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Dramatic Publishing

AUSCHWITZ LULLABY

A Play in Two Acts

by

JAMES C. WALL

Inspired by true events documented in the
Auschwitz diaries of Dr. Miklos Nyiszli.



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AUSCHWITZ LULLABY

A Drama in Two Acts
For 3 Men and 3 Women

CHARACTERS*

DR. ISAAC JONAH: Jewish Hungarian doctor of pathology, mid- to late 30s.

JACOB "CANADA" TANNENBAUM: Jewish prisoner who has been at Auschwitz for two years, mid- to late 20s.

CAPTAIN HANS GUNTER: A bureaucrat who runs Crematorium Number 2, mid- to late 30s.

KAPO EVA VACEK: Czech prisoner who works for the Germans, late 20s to early 30s.

MIRIAM JONAH: Wife of Dr. Jonah, mid- to late 30s.

LENA: Jewish girl, 16, who survives the gassing which murders her mother and father.

*More detailed character descriptions at end of playbook.

TIME and PLACE

September, 1944, Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, Auschwitz, Poland. Act One encompasses the first three weeks Dr. Isaac Jonah is in the camp. Act Two is the beginning of the fourth week.

SET: The set should be suggestive more than realistic, with various areas of the stage used to show certain locations in and around Auschwitz concentration camp. A scrim might be used to back light shadows representing large numbers of soldiers and/or inmates.

The areas in the camp where action takes place:

1. The pathology laboratory: a dissecting table, a cabinet with medicines in it, a table with a stool at it and a microscope on it. Medicine bottles, specimens, books, typewriter.

2. The gas chamber of Crematorium Number 2: Indicated by a gross sculpture from hell, naked bodies are intertwined in a lattice-work mountain of bodies as the dying climbed over each other trying to reach the ceiling and air to breathe.

3. A room in the women's hospital; table and chair.

4. Dr. Isaac Jonah's room in the Sonderkommando barracks (center stage). This room is indicated by a single bed or cot, a small table with a chair or stool, and a sink or washstand.

5. Train ramp platform looking down on rail area where trains pull in with boxcars loaded with prisoners.

6. Area near front gate.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

AT RISE: *Darkness. Waltz music playing softly is heard. Then center stage a tight spotlight hits a figure standing in the darkness. DR. JONAH talks to the audience.*

JONAH. It is Tishri of the year 5705. My Christian friends call it late September of the year 1944. For the three weeks that I've been in this place, every night when I close my eyes, I can only see one thing. It's not my wife Miriam or my daughter Sarah. It's not my home or my laboratory. It's him, peering into a microscope, pretending for all the world like he's a scientist and that he knows what he's doing. (*He takes a scalpel from his coat pocket.*) The moment I shut my eyes, I dream I am standing behind him—like I do countless times each day since I was assigned to his lab. I grab the top of his head with my left hand— (*He uses his left hand and mimes grabbing the top of someone's head.*) —pull it back to expose the throat area and then with my right hand, I can (*He mimes slowly cutting someone's throat.*) feel the sharp blade penetrate the exterior and the interior carotid arteries. As I draw the scalpel through the left vertebral, my hand is dripping wet and blood is pumping now from the exterior and interior jugular veins. I pierce the larynx. I can feel blood droplets showering all over. He

resists and the gurgling sound from his throat is muffled when I cut through the phrenic and the vagus nerve—his respiratory system is shutting down. He is struggling less but I hold him tight and cut on through the trachea and then on to the right side jugular and carotids!

(CAPTAIN HANS GUNTER walks out onto the stage drawing his sidearm as he approaches JONAH.)

JONAH. I've opened a smile in his throat the size of a summer squash and he'll be dead within a minute. He has stopped struggling. The life is oozing out of him and I feel good! The body collapses onto the floor and I just stand here—waiting for—a guard, an officer—someone who will put the first bullet through my head... I die with a huge smile on my face... But they never come.

(GUNTER holsters his pistol and exits.)

JONAH. Because it is only a dream—I wish I was more courageous. I would do it and not care. But I have to care. Miriam and Sarah, next door in the women's camp. They're counting on me to care, to do something. Except, I'm scared. And I don't know what I can do. Three weeks we've been here. I feel totally helpless. All I have left is the fear that I may die at any moment. That's all that's left. Fear. From the moment we got off the train.

(Others appear out of the darkness at the sides of the stage making a kind of circle around JONAH: VACEK, GUNTER, CANADA, and lastly, Dr. Jonah's wife, MIRIAM; looking bewildered, she holds a suitcase.)

