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*Dramatic Publishing*

# **Dancing the Box Step**

by

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**Dramatic Publishing**

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(DANCING THE BOX STEP)

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# DANCING THE BOX STEP

A Play in Two Acts  
For Three Men and One Woman

## CHARACTERS

WALTER MARSH . . . . . 70s, powerful in will and spirit,  
a survivor, difficult to deal with,  
but charming when it suits him

RAYMOND MARSH . . . . . 40s, has reached a time in his life  
when he realizes he won't live forever,  
desires to mend a badly broken fence

ALICE TERREYTON . . . . 70s, warm hearted, resilient, a realist

DELIVERY MAN . . . . . 20s

### TIME:

The present.

### SETTING:

An old apartment living room, neat but sparse, with a front door and two hallway doors, one leading to the kitchen, the other leading to the bedroom and bathroom. A chair or two, a table, a few lamps, and a couch. Scattered boxes filled with odds and ends are visible. World War II mementos, insignia, and pictures of Walter and his platoon comrades hang at random on one wall. A collage of contemporary post cards, some of them framed, and a large map of the United States with yellow, green and red pins stuck on it also dress the room.

for my father, Charles Crandall Brown

## PRODUCTION HISTORY

*DANCING THE BOX STEP* received a staged reading by the Aspen Theatre Company on July 31, 1989, as part of the Third Annual Aspen Playwrights' Forum. The reading was directed by Clurie Bennis.

In 1990, the script was included in the Denver Center Theatre Company's US West Theatre Fest New Play Festival under the Artistic Direction of Donovan Marley with Barbara E. Sellers serving as Producing Director. A staged reading was presented on May 10, 1990, under the direction of Frank Georgianna.

On November 11, 1990, the play was presented as a staged reading by Palo Alto's TheatreWorks under the direction of Ray Chan.

*DANCING THE BOX STEP* premiered at South Jersey Regional Theatre in Somers Point, New Jersey, on November 1, 1991, under the direction of Joanna M. Papada. Set Design by Daniel Ettinger. Lighting Design by Joseph R. Lazarus. Costume Design by Inge Malmstrom. Technical direction by James Averbach. Stage management by Ruth E. Kramer. The cast included Mark Hammer as Walter, John Thomas Waite as Raymond, and Ruth Miller as Alice.

## ACT ONE

AT THE CURTAIN. *No one is visible. From off stage we hear RAYMOND speaking as he enters from the bedroom hallway door carrying two suitcases. He is well dressed and wearing an overcoat. He isn't familiar with his surroundings.*

RAYMOND. And so I say "Larry, it's impossible. Can't be done." But he says "If we don't close the deal now, buddy boy, they'll eat us alive." (*Beat.*) I'll just put these by the door, what do you say? (*Puts the suitcases near the front door.*) How 'bout them Lakers, huh? They just keep comin' at you, don't they? (*Beat.*) So I tell him to send Mickey. Now, Mickey's not as good as I am, granted, but I'd just flown in from St. Louis.

*(WALTER enters carrying a framed picture. In these early moments he seldom looks directly at RAYMOND.)*

WALTER. Your grandmother taught dancing lessons at the Masonic Hall every Thursday night...Monday night. Ever tell you that? And she made me go every...Wednesday... whatever night it was. When I was twelve...maybe thirteen. Pimples everywhere. And I had to dance with her in front of all the other kids. I was the...ah...(*Hands the picture to RAYMOND.*) My graduation picture. Look at those collars. Used

to pull your neck right up outta your ass. I want to give it to the lodge. Maybe they'll put it on the wall. (*Begins to exit.*)  
Very graceful, your grandmother. (*Exits.*)

RAYMOND (*beat*). Dad, everything OK? (*Beat.*) I'm really looking forward to the trip. (*Beat.*) And then Louise opens the door and brings in the sherry. You with me? And she's smiling real big. So Larry takes one glass...and I take the other and he's looking me in the eye... (*Beat.*) Are we taking all this stuff? (*Beat.*) It's time we got on the road, Dad, OK?

