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Dramatic Publishing

AN UNCERTAIN HOUR

A Full-Length Play in Two Acts

by

NICHOLAS A. PATRICCA



Dramatic Publishing

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(AN UNCERTAIN HOUR)

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For Primo Levi
and for all who participate creatively
and carefully
in the gift of life

Although this play is based on real people and events,
everything in it, including the person of Primo Levi himself,
is a product of my poetry and, therefore,
an activity of my imagination

The writing of this play was supported in part by grants from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; from Loyola University of Chicago; and from the National Jewish Theater, Skokie.

Nick Patricca was awarded the Cunningham Prize for Playwriting by The Theatre School of DePaul University, Chicago, for *AN UNCERTAIN HOUR*.

AN UNCERTAIN HOUR

A Full Length Play in Two Acts
For 9 Men and 2 Women*

CHARACTERS

The Principals:

PRIMO LEVI

JEAN

A BOY

A WOMAN

The Ensemble:

KAPO, STEINLAUF

TECHNICIAN 1, TECHNICIAN 2

BUREAUCRAT 1, BUREAUCRAT 2, LORENZO

*The play is constructed in such a way that it can be performed by an ensemble of nine actors. Because it is truly an ensemble piece the advantages of additional actors are obvious and should be determined by the production concept of the director and the material and human resources of the producing company.

Performed with one ten-minute intermission between acts.

TIME: Saturday morning, April 1, 1987. The day before Palm Sunday. Three days before Passover.

PLACE: Turin, Italy.

SETTING: A simple, spare unit set. The memory-imagination of Primo Levi is the space-time of the play.

SITUATION: The moment before the death of Primo Levi.

AN UNCERTAIN HOUR premiered at Bailiwick Repertory, Chicago, on May 23, 1994 with David Zak, Executive Director; Cecillie D. Keenan, Artistic Associate; Steve Decker, General Manager and featuring:

<i>Primo Levi</i>	Gene Terruso
<i>Jean</i>	Jim Ortlieb
<i>The Woman</i>	Mary C. Beidler
<i>The Boy</i>	Jay Kiecolt-Wahl
<i>Kapo</i>	Steven Waste
<i>Bureaucrat</i>	Jeffrey Fracé
<i>Lorenzo</i>	Andrew Hawkes
<i>Steinlauf</i>	William Hepp
<i>Technician 1</i>	Guy Massey
<i>Technician 2</i>	Natasha Lowe

Understudies:

for Primo Levi—William Hepp
for Jean—Guy Massey
for Technician 1—William Hepp
for The Woman—Susan Thompson

Directed by	David Zak
Assistant Director	Lauren Stevens
Costume Design by	Christine Birt
Lighting Design by	Julio Pedota
Scenic Design by	Brian Traynor
Sound Design by	Joe Cerqua
Production Stage Manager	John Kokum
Assistant Stage Manager	Dawn Marie Galtieri

Preface

Primo Levi was born in Turin, Italy, in 1919, where he trained to be a chemist. His ancestors were Sephardic Jews from Spain who had come to the Piedmont area of Italy in the early 1500s to avoid the Inquisition of Ferdinand and Isabella. They introduced the silk trade into Italy at this time and specialized in making the dyes for which Italian silk is justly famous. Their native language was *Ladino*, a type of Spanish spoken in certain areas of medieval Spain. In Italy, they adapted this tongue to the indigenous *Piemontese* dialect, incorporating into it many Hebrew words, especially words necessary for the dyeing of silk. To this day, the Italian language uses these Hebrew words to describe types and qualities of silk and their colorings.

In September of 1943, Primo Levi joined a unit of partisans in the hills of Piedmont. The group was almost immediately betrayed by an informer and Dr. Levi was arrested by the Italian Fascist Militia. At the moment of his arrest, for reasons totally beyond his imagining, Primo Levi, a completely secular Jew and atheist, declared: I am an Italian citizen of Jewish blood. This fatal declaration caused him to be deported to Auschwitz in February of 1944 where he was imprisoned until his liberation by the Red Army in January of 1945. Because of his training, Dr. Levi was forced to work as a chemist for I.G. Farben Industries in one of their "factories" in the Buna-Monowitz sector of Auschwitz. This "employment" and the extra food given him by an Italian bricklayer helped Primo Levi to survive almost eleven months in this man-made inferno.

