

10 TO 1 ODDS: A COLLECTION OF TEN-MINUTE AND ONE-ACT PLAYS FOR THE THEATER

Elijah D. Dies

10 to 1 Odds: A Collection of ten-minute and one-act plays for the theater

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Thesis Paper

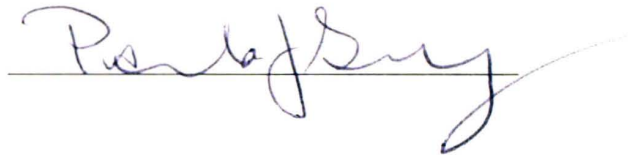
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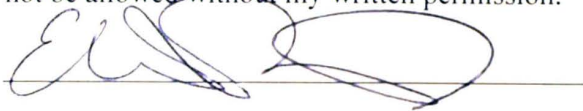


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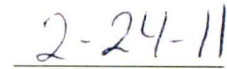
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Date

ABSTRACT

ELIJAH DYLAN DIES. 10 to 1 Odds: A Collection of ten-minute and one-act plays for the theater (under the direction of DR. MIKE GOTCHER.)

Purpose: The purpose of this paper was both to undergo the difficulties associated with writing a short play and to explore different elements of the human experience (i.e. death, fear, religion, solitude, ect). Writing a play that is one-act or shorter can be challenging because one must still present a whole production, that includes a beginning, middle, and end, in a very short amount of time. I chose to write in this format so I could dive right into the heart of a specific idea rather than write about an idea and then have to surround it with other ideas in order to fill time.

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Each entry in this anthology contains a section called On Writing and On Producing. On Writing is my attempt to tell you, the reader, about where each story came from and how it developed into its current form. On Producing gives costuming

and set recommendations as well as my “how to” for some of the theatrical magic the entry may contain.

CHAPTER I

A Little Fishing Tale

(Scene opens on a blank stage except for a boat center. There are two men in the boat, BILL and MIKE. BILL is the older of the two. He is 36. MIKE is 32. They are brothers. They are drinking Bud Light. Someone who did not know them would call them rednecks. They are both wearing long sleeve shirts and pants, but no coats or gloves....nothing to signify that it is very cold outside. MIKE is standing in the boat with his back to the audience. BILL leans over, careful not to spill the beer in his hands, and picks up the beer behind MIKE. He downs the rest of the beer and puts it back. We have caught them on day two of a drinking binge. MIKE is shaking his butt and we hear water hitting water.)

MIKE

Wooo!!!

BILL

It's only rented right?

MIKE

That's what they say.

BILL

You're gonna shake that ass hard enough to fall out the boat.

(MIKE turns, zipping up his pants.)

MIKE

As long as I don't fall into my own piss...I don't care.

(Without sitting, MIKE picks up his beer and turns it up. It is empty. MIKE looks to BILL who does not so much as crack a smile.)

MIKE

You sorry bastard.

BILL

I didn't want it to get warm.

(They both burst out laughing. After a moment they stop and MIKE drops the empty bottle into the boat.)

MIKE

Nurse!

BILL

Yes sir.

(BILL reaches into the cooler that is between them and pulls out a beer to hand to MIKE.)

BILL

Uh oh.

MIKE

What? We out?

BILL

Almost. We should probably get back over to shore and fill up soon.

MIKE

How many we got?

(BILL looks back into the cooler and does a quick count)

BILL

Worse than I thought, we've only got 13 left.

(MIKE sits and drops the trolling motor.)

MIKE

We better get there quick.

(BILL drinks the last of his beer and drops it into the boat.)

BILL

Nurse!

MIKE

I'm trying to drink and drive here if you don't mind.

BILL

Nurse!

(MIKE stops working the trolling motor and goes to the cooler to get BILL a beer.)

MIKE

Damn.

BILL

What?

MIKE

Only 12 left.

(They burst out laughing again.)

MIKE

You think we could get more in there this time if we didn't put ice in?

BILL

I don't drink piss warm beer.

MIKE

Gage says it's 42 degrees on land. I'm thinking it's cold enough on the water to keep them frosty.

BILL

Good point. We could probably get an extra six in there if we do that.

(BILL reaches up and mashes on his nose. MIKE laughs.)

I haven't been able to feel my nose for a while now.

MIKE

Beer or cold?

BILL

Reverse that.

MIKE

Cold or beer?

BILL

Colder beer!

(They both laugh and clink their beer bottles together. After which, they turn the bottles up and finish them. Both throw the bottles into the boat.)

BILL and MIKE (in unison)

Nurse!

(They laugh. MIKE heads back to the trolling motor. He stops at the cooler and takes out two more beers. He hands one to BILL and takes the other with him. He sits and starts the trolling motor again. He and BILL sit in silence for a long while. They both look like they're thinking hard about something while they sip their beer. BILL sees something and sits up-right suddenly. They are both serious now.)

BILL

Hey. Hang on a minute...point us in that direction.

MIKE

You see something?

BILL

You see that log over there by the hollow? Bet there's an eight pounder sitting under there.

(BILL grabs his pole and starts reeling it in. His line has been dragging behind them as they traveled this entire time. MIKE brings up the trolling motor and starts reeling his line in as well. BILL starts to cast his line then stops. He sets his pole down.)

MIKE

What are you doing?

BILL

You go on and take him. I don't think I could hit that spot anyway.

MIKE

Bull shit. Pick up your pole and catch that fish.

BILL

Nah, I'm gonna finish this off *(he indicates his beer)* and try to get us down to single digits while I laugh at you.

MIKE

You're old man teach you to be such a pansy?

(While MIKE is fooling with his reel, looking in the opposite direction, BILL reaches over and takes his beer again. He downs it.)

BILL

Nope, but he taught me how to take advantage dumb rednecks like you.

(BILL drops the bottle into the boat. MIKE hears the clank and turns around suddenly, already knowing what has happened.)

MIKE

Damn it! Nurse!

(BILL has already started reaching into the cooler to get MIKE another. MIKE gets ready to make his cast.)

MIKE

You sure?

BILL

Take it.

MIKE

Alright.

(MIKE makes his cast perfectly and sits back down.)

BILL

What's your first memory?

MIKE

Is it that time already?

BILL

Yeah. I think so.

MIKE

How many we got?

(BILL opens the cooler and counts.)

BILL

Nine.

MIKE

You wanna start this with only nine left?

BILL

Sounds like a good number to me.

MIKE

I got nothing against the number, but do you think it's enough?

BILL

I figure that's plenty to get us through.

MIKE

Alright. If you think nine is enough.

BILL

I don't think we could ever have enough to get through this...so first memory?

MIKE

Going fishing at Culver Ferry. I guess I was three maybe. Dad had me up on his shoulders wading through the creek. We hit that deep spot where the bank drops off suddenly...

BILL

High Hog Alley. There's a hoss of a fish in there every time.

MIKE

High Hog Alley. Yeah. Well we came up to it and he knew there was a fish in there. I'm sure he knew it was a monster, but he let me catch it. He told me right where to throw and helped me cast. The bait had hardly touched the water when that monster hit it. Dad about dropped me trying to help me reel it in. Three pounds...felt like fifty. What about you?

(BILL laughs and finishes off his beer. He opens the cooler and gets another. He offers one to MIKE who takes it although he hasn't finished the one in his hand yet.)

BILL

Same thing. Only he did drop me trying to reel. *(MIKE spits beer through his laughter. BILL joins in.)* He made me swear never to tell Momma. I don't guess I ever did...don't guess I ever told anyone else. I think he was more afraid than I was.

MIKE

How big was the fish?

BILL

It felt like fifty pounds.

MIKE

How big was the fish?

BILL

Pound and a half.

(This takes MIKE back into a fit of laughter and BILL again joins in. MIKE finishes his beer, drops it in the boat, and immediately opens the one BILL gave him.)

MIKE

Funniest thing?

BILL

(Without any hesitation.) Seeing him sneak by with a big, trouble-making grin on his face and then run out the door screaming when Momma came after him...towel flying behind her.

MIKE

That's when he threw the crawdads at her when she was in the tub.

BILL

Uh huh.

MIKE

I think seeing him drop you in the creek would have probably topped my list.

BILL

Probably right, but you weren't there.

(MIKE begins laughing before he can even start his story.)

MIKE

Then seeing him knock the chicken unconscious.

(Now it's BILL's turn to spew beer because he's laughing so hard.)

BILL

I had almost forgotten about that. That damned chicken kept waking him up on Saturday morning.

(MIKE imitates a rooster's crow.)

MIKE

He got up and stomped over to the back door...grabbed the first thing he could find...

BILL

A log from the fire-wood.

MIKE

...and hurled it at that rooster.

BILL

He didn't mean to hit it.

MIKE

No, but he sure caught him dead between the eyes with it. It fell over stone cold.

BILL

We all thought it was dead, but then, about an hour later, it stood up and shambled its way back to the chicken coop.

(MIKE still laughing empties his beer and starts for another. BILL stops him.)

BILL

(Suddenly somber) These last seven are for the old man.

(MIKE nods his agreement and sits back.)

MIKE

Why seven?

BILL

Every time he'd stop over after work he'd only have seven and then he'd go.

MIKE

I never noticed.

BILL

I kept noticing when I was cleaning up that he had the same pile every time.

Seven...every time. I asked him about it once; he just laughed at me and told me seven was more than a six pack and less than a DUI.

MIKE

Sounds good to me.

BILL

You okay?

MIKE

(Also very somber now) Yeah.

BILL

Here we go then. *(He opens a beer and raises it.)* To the old man. He worked hard all his life to make sure his family always had enough. *(He pours the beer into the lake and then drops the bottle with it.)*

MIKE

(He opens a beer and raises it.) To a great man. I have honestly never heard someone say a negative word about him...other than Momma. *(They both laugh a little at this and then he pours the beer into the lake and then drops the bottle with it.)*

BILL

(He opens a beer and raises it.) To a teacher. I don't think there was ever a situation where he just told me to do something...he always showed me. *(He pours the beer into the lake and then drops the bottle with it.)*

MIKE

(He opens a beer and raises it.) To the best fisherman I'll ever know. I think that's all I need to say about that. *(He pours the beer into the lake and then drops the bottle with it.)*

BILL

(He opens a beer and raises it.) To a husband. *(They look to each other and nod...that's enough ,and all they know on that matter as well. He pours the beer into the lake and then drops the bottle with it.)*

MIKE

(He opens a beer and raises it.) To Pa. The first time my kids called him that I balled like a little baby. *(He pours the beer into the lake and then drops the bottle with it.)*

BILL

(He opens a beer and raises it. This one is tough on him.) To my pillar, my hero, my... *(he begins to cry much harder)* best friend, *(now his words are barely understandable through the tears.)* my...my dad. *(He pours the beer into the lake and then drops the bottle with it.)*

(MIKE brings out a small box containing ashes. He puts an arm around BILL for a moment then opens the box.)

MIKE

I'm not going to say he's in a better place...I don't know what's waiting on the other side. I hope there's something great...something I can't begin to imagine... *(he looks down at the box)* I know this isn't you. What you are is...it's uh...

