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# TODAY I AM!

**Five Short Plays  
About Growing Up Jewish**

By

SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER

*One Foot After Another*  
*David's Star*  
*The Heart of Buchanan*  
*Wrestling With Angels*  
*Frank and Stein*



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(TODAY I AM!  
Five Short Plays About Growing Up Jewish)

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For Rabbi Jack Paskoff  
and Temple Shaarai Shomayim—  
congregation, family and friends

## IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

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# TODAY I AM!

## Five Short Plays About Growing Up Jewish

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These five plays may be performed individually, or in any combination as an evening of one acts. Casts may double in more than one play for even greater flexibility.

Total playing time: about 75 minutes.

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TODAY I AM was further developed through a workshop arranged by Amie Brockway-Henson, Producing Artistic Director of The Open Eye Theater, Margaretville, N.Y. A public reading was held at the Skene Memorial Library, Fleischmanns, N.Y., on Saturday, November 19, 2005, with the following directors and casts:

*One Foot After Another*  
Directed by Amie Brockway

BARRY COHEN . . . . . Luke Beemer  
ALMA ROSEN . . . . . Marie Palko  
PAM . . . . . Mary Small  
KEVIN . . . . . Thomas Hafner  
Stage Directions . . . . . Garrett Fairbairn

*David's Star*  
Directed by David J. Turan

CARA MATARASSO . . . . . Mary Small  
SAM . . . . . Thomas Hafner  
DAVE . . . . . Erwin Karl

TAMMY . . . . . Katie Lehn  
Stage Directions . . . . . Jessica Olenych

*The Heart of Buchanan*  
Directed by David J. Turan

SARAH . . . . . Alex O'Melia  
TRACI . . . . . Cassie Schmitt  
DEE DEE . . . . . Mary Small  
MRS. GOLDSTEIN . . . . . Jessica Olenych  
MOLLY . . . . . Barbara Morrow  
Stage Directions . . . . . Erwin Karl

*Wrestling With Angels*  
Directed by Amie Brockway

JACI . . . . . Cassie Schmitt  
JOSH . . . . . Luke Beemer  
ISAAC . . . . . Garrett Fairbairn  
BECKY . . . . . Alex O'Melia  
MRS. COHEN . . . . . Marie Palko  
Stage Directions . . . . . Mary Small

*Frank and Stein*  
Directed by Melissa Cooperman

BEN STEIN . . . . . Garrett Fairbairn  
SIDNEY . . . . . Alexa Abrams  
MOM . . . . . Sharon Abrams  
DAD . . . . . David J. Turan  
Stage Directions . . . . . Brandon Hargrove

# Wrestling With Angels

Adapted from a story by Carol Matas  
in *With All My Heart, With All My Mind:  
Thirteen Stories About Growing Up Jewish*  
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## CHARACTERS:

JACI (pronounced “Jackie”) . . . about to turn 14, wrestling  
with many things in her life  
JOSH. . . . . her classmate  
ISAAC. . . . . another classmate, an Orthodox Jew  
BECKY. . . . . another classmate  
MS. COHEN . . . . . their ethics teacher  
OFFSTAGE VOICES . . . . . may be prerecorded

TIME: The present.

PLACE: A classroom at the Jewish Community Center day  
school.

Approximate playing time: 12 minutes

## Wrestling With Angels

BEFORE RISE: *Stage is dark. OFFSTAGE VOICES are heard: eerie, distorted, echoing, nightmarish. They are interrupted by BECKY's onstage voice, still in the darkness. OFFSTAGE VOICES may be accompanied by other-worldly MUSIC.*

FIRST OFFSTAGE VOICE. Release me.

SECOND OFFSTAGE VOICE. No!

FIRST OFFSTAGE VOICE. I will bless you, if you release me.

SECOND OFFSTAGE VOICE (*laughing in disbelief*).  
Bless me and kill me!

FIRST OFFSTAGE VOICE. Release me.

SECOND OFFSTAGE VOICE. What kind of blessing?

FIRST OFFSTAGE VOICE. I will bless you. (*MUSIC fades.*)

BECKY. Jaci! Hey! Earth to Jaci. *Wake up!* What's going on?

*(LIGHTS come up, surprisingly fast and bright, revealing the classroom. JACI is seated in a chair facing the audience. She appears to be suddenly awakened from a disturbing daydream. BECKY sits beside her, shaking her awake by the shoulder. Upstage of them, JOSH and ISAAC sit separately in classroom chairs, studying. MS.*

*COHEN, also at a distance, is at her desk, grading papers. There is a book shelf along the upstage wall.)*

JACI (*disoriented at first, and troubled by it*). What? Oh. I must've been daydreaming. Sorry, Becky.

BECKY. You looked like you were in a *trance* or something. Are you okay?

JACI (*pulling herself back into the real world and avoiding BECKY's scrutiny*). Sure, I'm fine. Really. I...ah...didn't sleep well last night. That's all.

BECKY. Well, just don't do that again, okay? You scared me!

JACI (*trying to laugh it off*). Sorry.

BECKY. Too weird! (*In a conspiratorial tone—*) But listen: I've got to go sit with Josh for Torah study, but I wanted to let you know my brother says it's okay for after school.

JACI (*confused*). What?

BECKY. He'll drive us downtown. So it's all up to you, now: What are you getting pierced? Ears? Nose? Belly button?

JACI (*uncomfortable with this*). I—um—haven't decided yet.

BECKY (*impatiently*). Jaciiiiiii!

JACI. I still have eight days 'til my birthday, and my mom's going to *freak* when she finds out!

BECKY. Not necessarily.

JACI. Everyone else's parents did.

BECKY. Not Rachel's mom. She wants to get her tongue pierced.