(*WALTER enters carrying a potted plant which shows the effects of neglect.*)

WALTER. Your mother really loved her plants. Used to talk to 'em all the time. Said it made 'em feel happy. Hell, if she didn't want 'em she wouldn'ta bought 'em. That shoulda made 'em feel happy enough. I didn't like 'em in the house. Saw enough green things in the jungle. Turn around and the damn stuff would grow so fast you couldn't tell you'd been where you'd just came from. (*With great energy.*) The ice breaker! That's what I was. We danced the box step. You ever learn the box step?

RAYMOND. Sure. Mom taught me when I was...

WALTER. Step...one...two...three...four. She could glide like no one I ever saw. Gotta learn to glide.

RAYMOND, Thanks. I'll remember that. So, Louise is smiling...

WALTER. Real big, I bet. I got her in my sights.

RAYMOND. Real big. And I'm looking Larry right in the eye.

WALTER (*looking at RAYMOND*). Eyeball to eyeball.

RAYMOND. "I can't send a junior partner out on a job like this, Raymond," he says. "Gotta send my main man."

WALTER (*beat*). How 'bout that!



RAYMOND. Yeah! So...my mouth's hangin' open...and this glass of crappy sherry's in my hand. "Congratulations," he says. And I'm feelin' terrific, right?

WALTER (*handing the plant to RAYMOND*). I kept some of your trains. Couldn't throw 'em away. They're around here somewhere. You sure loved those trains. (*WALTER begins to exit to the bedroom*) Got to make the bed now. Your mother kept a clean house. Very neat. In the basement, zoom! zoom! You'll need that for your new office. Can't be a main man without a plant. I don't have the touch. Make it happy. (*Exits.*)

RAYMOND (*beat*). Thanks, I will. (*He puts the plant down and surveys the room. He looks into a box or two, and then retrieves a small train car.*) These aren't mine, Dad. These are Kevin's trains. You've forgotten. Kevin used to zoom! zoom! in the basement, not me.

(*WALTER enters holding several ugly ties in his hands.*)

WALTER. Not *I*. You can't say "It's not me." You should know that. You've got to say "It's not I." What did I pay those college people for anyway? You should know that.

RAYMOND. Just dropped my guard, Dad. I'm on vacation.

WALTER. Pretty amazing, eh?

RAYMOND. You're a pretty amazing guy, Dad.

WALTER. Your mother...she'd read from...A to M...and I'd read from N to...from N to...

RAYMOND (*beat*). Z.

WALTER. What's that?

RAYMOND. Z. From N to Z.

WALTER. Yeah! Z. The last one.

RAYMOND (*reminiscing*). And when you finished reading...

WALTER. Mother always read faster than I did...

RAYMOND. You'd exchange books. I used to sit on the stairs and listen to you read to each other.

WALTER. I'd read from A to M...and Margaret would go all the way from N...from N to... (*RAYMOND is about to complete the sentence but WALTER raises his hand.*)

RAYMOND (*beat*). From cover to cover.

WALTER. 1947 *Encyclopedia Americana*. Started in after I came back from Taiwan. Saved my mind, that's what she did.

RAYMOND. Manila. You were in Manila. In the hospital.

WALTER. Look at these ties, will ya? Your mother, poor woman, had no sense of color. But I didn't want to hurt her feelings.

RAYMOND. You were in the hospital for two months.

WALTER. Want these ties? If you take 'em you gotta wear 'em. Take a full plate...eat a full plate. Those are the rules. (*WALTER "gaps" for a moment or two, almost freezes in motion, seeing nothing. He is experiencing a "TIA." RAYMOND, who is taking off his overcoat and looking around the room is unaware of WALTER's difficulties.*)

RAYMOND. I've got a full plate, Dad. I wear a tie every damn day. Nothing but suits and ties for miles and miles. (*Beat.*) Got the feeling from our phone calls that the place was larger. Needs a little paint...but...no matter now. Why all the boxes? I told you I'd help pack up when we got back. That was the deal. (*WALTER has "returned." He is out of focus but refuses to let RAYMOND see him in a weakened condition.*)

WALTER. Kevin's trains? What's wrong with your memory? They're yours. Always zooming around underneath the dining room table. Real steel, too. Got 'em before the war. Hell of a time...the war.

RAYMOND. The car's topped off and all ready to go, Dad. Switch off the lights and we're gone. What do you say? (*Beat. They look at each other.*)

WALTER. You want the ties? Yes...or no? Can't wait... forever.

