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DEAD

**A Play by
DAVID ABOLAFIA**



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(DEAD)

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For those who gave me a chance

DEAD was first presented as part of the Directors Showcase at Albany Civic Theater, Albany, New York, June 17-19, 1993, with the following cast:

(In order of appearance)

DELIA Joan Justice
JACK MARTIN Craig D. Pearlberg

David Abolafia, *Director*

Christine Mahler, *Assistant Director*

Kristina Crawford, *Makeup*

DEAD

**A Play in One Act
For One Man and One Woman**

CHARACTERS

DELIA32, a receptionist,
but not like any you'll meet in this lifetime

JACK MARTIN 35, a smarmy, cocky, self-assured ladies'
man, that any woman with common decency
would have the sense to avoid

PLACE: A reception area.

TIME: The present, sort of.

DEAD

SCENE: *A bare set, walled by black curtain, except for a door at right and an office desk at left. On the desk is a computer terminal, telephone and a glass of white liquid. Seated at the desk is DELIA, who wears a simple, efficient black dress. An empty chair faces the desk. DELIA is typing at the computer as the door opens and JACK MARTIN confusedly staggers in. He is dressed in a flannel shirt unbuttoned to the chest, tight jeans and cowboy boots.*

DELIA (*not looking up*). Come on in, Mr. Martin. Please take a seat. I'll be with you momentarily.

JACK (*standing in the doorway*). Do I know you?

DELIA. Please be sure to shut the door.

JACK. Uh, sure. (*He closes the door, then crosses to the empty chair and sits restlessly.*) Where am I?

DELIA. Just one moment. (*She finishes typing.*) All set.

JACK. What's going on here?

DELIA (*mildly alarmed*). Didn't they tell you?

JACK. Didn't who tell me what?

DELIA. Your escorts. Didn't they tell you where you are?

JACK. My escorts? I don't know what you're talking about.

DELIA. Oh, dear, you must have made a sudden departure. Just one second...(*Types a bit on the computer, stares at the screen.*) Yes, indeed. Very sudden.

JACK. Very sudden?

DELIA. Extremely so. Just walking along when it happened.

JACK. When what happened?

DELIA. Mr. Martin, what is the last thing you remember before you came here?

JACK (*thinking hard*). Um, I was having a few drinks with my friends at Tico's. It was Friday night, time to let loose. I had to leave to go meet Susan at her place. Beautiful girl. (*Making universal "guy" gesture for "breasts."*) You wouldn't believe the ga... (*Realizing who he's talking to.*) Anyhow, I'm walking along and the next thing I know, I'm here. So where is here?

DELIA. Mr. Martin, simply put, after you left the establishment, you walked about three blocks and your body then succumbed to acute alcohol poisoning.

JACK. Meaning what, exactly?

DELIA. Mr. Martin, at 10:47 p.m. Earth time on April 23, you died.

JACK. Please, call me Jack. I'm not used to this "Mr. Martin" stuff, and... (*It hits him.*) What did you just say?

DELIA (*matter-of-factly*). Jack, you're dead.

JACK (*skeptically*). Dead?

DELIA. Deceased.

JACK. Deceased?

DELIA (*becoming frustrated*). Expired. Passed away. You have kicked the proverbial bucket, bought the proverbial farm. Get my drift?

JACK. I think you're full of it. Who put you up to this? Charlie? Max? I'm not dead.

DELIA. I understand your desire to deny the truth, Jack, but you must understand that your life is over.

JACK (*becoming angry*). My life is not over!

DELIA. You were thirty-five years old, reasonably well off, in decent health except for your drinking problem.

JACK (*snapping*). I do not have a drinking problem!

DELIA. You *did* have a drinking problem. Past tense.

JACK (*desperate, puts his hand to his chest*). I am not dead. My heart's still beating!