BILL

In us.

MIKE

Yeah. Inside us.

(BILL places a hand on the box as well.)

BILL

Know that here, on this side of whatever, you'll always be loved.

MIKE

Bye Pa.

BILL

We love you, Dad.

(Together they tip the box over and scatter his ashes into the lake. Then they hug for a long time. They are sobbing in each others arms. Finally they break away and sit back down. After a long few beats...)

MIKE

What now?

BILL

I didn't think we'd need the life jackets or the first aid box so I got rid of them.

(BILL pulls a 24 case of Bud Light out from behind him. They both laugh.)

BILL and MIKE (in unison)

Nurse!

CHAPTER I - A

On Writing *A Little Fishing Tale*

With the exception of *Etiquette of S*, the first draft of this play took the least amount of time to write than any other in this collection. It took me one night and one following morning. But it might have also been the hardest emotionally to write. This play is not true. It is not based on truth. Some of the stories that Bill and Mike, or the boys as I think of them, tell are the most far-fetched, but they are as close to truth as this play gets. This play is also not based on my relationship with my father or my brother. In fact, my father loves to be outside but I cannot see him for an instant holding a fishing reel with the intent of catching a fish. So why would this play be so emotionally difficult if it had nothing to do with my life. Well that's an easy answer; I got sucked into Bill and Mike's lives.

The seed for this play was planted years ago when I was out wading the creek, fishing with my two best friends. These two friends are brothers and though they are several years apart in age, to meet them you would think they were identical twins. One of the reasons I like to fish is to get away from everything. No cell phones. No iPods. Nothing except you, the water, the fish, the occasional snake (it can't be perfect all the time), the trees, and five or six hours of good conversation if you're lucky enough to go with someone. When I do get to go with these two particular friends we always end up deep in conversation about something. On this occasion we breeched the topic of death. Not much was said. As Mike says in the play, "I don't know what's waiting on the other side." I do remember very clearly a look passing between the two of them and one saying that when the "old man's" time is up, we're going to disappear for a few days.

We're going to hit the creeks with as much beer as we can carry and deal with it our own way. What they said never struck me as odd. I never thought to myself, mourning your father's death by getting drunk is pathetic. Knowing these guys, I understood that to deal, they would need to get away from everything, including themselves, and just purge.

I was hesitant to write this for a long time because, although I am not a superstitious person by nature, writing about someone's death, even a fictional someone's death, is creepy. At the time of this writing my friends' father is still alive and well. I know him. He's a great guy and I wish no ill mojo his way. Still though, I don't think I could ever let the boys read this play. With all my being I know that when their "old man's" day comes, they will do exactly like they said they would. Will it happen like it does in this play? Not a chance. Like I said this play is not truth. It is also not trying to foretell the future. I believe, like Bill and Mike, my friends will try to laugh more than they cry. I also believe they will have a burden on their hearts that paper and ink cannot fathom, and, honestly, I didn't want to belittle grief in this play by trying to show it ultra-realistically. Don't get me wrong, it is in there. I can vouch for that with my own spilled tears. I said it took me one night and one following morning to complete this. Normally, I write a general outline that may or may not make it into even the first draft, but with this I sat down and just began writing. I got to the point in which Bill tells Mike that the time has come to deal with their emotions and I decided to go to bed before starting down that journey. I already knew I was connected to the characters enough to know that I was feeling some of their pain; I was not ready to deal with it. Bill was right, though. I lay down and tossed and turned for two hours, crying; knowing that I had to deal with the pain, but not ready for it. Finally, Bill consoled me. I asked him, "What now?" as Mike

would in the play, tears still streaming down my face. I saw Bill turn around and bring out a case of beer. He smiled and made his joke. After that, I knew I could get through pain. I got up and finished the script right away. The following morning was mainly edits to make dialogue flow a little better. As I reread some of the things I had written the night before, it didn't come across as painful as it seemed. Although, when I got to the line where Bill has trouble saying "my father" I cried again.

So there we are. I set out to write something fictional and it became real to me. Will anyone else feel the pangs that have stung my heart while writing this? Maybe or maybe not, but I hope so. Since I came to appreciate theatre, and acting in particular, as more than just getting on stage and saying things loudly, my main goal has been to show one person in the audience an emotion or feeling that they have either buried in themselves or never experienced before. I feel like if one person is reached in that manner all the work, all the pain, has been worth it.

Elijah Dies

December 23, 2008

Goodlettsville, TN

Update:

In February 2010, Nashville's People's Branch Theatre began taking submissions for their 2nd Annual Festival of Short Plays. I had worked as an actor during the first annual festival, but in 2010 I decided to submit two short plays: *A Little Fishing Tale* and *Everyday Acting*. The three day festival selected 30 plays (ten each night) to be produced and performed, and both of my submissions were selected.

A Little Fishing Tale was produced on Saturday, March 6, to a full house. It was not the first time that something I had written was performed, but it was the first time a professional company using professional actors had performed anything I had written. I spoke with one of the actors in the piece before the evening began. He told me that of all the pieces he would be performing in during the evening, this one was the one he was most excited about. I asked him why, sure he would give me some meaningless dribble that he would also spill to the next playwright he spoke to, but I was pleasantly surprised. He spoke about making a direct connection with the character he was portraying. He was giving me details about his character that I had written into the heart of the dialogue but never actually put into the script.

At the end of each piece, a panel of adjudicators, as well as the audience, was asked to speak about what they had just witnessed. *A Little Fishing Tale* was received with absolute open arms. No one had anything negative to say about the piece, and believe me, negative things were said about pieces. The overall feel of the responses were that people felt as if they interrupted Mike and Bill's personal lives. They said it felt real and from the opening beat they were with the characters. That's theater jargon to say that from the moment the show started until the last line, the audience didn't feel like they were watching actors. They felt like they were watching real people in a real situation. The ease with which Mike and Bill spoke to each other, and through each other, made this feeling possible. I was also told, by someone who claimed to hate fishing, they connected with this piece on every level.

One thing that surprised me was how many of the responses centered around religion. I know religion is a part of this show. Mike himself says, "I don't know what's

waiting on the other side.” Some audience members took this and paired it with the fact that Bill and Mike were drinking heavily to come up with two non-Christians searching for their faith. That’s not really true at all, but that’s still a good analysis. Art can be nearly anything. It is interpreted by the person viewing the piece. The artist may have some grand point they’re trying to make with a mark they’ve made on the canvas, but the person viewing the piece makes it art, not the artist. Therefore, the viewer’s interpretation is more important than the artist’s vision. That’s not to say that the artist’s vision is not important, but rather that if the viewer sees something personal or inspiring in a piece they can never be truly wrong about it. Though this audience member saw something I never intended, it is still remarkable to me because they did see and feel something.

CHAPTER I - B

On Producing *A Little Fishing Tale*The Boat

I like this image because you can see the bottom is mostly flat. Also, it is small and inexpensive looking. It would be easy to see how much these two had been drinking with a cooler, lots of empty beer bottles, and a case of beer scattered about this boat.



This image called to me because it was also relatively inexpensive looking and it lacked the engine the first image has. This is not the boat that these two should be on the lake with...and yet, they are.

Trolling Motor

This is a very basic trolling motor, which is exactly what it should be. Again, this boat should not be something that would look at home in the middle of the lake. Most trolling motors are able to fold back and sit on the inside of the boat, but for the purpose of this play it could stay in the “water.”



For this play the blade at the bottom of the trolling motor would need to be removed. A black carpet caster (as shown at far right) could be attached to the end of the trolling motor pole so the trolling motor could still slide around on the stage.



Mike's Clothing

As soon as I saw this image I knew it was Mike. I looked at brighter colors but the red / black flannel lead me to believe something grim was taking place. Also, this is something Mike would have in his closet. I would like it to look more distressed and faded. This is a garment he has owned for years. Maybe there are even holes in the elbows or around the bottom where it has gotten caught on something and ripped.



This image is here purely because I wanted this type hood on the previous image. It shouldn't be thick, a hood that a light jacket might have on it. The grey undershirt of the first image could be a very light sweatshirt with a built in hood.

Mike's Clothing (continued)

Normal, everyday jeans. In fact, I would go to Goodwill or the Salvation Army and get a pair of work jeans, and I wouldn't pay more than three dollars for the pair. Holes in the jeans aren't necessary. These jeans are not trendy. They are not factory-faded or factory-worn. They are, however, both faded and worn...from work.



One thing that could be added is a Skoal ring to the back pocket.



A pair of muddy black or brown work boots. Bill would wear the same.



Bill's Clothing

This is Bill...it's that easy. He's comfortable and laid back. A hooded sweatshirt is perfect for him. I went with a Tennessee sweatshirt because that logo and color combination is known throughout the USA. And though this play could be set anywhere in the USA, in my mind it is Tennessee. Plus, I always get a kick out of seeing things like this in plays, TV shows, or movies. It makes me think...is this character from Tennessee or do they just like UT football. Maybe they have a relative in Tennessee that sent them this sweatshirt or maybe they just found it at Goodwill.

Bill's Clothing (continued)

Again, these would not be worn because of any fashion trend, but because they would be good to work in. They would be stained from working on the car or working at a factory or working in the field. As before, holes aren't necessary. Most people I know that work blue-collar jobs don't wear jeans with holes. Once they have holes the jeans don't have as much padding on the knees or, if there are holes in pockets, they don't want things falling out.



CHAPTER II

Everyday Acting

(A couch is set downstage semi-left. A love seat is opposite the couch on stage right with a long coffee table behind it. A refrigerator is upstage left. Upstage slightly right of the refrigerator is the pantry door.)

(BENJAMIN MARTIN lies on his sofa. The only part of him that can be seen is his face which flickers blue light from the television he is watching and his hand which holds the remote control. The rest of him is covered in a blanket. The television, which is imaginary, is on the fourth wall. There are potato chip bags and various other trash items on the floor in front of him.)

(LIGHTS UP)

(After ten/fifteen seconds NARRATOR enters from stage right with a podium and script. He sets the podium down, opens the script, and begins to read.)

NARRATOR

Benjamin Martin lies on his sofa. The only part of him that can be seen is his face which flickers blue light from the television he is watching and his hand which holds the remote control. The rest of him ...

BENJAMIN

(As soon as NARRATOR begins to speak, BENJAMIN jumps off couch startled. He realizes he is holding the remote and throws it onto couch. After regaining some of his composure he crosses to NARRATOR.)

Excuse me, but you the hell are you and what are you doing in my house?

NARRATOR

(NARRATOR begins flipping through his script as he says his line.)

I'm sorry...you must have come in on the wrong page. Hold on a sec.

BENJAMIN

(Completely flustered now.)

Wrong page? Okay look...either tell me what you're doing here, or I'm calling the police.

NARRATOR

I'm written here.

BENJAMIN

What?

NARRATOR

You are Benjamin Martin aren't you?

BENJAMIN

Yeah...

NARRATOR

I thought so...wanted to make sure I was in the write script. Now look you are way off right now. We need to get back into the dialogue. Enter Mother Martin.

