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Dramatic Publishing

A Long Bridge Over Deep Waters

by

JAMES STILL

(Large-cast version)

Commissioned by Cornerstone Theater Company
for the Faith-Based Theater Cycle



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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- Large-cast version)

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“All the world is just a narrow bridge. And the most important thing is not to be afraid.”

— Rebbe Nachman of Breslov

* * * *

Help!

Theatre, come to my rescue!

I am asleep. Wake me

I am lost in the dark, guide me, at least towards a candle

I am lazy, shame me

I am tired, raise me up

I am indifferent, strike me

I remain indifferent, beat me up

I am afraid, encourage me

I am ignorant, teach me

I am monstrous, make me human

I am pretentious, make me die of laughter

I am cynical, take me down a peg

I am foolish, transform me

I am wicked, punish me

I am dominating and cruel, fight against me

I am pedantic, make fun of me

I am vulgar, elevate me

I am mute, untie my tongue

I no longer dream, call me a coward or a fool

I have forgotten, throw Memory in my face

I feel old and stale, make the Child in me leap up

I am heavy, give me Music

I am sad, bring me Joy

I am deaf, make Pain shriek like a storm

I am agitated, let Wisdom rise within me

I am weak, kindle Friendship

I am blind, summon all the Lights

I am dominated by Ugliness, bring in conquering Beauty

I have been recruited by Hatred, unleash all the forces of Love

— Ariane Mnouchkine, Theatre du Soleil

A Long Bridge Over Deep Waters was originally commissioned by Cornerstone Theater Company, Los Angeles, California, Bill Rauch, artistic director, Shay Wafer, managing director. Cornerstone presented the world premiere of the play at the John Anson Ford Amphitheatre on June 4, 2005. Direction was by Bill Rauch, choreography by Otis Sallid, scenic design by Christopher Acebo, costume design by Lynn Jeffries, lighting design by Geoff Korf, music and sound by Paul James Prendergast, video direction by Yule Caise and dramaturgy by Scott Horstein. The stage managers were Michelle Blair and Anna Belle Gilbert. The cast was:

Loraine Shields, Andrew Cohen, Emily Goulding, Jennie Hahn, Naveed Merchant, Martin Alcala, Greg Cruz, Manuel Sanchez, DeLanna Studi, Sally Ben-Tal, George "Jiddu" Haddad, Natch Narasimhan, Toufiq Tulsiram, Nancy Yee, Leonard Wu, Mark Strunin, Debra Piver, Michele Derosa, Mark Brust, Joseph Gorelik, Dorothy James, Sofia Azizi, Jeff Sugarman, Adina Porter, JoAnn Charles Smith, George Gant, Virdell Twine, Diana Elizabeth Jordan, Pierre Chambers, Dora Hardie, Fred Fluker, Myron Jackson, Peter Howard, Michael Phillip Edwards, Page Leong, Shishir Kurup, K.T. Thangavelu, Sabrinath Touzene, Yogananda Touzene, Badrinath Touzene, Guinness the Dog, Elham Jazab, Ibrahim Saba, Olga Gorelik, Gezel Remy, Nathaniel Justiniano, Abdulla Al-Muntheri, Bennett Schneider, Berkeley Sanjay, Piyush Ved, Geeta Malik, Meena Serendib, Natasha Atalla, Lisa Robins, Ramy Eletreby, Ebonie Hubbard, Stephanie Nunez, Jonathan Del Arco.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Days after *A Long Bridge Over Deep Waters* closed in Los Angeles, I was in a cab going to the airport. My cab driver, in the course of about two minutes, told me that he was 66 years old, was born in India, was a Methodist, was raised in London, and had been in Los Angeles for forty years. And he practices the Kabbalah. It was a very strangely typical conversation that I had had in one form or another during the four years of working on *Long Bridge*. Somehow, people knew that I needed to know.

The most striking thing my cab driver said, though, was when he asked me where I was going, and I said I was going to Seattle to a theater conference. He listened and then said, "Theater is a place where you can see God." He looked at me in the rearview mirror as he said that, to see what I was going to say. And I leaned forward, and he continued to talk.

That was pretty much my experience of working on this play, sitting in story circles with people of many different faiths, where people would talk and I would find myself leaning forward.