DELIA. No, it isn't. What you hear and feel are the perceptions of sensations to which you grew accustomed during your life. You are a soul, now. Your body is just a hollow shell that collapsed on the street. You feel your heartbeat, your breathing, your head throbbing, only because your mind still expects it. Once you have come to realize that you are indeed dead, your mind will slowly let go of its hold on your life functions. For some people, this process happens quickly, for others it takes longer, depending on how desperate your cling to life is.

JACK. You're damn right, it's desperate. I'm not giving up because I'm not dead. If I'm dead, how come my watch is still... (*He looks at his watch, which has stopped. He trails off.*)

DELIA. Yes, Jack?

JACK (*muttering*). My watch stopped. At 10:47 p.m.

DELIA. Yes, Jack. Time is meaningless now. We could sit here forever and argue about whether or not you are actually dead, and no one would notice that you weren't anywhere else.

JACK. So what are you exactly?

DELIA. What I am is a receptionist. I receive new souls upon their departure from life. In most cases, the soul is provided with two escorts who explain the recent occurrences, so that my job becomes easier. I help process new arrivals, and then send them on their way to their final destinations.

JACK. What's your name?

DELIA. Delia.

JACK. Pretty name.

DELIA. Thank you.

JACK (*putting on the charm*). Does it matter to you whether I stay or go?

DELIA. I won't receive another new arrival until you have gone.

JACK. Convenient.

DELIA. I'm not the only receptionist. Hundreds of thousands of people die every day.

JACK. I suppose so.

DELIA. Does this mean you have accepted the fact that you are now dead?

JACK. No, not yet. I like to keep my options open.

DELIA. I see. (*Typing.*) Ah, yes. In life, apparently, you exercised quite a number of options, didn't you?

JACK. I went with the flow. I lived by instinct.

DELIA. Right. Do you now have an idea where you are?

JACK. Let me guess...purgatory, right?

DELIA. Exactly. Some religions would call this place "Limbo." You are here because your life was in balance between good and evil, and it is my duty to facilitate the determination of your final destination.

JACK. You sound like a stewardess.

DELIA. And you sound like most of the macho jerks I dated when I was alive.

JACK. When you were...wait a second.

DELIA. Yes, I'm dead.

JACK (*compassionately*). How did you...?

DELIA (*stoically*). I killed myself. I took a swan dive into a waterfall.

JACK. Why?

DELIA. Because I couldn't stand the hurt anymore. I couldn't stand to have men treat me like I was worthless. (*JACK reacts to this.*) I wanted to be free.

JACK. And now you are free?

DELIA. Yes, because now I can be who I want. Yes, I work here—that's a little perk to committing suicide—but I get time off to be the person I wanted to be when I was alive, but never was.

JACK (*sympathetic*). I'm sorry.

DELIA (*accusingly*). Are you?

JACK. Yes...I said I was.

DELIA (*looking at computer screen*). Are you sorry about Jean Dietz?

JACK. Who?

DELIA. You don't even remember her name! She was nineteen years old, a starry-eyed sophomore in college. You took her in your arms, seduced her, got her pregnant and left her by the curb like garbage. That was three years ago. Remember now, Jack?

JACK. You don't understand...

DELIA. Oh, but I do understand. To you, women are subordinate creatures, meant to cater to the whims of men like you. What sickens me is that some women actually go along with it, like Donna Mitchell.

JACK (*cringing*). Donna...

DELIA. You left her at the altar. She even knew what you were, and she still wanted to marry you. Her father almost went into hock to pay for that wedding, and you never showed up.

JACK (*to himself*). I think I'm in hell.

DELIA. I don't know where you're going...that's what I'm here to help determine.

JACK. By assaulting me with my past?

DELIA. That's part of procedure.

JACK (*sinking in his chair*). Oh, God.

DELIA. Speaking of God, let's talk about your religious principles.

JACK (*mocking her*). Yes, let's.

DELIA. How many times did you go to church last year? (*JACK mutters something incomprehensible.*) What was that?

JACK. Once.

