is that funny?

**ULRIC**

I do not know.

(The two sit, waiting for the smoke to fully clear.)

**ODESSA**

How the trash begins to smell when the swing is off.

(After a time, she turns the swing back on. It hums quietly.  
Curtains close.)