When artistic director Bill Rauch asked me to write the final play in Cornerstone Theater Company's multi-year Faith-Based Theater Cycle, I did not say yes immediately. One reason was because everyone at the time was referring to it as "The Impossible Play." What it involved was ultimately bringing together all of the communities of faith that had been working with Cornerstone, that I would be writing a play that featured Catholic immigrants, African-American Christians, Buddhists, Baha'is, Hindus, Muslims and LGBT people of faith. So I didn't say yes. I thought about it. I eventually did say yes, and then I did something crazy, which was to add two more communities of faith, which were the Tongva/Gabrielino Native American community (the original people of the Los Angeles basin), and the Atheist/

non-believers. So now I was dealing with ten communities of faith.

I should also point out that the first play I saw in the cycle was in the Festival of Faith, which was at New Horizons, the Islam school. It was a couple of weeks after 9/11 and what struck me was that I was going to this private Islam school, there was a lot of security there, and we had to show our picture I.D. to get in to see the plays.

For several years then, I shadowed all of the plays in the cycle. I attended some rehearsals, saw all the plays in performance, and went to community and company meetings that pertained to the cycle. I also began hosting my own series of what we called story circles. There are many names for this, many of you out there do this kind of work, oral histories, interviews, whatever you want to call it. But in the Cornerstone tradition it was literally people sitting around in a circle, telling their stories, primarily around issues of faith. Those gatherings happened often at the Cornerstone offices in downtown Los Angeles and other times in places of worship. There were anywhere from two to twenty-five people in those story circles. They took about two hours usually, and I did dozens and dozens and dozens of those with thousands of hours of audiotapes.

Some of the story circles were with specific communities of faith, others were interfaith. One was a story circle of converts. One was a story circle with women only, and me. One was a story circle about relationship to prayer, about when and how people talk to God. Another story circle was centered around food from their favorite religious holidays, and the family stories that were attached to those rituals.

All of that time I was committed to not writing the play ahead of time, to not having an agenda, to not figuring it all out neatly and then going through the motions, but instead trying to stay as completely open as I could to the process, and to absorb,

as deeply as I could, the stories that my community was telling me. It was for me the ultimate act of faith.

While I wasn't writing the play, I was, hysterically and in a very big panic, thinking about the structure of the play. That was the biggest challenge to me. How was I going to bring ten communities of faith together in something that would not feel like "We Are the World"?

At some point I revisited Schnitzler's "La Ronde." Director Bill Rauch and I got very excited about the idea of that structure, and how that would help us theatrically tell the story of how faith both unites and divides us, which was a credo that was on all of the Cornerstone literature around the cycle, and one that I took very seriously.

Once we decided on that structure, then it came to the big question of, what order? In "La Ronde" the play goes from one two-person scene to another two-person scene and something is passed along. How would I determine the order of these ten communities of faith in my play? Bill and I played many games with ourselves, little pieces of paper, putting them in all different combinations, lists. Some of those structures were more provocative. Some of them had better flow. Some of them I immediately could imagine what the scenes were about. Others, I had no idea. So I found myself getting more and more depressed, because I felt like we had a structure but I had no idea how to do it.

Finally, I decided that we needed to find an order that was mathematical, in a way that was almost defensible. We decided on a structure that would go in historical order. We went to the Los Angeles census, we studied and cited major events, beginning with the Tongva Native Americans, obviously, the founding of the first Jewish temple, a visit to Los Angeles from a famous Baha'i leader, all the way through to the founding of the Metropolitan community church in 1968, which was of course the LGBT community.

With the order and structure in place, I began a series of community dialogues where I brought together two communities at a time, usually four people (purposefully kept very small) and I sat on the side and said, “For ninety minutes, we’re going to have a conversation and the only rule is, you get to ask these people from another faith anything you’ve ever wanted to know about that other faith.” The only other ground rule was the person being asked had the right to say, “I really don’t want to talk about that.” It’s worth noting that no one ever refused to respond to the other’s questions.