MIRIAM. Isaac, where are we?

JONAH. Auschwitz.

MIRIAM. What is this place?

JONAH. Hold on to Sarah... Put your hands over her ears... tighter!

MIRIAM (*mimes doing this to the unseen child in front of her*). Why are you trying to scare—

JONAH. Smell it?

MIRIAM. What?

JONAH. That sickening sweet smell. Everywhere... Burning flesh.

MIRIAM. What?

JONAH. This is a death camp!

(*MIRIAM retreats to the edges of the circle of light.*)

JONAH (*to the audience*). I know that killing is wrong. I am a doctor. Everything in my life—my profession, my religion, my upbringing, everything I believe tells me that killing is wrong. Yet I am consumed with thoughts of killing him: Josef Mengele, *Malach ha Mawis*— The Angel of Death.

(*VACEK comes into the light, addresses MIRIAM.*)

VACEK (*gesturing to the suitcase*). Put that over here with all the rest.

(*MIRIAM leaves the suitcase UC.*)

VACEK. Now get in line with everyone else. Hold on to your daughter there. She is certainly a pretty one, isn't she?

(GUNTER comes into the light. He stands on small platform.)

GUNTER. As you pass through the gates of Auschwitz, please notice the words above you. "Arbeit Macht Frei." Work Sets You Free! Everything's going to be fine. Follow everyone else to the end of the train ramp. Pay attention to Captain Mengele; he's the officer with the white gloves. He will tell you which line to go in: *Link* or *Recht*—Left or Right. Hurry up now. *Mach schnell*.

OFFSTAGE VOICE. *Link ... Link ... Link ... Recht ... Link ... Link ... Link*.

(CANADA comes forward. He opens a suitcase and starts to rifle through the contents as GUNTER walks by.)

GUNTER. Is there any suitcase that comes through Auschwitz that you don't get your filthy Jewish hands on?

CANADA. Captain Gunter, I'm assigned to the luggage. We're supposed to bring it into the camp and—

GUNTER. Not anymore! New postings this morning. You no longer work the train station... You've been selected out!

(The look on CANADA's face shows he fears he's been "selected" to go to the gas chamber. GUNTER realizes he's thinking this.)

GUNTER. In the pit of your stomach, right? That sickly feeling that—my life might be coming to an end. (*Starts to walk away, pauses.*) Something to do with science classes in your background—you're the new orderly in Mengele's laboratory. (*He tears the star off CANADA's uniform.*) His help wear no stars... Not much you can organize from dead bodies, is there? (*He walks back to the edge of the light.*)

(*CANADA and JONAH converse without looking at each other. CANADA rifles suitcase. JONAH puts on lab coat.*)

JONAH. Who is that?

CANADA. Captain Gunter. He's in charge of Crematorium Number 2.

JONAH. How have you managed to survive this hell?

CANADA. I worked the trains.

JONAH. Was mine a good train? (*No answer from CANADA.*) People come here and die and you live off what you can steal from their possessions?

CANADA. In the Lager, "live" is to have more to eat than your ration of bread and watery soup. "Live" is one more shirt to ward off the freezing cold when winter comes and means death for hundreds all around you who don't have strength left to fight for their share of the food. They turn "Musslemen" and have maybe five, six days left to live. A few hours before they die, even the lice leave their bodies because there's nothing left to live off of. And the rest of us go on. Surviving for one more day. You string together as many of those days as you can, and that's what you call life.

JONAH. I didn't know.

(CANADA carries the suitcase back to the edge of the light.)

OFFSTAGE VOICE. *Recht!*

JONAH. *Got! Ich vais nit vos tsu ton!*

OFFSTAGE VOICE. *Link!*

JONAH. Give me a sign, God. Tell me what to do.

OFFSTAGE VOICE. *Recht!*

JONAH. Or at least let me wake up from this nightmare.

OFFSTAGE VOICE. *Link!*

JONAH. But all I hear is a voice at the end of the train
ramp splitting everyone into two lines.

OFFSTAGE VOICE. *Recht!*

JONAH. And then Canada—damn him! Telling me what
would have happened if Miriam and Sarah had gone to
the left.

OFFSTAGE VOICE. *Link!*

JONAH. The line ends with their undressing.

OFFSTAGE VOICE. *Recht!*

JONAH. Sometimes in the courtyard, other times in the
changing room.

OFFSTAGE VOICE. *Link!*

JONAH. The old, the sick, the crippled, young children
clinging to their mothers, entire families.

