

Range of Light

Range of Light

Cast of Characters:

President Teddy Roosevelt

John Muir

Ranger Charlie Leidig

Setting:

Yosemite Valley, 1903, dusk

Props:

Bedrolls, camping gear, camp chairs or a log to sit on perhaps

The actors need to carry in whatever gear they have unless there is something they can sit on made to look like a log. There could be something to look like a campfire, coffee pot and mugs, etc. Or all could be mimed and just have some blankets as the only props.

Range of Light

OPENING NARRATION: In May of 1903, while on an official mission to California, Teddy Roosevelt snuck away from his party and joined John Muir for three nights of camping in Yosemite, accompanied by Ranger Charlie Leidig. It was a party of three, but environmentalists, as well as The National Park Service, consider this the most significant event in the history of conservation in the United States.

Teddy enters, followed by John Muir, then by Ranger Charlie Leidig. The two men are obviously having a spirited conversation in which they hold differing opinions. Muir has a Scottish accent. They carry packs with camping gear and bedrolls. It's a chilly night in the woods.

TEDDY: Poppycock!

JOHN: No. It's true, if you will only look at the evidence, mon.

TEDDY: Whitney examined the evidence and his conclusion is shared by all other geologists. It's the obvious conclusion, given California's history of earthquakes.

JOHN: Sure, earthquakes caused rock falls and splits. I've enjoyed a great one here meself. But the obvious conclusion from human opinion isn't always the right one. It's just the easiest. No, the main creator of Yosemite's majesty was glaciers. Slow moving ice flows, over thousands of years. Sculpting and polishing the rocks and domes.

TEDDY: I still say it's poppycock!

CHARLIE: Shall we make camp here, Sir?

JOHN: We had better, before the snow comes.

They drop their packs.

(All this later action can be mimed, or use props if preferred, except the bedrolls should be real, old-looking blankets.)

Charlie disappears and comes back with an armload of wood and proceeds to make a fire. The other two men spread out their bedrolls near the fire. Leidig does the same. He puts a pot on the fire for coffee and starts making a meal using the other pot. Throughout the conversation, the men can stand, sit on camp chairs, log, or their bedrolls, or walk around, as directed.

JOHN: I'm afraid it might be a cold one tonight. Will you be all right?

TEDDY: A night without the mob of handlers and people fawning over me is worth freezing to death for.

CHARLIE: Let's hope it doesn't come to that, Mr. President.

JOHN: I hope to do the forest some good by talking freely with you around the campfire.

TEDDY: Of course. That's why I snuck away from the rest of the party. Of all the people in the world, you are the one with whom to see Yosemite, even if some of your ideas are pure poppycock!

JOHN: You asked me to talk freely. That's what I will do.

TEDDY: First tell me how you came to be the master of this place? I know some of your history, and you're obviously from Scotland, but why settle here?

Why Yosemite?

JOHN: When I worked in a factory in Scotland, I was blinded, and when God restored me sight, He said to me, "I am the Creator, the Master Builder. Now Johnny boy, it's for you to see my creation. To really see, and nae just with your eyes. See deeply what the others can't or won't see because they are truly blinded by their greed, or their ignorance. They drum up theories out of their own heads, and everyone falls in line behind them. But the story is written large on every rock, in every tree, and river and meadow.

TEDDY: The geologists looked at the rock piles below the falls and the cliffs and that told them it was earthquakes.

JOHN: But did they look at the cliffs themselves? Earthquakes leave fissures. They don't sheer off the faces. You'll see it tomorrow when we ride horseback in the high country. The cliffs smoothed and sleek, without residue, shining and glistening in the sunlight. The range of light with only the hardiest of trees clinging to the glassy rock faces with a tenacity born of exuberance for life.

TEDDY: But they could have been carved smooth by the wind, or the river.

JOHN: Ah, but the wind would carve them more like the great stone sculptures of Utah, and the river like the Grand Canyon. No. It's ice that sculpted this valley. I've seen the glaciers high in these mountains. This is what they do. They carve and sheer everything in their path -- with ice.

TEDDY: But you're going against all the scientists, and Whitney says...

JOHN: Whitney is a fool, and those so-called scientists – have they been here in these mountains? Have they ridden an avalanche down a glacier, as I have? Have they looked, really looked at the evidence? Or have they made a theory and tried to make it work, refusing to really look and see what is in front of them, or worse, not looking at the subject in person at all. Science isn't science if you ignore the facts. But if you really look with your eyes, and your mind and your heart, you'll see what God has created. And this place, right here, is the grandest cathedral of all. Not made with men's hands, and not by earthquake, wind or river, but carved by the Great Sculptor, Himself -- with ICE! Can't you feel the holiness of this place?

TEDDY: I admit. It's like lying in a great solemn cathedral, but far vaster and more beautiful than any built by the hand of man.

JOHN: It is a sacred cathedral and should be treated as such, but it needs your protection. You alone have the power that can save it.

TEDDY: Hasn't the State of California guaranteed it won't be overrun by mining and timber interests?