(MOTHER MARTIN enters from the pantry door on her cue. She does not in any way acknowledge

NARRATOR. As soon as she speaks BENJAMIN completely focuses on her (as if NARRATOR and he had never spoken.))

MOTHER MARTIN

Benjamin...

BENJAMIN

Hey Mom.

MOTHER MARTIN

...you look like a mess.

(She hugs him and breezes in.)

BENJAMIN

I have a job interview later on so I wasn't going to get ready until then.

MOTHER MARTIN

A job interview? Well, you can't go looking like this.

BENJAMIN

I know, Mom. Didn't I just say I was going to change?

MOTHER MARTIN

So who are you interviewing with?

BENJAMIN

A business downtown.

MOTHER MARTIN

Oh, downtown. It's not safe downtown. The crime rate in the city is very high...

(Suddenly)

Is it illegal Benjamin?

BENJAMIN

It's nothing illegal. Do you really think they set up job interviews at illegal companies?

MOTHER MARTIN

Yes.

BENJAMIN

No! It's just that...

(He suddenly notices something is wrong.)

Mom, did you come out of my pantry?

NARRATOR

No...no...no. Can we please stick to the script?

BENJAMIN

(He notices the NARRATOR again.)

You...what is this? Why is...

Mom, do you know this guy?

(She does not move or give any response.)

BENJAMIN

Mom? Mom, what's wrong?

(to NARRATOR)

What's going on here?

NARRATOR

(*Stage whisper.*)

I don't remember the name of the company.

BENJAMIN

What?

NARRATOR

(*Articulates more, but still a stage whisper.*)

I don't remember the name of the company.

BENJAMIN

I don't remember the name of the company?

MOTHER MARTIN

You're interviewing with a company and you don't know who they are? It is something illegal isn't it? Benjamin, are you okay?

BENJAMIN

Mom, what's wrong with you? Why are you playing along with this guy?

NARRATOR

You know, this script is fine the way it's written.

BENJAMIN

Okay, seriously man, this is really freaking me out. Wha...I mean, I dunno, what is this?

NARRATOR

This is "Everyday Acting."

BENJAMIN

What?!? Who are you?

NARRATOR

I was called "Narrator."

BENJAMIN

Narrator?

NARRATOR

Obviously the author knew someone was going to have to walk you through your lines.

BENJAMIN

See...we were communicating there for like a second, and then you lost me with the line thing.

NARRATOR

(Looks over to MOTHER MARTIN who is still frozen in place.)

Say "Love you too."

BENJAMIN

Why?

NARRATOR

Just do it.

BENJAMIN

No. I don't know you....

NARRATOR

Say "Love you..."

BENJAMIN

Love you too.

(MOTHER MARTIN begins crossing back to pantry door.)

There are you happy...Mom? Where are you going?

(She exits.)

Mom? Mom!

(He turns back to NARRATOR.)

What? Come on what is this?

(Pointing at pantry.)

What was that?

NARRATOR

That was her cue line to exit. No use Mother Martin being here if I've got to go over all of this.

(Pause. Slowly as if speaking to a young child.)

You're Benjamin Martin.

BENJAMIN

Yeah, I know. We've been over this.

NARRATOR

Benjamin Martin is a character in a play.

BENJAMIN

(Sarcastically.)

Well that's nice. But this Benjamin Martin is real.

NARRATOR

(NARRATOR laughs.)

Real?

BENJAMIN

Yeah...really real. This stopped being funny five minutes ago. Now I don't know how you got my mom in on this, but you can go do your "Everyday Acting," or whatever it was, somewhere else, because this is bullshit.

(DRAKE and CHARLIE enter from the refrigerator saying their lines. They are carrying random snack and drink items like they have been watching a football game.)

CHARLIE

I know...complete bullshit.

DRAKE

We had them up to the last drive.

BENJAMIN

(BENJAMIN falls right into the conversation. Grabbing a bag of chips from one of them.)

And he never fumbles...never.

(Sudden realization.)

No...no. No. No. No. How did my friends just walk out of the refrigerator?

NARRATOR

Because...it is written in the script that way.

BENJAMIN

Okay.

(Pause.)

Okay, I'll listen. Just tell me what's going on.

NARRATOR

Say "Who are we playing next week?"

BENJAMIN

Who are we playing next week?

DRAKE

Cleveland!

CHARLIE

Dude, we ran into somebody you might know on the elevator.

NARRATOR

Lemme guess.

BENJAMIN

(Repeating...unsure.)

Lemme guess...

CHARLIE

Need a hint...she said not to worry she'd be bringing us another blanket to sit on soon.

BENJAMIN

What am I talking about here?

NARRATOR

We skipped that part. When your mother was here, the two of you were supposed to have a conversation about replacing the raggedy, old blanket on your sofa.

BENJAMIN

But I love that blanket....it's the warmest blanket ever.

DRAKE

She said you were going to an interview today. I thought we were watching the game over here?

CHARLIE

We're not watching the game?

NARRATOR

See. You know your lines.

BENJAMIN

So everything I'm saying is in that script of yours?

NARRATOR

Yes.

BENJAMIN

Everything that Drake is saying?

NARRATOR

Yes.

BENJAMIN

(Challenging.)

Okay...what do I say to make these guys leave?

NARRATOR

(Looks at script. Flips a couple of pages.)

Maybe I'll take you up on that later.

BENJAMIN

(Overacting.)

Maybe I'll take you up on that later.

DRAKE

Okay, man, we'll see you there.

(CHARLIE and DRAKE exit through the refrigerator.)

BENJAMIN

This is seriously screwed up.

NARRATOR

Look, you are a character in a play. Everything you say is written down in this script. I am a character...Drake, Charlie, Mother Martin...we are all figments of the authors imagination.

BENJAMIN

No. That can't be true.

NARRATOR

Why not?

BENJAMIN

Because it just can't be. I mean I breathe...I have emotions, right? And I have a history!

NARRATOR

None of that makes you real.

BENJAMIN

Am I dead? Is that what this is? I feel like I've done all of this before, but not somehow...Am I seeing my life flash before my eyes?

NARRATOR

You would have to have been alive at some point to be dead now.

BENJAMIN

Give me that script. Let me see what happens.

(BENJAMIN flips quickly through a couple of pages.)

Yeah, come on up.

(MATTIE enters through the Love Seat. She doesn't say anything. BENJAMIN looks down and realizes it's still his line.)

BENJAMIN

I didn't know you were coming over today.

MATTIE

What? Did you have big plans?

BENJAMIN

(Reading still.)

Well, Charlie and Drake wanted me to go to Blister's to watch the game...

MATTIE

Why didn't you go with them?

BENJAMIN

(Stops reading.)

Because I wanted to see you.

(To NARRATOR.)

She's gotta be real. This can't be right. She is real. I love her.

NARRATOR

I'm sorry.

BENJAMIN

But I do...

NARRATOR

Only because the author tells you to.

BENAJMIN

Oh forget it.

(He flips further into the script.)

NARRATOR

What are you looking for?

BENJAMIN

Her exit...but I don't need this to tell me how it goes. She says, "Dream about me." And I say, "Always."

(MATTIE exits through Love Seat.)

BENJAMIN

Who am I then?

NARRATOR

You are Benjam...

BENJAMIN

Yeah....Benjamin Martin....character. But does the script say anything about me?

NARRATOR

(Takes Script from BENJAMIN; flips to front.)

It has a brief character description. Benjamin Martin: Male, Mid 20's, some self-esteem issues, people pleaser, lacks a firm grip on reality.

BENJAMIN

That's a lot of psychological issues for a character, but it's definitely me. Why am I like that?

NARRATOR

Because the author wrote it so.

BENJAMIN

Why though? Was I like that in the beginning...you know naturally, or do the other characters make me what I am?

NARRATOR

I couldn't say.

BENJAMIN

You mean there's nothing in the context to help me here? I can't believe that....let me see the script.

(BENJAMIN opens the script and begins flipping again.)

BENJAMIN

Why aren't our conversations in here?

NARRATOR

What do you mean?

BENJAMIN

Well, why isn't this...this conversation in here?

NARRATOR

It is. Let me show you.

(NARRATOR takes the book and begins searching.)

Huh...we must be at the wrong place.

BENJAMIN

No. I had it on the right page. Right after Mattie leaves.

NARRATOR

You couldn't have. It's...it's here somewhere.

BENJAMIN

(Getting excited.)

No it's not...in fact none our conversations are in there are they?

NARRATOR

Of course they are.

(Pause.)

They have to be.

BENJAMIN

If they're not written down....what does that mean?

NARRATOR

That means it's an impossibility...it is here.

BENJAMIN

No, it means we're actually having this conversation. We're not just quoting lines.

NARRATOR

That's impossible.

BENJAMIN

It's because we are real.

NARRATOR

No!

BENJAMIN

Then it's because I'm real.

*(Stage left (or right) side of couch collapses on its
legs.)*

NARRATOR

(Frantically searching.)

This is all in the script....somewhere.

BENJAMIN

(Testing.)

I'm real.

(Couch collapses onto itself.)

BENJAMIN

(With more power)

I'm real.

(Coffee Table collapses.)

NARRATOR

No.

BENJAMIN

(Practically screaming)

I AM REAL!

*(Pantry door falls over revealing nothingness
behind it.)*

NARRATOR

But...the author?

BENJAMIN

(Begins to continue with the his reality, but then stops)

...is real...

NARRATOR

Yes!

BENJAMIN

The author is real.

NARRATOR

YES!

BENJAMIN

The author...

(pause)

...is me.

NARRATOR

What?

BENJAMIN

That wasn't my mother. And those two guys...they aren't my friends...they have traits of some of them but they're not them. And Mattie...I do know her...I do love her...but she's not Mattie...she has another name. I created all this...

NARRATOR

But how can you be here?

BENJAMIN

I'm here *(points to his head)*...you're here *(points to his head)* .

(As this is said, all of the set pieces and NARRATOR are taken off of the stage.

BENJAMIN doesn't see this happening.)

I am....

(Pause)

I am....

(Longer Pause)

I am...

(He looks around.)

alone.

(LIGHTS OUT)

CHAPTER II - A

On Writing *Everyday Acting*

I wrote this my first semester at Austin Peay State University. It was an assignment for my Playwrighting class under Mr. Glen O'Malley. Mr. O'Malley had this to say about the pieces: "This really is a fascinating little play: well thought out; funny; well written, and totally unpredictable. It is always ahead of the audience - which is where you want it to be - and doesn't disappoint. The only "problems" I see in production are getting the refrigerator/love seat devices to work, and final collapse of everything. With imagination - this should be a lot of fun for a designer to work on. Congrats! You get the 10 minute play prize as far as I'm concerned. It does everything with crisp, "brio" and directness that it needs to as it barrels to its "point." It's great discovering an "existentialist" amongst us!"

