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Dramatic Publishing

Theory of Mind



Drama
by
Ken LaZebnik

*A moving affirmation of the value of difference
commissioned and premiered by
Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park.*

Theory of Mind

Drama. By Ken LaZebnik. *Cast: 1m., 1w., 1 either gender.* Autism makes social interactions challenging. Imagine, then, a high-school senior on the autism spectrum who desperately wants a girlfriend—and misreads just about every social cue she gives him. *Theory of Mind* is Bill's journey as he takes Hilo out on a date, with hilarious, touching and profound insights about identity, what it means to be on the autism spectrum and love. Set during one evening in Los Angeles, Bill Gates (his grandfather was Bill Gates before Bill Gates was Bill Gates) picks up Hilo from her home. As they drive to the Hollywood Bowl to see his favorite band, we see Bill and Hilo's funny and moving relationship: Hilo, easy-going lover of animals, views Bill as a friend; Bill perceives her as his girlfriend. Along the way, they have assorted mishaps and adventures involving the death of a squirrel and Bill's loss of the tickets. All this time, Bill is sitting on a big secret: he has applied and been accepted to Berea College, the same school that Hilo wants to attend. Hilo is aghast; this is the last thing she wants and the last school Bill should attend. (He did apply to a safety school—M.I.T.). Bill is not defined by his diagnosis; he is a rich character, brilliant, innocent, vulnerable, with an emotional arc that leads him to question why God gave him a unique set of challenges. *Simple set. Approximate running time: 50 minutes. Code: TP6.*

*Cover: Wharton Center for Performing Arts,
Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich.
(l-r) Jennifer Shafer and Hazen Cuyler.
Photo: Kurt Stepnitz. Cover Design: Susan Carle.*

ISBN 10: 1-58342-710-4
ISBN 13: 978-1-58342-710-1



9 781583 427101 >

www.dramaticpublishing.com



Dramatic Publishing

311 Washington St.
Woodstock, IL 60098
Phone: (800) 448-7469
(815) 338-7170



Printed on recycled paper

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By
KEN LAZEBNIK



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Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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Ken LaZebnik

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(THEORY OF MIND)

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ISBN: 978-1-58342-710-1

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Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, Edward Stern, producing artistic director, Buzz Ward, executive director, presented the Bruce E. Coyle Intern Company/Lafley Touring Program, *Theory of Mind*, commissioned by Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park through the generous support of the Macy's Fund of the Federated Department Stores Foundation, with the following:

CAST

Bill Josh Odsess-Rubin
Hilo Landree Renee Fleming
Policeman/Parking Attendant/Box Office Guy
Kevin Barber

PRODUCTION STAFF AND CREW

Director Mark Lutwak
Set Designer Christopher Boone
Costume Designer Jessi Cole
Sound Designer Adam Jacob
Properties Manager Anna Goller
Stage Manager Kristin Esteves
Assistant Director Neal Easterling

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

My father, a writer and teacher of writing, counseled his children to “write what you know.” I ignored that advice for many years, until life insisted I heed it. Three members of my extended family were diagnosed on the autism spectrum during the late 1990s, and when I observed my 16-year-old nephew struggling to find a girlfriend, I felt compelled to do what I could to share his story. The resulting character of Bill represents my best effort to be true to one character, one individual, and I make no claim that Bill is a universal representation of autism. The autism spectrum covers an absurdly vast range of abilities, heightened abilities, personalities, and patterns of behavior. Bill is, as is each person on the spectrum, an individual who is not defined by his diagnosis.

Just when I felt an urge to explore the difficulties relationships present to young people on the spectrum, my friend Bert Goldstein approached me about writing a play for Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park’s Macy’s Next Generation Theatre Series. I wrote *Theory of Mind* for him, although ironically he had moved to another job by the time it was produced. I was tremendously fortunate that the wonderful director Mark Lutwak succeeded Bert, and brilliantly directed the first production. It was subsequently done at my home base theater, Mixed Blood Theater of Minneapolis, directed by Jack Reuler, the unparalleled artistic director there. In 2011, Bert Goldstein directed it at last at the Wharton Center in East Lansing, Michigan. To all these artistic associates, I owe a debt of gratitude.

