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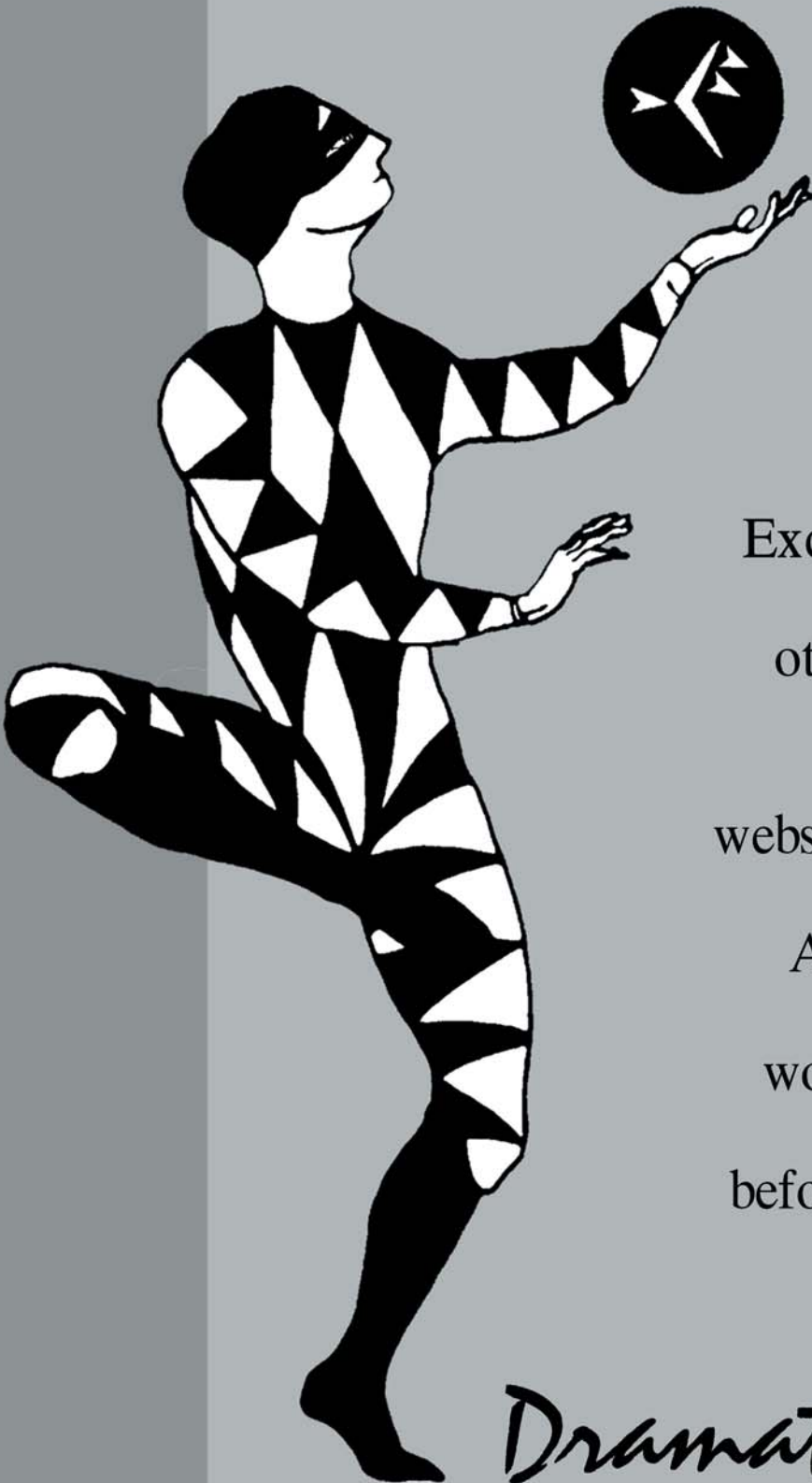
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Dramatic Publishing



AN UNCERTAIN HOUR

A Memory Play for Radio

By
NICHOLAS A. PATRICCA

Manuscript Version

Designed for radio broadcast, audio tape, and CD



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I was inspired to rewrite *An Uncertain Hour* for radio because of the pioneering work of Dr. Elizabeth Peterson-Vita and James Vita in their wonderful productions of live radio theatre for free, world-wide access over the Internet. I am grateful to Elizabeth and Jim, and to my publishers, Chris and Susan Sergel, for encouraging the development of my writing for this new medium.