DELIA. Right. Once. Midnight mass on Christmas Eve, and you were blind, stinking drunk.

JACK. I went, didn't I?

DELIA. Yes, you did. There's something to be said for that.

JACK. Just because I go to church, that doesn't mean I have to enjoy it.

DELIA. That's a very popular attitude, which is shaking the very foundation of religion.

JACK. Religion needs to be shaken up a bit.

DELIA. What about work?

JACK. What *about* work?

DELIA. What kind of work did you do?

JACK. Don't you have that on your little screen there?

DELIA. You were a graphic artist. And a very talented one, I might add.

JACK (*sarcastic*). A compliment!

DELIA. You designed the artwork for a lot of commercial products, including toys. You even won a few awards for your work. It's hard to believe.

JACK. What's hard to believe?

DELIA. That someone like you could be responsible for making so many people happy.

JACK. That's just the kind of guy I am. I like to make people happy.

DELIA. Then how come you were so adept at making people miserable?

JACK. What's that supposed to mean?

DELIA. The one person you ever deliberately went out of your way to make happy was yourself, and it didn't matter what you had to do to be happy.

JACK. That's not true!

DELIA. It isn't? What about what you did to Marian Donnelly?

JACK. What did I do to her?

DELIA. She was a happily married woman. Kind, loving, faithful. And you romanced her until she was forced to give in to you. You used her for two weeks and tossed her back to her husband.

JACK. So? She had someone to go back to.

DELIA. No. You did something to her. She wasn't able to love her husband anymore. And I'm not just talking about sex. She can't even be near him. You poisoned her, Jack.

JACK. That's a strong way of putting it.

DELIA. That's an accurate way of putting it.

JACK (*hurt, then suddenly realizing*). Hang on, you said that I was here because I was in balance between good and evil. What about the good things I've done?

DELIA. Smart move, Jack. Let's look at that, shall we? (*She types a few keys.*) When you were twelve, you saved your little brother's life.

JACK. Jimmy.

DELIA. Tell me about that.

JACK (*a moderately pleasant memory*). My friends and I used to play football out in the street in front of our house. We'd choose up teams and play two-hand touch, from as soon as we got home from school until it started to get dark and our moms called us home for dinner. Anyhow, Jimmy was eight, and he used to watch us. He wasn't allowed out in the street, so he'd just sit on the curb. So one day we were playing, and Frankie Harper, who was play-

ing quarterback, overthrew a pass to me. Jimmy, who always wanted to be a part of the group, went to get the ball. I don't think he ever saw the car. At first I turned to Frankie to chew him out for missing me when I was wide open, and then I saw Jimmy and the car coming toward him. I ran toward him, and the guy in the car must have been stoned or something, because his eyes were glazed over and he didn't look like he was slowing down. I dove right at Jimmy, to knock him out of the way. I pushed him aside, but the car sideswiped me in the leg. All I remember hearing was the football exploding as the car ran it over. Jimmy started crying and the pain started in my leg. Frankie ran to my house and got our mother, who drove us to the hospital. Jimmy was pretty okay, just a few cuts, scrapes and bruises, from when I pushed him down. The force of the car practically demolished my ankle. It took them a couple of hours of surgery to put the damn thing back together. I never played football again. I just sat on the sidelines and watched, even when Jimmy was old enough to play. I had to live out my dreams on the curb.

DELIA (*taken in*). Wow. Had you dreamed of becoming a professional athlete?

JACK. What twelve-year-old doesn't?

DELIA. Well, girls, usually.

JACK. I suppose. What did you want to be when you were twelve?

DELIA (*a moment's thought*). I wanted to be beautiful.

JACK. Why?

DELIA. I don't know. I wasn't really interested in boys at that point. I guess I was just brought up to think that I should want to be beautiful.

JACK. You know something, you *are* beautiful.

DELIA. Jack, don't try to...

JACK. I'm serious. Beauty is much more than appearance and you should know that. You have beauty inside you that shows through in your dedication to what you do, bizarre as it may be.