Eventually I went off and wrote the first draft of *A Long Bridge Over Deep Waters*. I had two things taped up on my wall as I was writing it. One said, “How does faith both unite and divide us?” And the other said, “You can’t please everyone.” I later changed that to read, “You can’t please anyone.” It was actually quite liberating. My goal was to write a play that was an authentic artistic response to what I had personally experienced as a person in the very privileged position of getting to hear people talk honestly, openly, painfully about their struggles with faith. That response is this play. Without a doubt it is the most challenging and most difficult play I’ve ever tried to write. And without a doubt, it was one of the richest and most surprising experiences in my life.

One final anecdote. During the run of *Long Bridge* in Los Angeles, a woman came up to me and told me that she had seen the play the previous week and was back to see it again. She went on to tell me that for years she had stopped dreaming at night, stopped remembering her dreams. But every night since she had seen *Long Bridge*—she had had amazing dreams and had remembered them.

For me, her experience helped me remember one of the many reasons I had been drawn to theater in the first place. Theater is a place where you can remember your dreams.

— James Still

A Long Bridge Over Deep Waters

A Play in Two Acts

13 actors minimum.

Can be cast with as many as 50+ actors.

CHARACTERS

PROLOGUE:

Mrs. Stevenson

Mrs. Stevenson's Dear Friends (*NOTE: Four actors were used in the original production; this should be adjusted to accommodate your production.*)

Cyril

Amilia

Olive

Yogananda

Pilgrimage Players (*NOTE: Entire cast on stage from beginning and also play other roles in the various scenes.*)

Native American Elder

Native American Percussionist (*NOTE: This was specific to the original production.*)

Native American Flute Player (*NOTE: This was specific to the original production.*)

SCENE ONE: THE LANGUAGE LESSON

Julia

Mrs. Stepankova

Mr. Shammas

Mr. Diggavi

Mr. Masih

Mrs. Nhim

Tevy

SCENE TWO: WINTER/SPRING

Ruth

Avrum (Ruth's father) (*NOTE: This was specific to the original production.*)

Rose (Ruth's mother) (*NOTE: This was specific to the original production.*)

Miriam (Ruth's grandma) (*NOTE: This was specific to the original production.*)

Sid (Ruth's uncle) (*NOTE: This was specific to the original production.*)

David (Ruth's little brother) (*NOTE: This was specific to the original production.*)

Ruth as a little girl (*NOTE: This was specific to the original production.*)

Tevy

SCENE THREE: A HEART IS WHERE THE HOME IS

Alan

Regina

Tee-Tee

Regina's Dad

Regina's Mom

Regina's Sister

Regina's Co-Worker

Regina's Friend

Regina's Neighbor

Pastor Quentin

SCENE FOUR: HOUSTON: WE HAVE A PROBLEM

Anderson

Redwood

Houston Control (Voice Only)

SCENE FIVE: LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Diana

Ajay

Lisa

Oldest Son

Middle Son

Youngest Son

The Dog

SCENE SIX: THERE MUST BE SOME MISTAKE

Ajay

Mother

Father

Sister-in-Law

Omeed

ShahAb

SCENE SEVEN: DECLARATION

Storyteller

Lord Shiva

Bhasmasura

Vishnu/Mohini

Foley Artist

Omeed

ShahAb

SCENE EIGHT: SPANISH 101 FOR TWO HINDUS AND A
MUSLIM”

Shama

Jayanti

Sangita

Tameem

SCENE NINE: THE SECRET

Connie
Tameem
Joy
Michelle

SCENE TEN: JESUS OF LOS ANGELES

Jesus
Jula

TIME: Now.

PLACE: Los Angeles.

ACT ONE

PRE-SHOW

Inside the John Anson Ford Theatre. On stage: 48 empty chairs. Our only company is each other.

OFF TO THE SIDE: *Six chairs around a big dining table.*

20 MINUTES BEFORE CURTAIN: *MRS. STEVENSON and SEVERAL OF HER DEAR FRIENDS sit at the dining table enjoying cake and lemonade. The PILGRIM-AGE PLAYERS begin to trickle on stage. They are actors, all distinctly dressed in heavy Biblical garb. One by one, in small groups, gradually they enter, watching the audience, and sit in the 48 chairs.*

AT PLACES: *All 48 chairs are filled with the PILGRIM-AGE PLAYERS. They look out at the audience.*

PROLOGUE

MRS. STEVENSON takes her rightful place behind a standing microphone in a pool of light. It is a moment for her to savor. MRS. STEVENSON is dressed beautifully in early 1920s attire, not a hair out of place. Something about her says "rich and important." She holds a

big old manuscript. If she opens it, you know that dust will fly, that passion and memories are trapped in those pages. The on-stage PILGRIMAGE PLAYERS applaud MRS. STEVENSON.