When writing this I was also reading Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series. In the sixth book of this work the protagonist, Roland, is forced to come out of his world, one created in Stephen King's imagination, and venture into our world. This being a fictional story, Roland of course is still inside the world of Mr. King, but Roland is challenged with the task of meeting his maker...Stephen King. Mr. King writes himself into the story a weak and vulnerable character that is charged with creating Roland's world...which is exactly what he did. This blurring of author / character is really the inspiration for *Everyday Acting*. Many great authors have said that their characters are telling the story themselves and the authors' job is just writing that story down. I fully believe that. Many times I have been awakened in the middle of the night by a character in a play or story that I am working on, and they will not let me sleep again until I get up

and write. Usually this type of writing is merely one or two lines, never more than a paragraph, but when I read them the next day...well they are plain and simply not my words. This type of creation, these other people telling stories inside my mind, it leads me to thinking about the idea that we are all just someone else's story...someone else's creation. None of us truly know what is before our birth or after our death. We theorize because we have a need to know...a need to be less frightened of an eternal existence of nothingness or maybe even worse a complete and total finite ending. For Benjamin Martin life is over. His last line, "I am alone," is his end. He is alone, and he has nothing. And I created him that way; not out of a malignant hatred of the character, but out of a fear of my own personal ending and the nothingness it may contain.

Elijah Dies

February 24, 2009

Goodlettsville, TN

Update:

In February 2010, Nashville's People's Branch Theatre began taking submissions for their 2nd Annual Festival of Short Plays. I had worked as an actor during the first annual festival, but in 2010 I decided to submit two short plays: *A Little Fishing Tale* and *Everyday Acting*. The three day festival selected 30 plays (ten each night) to be produced and performed, and both of my submissions were selected.

Everyday Acting was produced on Friday, March 5, to a full house. It was not the first time that something I had written was performed, but it was the first time a professional company using professional actors had performed anything I had written. This piece has several technically difficult elements to deal with. Characters are coming

out of furniture. Furniture pieces and doors fall apart. These kinds of things are difficult to do on stage. I was always told to write whatever you imagine and let the director decide how to make it happen. In this situation, *Everyday Acting* was done as a staged reading. The actors had their scripts in hand and a few chairs to represent furniture and that's it. I learned something very quickly. *Everyday Acting* was meant to be performed this way. In addition to the characters in the script, the director decided to have a real Stage Manager on stage to read the stage directions, and it made this piece absolutely hilarious...until the final few moments that is. It started with a bang of laughter as the real Stage Manager read the stage directions about Benjamin lying on his sofa watching TV. And then immediately the Narrator character comes onto the stage and reads the exact same thing, only much more dramatically. If I ever submit this piece to be performed again it will be written to have the exact same thing happen.

After each piece is performed a group of adjudicators, as well as the audience, get a chance to respond to what they have just watched. My critique was very positive. The only question anyone had was how this piece would ever be performed with all of the technical difficulties, and the previous paragraph should make it clear that I don't think I'd ever want to see this piece produced with those difficulties included. Overall the comments were about how the dialogue was believable. Ross Brooks, the Artistic Director of the People's Branch Theatre, said that when the piece first began he was afraid it was going to be an inside joke only understood by people involved in the theater world. He said there were several theatrical elements (a narrator, a stage manager, calling for lines, etc) that could be lost on someone unfamiliar with the theater world. He concluded, however, by saying that his fears were completely unfounded. He said that I

took these elements and honed them into a driving force that dealt with a universal subject...the idea of existing.

CHAPTER II – B

First Draft *Everyday Acting*

As talked about previously, this piece was originally written for a class assignment. The concept of the original script involved changing a character's costume every time a new group of characters came onto the stage. I wanted to show how we outwardly change but internally remain the same. I got about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through that script before I realized that it was very bland and very structured. When I turned this in, Mr. O'Malley said it was okay but that there was something else underneath. I began thinking about the pieces of theater I enjoy watching...*Waiting for Godot*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*... Theatre of the Absurd. I decided that I wanted to write something in that style. *Everyday Acting* did end up favoring something absurd but you really can't understand how far it went unless you read the original. Therefore, I wanted to include the original in this collection as well.

Everyday Acting – Draft One

(A couch is set downstage semi-left. A chair is opposite the couch on stage right with a long coffee table behind it.

Upstage center and slightly right is the main entrance. A small (dorm sized) refrigerator is upstage left on a small table.)

(BENJAMIN MARTIN lies on his sofa in a dimly lit room. The only part of him that can be seen is his face which flickers blue light from the television he is watching and his

hand which holds the remote control. The rest of him is covered in a blanket. The television is on the fourth wall. There are potato chip bags and various other trash items on the floor in front of him. After ten/fifteen seconds the doorbell rings. BENJAMIN turns off the TV with the remote and gets up wearing a suit. He starts to cross to the door then doubles back and kicks the trash under the couch. BENJAMIN crosses to the door, switches on the lights, and then opens the door.)

(Enter MOTHER MARTIN)

MOTHER

Benjamin...

BENJAMIN

Hey Mom.

MOTHER

...don't you look all handsome in your little suit? *(She hugs him and breezes in).*

BENJAMIN

I thought I should look nice for my job interview today.

MOTHER

You read my mind.

BENJAMIN

I thought I might have.

MOTHER

So who are you interviewing with?

BENJAMIN

A business downtown.

MOTHER

What...you don't want me to know? Is it illegal?

BENJAMIN

No...it's just...well I don't remember the name of the company.

MOTHER

You're interviewing with a company and you don't know who they are? They could be illegal. Benjamin, are you okay?

BENJAMIN

Yes, Mom, I'm fine. I have several interviews planned this week. It's hard to keep up with them all. I've got it written down around here somewhere.

MOTHER

Okay...okay...I just worry sometimes that's all. It's hard to live alone. Before your father and I got divorced things were...

BENJAMIN

Well, doesn't the apartment look great?

MOTHER

Yes, it really does. You've done amazing thing with such a small space.

BENJAMIN

And don't I look great in my new suit?

MOTHER

You don't need a new suit to impress me. I don't know if I like this old blanket here on the couch though. Do you need a new blanket? I think I've got an extra one in the closet somewhere.

BENJAMIN

No. I've had that blanket since before I can remember...I wouldn't know who I was without it.

MOTHER

You're like that Charlie Brown boy...what was his name?

BENJAMIN

Linus. The one with the blue blanket.

MOTHER

Now that you mention it, I do remember you carrying this thing around with you all the time.

(Pause)

MOTHER

Well, I didn't really need anything. Just thought I'd stop by to see how things were.

BENJAMIN

I'm glad you stopped by. No one ever comes to see me.

MOTHER

I'll stop by again when I find that blanket.

BENJAMIN

But I don't need...

MOTHER

Bye. Call me if you need anything.

BENJAMIN

(Big sigh) Alright. *(Out the door)* Love you too.

(BENJAMIN closes the door behind her and then checks his watch. He crosses to the couch and pulls the empty bags and trash back out from underneath the couch. He lies on the couch, covers back up, and turns on the TV. After a few seconds the doorbell rings again. He gets up, walks over to the pile of clothes, and takes off the suit. Under the suit he is wearing a football jersey and warm-up pants. He crosses back to the door and opens it.)

(Enter CHARLIE and DRAKE.)

DRAKE

What's up, Ben?

BENJAMIN

What's up? So who are we playing today?

DRAKE

Cleveland!

CHARLIE

Dude, we ran into somebody you might know on the elevator.

BENJAMIN

Lemme guess...

CHARLIE

Need a hint...she said not to worry, she'd be bringing us another blanket to sit on soon.

BENJAMIN

Damn. She is always over here trying to rearrange my life.

DRAKE

I think she's right about the blanket. How old is this thing?

BENJAMIN

Leave the blanket alone. It gets really fucking cold in here sometimes and that is the warmest blanket ever.

DRAKE

She said you were going to an interview today. I thought we were watching the game over here.

CHARLIE

We're not watching the game?

BENJAMIN

We can watch it here, but...I really couldn't afford to get any food or beer or anything so...

DRAKE

You have chips. (*He grabs the bag off the floor and starts eating.*)

CHARLIE

Get a job man. (*He starts searching through the fridge.*)

BENJAMIN

Fuck you...Mom!

DRAKE

(*With a mouthful of chips.*) She wasn't that bad. I mean she is offering to buy you stuff isn't she?

BENJAMIN

I was talking to...whatever...that's just her way of controlling my life.

DRAKE

Have you told her that *you* would like to control your own life?

BENJAMIN

Every time I see her. Today when she left I was like Mom, I don't want you to come back until you can respect the way I live.

DRAKE

If I talked to my mom that way, she would literally kill me.

CHARLIE

Dude, there's no beer here!

BENJAMIN

(to DRAKE) Didn't I say that 5 minutes ago?

CHARLIE

I can't watch football without beer.

DRAKE

He can't do anything without beer.

BENJAMIN

Sorry guys. Like I said, I meant to get some but I just couldn't afford it.

CHARLIE

If we can get to Blister's soon we can still catch kick-off.

DRAKE

Let's go.

BENJAMIN

You guys go on...I...well you know...can't really afford it.

CHARLIE

Dude, go find you mom and beg her for some damn money.

DRAKE

I can spot you some cash.

BENJAMIN

Maybe I'll come by later and take you up on that.

CHARLIE

(Grabs DRAKE by the shoulders and spins him around to face him.) Kick-off...must see kick-off.

DRAKE

All right, all right. *(CHARLIE exits with a quick gesture resembling a wave.)* I'll see you later, man. *(DRAKE exits.)*

BENJAMIN

Take it easy.

(BENJAMIN closes the door behind them. He crosses to the couch and kicks the trash back underneath. He lies on the couch, covers back up, and turns on the TV. After a few seconds the doorbells rings again. He gets up, walks over to the pile of clothes, and takes off the jersey and warm-ups. He is wearing a polo shirt and khaki pants. He crosses to the door and opens it.)

(Enter MATTIE.)

MATTIE

Hi Benny.

BENJAMIN

I didn't know you were coming over today.

MATTIE

What? Did you have big plans?

BENJAMIN

Well, Charlie and Drake wanted me to go to Blister's to watch the game...

MATTIE

I thought I saw them getting on the elevator. Why would they want you to go? I thought you didn't like them.

BENJAMIN

(Cutesy tone)...if you'd let me finish, Mat, I was going to say that I blew them off with an excuse because I had thought about calling you.

CHAPTER II - C

On Producing *Everyday Acting*The Sofa and Loveseat

I want the sofa and the loveseat to look as if they used to be Benjamin's mother's or maybe even grandmother's. I like the look of the sofa pictured above, obviously though, it would need to be distressed. It would not be a sofa that would have been given to Benjamin new. Benjamin probably watched many hours of TV and ate many meals on this sofa while it was still at his mother/grandmother's.

The Sofa and Loveseat (continued)

I also like this sofa and the matching loveseat below. The floral pattern makes it very obvious in my mind that Benjamin did not pick this out himself. Again, it would need to be distressed. The sofa and loveseat would need to be disassembled and then reassembled using lighter materials. Benjamin is on the couch as the play begins but no other action takes place on it. Therefore, it only needs to be stabilized enough to support his weight. The loveseat only needs to be big enough to mask Mattie until she enters. I envision all of the set-pieces (sofa, loveseat, refrigerator, and pantry door) to be assembled with light wood pieces attached to rope that runs off-stage. At the appropriate time, the rope would be pulled and the set-pieces would collapse.