And I owe a profound debt to my family and extended family for their insights, compassion and support. If you seek background material on autism, I can suggest no better source than the books my sister-in-law Claire Scovell LaZebnik has authored along with Dr. Lynn Koegel.

Lastly, my wife, Kate, a brilliant theater artist herself, and our sons, Jack and Ben, have braved a life in the arts through its many hills and valleys. I will always be grateful for their good humor and determination that reminds me there is an enduring human value in telling stories to one another, coming face to face with our best attempt at truth.

THEORY OF MIND

CHARACTERS

BILL 17, a high school senior on the autism spectrum
HILO. also 17, a resolute nonconformist

One additional actor plays these three roles:

LOS ANGELES POLICE OFFICER no-nonsense
PARKING ATTENDANT. harried
BOX OFFICE PERSON aloof

TIME AND PLACE: Present day Los Angeles.

MUSIC NOTE: Each production should create its own music for the fictional band “Homer and the Hollyglens.” It’s loud, funk, soulful, retro-’70s.

THEORY OF MIND

SCENE: *Two wooden chairs are center stage. Behind them is a sheet, strung between two poles. This unit set—two chairs and a sheet—will become the world of the play: a porch, seats in a car, the Hollywood Bowl, etc.*

We hear music from the fictional band Homer and the Hollyglens. It's loud, funk soulful, retro- '70s.

AT RISE: *A young man hurries onstage. He is walking rapidly, awkwardly, rubbing his hands together furiously. He is not running, but walking at the pace of a race walker—intensely. He listens to an iPod shuffle, clipped to his belt.*

This is BILL. He is a young man with autism who has had years of intensive intervention and now attends a small private high school in Los Angeles. His autism has been a private matter—his parents and he have never told his small circle of friends. What these friends might notice about BILL are certain strengths: an incredible memory, an ability to draw precisely and with great detail, a charm and good nature that are endearing. He is anxious.

BILL strides to the chairs and knocks on the curtain, which represents the front door of a house. A beat. He rubs his hands. The music continues, LOUD.

From behind the curtain, HILO appears, her hair tousled, wearing a funky skirt and no shoes. She's putting her hair up. She's a resolute nonconformist, comfortable in her own eccentric skin. The moment she walks on, words tumble out of BILL. He speaks at the very loud pitch people have when they wear earbuds and are speaking over music in their ears.

BILL. The street signs said no parking after six p.m.—Area 53 permit excepted—and I don't have an Area 53 permit so I had to go around the corner and I didn't have any change for the parking meter but it turns out that's okay because after six p.m. you don't need to put money in the meter.

HILO. You don't have to talk so loud.

BILL. Oh. Sorry. *(He takes out his earbuds and the volume of the music drops dramatically. Then he considers, worried.)* The parking meter didn't say anything about needing an Area 53 permit. So I assume I can park there.

(A pause.)

HILO. You could have parked in the driveway.

BILL. Really?

HILO. Yeah. That's what it's for. Cars.

BILL. Oh. I thought since it was your driveway and I didn't know if your dad or mom would be coming

home and they'd want to park in the driveway and then there'd be this 1996 Taurus sitting there and they'd be pissed because there was this strange car in the driveway and I didn't want to get them pissed off. No way.

HILO. They wouldn't get pissed. They have permits. They can park on the street.

BILL. Oh.

HILO. And anyway, they like you.

BILL. Really? Why?

HILO. I dunno. They're just not very bright.

BILL. They seem smart.

HILO. Do you know how to spell "gullible"?

BILL. G-u-l-

HILO. Forget it.

BILL. Sorry I'm late.

HILO. What time is it?

BILL. 6:03.

HILO. You said you'd be here at six.

BILL. Yeah, and it's 6:03.

HILO. So how are you late?

BILL. Because it's six oh—

HILO. Never mind. If I were ever late like you think you're late, I'd be on time. I'm like always late to everything. I'm going to be late to my own funeral.

BILL. That's cool. (*A pause.*) I could get the car. I could pull the car back up into the driveway so you didn't have to walk, which is probably a good idea because you're not wearing shoes and there's some gravel along the side of this street and that's going to be uncomfortable and are they going to let you into the Hollywood Bowl without shoes?

HILO. No. I'm just going to put on my shoes and feed the goat and we'll go.