DELIA. Bizarre?

JACK. Not exactly your standard, everyday occupation, is it?

DELIA. Perhaps not, if I were alive.

JACK. So you still believe we're both dead?

DELIA. I know what I believe. What I need to know is what you believe.

JACK. What difference does that make?

DELIA. I can't rightly send you on your way if you still think you're alive.

JACK. Why not?

DELIA. Do you know what a ghost is?

JACK. Yeah, sure.

DELIA. I'm not talking about a white sheet or a chain-dragging thing that goes bump in the night.

JACK. Oh.

DELIA. A ghost is the soul of a person that clings too tightly to life. When that person reached the reception area, here, he or she was sent on to their final destination, but the final destination had not been determined.

JACK. Because the person still hadn't realized they were dead, so the soul went wayward.

DELIA. Exactly, Jack. The soul, instead of ascending to heaven or descending to hell, drops back down to earth, where it spends eternity.

JACK. But if a soul was destined for hell, wouldn't it be better to be a ghost, and escape eternal damnation?

DELIA. Things don't quite work that way. First of all, souls destined for hell will go there immediately, as there is no need for processing. Second, souls that go to hell are not,

as you put it, "eternally damned." Hell is simply a place where a person pays their retribution for their sins on earth. Once that debt is paid, the soul will rise to heaven.

JACK. And ghosts?

DELIA. Ghosts are, unfortunately, a by-product of the minor inefficiencies in the system. If a receptionist doesn't complete his or her task, or the soul refuses to accept its destiny, it will become lost forever.

JACK (*mildly scared*). Lost?

DELIA. Lost on earth, never being able to reach their final destination.

JACK. No way back up here?

DELIA. In a sense, those individuals have created their own final destinations, but we are unable to keep track of them, so they go on forever being ghosts. That's why many people get the impression that ghosts are angry spirits.

JACK. Why?

DELIA. You'd be pretty upset too, if you had nothing to do for a thousand years except sit and wait around for the next thousand and the thousand after that.

JACK. Okay, okay, I get the idea.

DELIA. So it is extremely important for you to accept your situation, so you can get on with your afterlife.

JACK (*trying to sound official*). Well, have you made your determination as to my final destination?

DELIA. Not yet. Let me see, there's something here about your mother, when you were in high school?

JACK. Yeah, my mother had never graduated high school. She and my father were sweethearts since they were thirteen and, well, they were going to get married after high school. In November of her junior year, she dropped out.

DELIA. Because she got pregnant with you?

JACK (*quietly*). Yeah.

DELIA. And then what?

JACK. They had a quiet, little wedding ceremony in order to "legitimize me in the eyes of the Lord," and all of that nonsense. (*Pause. He looks up.*) Sorry. (*Back to her.*) Only their parents knew. I was born, my mother took care of me, my father finished high school, and then they had the wedding they were supposed to have.

DELIA. Were you there?

JACK. The wedding? Are you kidding? I was (*Church official.*) an insult to the sanctity of marriage.

DELIA. Rough.

JACK. My mother went to work to support us, since my father was going on to college. I got shuffled around between grandparents, great-aunts and friends. It wasn't bad, but as I grew up, I realized that my mother carried a sadness in her because she never finished what she started.

DELIA. So what did you do?

JACK. When I started high school—this was not too long after the football accident—I got her some information about getting a high school equivalency diploma. She didn't think she could do it, but I reminded her that she had been so smart in school before. Eventually, she said yes and, with a little help from me, she got her diploma. She then went on to take college courses and get her degree in business. Now she's an executive manager at a large company.

DELIA. All because of you and your pushing.

JACK. I just didn't want to see her waste her life in some stupid secretarial job. (*Pause.*) No offense.

DELIA. None taken.

JACK. She was too good for that. Now she's proving it.

DELIA (*typing*). I'm making a special notation about that.

JACK. Tell me about heaven.