(*He hangs the ties around RAYMOND's neck one at time.*)

This one with the brown suit maybe...this with the grey. You got a blue suit? That's a power suit. Got to have a power suit.

These others...ever been to Hawaii? They'll fit right in.

RAYMOND. Thanks.

WALTER. You look good. You healthy?

RAYMOND. Hope so.

WALTER (*beat*). How do I look? It's been a few years. How many years?

RAYMOND. A few. (*Beat.*) You look good, too.

WALTER. Don't shit me, boy. Give it to me straight.

RAYMOND. Real good.

WALTER. Real good, eh?

RAYMOND. Yeah.

WALTER. Not terrific?

RAYMOND. Yeah, terrific.

WALTER. A-okay?

RAYMOND. Top of the line.

WALTER. State of the art? What about a "state of the art" Dad?

RAYMOND. Not bad!

WALTER. I keep up.

RAYMOND. I'm impressed.

WALTER. Damn right you're impressed. I'm your father.

RAYMOND. That's hard to forget, Dad.

WALTER. Do you?

RAYMOND (*beat*). Do I what?

WALTER. Keep up. Can't fall behind.

RAYMOND. Six newspapers a day. *The Journal...The Times...New York and London...*

WALTER. Margaret always wanted to go there.

RAYMOND. New York's quite a city.

WALTER. We went to New York...before you and Raymond were born...and caught the World's Fair.

RAYMOND. Dad, I'm Raymond.

WALTER (*beat*). Said she always wanted to see where the bombs fell.

RAYMOND. London! You're talking about London.

WALTER. Well I'm not talking about New York. Nobody dropped any bombs on New York. She wanted to look up in the sky and imagine what it was like. Two letters a week I used to write...more if I could.

RAYMOND. I've got the letters, Dad.

WALTER. Carried 'em around next to my belly until I could mail 'em.

RAYMOND. At home. In my safe. They mean a lot to me.

WALTER. Told me she slept with the letters stuffed inside her pillow. Must have been a pretty lumpy sleep. (*Beat.*) My letters? To your mother.

RAYMOND. Mom sent them to me.

WALTER. About the war?

RAYMOND. She wanted me to know.

WALTER (*with sudden frustration*). I don't remember! When was that?

RAYMOND. Don't get excited.

WALTER. I'm not excited! I just don't remember! Where was Kevin?

RAYMOND. Dad, you know where Kevin was.

WALTER. Where was he?

RAYMOND. He wasn't there!

WALTER. What do you mean he wasn't there?

RAYMOND. It was after the Major came.

WALTER (*exploding*). Major. He wasn't a Major. They didn't send a Major. He was worth more than a Major. They sent a Colonel. Hair all trim.

RAYMOND. A Colonel. I'm sorry.

WALTER. Stood like a rail.

RAYMOND. I forgot.

WALTER. We can't both forget, son...we'll never get out of here alive. *(He begins to laugh. A moment later RAYMOND joins him.)* Hell of a time...the war.

RAYMOND. So I've been told.

WALTER *(takes a fight stance)*. The Gorilla of Manila! Now that was some fight. *(With relief.)* Z! From N to Z! There...that feels better. Make yourself comfortable. *(Exits.)*

RAYMOND *(to himself)*. Jesus Christ. *(He begins to take the ties from around his neck.)* What do you say on Halloween we scare the hell out of the Salvation Army with these? That OK with you? *(He puts the ties in one of the boxes and then walks over to the map on the wall.)* Minneapolis...Atlanta...New Orleans. Got everything all pegged out, eh? St. Petersburg, Florida. What are the yellow ones for? I'm only taking two weeks. I've got to be in Baltimore by the twenty third.

*(WALTER re-emerges carrying two pair of heavy wing-tipped shoes. He is wearing a conductor's cap.)*

WALTER. Your feet the same size they always been? Mine are longer. Doctor says they just flattened out...all those miles...punching tickets...rockin' up and down the aisles. The new men they'd be bouncin' side to side and the coffee'd be sloshin' in their cups. But I never spilled a drop. They don't make shoes like this anymore. Skimp here...skimp there. These are shoes! Solid. Always kept 'em shined. My dancing shoes. Didn't need but two pair in almost forty years.

RAYMOND. I've got ten pair of shoes, Dad.

