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Family Plays

HELP

Drama by
DAVID G. GROTE

Based on the satire
Love of One's Neighbor by
LEONID ANDREYEV



HELP

Drama. Adapted by David G. Grote. Based on the satire *Love of One's Neighbor* by Leonid Andreyev. Cast: 14+ actors, flexible. From the top of an unseen tower we hear a faint cry for help. Is the person about to jump—or fall? A crowd gathers, TV camera crews arrive, policemen cordon off the crowd and vendors sell refreshments as the scene takes on the air of a festival. It's a stinging look at the heartlessness of our gawking society, suggested by a biting satire, *Love of One's Neighbor*, by Leonid Andreyev. The characters are all broad stereotypes which should be recognizable to the actors and audiences. The performers should be encouraged to play the roles broadly and vividly. When used in class, a valuable assignment is to have each student develop the costume and props for the characters themselves. Once the characters have been clearly established, the players should be encouraged to embroider on the business indicated in the script. Most of the people are on stage for most of the play and consequently have to develop a great deal of character business and mime to occupy themselves when they don't have lines but are still a part of the background action. The crowd may be as large as you have bodies to fill the stage. Vendors of various kinds are possible, and other tourists would certainly fit in. If you add vendors, feel free to let them interrupt action with cries and sales pitches. One of the points of the play should be that no one really much cares about what any of the others are doing, so random shouts, if in character, will not cause a problem. Each actor should be encouraged to develop his or her own characterization and to have fun with it; the roles can safely be exaggerated, since none of the people in the play are very nice when you get down to it. That's one of the things that make *Help* an important play. *Help* was written with enough flexibility to be used by groups of many different sizes. Since there is a real shortage of good one-act plays in the 20 to 25 parts range, it was intended to accommodate a cast of 24 or more. However, since *Help* is also a strong contest play, the cast size may easily be pared down to 15 or less (with a minimum of three men) by following suggestions in the appendix, which also offers an alternative for the drunk scene for groups and situations where it is not acceptable. *Approximate running time: 25 minutes. Code: HD5.*

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Help

HELP

A One-Act Play

by

DAVID G. GROTE

Family Plays

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098

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(HELP)

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HELP

Cast of Characters

(3 to 14 men; 11 or more women)†

The Man (voice only)	Pushy Woman
*Two Policemen	*Two Drunks††
Fireman	Father
Alice	Mother
Sally	Junior
Mrs. Myer	Sis
Jones	Mary
Thompson	Revivalist
Old Lady	Newswoman (Lisa Lovely)
Young Woman	*Cameraman
*Tourist	*Soundman
*Vendors and additional sightseers, if desired	

†To reduce the cast to 15, see Appendix (p. 21)

**May be played by men or women*

††The two Drunks may be replaced by two Groundskeepers (see Appendix, p. 21)

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Place: A Modern Amusement Park

Time: The Present

ABOUT THE PLAY

“Help” was written with enough flexibility to be used by groups of many different sizes. Since there is a real shortage of good one-acts in the 20 to 25 parts range, it was intended to accommodate a cast of 24 or more. However, since “Help” is also a strong contest play, the cast size may easily be pared down to 15 or less (with a minimum of three men) by following the suggestions in the Appendix (page 21).

The Appendix also offers an alternative for the drunk scene for groups and situations where drunk scenes are not acceptable (page 21).

Based on Andreyev’s biting satire, “Love of One’s Neighbor,” this play is laid in an American amusement park where the “amusement” of the moment happens to be an impending tragedy . . . with a rapidly gathering crowd eager to see the tragedy as it happens . . . hungry to be able to say, “I was there.” It reminds us of the frequent news stories about gawkers gathering on a river bank to look on while someone drowns, or apartment dwellers watching from their windows while a girl is raped in the parking lot.

The characters are all broad stereotypes which should be recognizable to the actors and audiences. The performers should be encouraged to play the roles broadly and vividly.

“When we used this in class, a valuable assignment was to have each student develop the costume and props for the characters themselves. This gave them an opportunity to practice their observation skills, and to develop the physical aspects of the characters from their own imagination,” the author said.