An Uncertain Hour tells the story of the transformation of Primo Levi, an Italian-Jewish chemist, into a writer because of his experience in Auschwitz. The play poetically explores the spiritual struggle at the heart of all of Primo Levi's writing: the dual effort of every person to resist spiritual as well as physical extinction and to construct a meaning for human existence. *An Uncertain Hour* portrays Primo Levi as a Dante for our times, calling us from the "infernus" of our own making, the various false lights of modern ideologies and dominating powers, to a genuine, human "paradiso," the light of sympathetic understanding, courageous compassion and generous creativity for the good of all—the true purpose of science and art.

An Uncertain Hour is a memory play, employing the dramatic device of an incessant, interior dialogue between Primo Levi and Jean Amery, a fellow Auschwitz survivor. Theatrically, this dialogue about the meaning of the Holocaust and the appropriate human response to such evil takes place in dynamic relationship to Primo Levi's interactions with a boy whom he is tutoring in the art of Dante. The boy in turn is teaching Primo how to use a MacIntosh computer. The form of the memory play enables the author to show how the memories of the Holocaust constantly interrupted and overwhelmed the consciousness of Primo Levi causing him to see himself as a spiritual kin of the ancient mariner who had no choice but to voice his tale "at an uncertain hour" to anyone who would listen.

The original stage version of *An Uncertain Hour* received its world premiere under the direction of David Zak at Bailiwick Repertory, Chicago, in 1994, seven years after the death of Primo Levi and at a time when he and his work were given little attention in the English-speaking world. I am happy that deficiency has been remedied.

The original stage version of *An Uncertain Hour* was published by the Dramatic Publishing Company in 1995.

Although this play is based on actual historical events and real people, it is entirely a work of poetic fiction. Every character and event has been dramatically constructed to reveal Primo Levi, his work, and his predicament as I, the playwright, understand them.

Thank you, Nick Patricca
Chicago 2005

PRODUCTION NOTES

The world premiere, live Internet radio broadcasts of *An Uncertain Hour: A Memory Play for Radio* were given at the Duke Power Theatre, Spirit Square, Charlotte, N.C., and at the Virginia Holocaust Museum, Richmond, Va., in spring and summer of 2005. The performances were directed by Dr. Elizabeth Peterson-Vita and produced by James Vita. Dr. Elizabeth Peterson-Vita is the artistic director of Actors Scene Unseen, a theatre ensemble based in Charlotte, N.C. James Vita is the executive producer and technical director of CSCi Multimedia, an innovator in Internet broadcast programming and software, also based in Charlotte, N.C. **Live Internet Radio Theatre: www.actorssceneunseen.com**

Though based upon these two productions, this final edit is not identical to those scripts which provided the “reality test” for *An Uncertain Hour: A Memory Play for Radio*.

The cast:

James K. Flynn plays Primo Levi; **Hugh Loomis** plays fellow survivor Jean; **Michael Grew** is the Boy studying with Dr. Levi, and the voice for the German lullabies; **Tim Gockel** (Richmond) is Italian laborer Lorenzo, **Dael Waxman** (Charlotte) plays the Italian laborer Lorenzo and the German Jewish General Steinlauf; **Ted Delorme** is the German Bureaucrat in Auschwitz, **Brian Daye** plays the Interrogator in Italy and Auschwitz, and **Linda Fisher** plays one woman and every woman, and also provides the voice of the Ladin and Yiddish lullabies.

In Charlotte, no “At Rise” description was given prior to the start of the action; in Richmond, one was given at the beginning of each act. Obviously, this procedure and other such decisions are to be made by the director to suit each broadcast.