(The light starts to grow dim.)

OFFSTAGE VOICE. *Recht!*

(GUNTER and VACEK stand near the edge of the light.)

VACEK. *Schnell! Schnell!* Hurry people. Hang up your clothes and please remember the number of the hook you've left them on. (*She exits.*)

GUNTER. Remember, after you've been showered and de-loused, report back to your assigning stations. Now move into the showers. *Schnell! Schnell!* (*As he watches people filing past him.*) Thank you... Thank you... Thank you... Guards! Count off as you leave the room! (*He exits.*)

OFFSTAGE VOICE. *Einz. Zwee. Drie. Fier. Fünf...*

(Lights go out. We hear heavy door clang shut. Silence, then the faint sound of waltz music mixed with crying, coughing, choking, and finally screaming. Then total silence.)

SCENE TWO

AT RISE: *Darkness. We hear two voices: CANADA and DR. JONAH.*

CANADA. Dr. Jonah! Are you awake?

JONAH. Ah—yes—yes. What time is it, Canada?

CANADA. It'll be dawn soon. Come quickly. Bring your bag. We need you in the Number Two works. I can't believe it. This has never happened before.

JONAH. What are you talking about?

CANADA. In the gas chamber. One of them is still alive!

(Lights come up half on a shadowy form—a lattice-work mountain of dead, naked bodies, arms and legs inter-

twined showing the struggle to get to the air near the ceiling. JONAH with medical bag, CANADA with a blanket enter, stop in horror. JONAH is frozen. CANADA moves to the far side, kneels over figure of a young girl. He covers her with the blanket as the lights come up more.)

CANADA. God in Heaven! She is still alive!

JONAH. How?

CANADA. The floor is moist here. That means humidity. Some gasses don't work well in humid conditions. And her face is pressed into where the wall meets the floor—maybe an air pocket. Doctor— (*Looks to JONAH who is kneeling, praying.*) Doctor! What are we going to do?

JONAH. Let's get out of here!

CANADA. We can't!

JONAH. Where are the guards?

CANADA. They're still on break. You can't just leave her! That's condemning her to death!

JONAH. No. The Germans already did that. This isn't some nightmare in hell. This is real! Three thousand Jews in here, all dead—except one! And they'll kill us too if they find us in here.

CANADA. But we might be able to save her!

JONAH. Are you crazy? Think about what you are risking.

CANADA. I think—God meant for her to be saved.

JONAH. God? GOD?? I don't believe you! Look around us, you damned fool! If God cared about any of us, would this be happening?

(CANADA gets JONAH's medical bag and rummages through it.)

JONAH. What are you doing?

CANADA. We've got to clear her lungs. What's in here that I can give her to make her sick it up? Jonah! What should I do?

JONAH. *Du gaist tsu schnell.* Slow down. I can't think. I'm too scared! (*He's come close enough to look down at her now.*) She's not even as old as my Sarah.

CANADA. Doctor—hurry!

JONAH (*kneels, gets a syringe, prepares it and gives her a shot*). What are you going to do with her?

CANADA. Bring her to the laboratory.

JONAH. And if someone sees us?

CANADA. You tell them she's one of Mengele's twins.

JONAH. Mengele! He's in and out of that lab ten times a day!

CANADA. Your room! We could hide her there!

JONAH. No! I'm not risking my life for—for someone—I don't even know!

CANADA (*picks her up and holds her close to him*). Two—years—I've been drowning in the smell of death. It's in my clothes, on my skin, even in my hair! But her hair—it smells like before! She's alive! She beat them! And maybe we can keep her alive a little longer! Your room, Jonah. It's the only chance we have. (*Beat.*) Hurry man! In seconds this place'll be swarming with guards! (*Still no answer from JONAH.*) Help me with her and I swear I'll do anything you ask—help you with anything, any time—you just—

JONAH. Teach me what I need to know to survive in this place—what my wife and daughter need to know to survive!

CANADA. And we can hide her in your room?

JONAH. Yes. But just until you can—

CANADA. Deal! Get your bag and check the hallway.

JONAH (*gets the bag, runs to side of stage, looks off, as he's praying*). “When we listen with our hearts, we can hear the lamentations through time’s corridor ...”

CANADA. Are you praying again?

JONAH. For the three weeks I’ve been here, I haven’t stopped!

(JONAH signals OK, they exit, CANADA carrying the girl, JONAH with his medical bag as the lights go down and waltz music starts.)