JOHN: Aye, but not by the people themselves.

TEDDY: I've set aside Yellowstone and the high country here as National Parks.

And Mt. Rainier and

JOHN: But look what the people do to this valley. They cut tunnels through the giant trees. They strew the floor with garbage and tin cans, they make hay fields from meadows. They throw fire from El Capitan. Under California, they have turned Yosemite Valley into a "carnival."

TEDDY: So what do you suggest?

JOHN: Take the valley and the Mariposa grove back from the State. Join it to the rest of the National Park, and set rules for its protection.

TEDDY: These are meant to be the peoples' parks, open for all.

JOHN: Yes, but the people apparently have no experience in caring for something so grand. Most have had nothing more wild around them than the geranium on their windowsill. They don't know that necessity in all that is wild is an essential part of ourselves. When we lose it, we lose our souls.

TEDDY: But the people flock to Yosemite...

JOHN: Yet they are so little influenced by its grandeur, as if their eyes were bandaged and their ears stopped. Most of those I see are looking down as if wholly unconscious of anything going on about them. Even wise-looking people are fixing bits of worms on bent pieces of wire to catch trout. Sport, they call it. Should church-goers try to pass the time fishing in baptismal fonts

while dull sermons were being preached, the so-called sport might not be so bad; but here in the Yosemite temple, to seek pleasure in the pain of fishes struggling for their lives, and not to notice that God is preaching the sublimest sermons in water and stone all around them is a sacrilege.

TEDDY: But man was made to hunt and fish.

JOHN: For food, yes. But not for trophies to hang some grand creature's head on a wall. I heard that you went to Yellowstone in the first place when you heard the bison was about to become extinct and wanted to be sure and shoot one while you still could.

TEDDY: But I didn't in the end. I couldn't do it.

JOHN: Ah, so you had a change of heart when you saw the magnificent creatures for yourself?

TEDDY: Not really. My aides wouldn't give me my gun.

JOHN: And now?

TEDDY: We have too many people in Yellowstone so be able to shoot.

JOHN: You had to call in the army to keep order. Do it for Yosemite! This valley is being overrun! And the business companies....

TEDDY: And what do the business interests want with the valley?

JOHN: To exploit its resources, of course. They would make a city of it for nothing but profit. It should be left for all the people and generations to come, but in it's

natural state. And the people encouraged to view it with awe.

A wolf howls. He's joined by others. The men are silent, with Teddy particularly lost in thought. Finally, John speaks softly and reverently.

JOHN: Mankind is just one part of the natural world, not its master, and God is revealed through nature.

An awkward silence for a moment. Teddy finally talks, obviously a little uncomfortable with the way the conversation has turned, yet seeming to have turned with it.

TEDDY: Well, in any case, I came out here to meet with you to talk conservation.

JOHN: Ah, good! We need strong legislation to prevent these treasures and archeological ruins from commercial exploitation. Just look at Niagra Falls!

TEDDY: That seems to be the normal way of the world.

JOHN: Yes, it's like the earthquake. It strikes suddenly, and then the world as we knew it is changed in an instant. We can't keep the earthquake from shaking us to the core. But we can preserve the land from human greed. *You* can preserve it.

TEDDY: What would you have me do? We already have the high country preserved as a National Park.

JOHN: (*With a hint of exasperation because he has already said this.*)

Take back the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove from California and add them to the National Park, along with the meadows of the Tuolumne and Hetch Hetchy.

TEDDY: And for the rest?

JOHN: Your National Park system is brilliant. Add to it.

TEDDY: But the legislation to create a new park takes a long time – all the bickering back and forth in Congress, the special interests. How do you propose we do that?

JOHN: What about using the Antiquities Act, if it passes?

TEDDY: That bill would give the president power to proclaim *historic* sites as National Monuments, without Congress....

JOHN: So why can't our natural treasures be called National Monuments, as well? Why is it just battlefields, honoring destruction? Why can't we honor preservation of nature, as well?

TEDDY: (*Suddenly excited*) Why not, indeed! You may have hit on the right idea!

JOHN: You'll get flack from the states, as well as the special interests. It will take courage.

TEDDY: You're talking about courage to the man who stormed San Juan Hill in the war! But a right idea will always win in the end. And I agree with you.

Without preservation of our valuable natural resources and treasures, we'll be lost.

JOHN: The snow is starting. Leidig, bring the President another blanket.

Charlie brings a blanket over and puts it on Teddy's bedroll.

TEDDY: Let it snow! It makes me feel alive. And Muir, tomorrow, how about we check out this theory of yours about the glaciers. After all, we don't have to accept the normal lay of things now, do we?

JOHN: Not if we can see with our own eyes what nature is telling us. It's all right there. Right here, in this redwood cathedral, in this range of light.

CURTAIN

Acknowledgement: Some of the words used in this play are from the writings of John Muir and Teddy Roosevelt that are now in the public domain. The author has woven them in and out of the dialogue.