When Primo Levi returned to Turin in 1945, he wrote his first book, a memoir of his experience at Auschwitz entitled *If This Be a Man*, in which he tries to "look objectively" at what happened in the death camps, to the oppressors as well as to

the victims. Initially, this book was unanimously rejected by the Italian Board of Censors, several members of which were Jewish writers, for being "negative." The book was published in 1947, however, by a small press, and was largely ignored until 1966 when it was re-issued and became a best-seller throughout Europe. In this same year, Jean Amery, also an Auschwitz survivor, published his definitive work *At the Mind's Limits* in which he also attempts to "look objectively" at the death-camp experience. This work so disturbed Primo Levi that he began an eleven year correspondence with Amery in which they debated the nature and meaning of human existence, essentially arguing about whether we humans are worth saving. In 1977, Dr. Levi retired from his position as a manager of a chemical factory in Turin to devote himself full time to his writing. From 1966 on, Primo Levi's reputation as a writer became well established throughout Western Europe. It was not, however, until his death in 1987 that his work was readily available to English readers in the USA. Today, his work is receiving the attention it deserves.

Primo Levi's writings defy categorization because they are truly unique works of art, possessing elements of the Italian Enlightenment's essay tradition, the Italian Renaissance's philosophical poetry tradition as well as elements of our modern "confessional" literature tradition. In all of his writings, Primo Levi is concerned to show the value of reason (science) and art working hand in hand to promote the well-being of all life. His writings focus on the unique creative qualities of human Memory which he believed hold the key to our survival as truly human beings. For reasons known only to the spiritual endowment of our race, when Primo Levi very much wanted to give up and die, his identity as a Jew and the immortal words of Dante came to his rescue, calling him to the life of a poet, a maker of words necessary for life.

ACT ONE

(As the audience enters the theatre, they see an entirely empty stage except for a man [PRIMO LEVI] standing alone, C, facing the audience. He is modestly dressed in casual clothing typical of the Northern Italian working middle class. When the audience is settled and focused, the VOICE of an Italian fascist interrogator is heard.)

VOICE *(from offstage)*. Partigiano! *(Simultaneous with this shouted accusation, PRIMO mimes having his face slapped. The sound of the slap should be sharply distinct and forceful. Again from offstage, the VOICE.)* Confess, you are a partisan! *(Again PRIMO's face is slapped.)*

PRIMO. Sono Ebreo. I am an Italian citizen of Jewish blood.

(As soon as PRIMO utters the last words of this fatal sentence a WOMAN enters from L, singing a Sephardic Jewish lullaby to absent children, "Durme, Durme," or some other appropriate lullaby. She carries a rocking chair which she sets in place for PRIMO. The WOMAN is simply dressed. She wears a head scarf. She takes a position L and a MAN [JEAN] enters from R. He is pushing a wheelbarrow full of old shoes. He sets the wheelbarrow next to the rocking chair and takes a position R. JEAN is dressed in the garb of a prisoner of a death camp. He wears an Army prison blanket wrapped around him to protect him from a cold that is more spiritual than physical. PRIMO

goes to the wheelbarrow, selects a shoe, sits in the rocking chair, starts cleaning the old shoe with great care. As he cleans the shoe, he recites verses from Dante. The WOMAN continues to sing softly in the background.)

PRIMO. *“O Frati, O Frati...*

*Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.”*

(The WOMAN stops singing the lullaby. A light focuses on JEAN. JEAN lets the blanket fall and addresses the audience.)

JEAN. I don't think you properly appreciate the problem. Frankly, I don't think you even want to understand, because to understand you must trespass, push beyond the boundaries, violate the very conditions of your existence.