The Refrigerator

I would like it to look like something a cheap apartment would come with. I would also like it to have only one door, but I'm not sure if it would look too old that way. This refrigerator would be easier to gut and reassemble without having to worry about a separate freezer door.



This refrigerator would work as well. It is plain and simple and could probably be found in many cheaper apartments across America. The only thing I don't like about it is the fact that it has two doors. It could still be made to work by only gutting the bottom door and having Drake and Charlie ducking when they come through.



The Pantry Door

The pantry door can be any ordinary door.
It doesn't need to be white, but this image
contains the simplest door I could find.
The door needs to be free-standing and
large enough to mask Mother Martin.



Benjamin should look very casual, as if it's ten o'clock in the morning when this play starts and he has just woken up. There are any number of graphic t-shirts and pajama pants with logos, sports teams, funny slogans, and superheroes on them, and really any of those would work. When picking out an outfit I kept things as simple as possible...down to the plain white socks.





This is exactly the blanket I had imagined draping Benjamin at the beginning of the play. Why? Because it is the exact ratty and torn old blanket that I have.

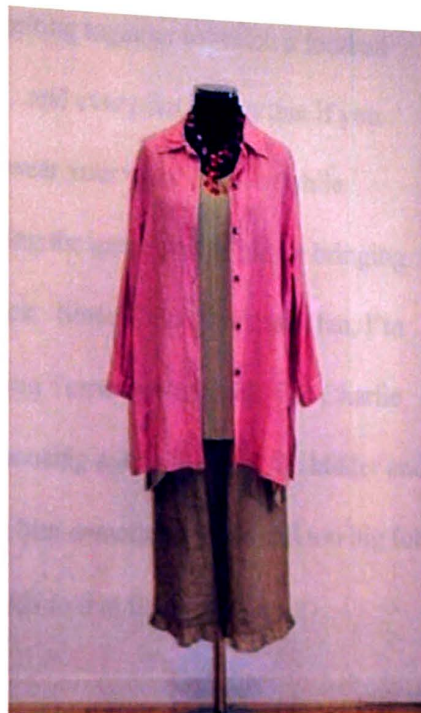
Narrator



I'm not sure why, but when I was writing this I always pictured Nathan Lane as Narrator. So this entry is going to be pretty simple. My costuming of Narrator would be...Nathan Lane in a suit.

Mother Martin

I want Mother Martin to look well when juxtaposed with Benjamin, but she shouldn't look professional. I like everything about this outfit. At first the pink made me weary because I associate pink with young and modern, but in this photo the color, mostly because of the flow of the fabric, has a classic feel. I definitely see Mother Martin as classic. She has a fear of different and new, as when she talks about the dangers of working downtown.





This portion of the play is about a group of guys getting together to watch a football game...and every fan knows that if you don't wear your team's colors while watching the game you might be bringing bad luck. Since I'm a Tennessee fan, I'm choosing Tennessee apparel. For Charlie I'm choosing a jersey. He is the kidder and giving him something loose and too big for him adds to that funny look.



For Drake I'm choosing a form fitting baseball jersey with the Titans logo.

Charlie and Drake (continued)

Both guys would be in jeans and sneakers.

Mattie

This was the most difficult costume for me to arrange as I am not familiar with trendy women's clothing. I want Mattie to look cute not flashy but with a sense of style. I like the color and style of this top. The jeans should be the same way. I like these because they are modern but also have a retro flair to them.



CHAPTER III

Etiquette of S

*(Stage Right – a man locked in a giant
birdcage (S).)*

*(Center Stage – a woman who is blindfolded
and whose hands are bound behind her back
lying on the floor (M).)*

(Stage Left – a man lying on the floor (B).)

*S and B cannot communicate directly to
one another. Only M is in touch with both.*

*S never looks up to the audience. All of his
lines are spoken with his head held
downward.)*

*(Center stage lights come up. Only M can
be seen. She is still for a beat and then
begins to stir.)*

M

What the hell is going on?

*(Lights slightly fade up on B as he begins to
stir.)*

M

(Panicked)

What the hell is going on?

(B staggers to his feet.)

B

What happened?

M

What do you mean, "What happened?"

B

It's a fucking question *(pause)* it means what the fuck happened?

(B and S's lights slowly fade up to full.)

M

Get over here and untie me.

B

Naw...I don't think I'm ready for that yet.

M

I can't see a damned thing.

B

You don't need to see...I don't want to see.

M

How do I not know what's going on...how? *(More)* How?!

B

I don't know. I don't fucking know all right. You're supposed to be the one *(S begins to speak over these lines.)* that...that...well...

S

(Speaking over B.)

You gave yourself the apple this time.

M

Gave me the apple?

B

Apple...what the hell are you talkin' about? Apples?

M

I don't know...

S

Why does he keep you bound?

M

Shut up...I am trying to figure out what's going on.

B

What? I didn't say anything.

(Pause)

Wait...you're talking to him now aren't you?

M

Never mind that, just tell me what you did.

B

I...I don't remember.

M

You don't remember – I do. But why can't I?

S

She is gone.

M

Who is gone?

S

She who was here.

M

She?

B

No...no...she is not gone, she can't be.

M

Miranda?

(Beat.)

Where is Miranda?

B

NO!!

(M, who has by this point gotten to her knees, suddenly screams and breaks the rope that binds her wrists. She covers her face.)

B

She's okay...I swear she's gonna be okay.

M

(Taking her hands down.) You gave me the Rope? *(Rope is a slang term for a date rape drug)*

S

(Proclaiming.) She has been released.

M

You were supposed to give her the drug...I...I don't understand.

B

I did...I put several of them in her glass.

M

But why am I...

B

(Interrupting.) I can't. I CAN'T. I JUST CAN'T.

M

You have to tell me.

B

(Sobbing.) No...

M

(Trying a new approach.) You have to please tell me what happened.

(Following two lines are spoken in unison.)

B

She's gone.

S

She's gone.

M

What the hell does that mean? She's gone...

B

I fucking killed her all right!

(Beat.)

M

What?

S

She's gone.

M

Would you stop saying that? I know she's gone. I understand she's gone. She can't be gone. How the hell is she gone?

B

(Irate.) Tell him to shut the fuck up. This has nothing to do with him. He's not even there.

M

He is there...he has to be there.

B

I killed her...I fucking killed her. I killed her and then I fucked her. Ask him what he thinks about that. Ask him if he's there now. Ask him how he can be there now.

(M slowly takes the blindfold off and stands.)

M

No...you didn't know she was dead. You didn't know.

S

He is not gone.

B

How do you know? How do you know she wasn't dead?

M

I know...everything...

(Beat.)

You didn't take the Rope until after you...you realized.

B

Yeah. Like that'll stand up anywhere.

M

I am not worried about anything "standing up." I just want to know it wasn't...intentional.

B

I drugged a teenage-fucking-girl, slept with her...

M

That's never bothered you before.

B

SHE DIED!

S

Every knee.

B

SHE FUCKING DIED!

(Beat.)

(Calming down.) So now you know...what are we going to do?

M

Do? Why does everything have to be an action with you...just let me think. It can be worked out. There's a way out of this. I just have to think.

S

Every knee will bow.

B

No. Something has to be done. There is a solution...but you don't need to "think."

M

What are you talking about?

(B takes gun out of the back of his jeans.)

S

(Shaking the cage violently.) No.

M

What are you doing?

B

I murdered her...she had...she had...life.

M

(Faintly.) No.

S

(Screaming.) NO!

(B puts the gun to his temple. It should be indecipherable as to whether he is responding to M or S.)

B

(Calmly.) Yes.

(B pulls the trigger, gun fires. B and M both drop at the same time. Simultaneously, cage door opens for S. S steps out and looks up for the first time.)

(Lights out.)

CHAPTER III - A

On Writing *Etiquette of S*

I wrote this play in a bar in Greensboro, NC, at the South Eastern Theatre Conference. I was there with a couple of friends of mine and we were discussing the marathon of 10-minute plays we had just seen. We agreed that they had all been bad. At that point I decided that I could write something better, so while everyone else drank and talked at the bar, I wrote *Etiquette of S*...in less than 30 minutes.

My general idea for this show was that everyone had a mind (M), a body (B), and a soul (S). The body could communicate with the mind and the soul could communicate with the mind, but the body and soul could not communicate with each other. In fact, most of the time, the body refuses to acknowledge the existence of the soul all together. I had recently been thinking about the idea of an unforgivable sin. The idea that you could do something so horrific that situation and circumstance did not matter...you would automatically be given a one way ticket to hell. Suicide is one of these sins. You can kill someone else and be forgiven, but you cannot kill yourself and be forgiven. You're dead, how can you ask for forgiveness? Because I personally don't believe death is "the end" (I'm not sure what I believe it is), I wanted to play around with the idea.

This play is about one man, he is unnamed. His mind is female and his body and soul are male because, unlike English, most words have a gender. In Biblical texts, references to the mind are feminine and references to the body and soul are masculine. In this play one man has woken up from a drug-related unconscious state. He has overdosed a girl he meant to date rape and it has killed her. In order to escape the knowledge that reality brings...he took the drug himself, therefore the mind and body are gagged. Once

he realizes what he has done he decides suicide is the best way out. Once the man is dead, his soul is released. Does it go to hell? We, the audience, do not know. All we know is that it is gone.

I have to say that I love the idea of this play. It has a simple setup with a highly complex plot. My problem lies within the fact that I would need to see it produced in order to make any real adjustments to it...and believe me it needs adjustments. The dialogue is choppy, quick, and emotional. It was written to be that way. But I would need to see it produced to determine if it translates. I already know it is hard to read. I set this play aside for a few months and have just now reread it. I got lost. But, in my defense, it wasn't meant to be read.

Elijah Dies

February 26, 2009

Goodlettsville, TN

CHAPTER III - B

On Producing *Etiquette of S*The Birdcage

A fairly basic birdcage design, but this is the one I have always envisioned in this play. Obviously it would need to be large enough to comfortably seat a human being. And it would not need to be hanging like this one is. It would be better sitting on the stage floor. A chair on the inside and a functional door are all that would be required to make this work.

M

I struggled with all three of these choices for a long time. I think my first choice would be to have Mind in a full nude stocking. This image is sexier than I want it to be but the suit is close enough. There is a hint a sex at the opening of the play with the woman bound and gagged, but she is, after all, the mind of a man. Also, unlike this photo, she would not be wearing shoes. The idea of the body stocking is that the mind is not completely free even within our own heads. We would like to say, "I think whatever I want," but even our thoughts are restrained by societal outlines.



B

I like this costume for the body. It's casual but could be worn by a predator trying to make a good impression. It would not need to be this neat and wrinkle-free; after all, he did just rape a girl and take a lot of drugs.

S

The soul would be naked. It is the one part of us we have no control over and therefore cannot put any type of restraint on.