JACI. That is so gross!

BECKY. I think it's cool! And speaking of cool—when are you going to say yes to a date with Josh? He is *dying* to go out with you!

JACI. I haven't decided that, either. I'm not really allowed to date yet—

BECKY. Jaci, will you get with the program! Please? You're the only one who hasn't pierced *something*—

JACI (*interrupting*). I'm not the *only* one.

BECKY. *Practically!* Plus, you're nearly fourteen and you've never had a real boyfriend.

JACI. So?

BECKY. So being your best friend is getting just a little *embarrassing*.

JACI (*hurt*). Oh, really?

BECKY. Now, don't get all huffy. It's just that I'm always sticking up for you, and it's *hard!* (*ISAAC stands up and crosses the stage toward the shelf of books. During the following, he chooses a large reference book and heads toward JACI while reading it.*) Uh-oh, here comes your partner, Mr. Orthodox Jew. I feel so sorry for you being stuck with him!

JACI (*shrugs, without enthusiasm*—). Isaac's okay.

BECKY. He's a Jewish anti-Semite, is what he is. Thinks he's better than the rest of us. I don't know why he even comes to this school.

JACI. It's the only Jewish day school in town—

BECKY. Yeah, well, he already knows everything. Or he thinks he does. Have fun. I'm out of here. (*She gathers her books from the desk and goes upstage to sit beside JOSH, very obviously ignoring ISAAC, who notices the snub and is annoyed by it, but says nothing.*)

ISAAC (*puts a book on each desk and sits beside JACI*).

Do you want me to begin?

JACI (*lost in her own thoughts, she speaks with unintentional curttness*). Sure. Whatever.

ISAAC (*frustrated with her attitude, on top of BECKY's snub*). What's your problem?

JACI (*laughs, ruefully*). Do you really want to know?

ISAAC (*surprised*). Well...yes, if you really want to tell me.

JACI (*regards him for a beat; then, hesitantly—*). It's... something weird.

ISAAC. That shouldn't bother me. I'm the Captain of Weird around here.

JACI (*smiles, not able to refute that but liking him for saying it so casually. Another moment of hesitation while he waits patiently, and then, because she has to share it and can't tell anyone else, she lets it all pour out*). I had this dream last night. I was...*wrestling* with someone. I couldn't tell who it was, but there was a voice that kept saying "Release me and I will bless you." And I kept hanging on and saying "No." It was so...*real* that when I woke up, I had no idea where I was—or *who* I was. I was *that* deep into it. And I had this terrible twinge in my right hip. When I touched it—not in the dream, later, when I was awake and sitting up—it *hurt*, as if I'd actually been fighting. (*Shaking her head as if to shake off the memory.*) I've never had a dream like that before...it was *as real as life!* And it won't go away. It's been... *haunting* me all day.

ISAAC (*a beat, and then—*). You were wrestling with the divine. Just like your namesake.

JACI. Huh?

ISAAC. Jacob. Jaci. I guess that's what your parents were thinking of when they named you.

JACI. So?

ISAAC. You know the story. In Genesis, Jacob wrestles with a divine being.

JACI (*beginning to make the connection*). And asks it to bless him!

ISAAC (*nodding*). And the being does—and gives him the name Israel, from whom we are all descended.

JACI. Well, that *kind of* explains it. Maybe that was stuck in my subconscious somewhere—

ISAAC. Maybe it was real.

JACI (*laughing*). Yeah, right!

ISAAC. It could have been real. Maybe you were visited by an angel.

JACI. Oh, sure.

ISAAC. It's possible.

JACI. No, it isn't.

ISAAC. Yes, it is.

JACI (*realizing this is going nowhere*). Okay, fine. Then, *why?*

ISAAC (*shrugs*). Do I look like the Almighty?

JACI. No, you don't!

ISAAC. Then I wouldn't know why, would I? (*JACI rolls her eyes. ISAAC shrugs this off and taps his book of commentary.*) We haven't gotten very far with our project.

JACI. Oh, who cares? I don't get Job anyway. Why *didn't* he curse God—after all the terrible things God did to him? Just to win a bet with Satan! Boils all over his skin. His children dead. His servants. His animals. I can tell you, I would've cursed God!

ISAAC. Many do.

JACI. Yeah, well. You'd have to *believe* in God to curse God. (*Before ISAAC can sort any of this out, she turns toward MS. COHEN—*) Which reminds me—Ms. Cohen, if you don't believe in God, then you don't have to follow any of the Jewish laws, correct?

MS. COHEN (*stands up slowly, as JOSH, BECKY and ISAAC stare at her and at JACI in amazement*). Jaci, there are many kinds of Jews, you know that—

JACI. I'm not saying I'm not Jewish. I am. But *why* am I? Or maybe I'm not. I mean, if I don't believe in God, and that means I don't believe in following any of the laws, what's Jewish about me?

JOSH. The Nazis would say you're Jewish.

BECKY. Oh, Josh. You think the next Holocaust is right around the corner.

JOSH. Maybe it is.

BECKY. Oh, please!

JACI. Whatever! Is that a good enough reason for me to obey all of God's laws? Because the Nazis would expect me to?

BECKY. Of course not!

JACI. How many of us obey all the laws, anyway? Most people here don't keep the Sabbath, or keep kosher.

ISAAC. You have to ask yourself what it means to be a Jew. What is the *essence*?

MS. COHEN (*nods at him and asks JACI—*). "What is the essence?" *Interesting*. Any thoughts about that?

JACI. Well, yes, I've been thinking about it—a lot. And I think it's "Love your neighbor as yourself." That's from Leviticus. And Rabbi Akiva, who was a great scholar,