PRIMO. My Brothers, Consider...

JEAN. Consider this. You need to kill someone. It doesn't matter why, whether you want to, or whether you are being forced to do so by circumstances or authorities. Motives and feelings really don't matter.

PRIMO. Consider the seed that gave you life...

JEAN. I'll make a concession—you need to kill someone or else you yourself will be killed, but really this is a mere detail. In fact, I fear it will distract you from the true heart of the matter.

PRIMO. You were not made to live mindless and careless lives.

JEAN. You need to kill someone. This is your task, this is your problem. How are you going to do it?

PRIMO. You were made to know truth and to follow its path.

JEAN. What about using your bare hands? That's a good, honest approach. But, have you ever tried to do that, kill someone with your bare hands? It's very difficult. This method requires a great deal of physical exertion, psychological determination or powerful passion. People do not die easily. You've got to know what you're doing, and even then, it takes effort. If you find this hard to grasp conceptually, try it sometime, then you'll understand my point.

PRIMO. We have already crossed a hundred thousand dangers. With this brief time remaining to us, let us keep awake. Remember who you are. Remember the seed that gave you birth. *(The WOMAN removes the scarf covering her head. She reads a letter to PRIMO.)*

WOMAN. Dear Mr. Levi, Thank you for your reply to my letter. I never expected you to answer. I thought at best I'd get a form letter from your secretary or something like that, but I should have known better. I've tried to tell the people in my village what I saw but they won't listen to me, so, with your permission, I'm going to tell you. Then maybe someday, someday when people are ready to listen, these stories will be waiting for them.

(The WOMAN summons a BOY from offstage, leads the BOY to PRIMO. She hands the letter to the BOY who in turn hands it to PRIMO. The BOY sits on the floor in front of PRIMO. The WOMAN exits.)

PRIMO. "O Frati, O Frati...

*Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza."*

BOY. The Song of Ulysses, Canto xxvi.

PRIMO. Verse?

BOY. Verse 118.

PRIMO. Bravo! (*The BOY jumps up, heads offstage.*) We're not finished.

BOY. I know. (*He's gone.*)

JEAN. Let us advance our problem to the next level of technique, as our ancestors had to, in the effort to survive, in the effort to gain a toehold for the human species in the competition of life. Let's consider using a weapon. A knife, for example. You'd think a knife would make things easier. But really not much. No, not much easier, because a knife is an extension of the hand, of our physical self, so it's still within the range of the human, so to speak, still within the range of...decency in some queer way. You still have to get close to your victim. You might smell the garlic on his breath, or the fear oozing out of his pores. This might upset your stomach or disturb the firmness of your resolution. And when you plunge the knife into his gut, blood will surely spurt out, splashing all around, perhaps even staining your favorite shirt. Yes, that's how it is when you have to deal face to face with real living human beings. Things get messy. There's no getting around that.

(As JEAN speaks the above, The BOY re-enters with a Macintosh computer setup in tow.)

PRIMO (*seeing the computer*). That's not what I had in mind.

BOY. You promised.

PRIMO. After we finish our study of Dante's *Inferno*.

BOY. It's too long. You tricked me.

PRIMO. We're very close to the end.

BOY. There are eight more cantos and none of them are short. Poems are supposed to be short. (*The BOY continues to set up the computer, getting it operational.*)

JEAN. I have taught myself the ancient Japanese art of Sepuku. With a few minor adjustments, I can adapt this technical skill I've acquired for killing myself to killing someone other than myself. It is a matter of complete indifference to the technique.

BOY. If Dante's so smart, why does he write in such funny Italian?

PRIMO. I already explained that to you. Dante was one of the first people ever to write in Italian. You could even say he invented our language. So, of course it differs from ours. What's so surprising is how much like ours it is.

JEAN. You don't just take a knife and shove it willy-nilly into the belly, whether your own, or a friend's, or a stranger's. It makes no difference. A belly's a belly.

PRIMO. "*Considerate la vostra semenza:*"

BOY. My Brothers, Consider the seed that gave you life...