Music:

For the Internet radio performances, James Vita used solo bass cello music to introduce scenes, to mark significant transitions and to indicate special emphasis within scenes. Please feel free to contact Mr. Vita for information on sound effects.

AN UNCERTAIN HOUR
A Memory Play for Radio

(For a flexible cast playing multiple roles as suits the production and the director.)

VOICES (in their order of speaking):

ACT ONE [Director introduces Act One with At Rise description]

Interrogator (Camp Guard)

Primo

Woman (Singer)

Jean

Boy

Kapo

Scientist

Lorenzo

Steinlauf

Intermission

ACT TWO [Director introduces Act Two with At Rise description]

Woman (Singer)

Primo

Jean

Technician 1

Technician 2

Bureaucrat

Engineer

Boy

Camp Guard (Interrogator)

APPROXIMATE RUNNING TIME: 90 minutes.

TIME & PLACE: April 1987. Turin, Italy.

SITUATION: Final days of the life of Primo Levi.

SETTING: The study of Primo Levi in his family's top-floor (sixth floor) condominium.

The ACTION moves seamlessly between EVENTS in present time and MEMORIES which flood uncontrollably into Primo's consciousness.

Primo is instructing a neighbor's son in the art of Dante. The Boy in turn is teaching Primo how to operate a MacIntosh computer. Primo's internal dialogue with Jean Amery, a fellow Auschwitz survivor, constantly interrupts.

ACT ONE

(DIRECTOR [optional]: Primo Levi is seated in an old rocking chair. He is cleaning and polishing old shoes. He is listening to music playing on an old Victrola.)

MUSIC: Classical BASS CELLO SOLO.

INTERROGATOR. *Partigiano!*

SOUND: Interrogator SLAPS Primo's face. Sound of CELLO ceases abruptly.

INTERROGATOR. Confess, you are a partisan!

SOUND: Interrogator SLAPS Primo's face.

PRIMO. *Sono Ebreo.* I am an Italian citizen of Jewish blood.

SOUND: Woman SINGS one verse of the Sephardic Jewish lullaby "Durme, Durme" to absent children. The lullaby continues softly in the BACKGROUND then fades out.

SOUND: POLISHING of SHOES.

PRIMO *(cleaning old shoes).*

"O Frati, O Frati...

*Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza."*

SOUND: *FILTER for Jean's voice to indicate memory.*

JEAN. I don't think you properly appreciate the problem. Frankly, I don't think you even want to understand, because to understand you must trespass, push beyond the boundaries, violate the very conditions of your existence

PRIMO. My Brothers, Consider...

JEAN. Consider this: You need to kill someone. It doesn't matter why, whether you want to, or whether you are being forced to do so by circumstances or authorities. Motives and feelings really don't matter.

PRIMO. Consider the seed that gave you life...

JEAN. I'll make a concession—you need to kill someone or else you yourself will be killed, but really this is a mere detail. In fact, I fear it will distract you from the true heart of the matter.

PRIMO. You were not made to live mindless and careless lives.

JEAN. You need to kill someone. This is your task, this is your problem. How are you going to do it?

PRIMO. You were made to know truth and to follow its path.

JEAN. What about using your bare hands. That's a good, honest approach. But, have you ever tried to do that, kill someone with your bare hands? It's very difficult. This method requires a great deal of physical exertion, psychological determination or powerful passion. People do not die easily. You've got to know what you're doing, and even then, it takes effort. If you find this hard to grasp conceptually, try it sometime, then you'll understand my point.

PRIMO. We have already crossed a hundred thousand dangers. With this brief time remaining to us, let us keep awake. Remember who you are. Remember the seed that gave you birth.

SOUND: *A door OPENS and CLOSES.*

PRIMO.

*“O Frati, O Frati...
Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.”*

BOY. The Song of Ulysses: Canto xxvi, verse 118.

PRIMO. *Bravo!* Read the letter to me. I must finish cleaning these shoes.