Once the characters have been clearly established, the players should be encouraged to embroider on the business indicated in the script. One of the values of this kind of script for a theatre class is that most of the people are on stage for most of the play and consequently have to develop a great deal of character business and mime to occupy them when they don’t have lines but are still part of the background action.

The crowd may be as large as you have bodies to fill the stage. Vendors of various kinds are possible, and other tourists would certainly fit in. If you add vendors, feel free to let them interrupt action with cries and sales pitches. One of the points of the play should be that no one really much cares about what any of the others are doing, so random shouts, if in character, will cause no problem.

Each actor should be encouraged to develop his own characterization and to have fun with it; the roles can safely be exaggerated, because none of the people in the play are very nice when you get down to it. That’s one of the things that make “Help” an important play.

PRODUCTION NOTES

To Reduce the Size of the Cast

Written for a cast of 25 or so, "Help" may be performed with a cast of 15 (or less) by making the following simple changes: The two gamblers, JONES and THOMPSON, may be cut (the conversation JONES has with POLICEMAN 2 may be assigned to YOUNG WOMAN, eliminating the line "We have a bet"). The roles for the two DRUNKS may also be eliminated. Their lines on the last page may be assigned to two cleaning persons (doubled by the CAMERMAN and the REVIVALIST) who cross the stage picking up some of the mess left by the crowd. The TOURIST may be omitted, with his lines and actions taken by the YOUNG WOMAN. The SOUNDMAN may be cut, giving his lines and actions to the CAMERMAN. The CAMERMAN and POLICEMAN 1 may be played by the same actor (POLICEMAN 1's lines while CAMERMAN is on stage may be given to FIREMAN). POLICEMAN 2 may be eliminated, with his lines and action taken by the FIREMAN. Since the MAN is never seen, his lines may be handled by a tape recording. These changes will reduce the cast to 15, with a minimum of three men (the FIREMAN, FATHER, and JUNIOR).

An Alternate for the Drunk Scene

For groups or situations where drunk scenes may be unacceptable, the following scene between two GROUNDSKEEPERS (male or female) may be substituted: (Begin on page 10 of text)

MAN. Somebody help!

[Two GROUNDSKEEPERS enter, lackadaisically picking up trash. "One" is nearly blind, with huge glasses, and "Two" is deaf]

MAN. Hey!

GROUNDSKEEPER 1. *[Stopping suddenly in open space, apologizing to the empty air]* Oh, I'm terribly sorry. I didn't see you.

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. Who are you talking to?

GROUNDSKEEPER 1. I almost walked right over this nice young man.

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. What nice young man? There's nobody there.

GROUNDSKEEPER 1. Are you sure? I could have sworn I heard someone yell.

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. And I tell you there's nobody there!

MAN. Help! Help!

GROUNDSKEEPER 1. There he is again.

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. I don't hear anything.

GROUNDSKEEPER 1. It's like he's right in front of me *[feeling way to rope]*.

SALLY. He's right up there!

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. What, dear?

SALLY. Look up there!! *[Points]*

GROUNDSKEEPER 1. I can't see a thing.

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. Why, there's a man up there.

GROUNDSKEEPER 1. What's he doing up there?

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. How should I know? Let's ask him. *[Shouts]* Hey, what do you think you're doing up there?

MAN. Help!

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. Hello to you, too! Wave to the nice man. *[Both wave, GROUNDSKEEPER 1 in the wrong direction]*

MAN. I dropped my ladder.

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. Nothing's the matter down here. We're fine. How about you?

MAN. I can't get down!

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. OK. *[Drops to hands and knees. "1" has been feeling along rope for him, bumps into him]*

GROUNDSKEEPER 1. Ooops. Sorry.

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. Get down.

GROUNDSKEEPER 1. Oh. *[Drops to hands and knees. Pause]* What are we looking for?

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. A letter.

GROUNDSKEEPER 1. I don't see anything.

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. *[Rising]* Look, we can't find any letter. Sorry!

MAN. Help!

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. No need to use that kind of language. We're just trying to be helpful.