JEAN (*takes out a knife, demonstrates the technique*). First, you must learn to hold the knife tilted down at the proper angle, with the wrist perfectly relaxed, and the elbow slightly bent, like this. Second, you must position yourself in such a way that when you make your thrust deep into the gut you won't throw yourself off balance. (*Demonstrates footing for the lunge/thrust.*) Third, you must aim to hit your target in the soft part of the belly under his right rib cage just below the liver. Right here (*Demonstrates the placement of knife's cutting into the gut.*) Obviously, you don't want to hit a rib or have to make a second stab. Fourth and finally, you must thrust deep, without unbalancing your center of gravity, pull up firmly with a quick powerful twisting of the wrist, (*Demonstrates the wrist*

movement up.) then shift sharply to your left with the full strength of your arm to cut the vital veins that flow into the liver. (*Demonstrates the movement of the arm so that the knife cuts into the liver.*) Beautiful, isn't it, body, wrist, arm—a true physical poetry. You see, it's the liver that matters. If you don't cut deeply into the liver, there's a good chance the person will survive. But, if you cut sharply into the liver, he'll bleed to death very rapidly, and, all things considered, isn't that the best thing for him as well as for you. Isn't that, all things considered, the humane thing to do.

BOY. You'll be able to write lots more letters with the computer.

PRIMO. I do just fine with my pen. We're old friends. (*PRIMO takes his pen from his pocket, handles it with obvious love.*)

BOY. Nobody can read your writing.

PRIMO. "*Fatti non foste a viver come bruti*"...

BOY. You were not made to live mindless lives...

JEAN. But perhaps you are protesting to yourself that even the knife is too much trouble. You need something easier, much easier, if you have to kill someone. So, you say to yourself, let's try a gun. But, even the gun is an extension of the human body. No matter how sophisticated the gun might be. It has mass and weight. You have to carry it, you have to aim it. In short, you have to know how to use it and how to take proper care of it. You still need to be at one with it, as they say in Zen philosophy, to make it work well. It's still a tool fitted to the physics of the human body. You feel its recoil when it fires. You smell the powder. You can feel the heat it generates. The sound hurts your ears.

BOY. Why are you always cleaning those old shoes?

PRIMO. *“ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.”*

BOY. You were made to pursue knowledge and virtue.

JEAN. Now are you beginning to appreciate the problem? If you find it so difficult to kill just one person, how can you get a small number of people to kill a great many people. If our technology is merely an extension of our human physical/sensual being, it will never work. Never. Because even the most dedicated, the most hard working, the most fanatical killer will get tired. Again, if you don't believe me, try it. Take a pistol, a good, well-made Luger, and shoot a person in the back of the head, just one person every ten seconds for just one hour. Or, take a machine gun, and shoot ten people in the back every ten seconds for one hour. Do you see the problem? Do you feel the problem? It wears you down, no matter how dispassionate you are. It wears down the machines as well. And it's expensive. It's not cost effective: it uses up too much human and material resources. But worst of all, and this is the biggest problem in the whole equation, worst of all, when a person is killing thousands and thousands and thousands of persons, you begin to lose interest. *(During the following, JEAN takes the fallen Army blanket, moves toward PRIMO, places it around PRIMO's shoulders.)*

BOY. If you use the computer you can write your books much faster.

PRIMO. Faster doesn't mean better.

*“Fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.”*

BOY. We already did that line.

PRIMO. Do it again.

BOY. Why?

PRIMO. Because it's important. “My Brothers...”

BOY. My Brothers, You were not created to live mindless lives but to follow virtue and knowledge.

He misspelled: "*conoscenza*"?

PRIMO. So you noticed. That's good. That's very good. He didn't misspell it.

BOY. Yes, he did. It's "c-o-n" not "c-a-n." I asked my teacher in school. (*The BOY spells it out.*) "*Conoscenza.*" Dante's wrong.

JEAN. The boy's right, Primo. Dante is wrong.