BOY. Dear Mr. Levi,

SOUND: Woman writing *ALOUD*.

WOMAN. Thank you for your reply to my letter. I never expected you to answer. I thought at best I'd get a form letter from your secretary or something like that, but I should have known better. I've tried to tell the people in my village what I saw but they won't listen to me, so, with your permission, I'm going to tell you. Then maybe someday, someday when people are ready to listen, these stories will be waiting for them.

SOUND: Door *OPENS*.

PRIMO. We're not finished.

BOY. You get too much mail.

PRIMO. That isn't what I meant.

BOY. I know. *(Pause.)* Something else came for you. Something really important.

SOUND: The door *SLAMS shut*.

JEAN. Let us advance our problem to the next level of technique, as our ancestors had to, in the effort to survive, in the effort to gain a toehold for the human species in the competition of life. Let's consider using a weapon. A knife, for example. You'd think a knife would make things easier. But really not much. No, not much easier, because a knife is an

extension of the hand, of our physical self, so it's still within the range of the human, so to speak, still within the range of...decency in some queer way. You still have to get close to your victim. You might smell the garlic on his breath, or the fear oozing out of his pores. This might upset your stomach or disturb the firmness of your resolution. And when you plunge the knife into his gut, blood will surely spurt out, splashing all around, perhaps even staining your favorite shirt. Yes, that's how it is when you have to deal face to face with real living human beings. Things get messy. There's no getting around that.

SOUND: Door OPENS.

BOY. Your new computer. I'll set it up for you.

PRIMO. You haven't finished your lesson.

BOY. You promised.

PRIMO. After we finish our study of Dante's *Inferno*.

BOY. It's too long. You tricked me.

PRIMO. We're very close to the end.

BOY. There are eight more cantos and none of them are short. Poems are supposed to be short. I need to make sure your new computer works.

JEAN. I have taught myself the ancient Japanese art of *Sepuku*. With a few minor adjustments, I can adapt this technical skill I've acquired for killing myself to killing someone other than myself. It is a matter of complete indifference to the technique.

BOY. If Dante's so smart, why does he write in such funny Italian?

PRIMO. I already explained that to you. Dante was one of the first people ever to write in Italian. You could even say he invented our language. So, of course it differs from ours. What's so surprising is how much like ours it is.

JEAN. You don't just take a knife and shove it willy nilly into the belly, whether your own, or a friend's, or a stranger's. It makes no difference. A belly's a belly.

PRIMO. *“Considerate la vostra semenza:*

BOY. My brothers,
Consider the seed that gave you life...

JEAN. First, you must learn to hold the knife tilted down at the proper angle, with the wrist perfectly relaxed, and the elbow slightly bent, like this. Second, you must position yourself in such a way that when you make your thrust deep into the gut you won't throw yourself off balance. Third, you must aim to hit your target in the soft part of the belly under his right rib cage just below the liver. Right here. Obviously, you don't want to hit a rib or have to make a second stab. Fourth and finally, you must thrust deep, without unbalancing your center of gravity, pull up firmly with a quick powerful twisting of the wrist, then shift sharply to your left with the full strength of your arm to cut the vital veins that flow into the liver. Beautiful, isn't it, body, wrist, arm—a true physical poetry. You see, it's the liver that matters. If you don't cut deeply into the liver, there's a good chance the person will survive. But, if you cut sharply into the liver, he'll bleed to death very rapidly, and, all things considered, isn't that the best thing for him as well as for you? Isn't that, all things considered, the humane thing to do?

BOY. You'll be able to write lots more letters with the computer.

PRIMO. I do just fine with my pen. We're old friends.

BOY. Nobody can read your writing.

PRIMO. *“Fatti non foste a viver come bruti...*

BOY. You were not made to live mindless lives...