M, B, & S

I understand that not all areas where theatre is performed are liberal enough to allow nudity on stage. In a case where nudity was not allowed I would prefer all three character to be in the same outfit. A white button-up shirt and black slacks would probably work best...with no tie. If this were the case I would want the characters to look more like business casual than church.

CHAPTER IV

Gray Matter

(Two low-powered lights are hanging on the downstage right of the stage. One light is blue. The other is green. They are both facing the audience so that no light will be shed onto the stage itself. Underneath the lights is a computer terminal. Upstage, although they cannot be seen at this time, are two metal doors that are chained tightly shut. If these doors actually went somewhere they would lead to concentration-camp incinerators, but other than the doors and the computer, the stage should be bare. There should be a clear division (an invisible "viewing station" that is the fourth wall) between the upstage and downstage areas, the upstage area being the facility that holds prisoners. The downstage area being the room in which one could watch the prisoners through a screen. The space is almost bare, but should give the feel of a Nazi concentration camp. The play, however, is not set in Germany during WWII, but for the universality of the play, it should remain ambiguous.)

(Off-stage left is an unseen air-lock and changing room. Before any of the guards can enter the upstage prisoner area, they must first gear up and pass through this air-lock.)

(The blue light comes on. Silence fills the auditorium for a few beats, and then a high-pitched, agonizing whistle breaks the silence and begins the action.)

(MARTIN FLETCHER, or Gray number 72840 runs onto the stage, but in the dark, he appears only as a something. The audience should be able to recognize him as human only because of his silhouette and the fact that his footsteps come in pairs. He is breathing heavily because he has been running for quite some time before he ran onto the stage. A faint, white light from offstage finds the man. It is not powerful enough to make him clearly visible, but it does reveal that he is human. In the light you can see he wears a tattered, grey outfit with the number 72840 printed across his chest and back. No other details can be seen in this light.)

72840

(Drops to his knees in exhaustion)

(Three Guards (NICHOLAS SMITH, LOU GRAPES, and ANTHONY MILLER) enter from the direction the light came from. They make a semi-circle around him. The men, though they also can hardly be seen, carry rifles and have covered faces. Their faces are covered by gas masks and goggles.)

FIRST GUARD (ANTHONY MILLER)

72840, on the ground now.

72840

I'm on the ground.

FIRST GUARD (ANTHONY MILLER)

72840, I repeat, get on the ground now.

72840

I told you, I'm already...

SECOND GUARD (LOU GRAPES)

(Interrupting) Face down, asshole.

72840

You know what, I'm done.

SECOND GUARD (LOU GRAPES)

Listen, you gray fuck, if you don't do exactly as you're told right now...I swear to God

I'll put a bullet into your brain.

THIRD GUARD (NICHOLAS SMITH)

Let him talk.

72840

Go to hell. And you (*Indicating SECOND GUARD*) can say hi to whatever god you swear to while you're there. The only way you're going to get me closer to the floor is by shooting me. So go ahead. You're going to kill us all anyway (*He stands up*), so you might as well make it quick.

THIRD GUARD (NICHOLAS SMITH)

(Laughs)

72840

Yeah, you too, laughing boy. You can all three go to hell.

SECOND GUARD (LOU GRAPES)

Tell us how you got the lights off.

72840

(He chuckles) Did I not just tell you to go to hell? I know...you can put a bullet in my brain. Then do it. If it will end all this then do it.

THIRD GUARD (NICHOLAS SMITH)

You're standing here cursing us and (*Indicating SECOND GUARD*) this gentleman's God. *(He laughs)* If I had a leash, 72840, you'd make a fine pet.

72840

You better believe I'd bite.

THIRD GUARD (NICHOLAS SMITH)

(Quickly crossing forward and putting his gun to 72840's temple) You want a quick death, gray meat. I would gladly kill every one of you before your next breathe, but I

can't do that yet, we're not done with you. But *you've* been a fun pet. So I'll give you half your wish. (*He lowers his gun to 72840's gut and fires*)

72840

(*Screams in pain*)

THIRD GUARD (NICHOLAS SMITH)

(*To FIRST GUARD*) Get him out of here and clean this shit up. (*72840 continues to groan in pain*) I'm sure there's blood everywhere.

FIRST GUARD (ANTHONY MILLER)

Right away.

(*Chains are heard as the lock is taken off of the doors that stand upstage. Doors open and close.*)

THIRD GUARD (NICHOLAS SMITH)

(*To FIRST GUARD*) Do that quickly. We need to secure this place as soon as possible, especially with these lights down.

SECOND GUARD (LOU GRAPES)

Lights should be back up within minutes.

THIRD GUARD (NICHOLAS SMITH)

Good. Do we know how they did it?

SECOND GUARD (LOU GRAPES)

Everything we know is in the report.

THIRD GUARD (NICHOLAS SMITH)

Which is...?

At the viewing station.

SECOND GUARD (LOU GRAPES)

(THIRD GUARD exits with the SECOND GUARD.

The FIRST GUARD reenters and quickly cleans up the mess that is the remains of 72840.)

(THIRD GUARD and SECOND GUARD reenter onto the apron of the stage (the section outside of the concentration camp with the computer terminal). Soon after they reenter, the lights come up on the stage.)

THIRD GUARD (NICHOLAS SMITH)

About time.

SECOND GUARD (LOU GRAPES)

Yes sir. *(This is the first reference to any kind of chain of command)*

(They cross to the computer station. While they do this, they remove their goggles and masks. Behind THIRD GUARD's mask is NICHOLAS SMITH. Behind the other is LOU GRAPES. NICHOLAS picks up a folder that is lying on the desk.)

NICHOLAS

(Reading the file) This report shows that the wiring for the lights had been chewed through?

LOU

Like sewer rats sir.

NICHOLAS

How much electricity is flowing through those wires? Enough to power all the lights in the facility right?

LOU

Yes sir.

NICHOLAS

No man could chew through that and live.

LOU

No man sir, but you're not suggesting that these things are human? It might be part of what they are.

NICHOLAS

Yeah. Maybe.

(During this conversation, ANTHONY exits the stage.)

NICHOLAS

Lou, go down to the testing facility and let the boys know they need to start developing a test that will run electricity through a few of the pack to see how their bodies react.

LOU

Yes sir.

NICHOLAS

Oh Lou...one more thing.

LOU

Sir?

NICHOLAS

Are monkeys human?

LOU

Sir, we've discussed this. You know I don't believe...

NICHOLAS

(Interrupting) Are monkeys human?

LOU

No sir.

NICHOLAS

But what happens when we open up an ape and work on him?

LOU

I'm afraid I don't follow.

NICHOLAS

Mr. Grapes, they're enough like us that when we test 'em we can learn about ourselves.

It doesn't make 'em human...just useful. So tell the boys not to make the juice so high

that it kills all our test subjects, just make sure it stings a little.

LOU

(Smiles a malicious grin) Yes sir.

(LOU exits. NICHOLAS sits at the computer station and continues through the file. Two men enter the stage. They wear the same type of clothing

as MARTIN, but in the clear light that now shines on the stage; you can tell they are not normal men, their skin is gray. They enter slowly and cautiously, listening very carefully for something. The man wearing 733531 is PATRICK HALLBURN. The other man is JONATHON MEEK, also known as 702517. Both men are far younger than MARTIN. NICHOLAS is completely unaware of their presence and does not react to their dialogue.)

JOHATHON

Are you sure this is where it came from?

PATRICK

No, but Harold said this is where we should look. You don't hear it do you?

JONATHON

No.

PATRICK

Good.

NICHOLAS

(To himself) Fuck! How does anything chew through an electric cable without frying?

PATRICK

This is it. This is the big time. Ya know if what we heard was what we heard.

JONATHON

I know. *(Beat)* God, I hope it's not what we heard.

PATRICK

Well, yeah, of course, me too. But if someone did get shot, all bets are off aren't they? If they shoot one of us for the lights, then they'll shoot for anything.

JONATHON

I just hope it isn't what we thought it was. Especially if it was Martin.

(PATRICK has found his way to the spot where MARTIN was shot. NICHOLAS, meanwhile, is up from the computer station and looking at the stage. He cannot see the two men and they cannot see him.)

PATRICK

I think it was. There're smears of something all over the floor here. It looks kind of reddish.

JONATHON

Blood?

PATRICK

I think so. *(He bends close to the floor)* It smells lemony.

JONATHON

I can't smell anything but that burnt smell. What is that?

PATRICK

I don't know, but it's coming from in there. *(He motions to the doors on stage)*

(NICHOLAS crosses back to the computer terminal and types something quickly. Within seconds, a low drone is heard like the rumbling of a small generator. NICHOLAS crosses back to his standing place and watches.)

(As soon as the droning noise begins, PATRICK and JONATHON leap up and dart off of the stage.)

(Moments after they exit, the blue light on stage changes to a green light.)

NICHOLAS

Damn!

(MELISSA RHINEHOLD enters the apron of the stage and crosses to NICHOLAS. She is around the same age as JONATHON and PATRICK, but she dresses in the same attire that all the other guards wear. She embraces NICHOLAS as his daughter, but the audience should be confused about what their relationship is exactly. They should have an air of familiarity about them that only comes with a long relationship.)

MELISSA

Not what you were hoping to see?

NICHOLAS

Do you remember when we first started all of this?

MELISSA

It's been almost a year.

NICHOLAS

Yes, but do you remember the beginning? When we first brought them to the facility...this was my favorite part.

MELISSA

The viewing screens. Mine too...in a way.

NICHOLAS

We used to be able to watch them whenever we wanted, anytime we brought up one of the screens. It was like going to the zoo. Now I never see anything.

MELISSA

You've been speaking with Mr. Grapes haven't you?

NICHOLAS

Why do you ask that?

MELISSA

Because you're referring to these sick people as animals. You know how much I hate when he talks that way. He treats them like lab rats...like we have an unlimited supply of...never mind, I don't even want to think about it. But you know I hate you talking that way.

NICHOLAS

I know. But I have my doubts about your beliefs. Tonight, when the lights went out, it was because one of those things chewed through the electrical supply line. Nothing human could have survived that, but when I checked the pack's vital signs just now, they all checked out normal.

MELISSA

Not all of them checked out normal.

NICHOLAS

Yes they did. I just checked on the monitor.

MELISSA

Martin Fletcher.

NICHOLAS

Who?

MELISSA

Martin Fletcher.

NICHOLAS

Who the hell is Martin Fletcher?

MELISSA

This is exactly what I'm talking about. Martin Fletcher is the *person* you call 72840.

The *man* that was killed tonight.

NICHOLAS

A direct order was given and that Gray refused to follow. The rules of this facility are clearly posted for our safety as well as theirs. If I determine one of them to be a threat...

MELISSA

(Interrupting) So dressing them in prison attire and replacing their names with numbers...that's safety?

NICHOLAS

Yes.

MELISSA

These poor people are sick. They should be in a hospital somewhere being treated, but instead they are thrown into this living hell and treated like violent prisoners.

NICHOLAS

These things carry a plague. If you so much as breathe the air around them you inherit the same abnormalities into your skin.