MRS. STEVENSON (*to her PLAYERS*). Thank you. Thank you, dears. (*To the audience.*) Good evening. And welcome to the Pilgrimage Theatre. (*Clearing her throat.*) My name is Mrs. Christine Wetherill Stevenson, and I was the original owner of this theater. When I arrived in Hollywood in 1917, I wanted to bring culture to the community by presenting religious plays. My first endeavor was to produce an outdoor drama called *Light of Asia*—which featured the character of Buddha. That experience led me to seek stories of the other great masters known to the world—my plan was to dramatize all of them. I had so many plans! But I'm getting ahead of myself. (*Clears her throat.*) I'm a little nervous. (*Looking out at the audience.*) My name is Mrs. Christine Wetherill Stevenson— (*Beat.*) And I've been dead for over eighty years... (*She stops—looking around the space.*) I can't seem to leave this place, this theater. It's like my home, my church. (*She pauses, regaining her composure.*) Before I came to Los Angeles I had never even opened a Bible. But in 1920 I stood at the corner of Highland Avenue and Hollywood Boulevard, gazing northward at the Cahuenga Pass... (*Remembering.*) It seemed to me to be the most spiritual place in all of Los Angeles. In that moment I knew that this was the perfect setting for a play I was writing about the life of the Christ called *The Pilgrimage Play*. So I purchased this 29-acre ravine—and work soon began on building my

theater which I called the Pilgrimage Theatre. (*Passionate:*) What a time that was! I wrote the entire play based on my own translation of the four Gospels according to the King James version of the Bible. Then I journeyed to the Holy Land and brought back authentic fabrics and props which we used in our production. I was also the director of that first production. For years my play was performed here by noted actors—dear, dear friends—many of whom you see here tonight. Ghosts. (*She looks around at her beloved PLAYERS, moved by them all over again. To us:*) Anyway dears, it's now been more than forty years since the last performance of my play—and all that time we've been waiting. Every night—me and my dear actors—we've been waiting for you. And here you are. (*Looking out at the audience, emotional.*) Dear, dear audience. (*Beat.*) Let us wait no longer. This city, this theater, this ground—cries out for this story.

(MRS. STEVENSON is re-seated with her DEAR FRIENDS at the dining table off to the side. Not only do they have a great view of the play—but the audience has a great view of them watching the play too. The microphone is struck. The PILGRIMAGE PLAYERS all take their places for the beginning of The Pilgrimage Play. The lights change. Strange silence. Then MUSIC:)

The Pilgrimage Play by Christine Wetherill Stevenson:

“The Voices of Judea”

PILGRIMAGE PLAYER #1. In the beginning was the Word,

PILGRIMAGE PLAYER #2. And the Word was with God,
PILGRIMAGE PLAYER #3. And the Word was God.

PILGRIMAGE PLAYER #4. And the Word was made
flesh

PILGRIMAGE PLAYER #5. And dwelt among us.

PILGRIMAGE PLAYER #6. And we beheld his glory;

PILGRIMAGE PLAYER #7. The Glory as of the only

PILGRIMAGE PLAYER #8. Begotten of the Father,

PILGRIMAGE PLAYER #9. Full of Grace and Truth.

PILGRIMAGE PLAYER #10. For the law was given by
Moses,

PILGRIMAGE PLAYER #11. But Grace and Truth came
by

ALL PILGRIMAGE PLAYERS. Jesus Christ.

(Biblical MUSIC. We are by a river. THREE PEASANT WOMEN huddle together on the bank of the river.)

PEASANT WOMAN #1. Behold, hither cometh the
well-favored harlot, Magdalene—

PEASANT WOMAN #2. With her Roman lover.

(MAGDALENE and PANDIRA enter right. MAGDALENE is in a serious mood and tries to conceal it from PANDIRA.)