JEAN. But perhaps you are protesting to yourself that even the knife is too much trouble. You need something easier, much easier, if you have to kill someone. So, you say to yourself, let's try a gun. But, even the gun

is an extension of the human body. No matter how sophisticated the gun might be. It has mass and weight. You have to carry it, you have to aim it. In short, you have to know how to use it and how to take proper care of it. You still need to be at one with it, as they say in Zen philosophy, to make it work well. It's still a tool fitted to the physics of the human body. You feel its recoil when it fires. You smell the powder. You can feel the heat it generates. The sound hurts your ears.

BOY. Why are you always cleaning these old shoes?

PRIMO. *“ma per sequir virtute e canoscenza.”*

BOY. You were made to pursue knowledge and virtue...

JEAN. Now are you beginning to appreciate the problem? If you find it so difficult to kill just one person, how can you get a small number of people to kill a great many people. If our technology is merely an extension of our human physical/sensual being, it will never work. Never. Because even the most dedicated, the most hardworking, the most fanatical killer will get tired. Again, if you don't believe me, try it. Take a pistol, a good, well-made Luger, and shoot a person in the back of the head, just one person every ten seconds for just one hour. Or, take a machine gun, and shoot ten people in the back every ten seconds for one hour. Do you see the problem? Do you feel the problem? It wears you down, no matter how dispassionate you are. It wears down the machines as well. And it's expensive. It's not cost effective: it uses up too much human and material resources. But worst of all, and this is the biggest problem in the whole equation, worst of all, when a person is killing thousands and thousands and thousands of persons...you begin to lose interest.

BOY. If you use the computer you can write your books much faster.

PRIMO. Faster doesn't mean better.

*“Fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.”*

BOY. We already did that line.

PRIMO. Do it again.

BOY. Why?

PRIMO. Because it's important.

“My Brothers...

BOY. “My Brothers, You were not created to live mindless lives but to follow virtue and knowledge.”

He misspelled: “conoscenza”?

PRIMO. So you noticed. That's good. That's very good. He didn't misspell it.

BOY. Yes, he did. It's “c o n” not “c a n.” I asked my teacher in school. (*The boy spells it out.*) “Conoscenza.” Dante's wrong.

JEAN. The boy's right, Primo. Dante is wrong.

PRIMO. No. Dante is not wrong.

SOUND: The CLICKS of the computer keyboard. The Boy is booting up the MacIntosh computer.

PRIMO. Dante wants us to understand that knowledge and conscience are inseparable. He uses this special spelling on purpose to show us the common origin of these words.

BOY. I don't know why you got this fancy MacIntosh if you don't ever want to learn how to use it?

PRIMO. I bought it so you would study Dante with me.

BOY. But I do study Dante. The computer's ready for you to start writing. I forgot something.

SOUND: Door OPENS, Boy exits, the door SLAMS shut.

SOUND: *CLICKS of computer keyboard. MUSIC from BASS CELLO.*

JEAN. Dante is wrong, Primo. For a thousand years, we've been pretending that he is right, but he is wrong.

PRIMO. When every cell of my body, when every quality of my soul longed for death, what made me quote Dante to you? What made you want to listen to me speak his words? Why did you care?

JEAN. In the blood of the young, the sap of life is a torrential urge. I wanted to believe. What were my alternatives: the blood gods of the German folk, the dead god of the Christians, the impotent god of the Jews? A philosophical poet seemed just the thing for an act of faith.

PRIMO. I wanted so much to die, and when I tried to die, his words came gushing out of my mouth. Not words of hatred or despair or self-pity. Not prayers to some unknown savior. I breathed in death and exhaled the words of a poet. My last breath became a new life for me. Dante's words saved me, Jean. And, they saved you.

JEAN: We are dead, Primo. Like these old shoes you keep cleaning. We are dead. The first shoe has already dropped.

SOUND: *Jean DROPS one shoe on the floor.*

JEAN. We are merely waiting. Dante has extended the duration of our dying. He has delayed our hearing the sound of the second shoe.

PRIMO. Jean, you taught me to survive. No, you forced me to survive. You, and Lorenzo, and Steinlauf. For what reason? Out of cruelty? To prolong suffering? Why did you want to live? Why did you want me to want to live?