MELISSA

And after a year we still haven't found out if these so called abnormalities are anything more than a discoloration of the skin. We have no clue what caused any of this. You call it a plague, but it could just be a new color of skin that comes from the pack's mixed breeding...god, you've got me talking about them like they're animals.

NICHOLAS

Does skin color just change overnight like it did for these things? No. It does not. If this were part of their genetic code, the skin discoloration would have been a lifetime process and it certainly would not spread through contact and air-born methods.

MELISSA

They are sick. We should be treating them while they rest in hospital beds. They are people.

NICHOLAS

They were chosen by God to be eradicated.

MELISSA

What? You have been talking to Mr. Grapes too much. God isn't eradicating them. You are the only one eradicating anything...with your guns.

(NICHOLAS reaches out and slaps MELISSA. She falls to the ground.)

NICHOLAS

God uses me to keep his sheep. If there is trouble in the flock, I eliminate the trouble. If that means killing a gray (*Beat*) I'll kill them all. Go serve the lunches.

(She begins to exit.)

NICHOLAS

I don't want to hear anything else about this. Do I make myself clear?

MELISSA

Yes sir.

(She exits.)

(NICHOLAS crosses to the computer terminal and types something in. The feeding whistle rings and MELISSA and ANTHONY enter the stage with food and their masks and goggles. After a short time, PATRICK and JONATHON reenter the stage along with 752219, which is HAROLD REIGNS. They all cross to the feeding area and receive their portions

in small silver pie trays. They must kneel down and raise the tray in order to be fed.)

NICHOLAS

(Into a walkie-talkie) Are they all accounted for? I have three of them at this station.

LOU GRAPES *(Voice over Walkie-Talkie)*

Yes sir. We have a full count.

NICHOLAS

All right. Close up if that's all of them.

(NICHOLAS enters something into the computer again. The droning noise stops and the green light changes back to blue. NICHOLAS exits.

ANTHONY and MELISSA begin loading food back onto their cart and then begin to exit.)

MELISSA

I'll catch up. I'm going to wait around for these bowls. There are only three of them...be quicker than coming back.

(ANTHONY exits and MELISSA slowly makes her way over to the group of Grays.)

MELISSA

How did you manage to get the lights off?

(Faster than MELISSA thought possible, HAROLD has taken her gun from her and is now forcing her to the ground with it.)

HAROLD

Well, well, lunch meat, didn't expect this did you?

(MELISSA doesn't say anything.)

HAROLD

Did you?

MELISSA

I just...I just...

HAROLD

You just what? Wanted to take a cheap shot at one of the freaks huh?

MELISSA

No. I just wanted to talk to you.

HAROLD

Your kind don't just talk to us. So tell me what you really wanted.

PATRICK

Where is 72840?

MELISSA

Martin Fletcher?

HAROLD

Don't you call him that.

(HAROLD brings the gun to MELISSA's forehead.)

JONATHON

No. Don't.

PATRICK

Just back off, Jon. Let Harold handle this.

HAROLD

Don't you ever talk to any of us that way. You gave us these numbers, now you use 'em.

MELISSA

The other guard will be back to look for me soon if I don't report in, and they're watching you right now anyway.

HAROLD

Oh? Are they now? *(he laughs)* Maybe they'll just have to watch me put a bullet into your brain. Or better yet, how about I take all this gear off you and see if you can't help me prolong my species?

JONATHON

Where is Martin?

MELISSA

He...

HAROLD

Think real careful about the answer you give Jon here.

MELISSA

He was executed.

(ANTHONY enters the apron of the stage and crosses to the computer terminal during the following dialogue.)

HAROLD

That is not the answer I was looking for.

(HAROLD cocks the gun. PATRICK runs over and pulls HAROLD away. JONATHON crosses to keep MELISSA down.)

PATRICK

Not right now.

HAROLD

(he is obviously devastated by this news) They killed him. *(To MELISSA)* You better pray to your gods that you're lying to me.

PATRICK

We didn't have time to tell you. We found blood.

(The drone of the viewing screen light comes on.

JONATHON perks up as he faintly hears it over the yelling and crosses to PATRICK and HAROLD.)

JONATHON

It's here. They're watching.

PATRICK

How long?

JONATHON

Thirty seconds maybe.

(HAROLD hands the gun to JONATHON then walks over and spits on MELISSA.)

HAROLD

(To MELISSA) Lucky bitch. *(To PATRICK and JONATHON)* Come on.

(HAROLD exits with PATRICK right behind him.

JONATHON is lagging back a few steps.)

MELISSA

(As she tries to get up) I'm sorry about Mr. Fletcher.

(JONATHON hesitates and then crosses back to

MELISSA. He puts her gun onto the ground beside her.)

MELISSA

Why are you all running out of here?

(JONATHON looks at her for just a moment, then

he looks to the door, and then takes off to catch the

other two. As soon as he exits, MELISSA picks up

her gun and stands up. The light changes from blue to green.)

ANTHONY

(Through the walkie-talkie) Is everything all right Ms. Rhinehold?

MELISSA

Yeah. I'm fine.

ANTHONY

Are you sure? Why is your gun out?

MELISSA

I...I thought I heard...are you watching me? Where are you?

ANTHONY

I'm watching you through the viewing screen 14.

MELISSA

(Suddenly understanding why the three Grays just ran away) Turn the screen off for a moment.

ANTHONY

I'm not going to do that until you tell me why your gun is drawn.

MELISSA

I was just looking around and thought it would be safer to have it out. Now turn the damned screen off, Anthony.

ANTHONY

Okay. Okay. Give me a second.

(ANTHONY crosses to the computer and pushes a few buttons. The light changes from green to blue and the buzzing stops.)

MELISSA

Now turn it back on.

(ANTHONY types into the computer once again and the buzzing resumes.)

MELISSA

And you can still see me?

ANTHONY

Not yet. It takes the screen a few seconds to warm up.

MELISSA

Do you hear anything?

ANTHONY

Should I?

MELISSA

(Not into walkie-talkie) It's been that simple all along.

(MELISSA exits the stage. The green light once again replaces the blue as she reappears on the apron of the stage. She removes her mask and goggles as she crosses to the computer terminal, ignoring ANTHONY.)

ANTHONY

Is everything okay?

MELISSA

Yeah. Fine.

(ANTHONY crosses to computer terminal.)

MELISSA

Why do we not have sound with these things?

ANTHONY

Sound? With what?

MELISSA

(She contemplates telling him) Nothing really. I just suddenly realized how much I hate these walkie-talkies.

ANTHONY

Are you sure you're....

MELISSA

Look, I'm fine, okay. *(Pause)* I got into trouble earlier with the boss. It put me in a weird mood.

ANTHONY

Sometimes he's worse to deal with than that gray meat in there. *(Indicates upstage)*

MELISSA

Could you leave me alone for a while? I'm just looking for a quiet place to think.

ANTHONY

I can understand that. Radio if you need me.

(ANTHONY exits. MELISSA focuses all of her attention on finding out how to eliminate the sound that comes with the viewing station. She turns the screen off. The droning noise stops and the light changes to blue. After a few beats, JONATHON enters and crosses to the locked double-door. He struggles to open the door but without success. The droning buzzer sounds again and JONATHON hurries off stage. MELISSA crosses the stage away

from the computer. The light changes from blue to green. MELISSA exits the stage and after a beat she reappears behind the viewing screen wearing her mask and goggles.)

MELISSA

Damn it.

(She exits the concentration-camp and after a beat returns to the front of the stage. She takes her mask and goggles off as she returns to the computer terminal and types again, turning the light blue again and silencing the drone. As she continues to work on the computer, JONATHON reenters the stage and goes back to the door. PATRICK and HAROLD enter shortly after.)

HAROLD

What are you doing in here?

JONATHON

(Startled) I was trying to get this door open.

HAROLD

Why?

JONATHON

To know what's in there.

PATRICK

You know who's in there.

JONATHON

But maybe he's not. Or maybe she lied and he's not...

(HAROLD punches JONATHON hard in the face.

JONATHON goes down. PATRICK crosses to him.)

PATRICK

What the hell was that for?

HAROLD

(To JONATHON) He's dead you asshole. You saw the blood. And we might have been able to make sure a few of them ended up in this closet if you hadn't given it back to her.

JONATHON

(Through a bleeding nose) If they had seen her laying there without her gun they would have come in and killed us all.

HAROLD

But we would have had a gun.

PATRICK

(Still with JONATHON) One gun...how many bullets?

HAROLD

Enough to kill her and a few more maybe.

JONATHON

She didn't kill Martin.

HAROLD

How do you know that?

JONATHON

I don't know. I just...don't think she did.

HAROLD

It doesn't matter if it was her or not. They all need to die.

JONATHON

So you're willing to kill us all just to kill one or two of them?

HAROLD

(With no hesitation) Yes. I could have taken out one of them for every bullet that was in that gun. *(Beat)* Aren't you tired of living like a rat in a cage? Look around you. Look where you are. *(Indicates the stage)* This is purgatory. Bare walls. Shitty food. Ragged gray uniforms with numbers stamped onto them. *(He crosses to doors)* But this, this is hell. And we're all going to end up behind these doors. *(To JONATHON)* You know what they've done to Martin in there? They're burning away every trace of him. Don't you smell that? That's Martin! And they'll burn every trace of us. We didn't do anything to deserve to be put there.

(The light changes from blue to green. The buzzer does not sound. MELISSA crosses offstage.)

JONATHON

But we're sick, right? They have to quarantine us.

(HAROLD turns and leaves. PATRICK stands.)

PATRICK

When was the last time you actually felt sick?

(PATRICK turns to leave then turns back.)

Besides if we were sick...wouldn't we be in a hospital?

(PATRICK exits. MELISSA enters with mask and goggles and is surprised to see JONATHON there. She draws her gun and points it at him.)

MELISSA

702517, stand slowly and turn around.

(JONATHON turns to see the gun and does as she has instructed.)

MELISSA

Why are you bleeding?

JONATHON

Because I'm human.

MELISSA

You gave me my gun back. Why?

JONATHON

Why aren't we in a hospital? If something is wrong with us, why aren't we in a hospital being treated?

MELISSA

702517, I asked you a question.

JONATHON

I have a name.

MELISSA

Jonathon Meek. I know.

JONATHON

Why do you call us by these numbers?

MELISSA

I don't. *(Beat)* Your friend yelled at me last night when I called Mr. Fletcher by his name. *(Beat)* We have a lot of questions for each other, don't we?

JONATHON

Yeah, I think we do. *(Beat)* I gave you your gun back because Harold would have killed you if he'd kept it. And he would have had every right to. Martin was like a father to some of us.

MELISSA

I didn't kill him.

JONATHON

I know, but he thinks you did.

(MELISSA lowers her gun and puts it away.)

MELISSA

You're here instead of a hospital because we really don't know what's wrong with you.

We know you're sick, and we think it's highly contagious.

JONATHON

But are we sick?

MELISSA

Well, there are the obvious signs like the discoloration of your skin and...*(She trails off)*

JONATHON

That's it? You're keeping us here just because of our skin color?