PANDIRA (*jovially*). What new madness did possess ye
Magdalene to come to this desolate place?

MAGDALENE (*forcing a smile*). A prophet hath been
promised to our people, and 'tis said he frequently
abides here by the river—

(We hear the SOUND OF A FLUTE. PANDIRA tries to continue:)

PANDIRA *(chuckling)*. A prophet! What wouldst thou with a prophet.

(The FLUTE MUSIC continues, growing stronger. The PILGRIMAGE PLAYERS look around, confused by the sound. Obviously this isn't supposed to happen... Then upstage of the PLAYERS, there is the SOUND OF SINGING.)

TONGVA ELDER. <TONGVA SINGING>

(The PLAYERS all turn to look upstage at the hillside where a light reveals AN OLDER MAN (TONGVA ELDER. The FLUTE PLAYER continues to play from the back of the house. The TONGVA ELDER continues singing upstage in the hillside. It is the "Tongva Welcoming Song." The PILGRIMAGE PLAYERS are caught in between.)

MRS. STEVENSON *(to the TONGVAS)*. Excuse me! We're doing a play down here!

(Some of the PLAYERS look to MRS. STEVENSON for some idea of what they should do. She's as confused as anyone, gestures to PANDIRA to start again, anything to get her play back on track.)

PANDIRA *(forced, jovially)*. What new madness did possess ye Magdalene to come to this desolate place?

(But the WOMAN PLAYING MAGDALENE seems mesmerized by the flute music, looking out at the audience toward the back of the theater. Upstage on the hillside, the TONGVA ELDER continues singing the “Tongva Welcoming Song.” Another player—JOHN THE BAPTIST—steps forward as if to try and jump ahead to another part of The Pilgrimage Play.)

JOHN THE BAPTIST. Prepare ye the way of the Lord,
make his path straight and all flesh shall see salvation
of—of—of—

(But it’s no use. JOHN THE BAPTIST stops, distracted, looking back at the TONGVA ELDER who continues singing “The Welcoming Song.” The WOMAN/MAGDALENE is now the only one not looking back up at the TONGVA ELDER. She remains downstage, facing the audience. She is moving, awkwardly. It’s as if her bones are trying to remember something from long ago. She is trying to remember the language, how to move, how to dance... Before the song can end, the moment is interrupted by the RINGING OF A CELL PHONE. The sound is foreign to the PLAYERS, some of them might even cover their ears. The WOMAN/MAGDALENE searches her body/clothes for the ringing. In the process of looking for her phone, she begins to peel off layers of the Biblical garb. Eventually she is standing in contemporary clothes, the Biblical garb in a discarded heap at her feet. She finally discovers a ringing cell phone in a pocket or bag—and then has to figure out what the phone is, then tentatively answers it.)

JULIA (*to cell phone*). Hello? Who? (*Realization.*) Yes, this is Julia. (*From this moment on, she is JULIA.*) Who is this? Oh, God. Yes, I did. Right. I know. OK. What day do you need me to be there? OK. I don't know, but I'll cancel stuff if I have to, I'll be there. Saturday. Yes, I know— (*Firm.*) I'll be there. OK, uh-huh. No but I can Mapquest it. Yeah I know that area—I teach at a Catholic church in Long Beach. I teach English. No—the language. ESL, right. No, it's just one class—I'm really an actress. OK. Right. Saturday. Do I need to bring anything? Right. Wait—can I ask—how many are there, how many did they find? (*Listens, then long pause.*) No—I'm still here. I'll be there. Saturday. Bye. (*JULIA hangs up her cell phone—and breaks down crying.*)

PLAYER/JOHN THE BAPTIST (*urgent*). Mrs. Stevenson, what about the play?

OLD SHEPHERD. What about OUR play?

(They all look to MRS. STEVENSON for her wisdom. She is strangely calm, shocked, but not afraid.)

MRS. STEVENSON (*matter of fact*). I don't know, dears.

(The space begins to change all around her. MUSIC. FIVE PILGRIMAGE PLAYERS strip away their Biblical garb and transform into 21st century SENIOR CITIZENS. [NOTE: From this point, all transitions will involve the PILGRIMAGE PLAYERS stripping away the Biblical garb, revealing contemporary clothes.]