BILL. Oh. Should I wait?

HILO. What else would you do?

BILL. Get the car. I just explained—

HILO. Just wait.

(HILO grins at him and runs off. BILL stands, rocking slightly. From OFFSTAGE we hear a BLEAT. HILO has a pet goat in the backyard. BILL's cell phone RINGS and he answers.)

BILL. Hi, Mom... Everything's fine. I got here and I thought I couldn't park on the street because you can't park on the street after six—Area 53 permit excepted—but then I found a meter... I didn't want to park in the driveway. I'll be fine. Everything's fine... I just didn't... Yes, yes... I'll be fine. I've got to go.

(BILL puts the earpieces back in. Music back up LOUD. HILO comes back from around the curtain, wearing clogs.)

HILO. Okay. I'm good.

(BILL looks nervously at his watch and lurches off, walking rapidly. HILO hurries to catch up to him.)

BILL *(speaking loudly again)*. You're the only person I know in Los Angeles who has a pet goat. I had an uncle who had a chicken in his backyard. He got it for my cousins when they were little kids. It was Easter and

they were supposed to return the chick to the place where you got it after Easter, so it was just like this cute little Easter chick but David really liked it so they kept it and it grew up and their whole backyard got covered in chicken poop.

HILO. Loud. You're loud again.

BILL. Oh. (*He takes off the earbuds and the music volume drops again.*)

HILO. Chickens do that. Poop a lot.

BILL. Then one day the chicken got scared or something and got caught in the chicken wire and strangled himself.

HILO. That's awful.

BILL. Yeah. They didn't eat it. I don't know why.

HILO. You don't generally eat pets.

BILL. But this was a chicken and God put them on earth to produce eggs and benefit mankind.

HILO. You don't *have* to eat them.

BILL. I guess... (*A pause.*) How's your goat?

HILO. I'm not going to eat it.

BILL. He's not dead, is he?

HILO. No, no, he's fine. He's Gruff.

BILL. I know he's Gruff. How is he?

HILO. He's gruff. It's like his name and his attitude in one package.

BILL. Why do you have to feed him? Don't they eat tin cans and cardboard and weeds and anything they can get?

HILO. Just in cartoons. I mean, if they can get at it, they'll eat a lot of junk, but it's not good for them.

(They've crisscrossed the stage and arrive at the two chairs. The chairs now represent BILL's car. BILL stops by the side of the chairs. He takes out his earbuds and the music volume diminishes.)

BILL. I think the issue of nourishment is very interesting. Goats eat grass and hay and then they'll eat tin cans which cut their throat and Styrofoam which expands in their stomach and causes gastric distress and why would they do that? Why did God program creatures to eat things that are bad for them?

HILO. I don't think God has much to do with it. Goats just eat what they see.

BILL. In the Youth Crusade, Matt was telling us about how God sees the fall of a sparrow. So he doesn't notice a goat eating Styrofoam?

HILO. F-W-N-G-P. Free Will: Not God's Problem. The goat has free will. Not the Styrofoam.

BILL. You think animals have free will?

HILO. Gruff does. He comes to me when he wants to. He stays away when he doesn't.

BILL *(pondering)*. What does free will have to do with God not noticing a goat eating Styrofoam?

HILO. You asked why God would just watch an animal hurt himself. It's free will. We can hurt ourselves if we want to. And God will weep for us but he won't stop us.

BILL. Yeah. He must cry a lot. There's a lot of stupid people out there. *(He chuckles and HILO smiles.)*

HILO. I don't know if that's what Pastor Chad would say.

BILL. I didn't want to go to Crusade at first. My mom made me. But I'm glad I did.

HILO. Good. Because you liked it, right? You like Chad, right?

BILL. It was okay.

HILO. You haven't been coming much lately.

BILL. Yeah. You know, senior year stuff.

HILO. You can try it again. We have this concert coming up— (*BILL mimes opening the car door and they sit. HILO looks around the interior.*) Jeez.

BILL. What?

HILO. Your car's a pit.

BILL. Oh. Yeah... I guess.

HILO. I mean, the Burger King bags and the newspapers and the Dr Pepper cans and the napkins and—is this like homework?

BILL. Maybe. I guess I should clean it up. It just gets this way.