JEAN. We were murdered the very first moment they negated our humanity.

PRIMO. Your writings, Jean, are the most eloquent, most gentle, most humane testimonies to their utter failure to destroy the human spirit.

JEAN. Poetry is your claw, Primo, as philosophy was mine. You write to defend yourself. That I can understand. What I cannot understand is why you insist on believing that art can change us for the better. Look at the world, Primo. In the camp, you were a man without illusions. No ideology could seduce you. Neither the Marxists, nor the religious Jews, nor the Catholics. You refused to cloud your mind with theoretical excuses for the plain truth of the evil we inflict upon each other.

PRIMO. Jean, there are some things in life which are entirely of our own will and creation, but there are other things which are given to us. This has been given to me. I have tried to die. I have tried *not* to remember. But I cannot escape myself.

JEAN. Silence is the only honest response left to us. If Dante were alive today, he would not write a word. There is no vision of humanity that can redeem us from ourselves.

PRIMO. Every Wednesday I go to an elementary school to talk about writing. When I am with these young students, with these children, I can see in their eyes the thirst for knowledge, I can feel in their hearts the passion for truth, I can taste the joy of communication in their efforts to write. When I am with these children, Jean, I am like them. I remember...I remember the six-year-old boy who made a rocket ship with his first chemistry set. I remember the boy that pricked his finger so he could see his own blood, full of life, under the microscope. I remember the human being, Primo Levi, the person that wanted to discover and name every unknown star in the heavens. When I am with these children, Jean, I understand. I understand that I cannot remain silent. I must tell the stories of the people who have been entrusted to me.

SOUND: Distinct CLICKS of keyboard as Primo types the name "Jean."

PRIMO (*spells out the name as he types*). "J-E-A-N."

SOUND: Keyboard CLICKS. Primo typing the story of Jean on the computer. The volume of the CLICKS diminishes as the story progresses.

PRIMO (*typing*). Jean was fourteen when they put him in the camp. He spoke German and French which was useful, and had a good ear for picking up other languages as well, which was also useful. But Jean knew that it was even more useful not to let anyone know this. Jean was small and slight and intelligent, in short, destined for the ovens, but one of the Kapos took a liking to Jean. He could see that Jean was—exceptional. Jean knew how to “organize” things, that’s a camp expression. It means knowing how to get whatever you need or whatever your Kapo wants. It means knowing how to survive.

JEAN. I served my Kapo well. I satisfied his needs, whatever they might be—he liked his Pikolos to be young. He was a good man really, of the German criminal class who thought us all hopelessly stupid in the art of staying alive. To his credit, I must tell you he only hit us or hurt us when it was necessary to save our lives. Only once did he beat a man to death, but that too was because the man broke a rule in front of an S.S. commandant and it was either his life or the man’s life. I was Jewish, but that was of no importance to me, and I don’t even know if they knew that. They just picked me up on the streets one day and shipped me off, naming me a hooligan. My Kapo got me the green star of a German criminal to wear, to give me status. My job was an easy one, by comparison to the others. The only thing you had to worry about was pleasing your Kapo. If you pleased him, you lived. If not, you died. I had to make sure the barracks were kept clean, and that all the labor gangs attached to the barracks properly performed their tasks. I ladled out the soup twice a day, saving all the cabbage and other few vegetables at the bottom for the Kapo, myself, and for those I liked. I got to keep all the soup that was left over, which was whatever amount I wanted to have left over since I filled the tins. This was how I survived, trading soup for whatever I or my Kapo or my friends needed. There were many Italians in my barracks, and many became my friends, but one was extraordinary. He never asked anything of me, but for some reason, he was desperate to recite to me the works of Dante. He didn’t know why and I didn’t know why, but he recited Dante to me until I learned almost the entire *Inferno* by heart. You can imagine how bizarre my Italian is: it’s Dante-esque.

CAMP GUARD. *Selekeja!* [*Polish term meaning: selection*]