SCENE ONE: The Language Lesson

Tongva / Catholic Immigrant

(Long Beach. A small room. Part of a Catholic church or annex. Folding chairs. A blackboard. It's musty but comfortable. Everything in the room looks like it has been donated over the years from people's homes. JULIA stands at the blackboard in front of SEVERAL IMMIGRANT SENIOR CITIZENS. She points to the phrase written on the blackboard and reads it very clearly, over-emphasizing:)

JULIA. "May I use the telephone?"

IMMIGRANT SENIORS *(repeating it aloud, slowly, in unison:)*. May—I—use—the—telephone?

JULIA. Good, good. "Have a nice day!"

IMMIGRANT SENIORS. Good—good—have—a—nice—day! *(JULIA applauds her students' success; they applaud back.)*JULIA *(smiling, nodding)*. Perfect. Now let's try this one: "It is a sunny day in Los Angeles." Everyone:

IMMIGRANT SENIORS. "It is a sunny day in Los Angeles."

JULIA. Wonderful. Everyone is improving so much.

MRS. STEPANKOVA *(raising hand)*. What is this—"improving"?

JULIA. "Improving"—um—getting better, making progress...

(All of the SENIORS talk aloud in their own languages, translating for themselves. Then:)

IMMIGRANT SENIORS (*simultaneously/overlapping*).

Yes, yes! Im-proving!

JULIA. Yes, improving! OK. Let's try an exercise. I'll start a sentence and you can fill in the blank— (*They all look at her, confused.*) Um, fill in the blank, finish the sentence. Yes? (*The class laughs, not sure what she means, but willing to try.*) Right. Uh— “My favorite thing about Los Angeles is...” (*She looks at the class, motions for them to finish the sentence. An older Indian man [MR. DIGGAVI] raises his hand, enthusiastically.*)

MR. DIGGAVI. “Catholic church!” (*The other students all nod in agreement, pleased. A murmur of “yes’s” ripples across the room.*)

JULIA. Huh. The Catholic church. Well. Sure. I guess that's—that would count. Anyone else? A favorite thing about L.A.? Palm trees? The ocean, anyone? Favorite thing?

MR. DIGGAVI. “Catholic church!”

JULIA. OK. OK. Let's try this one: “Does this bus stop near...”

MR. DIGGAVI. “Catholic church!”

JULIA. Right. How about another one. Um— “This morning I saw...?”

(*An Egyptian man [MR. SHAMMAS] calmly answers:*)

MR. SHAMMAS. God.

JULIA. God?

MR. SHAMMAS (*halting English*). “This—morn-ing—I saw—God.”

JULIA. You saw God?

MR. SHAMMAS (*nodding*). This morning I saw God.

JULIA. Really?

(MR. SHAMMAS just nods calmly, smiling. Suddenly JULIA begins to cry. The IMMIGRANT SENIORS are unsure of what to do, unsure how to react to their teacher crying. They begin to talk to each other in several different languages.)

IMMIGRANT SENIORS *(simultaneously)*. <Several languages: “What is wrong with her?” “Should someone get her some water?” “Maybe she’s not feeling well.”>

JULIA. I’m sorry, really, I—well I had some news, some bad news, SAD news right before I came here tonight, and I’m feeling a little raw.

IMMIGRANT SENIORS *(repeating the new word)*. Raw.

MRS. STEPANKOVA *(explaining to class)*. Means uncooked—like sushi.

MR. MASIH *(confused)*. How this news make you feel like sushi?

JULIA *(laughing through tears)*. No, I don’t feel like sushi. Raw—um, how do I explain it? *(She looks out at the faces of the IMMIGRANT SENIORS. They are looking at her with such compassion—it only makes JULIA begin to cry again.)*

MR. MASIH. Oh! Sushi is crying, yes?

JULIA. No, no.

MR. SHAMMAS. May I ask question? Are you Catholic?

JULIA *(thinking)*. Am I Catholic? Kind of. I mean, I was born Catholic. Part of me is definitely Catholic. I think. Am I Catholic? I don’t know. I guess I’m—I’m a version.

MRS. STEPANKOVA. Like Virgin Mary!