GROUNDSKEEPER 1. *[He has crawled along to Pushy Woman's chair, bumps into it]* Ooops. Sorry.

PUSHY WOMAN. Watch it!

["1" tries to rise. In the process, he gets entangled in chair and the woman's paraphernalia]

PUSHY WOMAN. Will you get out of here? Leave that alone.

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. I don't think I want to talk to you any more, if you want to be that way about it.

OLD LADY. Oh, I'll call a policeman. *["1" bumps into her]* Police! Help! Help!

GROUNDSKEEPER 2. Such language! Come on, we have work to do. I don't think we have to stay here to listen to things like this. *[Extricates "1" and they both exit]*

Resume text in middle of page 11 with "PUSHY WOMAN. Absolutely disgusting—" The GROUNDSKEEPERS will also give the DRUNKS' two lines on page 20.

Properties

- rope—Policemen and Fireman
- wallets with paper money—Jones & Thompson
- pillow (perhaps a souvenir pillow with the name of the park)—Sally
- two or three cameras in cases with long straps—Tourist
- enormous tote bag containing folding aluminum lawn chair, thermos bottle, bag of sandwiches, small parasol or bottle of suntan lotion, smelling salts bottle, two or three pillboxes, small whiskey bottle, and other picnic items—Pushy Woman
- radio earplug and small transistor radio—Sis
- wallet with paper money—Tourist
- cigar box or other collection box—Revivalist
- chewing gum wrapper—Sis
- ballpoint pen—Newswoman
- various scraps of paper for autographs—crowd
- *TV camera, cable, and equipment—Cameraman
- microphone, earphones, and associated equipment—Soundman
- picket sign: "TOPPLE THE TOWER" printed on one side, "SAVE OUR SUICIDES" on the other—Young Woman
- (if Groundskeepers are used, they will need trashbags and pickup sticks, with wadded paper, etc., on ground for them to pick up)
- (if Vendors are used, their wares may be actual props or pantomimed)

*See next page

*A good fake TV camera may be made with a cardboard box and a cardboard tube for a lens, painted to match the other equipment. Many schools have a portable camera in the audio-visual department which can be borrowed. A tape recorder or portable control panel will do for the Soundman.

Costumes

Modern clothing is called for, with perhaps a bit of exaggeration to augment the stereotyped roles and the amusement park atmosphere. Outlandish or bizarre fantasyland costumes are not recommended, however. Bright colors will highlight the contrast between the carnival mood of the crowd and the tragic situation of the Man.

Set

"Help" was designed for production on a bare stage. If the director wishes, set props may be added: platforms for a variety of levels, vendor stands or pushcarts with brightly colored awnings, trash barrels, perhaps a sign pointing to the tower, a couple of park benches (far enough upstage of the rope so that the principal performers can stand and sit downstage of the benches), etc.

HELP

By David G. Grote

[The stage represents the space at the base of a large observation tower at a modern American amusement park. The tower is the kind of needlelike structure which people climb, by elevator of course, in order to see the park spread out below them. For the play, the tower should be assumed to be rising out of the audience, so that the characters when watching it are looking directly into the audience. There is a person currently at the very top of the tower, apparently planning to jump off at any moment. This may be a man or a woman, depending on casting requirements, although he will here be referred to as the MAN. He should be placed somewhere above and behind the audience, so that he can be heard but not seen. In the balcony would be a good place, if you have one, or on one of the lighting catwalks, or in the booth with the follow spot. If nothing like this is available, he can be offstage, with his voice coming from a speaker placed as high as possible over the audience. If a speaker is used, be sure that his voice is not amplified in any way, but rather sounds very weak and far away. Be sure that the visible actors on stage always look toward this voice, wherever it is placed. As the lights come up, we see a small crowd gathered, staring up at the imaginary tower. The crowd includes MRS. MYER, the OLD LADY, JONES and THOMPSON, SALLY and ALICE (both little girls), two DRUNKS, a YOUNG WOMAN in a suit. There should also be some VENDORS selling hot dogs, soft drinks, souvenirs, ice cream, and so forth, depending on how many extras are at hand for a particular production. The director may also add other CROWD members, if enough performers are available. Two POLICEMEN and a FIRE-MAN are busy trying to sort the crowd out as they stretch a rope across the front of the stage. SALLY and ALICE dart underneath the rope and stand downstage on the apron, gazing up at the top of the tower]

POLICEMAN 1. *[At Left end of rope]* Here now. Where d'ya think you're going?