HILO. It doesn't happen by magic, dude.

BILL. Yeah. (*He mimes turning on the ignition and starts driving. Then he starts rocking back and forth. This physical tic manifests itself when he gets anxious.*) So. Have you heard anything?

HILO. About what?

BILL. College. I've been checking my e-mail every hour.

HILO. For what?

BILL. Acceptance! You can find out online, you know. You should check online.

HILO. Whatever. I'll get a letter in the mail.

BILL. But you could find out online. Maybe right now. You'd know where you'll be spending the next four years of your life. Unless you transfer. My mom keeps saying, "It's not prison, you can transfer if you're not happy."

HILO. That's all right.

BILL. You aren't curious?

HILO. I'm Hilo. Like the city in Hawaii. My dad always said, "You were conceived in Hawaii and there's this Hawaiian energy in you. No worries."

BILL. It's kind of gross. Him telling you where you were conceived.

HILO. Well, it's pretty obvious. They were living in Hawaii and then they moved to L.A. after I was born.

BILL. I just don't like thinking about it. You sure you don't want to know?

HILO. About what?

BILL. College!

HILO. I'm cool.

BILL. Oh. *(A pause.)* What am I doing? *(He turns on the car CD player. Up booms Homer and the Hollyglens.)*

HILO. All right.

BILL. Since we're going to see them. This is like the appetizer. Homer himself wrote this one.

HILO. Cool.

BILL. He's the drummer. He's forming his own record label. And he has a blog about the restaurants he's eaten in when the Hollyglens tour.

HILO. Do you like know everything about this group?

BILL. Yes.

HILO. So when did they get together?

BILL. 2000. A Brooklyn funk group called the Bed-Stuys split up and Homer Rainey started Homer and the Hollyglens with a saxophonist and named it that because he lived at 417 Hollyglen Avenue at the time.

HILO. Do you have like a photographic memory?

BILL. No. I just remember things. But you remember things. You remember everything about animals.

HILO. Well, I go to the zoo magnet school. It's what we do. We're there at the zoo and we deal with animals every day.

BILL. That's so cool. Tell me something about...a dingo.

HILO. A dingo is a mammal. They live in Australia. They have never eaten a baby as far as I know.

BILL. Yeah. Oh, this is good... (*He leans over to adjust the volume—and HILO sees something on the road and screams.*)

HILO. Oh my god!

BILL (*shouting*). What what what!?

HILO. Look out!

BILL. Oh my god oh my god! (*He slams on the brakes, the car skids, which means the actors skid their chairs in a slide one way and then the other as the car fishtails to a halt. BILL still shouting:*) What? What is it?

HILO. The squirrel!

BILL. What?

HILO. You hit a squirrel!

BILL. I didn't see it.

HILO. I'm pretty sure you hit it.

BILL. What do I do?

HILO. Let me see. (*She gets out of the car and hurries in front of the chairs. She leans over, inspecting the squirrel.*) Oh god. Oh my god. Oh...god.

(BILL gets out of the car, too. He steps to the squirrel and looks without emotion.)

BILL. Yeah, it's dead.

HILO (*distraught*). It's dead!

BILL. Yeah. We should get back in. We're gonna be late.

HILO. We just killed this living thing.

BILL. Yeah. It's definitely dead. We should go, we're late.

HILO (*astounded*). Are you... Can't you see? We killed it.

BILL. It ran in front of the car. You could call it suicide.

HILO. Bill!

BILL. Well, Hilo, it sort of was. Maybe he wanted to die.

You said animals have free will.

HILO. This was not a case of free will! He was trying to run across the road—maybe he has family on the other side. Maybe it's not a he, maybe it's a she and she had babies on the other side of the road and she was getting them food. (*Getting distraught.*) I don't even know if it's a male or female.

BILL. You're not going to check, are you?

HILO. The point is, she may have been running to see her baby squirrel and we killed it.

(*A pause.*)

BILL. Can we go now?

HILO. No! We've got to bury it.

BILL. Really?

HILO. Yes. We have to honor it somehow. We killed it. We're responsible.

BILL. Are you sure?

HILO (*pissed at him*). I'm going to bury it. You can drive on if you want. But I'm going to honor the life that we took.