WALTER. 'Course you do. But they're skimpy. Like the ones you got on now.

RAYMOND. Yeah...I guess you're right. Skimpy.

WALTER (*hands the shoes to RAYMOND who holds them awkwardly*). They're yours.

RAYMOND. Thanks.

WALTER. Keep 'em shined.

RAYMOND. I will.

WALTER (*moving to the map*). The red ones are places I've always wanted to see. Evening Shade...Hilltop Valley... Ironman Junction. Cowboys and Indians. Bang! You're dead! Don't know what those other colors are doing here. Musta meant something. (*WALTER closes his eyes suddenly and leans against the wall.*)

RAYMOND (*beat*). Dad? You OK? Want to sit down?

WALTER. Nope. Gotta keep goin' down the track. Just resting. Be...right with you.

RAYMOND (*studying WALTER carefully*). I got my stuff all packed in the car. Got it down pat. After all those business trips you really learn to pack it in tight. Got one of those compact bags. Ten shirts, two suits, two pair of shoes.

WALTER. Four pair, right?

RAYMOND. Right.

WALTER. Just gave you two more.

RAYMOND (*laughs*). Right. I can cram in two more pair. I need them. Mine are skimpy.

WALTER. No pride in workmanship anymore.

RAYMOND. Right. (*Beat.*) How 'bout a bite to eat on the road? My treat. Get some energy.

WALTER. You got pride, son? Got to have pride in who you are.

RAYMOND. You know I do.

WALTER. Got to know deep down who you are.

RAYMOND. You know better than anyone.

WALTER. It's been a long time. Moves along real fast.

RAYMOND. I'm glad I'm here, Dad.

WALTER (*moving to the map*). The yellow ones are where we're going ... I think.

RAYMOND. Thanks for letting me come.

WALTER. When I retired they gave me a chicken dinner... a chrome caboose... and a free pass. Gonna let someone else punch my ticket for a change.

RAYMOND. You deserve it.

WALTER. That's not like punchin' out your lights, is it?

RAYMOND. Nope.

WALTER. That's fight talk.

RAYMOND. Out in the garage.

WALTER. What an uppercut.

RAYMOND. He had great balance.

WALTER. "Keep your left up, Raymond." But you didn't keep your left up, did you, boy?

RAYMOND. Maybe I let him win, Dad.

WALTER. He'd smack you in the face and you'd rock back on your heels. "Your left. Your left."

RAYMOND. Ever think of that?

WALTER. And then from way down under... up it'd come!  
Pow! What a fighter.

RAYMOND. Maybe I let him beat me.

WALTER. Who you kidding?

RAYMOND. To make him feel good, maybe.

WALTER. Nobody lets his kid brother pound on him.

RAYMOND. Build up his confidence.

WALTER. You never liked to box very much. (*Beat.*) Well... nobody's perfect.

RAYMOND. That's good to know. (*Beat.*) Dad, we need to hit the rails. We're on a tight schedule here.

WALTER (*gestures to the map*). They've got river boats in St. Louis where you can stay up all night and listen to jazz. Your mother loved jazz. (*Begins to exit.*) From cover to cover. Real thick books. Learned all about Albatrosses... and Babylon...and Continuity. (*He exits to the bathroom.*) Very important... continuity.

RAYMOND (*beat*). Did you get the address labels I sent? You'll want your friends to know you've made a big move. (*Beat.*) Atlanta is a hell of a long way away, Dad. So is New Orleans. You didn't mention Atlanta on the phone. Can we talk a bit about this?

WALTER (*off*). Damn! Oh!

RAYMOND (*exits to the bathroom*). Dad? What happened? Dad? Aw, Christ.

(*WALTER enters. He has cut himself shaving and is holding an end of his shirt to his neck.*)

WALTER. I always do this. Damn pain in the neck.

RAYMOND (*off*). Christ, it's all over the place.

WALTER. That's good to know. If it's still flowin' means I'm still alive.

(*RAYMOND enters carrying a towel.*)

RAYMOND. Here...hold this to your neck.

WALTER. Figured it up once. Eight minutes...maybe nine to get real close.

RAYMOND (*helps WALTER change his shirt*). Shit! Let's get you out of this.

WALTER. Maybe I'd let a Sunday go now and then. A change of pace. But a clean face...that was company policy. A face the public could trust.