ALICE. We want to see the man.

POLICEMAN 1. Well, you can see him just as well behind the rope as in front. Now get back there and stay there.

MRS. MYER. *[At the soft drink stand]* Alice! Where are you?

SALLY. *[To Policeman]* But we can't see as good back there.

POLICEMAN 1. *[Crossing to girls]* Yes, you can. If you stay out here, he might fall right on top of you.

SALLY. Really?! Oh boy!

MRS. MYER. Alice! What are you doing out there! You could get hurt.

POLICEMAN 1. Just what I was telling them, ma'am.

MRS. MYER. *[At rope]* You come back here this instant!

POLICEMAN 1. *[As the girls refuse to move]* You heard your mother. Git! *[ALICE dejectedly returns to other side of rope; SALLY stays]*

POLICEMAN 1. Didn't you hear me?

SALLY. She's not my mother.

POLICEMAN 1. Git out here, NOW! *[SALLY dashes under rope and disappears in crowd]* Hey, Charley, are you ever gonna get this thing up today?

POLICEMAN 2. *[Still working with rope at Right]* I don't see you breaking any records trying to help.

POLICEMAN 1. Just shut up and get it done. I'm gonna take a break before the crowd really gets here. *[Exit Left]*

POLICEMAN 2. *[Mimicking]* "I'm gonna take a break before the crowd really gets here!" Take a break, take a break. Oughta be his middle name.

JONES. *[Crossing to Policeman 2 at rope]* How many people you figure are here? We got a bet.

POLICEMAN 2. This is nothing. Wait till you see the big crowd later.

JONES. Really? How many you expect?

POLICEMAN 2. Depends on when he jumps. If he waits another hour, word'll get out to the rest of the park and we'll have a couple thousand. If he waits any longer, it'll get on TV and radio, and then we won't be able to count 'em, there'll be so many.

JONES. You hear that, Fred? Gonna be thousands of people here soon. We better stay down close, or we won't have a spot. *[JONES and THOMPSON take up position near rope at Down Right. POLICEMAN 2 checks rope across the stage and exits Left]*

MRS. MYER. Alice! Don't you run away from me. There are thousands of people on their way here right now, so you'd better find your father and tell him he's going to miss everything if he doesn't get over here soon.

ALICE. I told him that already.

MRS. MYER. I don't care, you go tell him that again.

ALICE. Oh, all right. He'll just say, "In a minute, darling," and then have another beer.

MRS. MYER. Don't talk about your father that way, dear. People might hear you.

ALICE. But he will, I know he will.

MRS. MYER. I don't care. You do as you're told.

[ALICE exits Up Right]

MRS. MYER. *[To no one in particular]* I declare, kids today! If I'd talked that way about my father . . .

OLD LADY. *[On her right]* I know just what you mean, dearie. *[MRS. MYER is a little surprised; she didn't know anyone was so close to her]* These kids just run around and do whatever they feel like, and then, when they get in trouble, they expect everyone else to come along and take care of them. Just like that youngster up there *[pointing to tower]*. I come out here for a nice bit of fun, to pass the time in my old age—after all, I don't have all that much time left, do I? A little fun, a little peace and quiet is all I ask, and you'd think they'd let me have it, wouldn't you, after all the years I slaved away waiting and saving up for my retirement. But no, all he can think of is messing everything up, drawing all these crowds and making all that noise. It's disgraceful, that's what it is.

[FIREMAN enters Up Right, crosses to rope, and moves Left, checking it to be sure it's sturdy]

OLD LADY. Young man!

FIREMAN. *[Stopping just to left of Old Lady]* Yes ma'am?

OLD LADY. When are you going to get that fellow down from there?

FIREMAN. I don't know, lady. We tried everything we knew.