MELISSA

Last night when the lights went out, we found a power cord that looked like a rat had chewed through it. It's not humanly possible to take in that much electricity and not have any signs from it. Something is wrong with you. And quite frankly, it scares a lot of people.

JONATHON

So with all your research and testing, you assume one of us chewed through the wire?

MELISSA

That's what the report shows, yes.

JONATHON

(he laughs) Would you like to see the fried rat that got us into so much trouble?

MELISSA

What?

JONATHON

We had been watching Fred for a little while...hoping that maybe he would burrow a hole out of this place. Instead, it looks like he found a live wire.

MELISSA

Fred is an actual rat?

(JONATHON nods.)

MELISSA

God, Grapes is infecting us all.

JONATHON

Grapes? What do grapes have to...

MELISSA

(Interrupting) No. Lou Grapes. He one of the Heads of Security. He talks about the Grays like you're nothing but a disease; like you're out to get us.

JONATHON

A lot of people in here feel the same way about you guys.

MELISSA

And you have every right to. We're killing you off one-by-one.

JONATHON

Is this how the whole world feels about us?

MELISSA

No, not all of us. Some of us really do want to find out what's wrong.

JONATHON

What's your name?

MELISSA

Oh. Melissa...Melissa Rhinehold. Sorry I didn't...

JONATHON

(Interrupting) Melissa, are you afraid of me?

MELISSA

What?

JONATHON

Are you afraid because my skin is gray?

(*Beat.*)

MELISSA

A little.

JONATHON

Why?

MELISSA

I can't say. (*There is a long beat of silence*) My mother...she was infected. It took her. That's why my dad, I mean step-dad, started this facility. But it's different now. We're not helping anyone, and he, well he...has changed.

JONATHON

I'm sorry.

MELISSA

Yeah. (*Beat*) After I had worked here a while, I started wondering why none of you had died. I asked my dad about it, but he didn't care to here about it. He just wanted to kill whatever had taken my mom from him and the Gray was embodied in you guys. He's not a bad person.

JONATHON

It doesn't sound like he is.

(*MELISSA shakes her head no.*)

MELISSA

He's being manipulated by the easy answer.

JONATHON

I'm not sure I follow.

MELISSA

Nothing that we have done at this facility makes me think my mom died because of the Gray. I think it was something else, something less honorable maybe. But it happened at the same time as the Gray was erupting. So when she died, this became his escape from reality.

JONATHON

You don't think the Gray affected her at all?

MELISSA

No. But in his mind, I think he really believes you guys have done this to him. He gathered his funds and began this facility. *(Another long beat between them)* I'm not sure what to do now.

(There is a silence between MELISSA and JONATHON. NICHOLAS, LOU, and ANTHONY enter the theatre from the back and see what is going on onstage.)

LOU

"The Lord God hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back."

(MELISSA begins taking her mask and goggles off.)

NICHOLAS

What the hell is Melissa doing?

(NICHOLAS runs off Stage Left followed by LOU and ANTHONY.)

JONATHON

No. Don't do that.

MELISSA

Why shouldn't I? *(Beat)* I didn't ask, and maybe I shouldn't, but what color were you before you were gray?

(NICHOLAS, LOU, and ANTHONY burst onto the stage with their masks and goggles on. NICHOLAS immediately shoots JONATHON in the leg, wounding him.)

MELISSA

Dad! No!

(MELISSA goes to JONATHON.)

LOU

Dad? She's your daughter?

NICHOLAS

Never mind that now, just get her away from him.

(LOU and ANTHONY grab and hold MELISSA.)

LOU

Come here, girl.

(NICHOLAS gets into JONATHON's face.)

NICHOLAS

You have infected my daughter, you gray sack of meat.

JONATHON

I didn't infect her. She took her gear off.

MELISSA

Mom wasn't infected. The Gray didn't kill her. You know that.

LOU

Listen to her rave. Look what the disease has done to her already. She's been fouled.

MELISSA

You've known it all along. Please don't do this. It's not their fault.

NICHOLAS

Shut her up.

(LOU begins to take out his gun. JONATHON tries to stand and protect MELISSA.)

JONATHON

No!

NICHOLAS

(He pushes JONATHON back down) Sit your ass back down. *(To Lou)* Not like that.

MELISSA

Why not? If I'm *infected* now, do I not deserve the same fate as all the Grays now? You know the Gray is not as bad as we make it out to be.

(LOU smacks MELISSA hard enough to knock her down. ANTHONY picks her up and holds her mouth shut.)

JONATHON

(To NICHOLAS) Why won't you listen to her, you asshole?

NICHOLAS

I'll give you this; you creatures always go down fighting don't you.

JONATHON

You creatures...we're people the same as you...

(ANTHONY gives MELISSA to LOU and then unlocks the door. NICHOLAS grabs JONATHON by the back of his shirt collar. He drags him toward the door. JONATHON struggles to get free.)

JONATHON

No! No, not in there.

LOU

What about her?

(NICHOLAS looks back and only hesitates for a brief second before answering.)

NICHOLAS

Bring her too.

(NICHOLAS drags JONATHON through the door and LOU carries MELISSA through. Both

JONATHON and MELISSA struggle the entire way.

ANTHONY closes the door behind them. He walks to the apron of the stage as the upstage lights fade out.)

CHAPTER IV - A

On Writing *Gray Matter*

This play came to me for me on my drive home for Thanksgiving 2004. Since reaching adulthood, Thanksgiving has been my favorite holiday. I'm a sucker for turkey and pumpkin pie. Plus the fall colors are amazing. And, of course, it's a time set aside to spend with the extended family that I rarely ever get to see. So how did all of these wonderful thoughts lead me to a play with murder and hatred? Well that's a long story with a lot of family issues needing to be dealt with. For a quick summary, let's just say this. A member of my extended family had just gotten remarried. Her last husband had not been so great to her but the new guy...he really loved her. Seems pretty great right? It would have been if this new, great guy hadn't been black. The marriage sent a shock wave through my family that split us into two distinct halves. There were the family members that thought not only that was the marriage was socially wrong but also that it was spiritually wrong as well. And there were the family members that thought he seemed pretty great so why not welcome him into the family. These two halves butted heads for the first time on this particular Thanksgiving. Word was sent out that my family member that had married the black man could come to Thanksgiving...only if she did not bring her husband. This was not the beginning of the war, but it turned out to be one of the biggest battles. So on my drive home for Thanksgiving, my favorite holiday, I was furious. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to see all of my family, not just those with the "white only" card to get through the door. I debated with myself the whole way about whether or not to go. In the end I went, and, exactly as I knew it would be, I was glad to be around my family but missed seeing the whole family.

This play started off with me only wanting to write a color-blind play. I wanted to have all of the characters' skin covered in gray makeup so that you really didn't get to see black guy, white guy, white girl, black girl. I wanted the characters to be trapped in a black and white world. I wanted the walls of the set to be covered in black and white paper. In the end everything would be ripped / washed away to reveal beautiful bright colors, kind of like Dorothy getting to Oz from Kansas. And everyone would see how wonderful different colors were and how they made a beautiful picture together. Not bad I guess, but I didn't get very far down that road. Those who really know me know that growing up I wanted to be a dinosaur and then an astronaut and then a comic book writer. I loved reading these stories where anything could happen. People could fly. People could walk through walls. Anything was possible. But my favorite was always the X-Men because they were amazing and could do just about anything but people still hated and feared them just because they were different. Being an ultra-skinny, bottom-of-the-coke-bottle glasses wearing, red headed kid...I could understand being different. I think we can all understand being different. At some point we reach a place where we forget that being different is good. We have the same car as everyone else, the same jeans, the same phone, and the same shoes. I must be okay...that guy's okay and I look just like him. Anyway, I still think being different is good and that idea through the comics I used to read made their way into this play. Suddenly I was able to set this play in a world where anything was possible, even very bad things. I had my idea and I had my play's world in a place where anything could happen. What did happen was kind of accidental. The movie *Good Night, and Good Luck* came out. I began looking into the McCarthy trials and that lead me to Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Until then I did not

know Miller wrote about the witch trials but that he was really writing about the McCarthy trials. I thought that was a brilliant idea and so I tried it. I looked throughout history for an event that I could blend with modern racism. I didn't have to look very hard or far. History is filled with hatred. I found two things that interested me right away. The first was the black plague. I was looking for this one specifically. I know a few people who would like to use this description of death as a substitute for everything that's wrong in the world today and it would have nothing to do with fleas or rats. The other was World War II, particularly the concentration camps. The plague became the Gray. It was a "sickness" that began and cannot be figured out, and in the world that the comic's helped me create...that's how it stays. The concentration camps became camps that these people with gray skin were sent to. These people are not sick, only different. But when the majority became frightened it was okay to punish the minority. I researched concentration camps, but decided to make these camps my own instead on anything that I had seen or read. I did this mainly because I do not understand what it would be like to be in one of them. I have never been repressed, tortured, or killed for simply living. I do not understand what it would be like to have a family and a life one day and less than nothing the next. I could imagine, and to a degree I had to in order to write this play, but my intention was not to show torture. My intention was simple and is written word for word in the script. Jonathon poses it as a question to Melissa..."You're keeping us here just because of our skin color?" I simply wanted to say we can find plenty of reasons to hate our fellow man, but to hate someone...anyone...purely on the color of their skin. It's absurd. That's the only word I can think of to describe it. And my play does not just look at how silly it is that the guards hate the grays, it also works in

the reverse. The character Harold is based on a real person. I had classes with this person three days a week for a semester. He did not like me at all. Midway through writing this play I realized I need Harold as a character because, unfortunately, the hate doesn't just flow one way.

Oh, just as an added bonus, tonight I am going to a Christmas dinner with my extended family, the same that was at that Thanksgiving I first mentioned. My family member who is married to the black man is still invited to come...only if she doesn't bring her husband. Four years have past and yet she has not made it to one family gathering. I say...good for her. But not all is lost. I will see her and her husband tomorrow night when we have our own little interracial Christmas dinner...another tradition that started four years ago.

Elijah Dies

December 23, 2008

Goodlettsville, TN

CHAPTER IV - B

On Producing *Gray Matter*The Doors to Hell

I love this image, which was taken in Clarksville, because I feel like if I could pick this up and place it on the stage it would be perfect. It doesn't seem to have any hope. The door should have a feeling that if you were unlucky enough to go through it, hell would be all that was waiting on the other side. *Gray Matter's* set is minimalist and all you would really need would be the door in the picture.



This image is of an actual Auschwitz crematory and it really does contain a door from which there is no return. I can imagine prayers being issued begging for life after so much suffering and then seeing this building and losing all hope. It is a horrible thing and wish I could feel an emotion stronger than sorrow for all those who saw it up close.



Again, these images are horrible
to look at, but they contain the
complete essence of what *Gray
Matter* was intended to be.





My perfect soldier costume would be a combination of the images on this page. With these images combined, it would be really difficult to distinguish between male and female, black and white, beautiful and ugly...that's how I want the guards to look to the prisoners...completely uniform soldiers. But I want the audience to see the guards as normal people. When the guards remove their gas masks and shrouds that's what they become...normal people, scared of what they might catch.