PRIMO (*rising from the chair*). No. (*The blanket falls.*) Dante is not wrong. (*PRIMO goes over to the computer where the BOY is hacking away.*) Dante wants us to understand that knowledge and he uses this special spelling on purpose to show us the common origin of these words.

BOY. I don't know why you got this fancy MacIntosh if you don't ever want to learn how to use it?

PRIMO. I bought it so you would study Dante with me.

BOY. But I do study Dante. (*Exits to get the mail. PRIMO sits down at the computer. He begins to use it as a word processor. He writes hesitantly at first, then more confidently.*)

JEAN. Dante is wrong, Primo. For a thousand years, we've been pretending that he is right, but he is wrong.

PRIMO. When every cell of my body, when every quality of my soul longed for death, what made me quote Dante to you? What made you want to listen to me speak his words? Why did you care?

JEAN. In the blood of the young, the sap of life is a torrential urge. I wanted to believe. What were my alternatives: the blood gods of the German folk, the dead god of the Christians, the impotent god of the Jews? A philosophical poet seemed just the thing for an act of faith.

PRIMO. I wanted so much to die, and when I tried to die, his words came gushing out of my mouth. Not words of hatred or despair or self-pity. Not prayers to some unknown savior. I breathed in death and exhaled the words of a poet. My last breath became a new life for me. Dante's words saved me, Jean. And, they saved you. (*JEAN takes a shoe from the wheelbarrow. He holds it arm's length from his body.*)

JEAN. We are dead, Primo. (*Lets the shoe drop to the floor.*)
Dante has merely extended the duration of our dying. He has delayed our hearing the sound of the second shoe.

PRIMO. Jean, you taught me to survive. No, you forced me to survive. You, and Lorenzo, and Steinlauf. For what reason? Out of cruelty? To prolong suffering? Why did you want to live? Why did you want me to want to live?

JEAN. We were murdered the very first moment they negated our humanity.

PRIMO. Your writings, Jean, are the most eloquent, most gentle, most humane testimonies to their utter failure to destroy the human spirit.

JEAN. Poetry is your claw, Primo, as philosophy was mine. You write to defend yourself. That I can understand. What I cannot understand is why you insist on believing that art can change us for the better. Look at the world, Primo. In the camp, you were a man without illusions. No ideology could seduce you. Neither the Marxists, nor the religious Jews, nor the Catholics. You refused to cloud your mind with theoretical excuses for the plain truth of the evil we inflict upon each other.

PRIMO. Jean, there are some things in life which are entirely of our own will and creation, but there are other things which are given to us. This has been given to me. I have

tried to die. I have tried *not* to remember. But I cannot escape myself.

JEAN. Silence is the only honest response left to us. If Dante were alive today, he would not write a word. There is no vision of humanity that can redeem us from ourselves.

PRIMO. Every Wednesday I go to an elementary school to talk about writing. When I am with these young students, with these children, I can see in their eyes the thirst for knowledge, I can feel in their hearts the passion for truth, I can taste the joy of communication in their efforts to write. When I am with these children, Jean, I am like them. I remember...I remember the six-year-old boy who made a rocket ship with his first chemistry set. I remember the boy that pricked his finger so he could see his own blood, full of life, under the microscope. I remember the human being, Primo Levi, the person that wanted to discover and name every unknown star in the heavens. When I am with these children, Jean, I understand. I understand that I cannot remain silent. I must tell the stories of the people who have been entrusted to me. (*PRIMO types the name "Jean." An electronic billboard displays the name "Jean."*) Jean was fourteen when they put him in the camp. He spoke German and French which was useful, and had a good ear for picking up other languages as well, which was also useful. But Jean knew that it was even more useful not to let anyone know this. Jean was small and slight and intelligent, in short, destined for the ovens, but one of the Kapos took a liking to Jean. He could see that Jean was—exceptional. Jean knew how to “organize” things, that’s a camp expression. It means knowing how to get whatever you need or whatever your Kapo wants. It means knowing how to survive. (*As JEAN speaks, PRIMO writes on the MacIntosh.*)