YOUNG WOMAN. *[Moving down to left of Mrs. Myer]* What do you mean, you tried everything? What about all those fancy trucks and ladders?

FIREMAN. Way too short for something like this.

YOUNG WOMAN. Then why not just go up in the elevator and grab him? You'd think, after all the money we pay in taxes, we could get some public servants with brains enough to ride up in an elevator.

FIREMAN. We tried that too. But the elevator stops at the observation deck, and he crawled on up to the very top. See? Then he pulled up the little ladder behind him so we can't get to him at all.

JONES. Can't reach him at all?

FIREMAN. Nope. And there's no place up there to land a helicopter neither. I guess we just have to wait him out. Either he puts the ladder back down and climbs down, or he jumps. There's not much we can do either way, except wait.

JONES. I'll bet he doesn't last another 20 minutes.

THOMPSON. How much? He made it this long, he's good for hours yet.

JONES. I've got 20 bucks here that say 20 minutes.

THOMPSON. You're on! *[They pull out their wallets, while SALLY sneaks under rope and places a large embroidered souvenir pillow on the ground, Down Center]*

FIREMAN. Hey, what're you doing here? Don't you know it's dangerous?

SALLY. I just brought the man a pillow.

FIREMAN. What for?

SALLY. So he won't hurt himself when he falls.

[FIREMAN chases SALLY back behind rope and then throws pillow at her. Then he exits left as TOURIST, with cameras, enters Up Right, and crosses to Center, right of Old Lady]

TOURIST. What's going on?

OLD LADY. There's a man up there, about to jump.

TOURIST. Where? Where? *[OLD LADY and MRS. MYER point, and TOURIST starts to take pictures. This becomes a very complicated procedure, because the cameras get all tangled up. The more he struggles to sort them out, the more tangled they get, so that he is eventually tied up in his camera straps]* Dang it! Everytime something good happens, I miss it.

PUSHY WOMAN. *[Enters Up Left, crosses to Center and pushes Tourist away]* Where is he?

TOURIST. Hey, wait a minute. That's my place!

PUSHY WOMAN. Not any more, it's not.

TOURIST. I was there first. It's the best place to take pictures.

PUSHY WOMAN. How are you gonna take pictures? You can't even untie yourself.

TOURIST. Just you wait till I get out of this.

PUSHY WOMAN. Sure. Then you'll come beat up a poor defenseless woman, won't you? Just like a man!

[PUSHY WOMAN has an enormous bag she carries, which she now sets on the ground and unpacks. She takes out a folding aluminum lawn chair, sets it up, and then glares at TOURIST, as if daring him to chase her off now. He grinds his teeth, and struggles with the cameras, getting himself tied even more tightly. She continues unpacking. Contents may be as varied as the bag will allow, but should definitely include a thermos bottle and a bag of sandwiches. If a small parasol which can be bolted to various places can be found, she should attach it to the back of her lawn chair. If not, a large bottle of sun tan oil should be taken out and applied to her arms as she sits down]

OLD LADY. Goodness, dearie, you came prepared, didn't you?

PUSHY WOMAN. Sure I did. I've been to these things before. Sometimes it's hours before they finally get up the nerve to jump.

OLD LADY. Oh dear, that long?

THOMPSON. What did I tell you?

JONES. Time isn't up yet; we'll see.

PUSHY WOMAN. Of course, accidents are more exciting, because you never know what will happen. I've seen some wonderful things at fires and such. But suicides are much more dramatic. They give you time to prepare yourself and to take in everything.

YOUNG WOMAN. What are you talking about?

PUSHY WOMAN. I'm talking about something you know nothing about, so just keep your nose out of this, big shot.

YOUNG WOMAN. I know enough to know it's not right to talk like that. Where's your sense of decency? A person could die here today.

PUSHY WOMAN. I know that. And it would be a terrible thing, too. I should know, I've seen it happen before. One time I went to the circus, and the tightrope walker fell off, right in front of me.

OLD LADY. That must have been terrible.

PUSHY WOMAN. It was. I missed the whole thing. Fainted dead away.

MRS. MYER. I never thought about that.