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BACK STORY

Based on characters created
by
JOAN ACKERMANN

A dramatic anthology by
Joan Ackermann, Courtney Baron, Neena Beber,
Constance Congdon, Jon Klein, Shirley Lauro,
Craig Lucas, Eduardo Machado, Donald Margulies,
Jane Martin, Susan Miller, John Olive, Tanya Palmer,
David Rambo, Edwin Sánchez, Adele Edling Shank,
Mayo Simon and Val Smith

* * * *

This play was commissioned by
Actors Theatre of Louisville

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*** NOTICE ***

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BACK STORY
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Mayo Simon and Val Smith.

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Actors Theatre of Louisville."

BACK STORY

A two-character play in 19 scenes and monologues.
Can be played with any combination of male and female actors, from 1m and 1w to 11m and 11w.

Contents

Humana Festival Production

Back Story was commissioned by Actors Theatre of Louisville and premiered at the Humana Festival of New American Plays in March 2000. It was directed by Pascaline Bellegarde, Aimée Hayes, Dano Madden, Meredith McDonough and Sullivan Canaday White with the following cast:

ETHAN.... Phil Bolin, Cary Calebs, Patrick Dall'Occhio, Jeff Jenkins, Tom Johnson, Cabe McCarty, Tom Moglia, Stephen Sislen, Mark Watson, Zach Welsheimer, Travis York

AINSLEY ..... Shawna Joy Anderson, Molly M. Binder, Rachel Burttram, Christy Collier, Samantha Desz, Melody G. Fenster, Aimée Kleisner, Kimberly Megna, Holly W. Sims, Heather Springsteen, Jessica Wortham

and the following production staff:

Scenic Designer ..... Paul Owen
Costume Designer..... Kevin McLeod
Lighting Designer..... Greg Sullivan
Sound Designers.. Darron L. West and Martin R. Desjardins
Properties Designer..... Mark Walston
Stage Manager ..... Amber D. Martin
Dramaturgs ... Michael Bigelow Dixon and Amy Wegener
Assistant Dramaturg ..... Kerry Mulvaney

The Making of *Back Story*

by Amy Wegener and Michael Bigelow Dixon,
Dramaturgs, Actors Theatre of Louisville

"What's the character's back story?" This question is a familiar one for actors working to build a psychologically complex role out of the clues provided in a dramatic text. By imagining the character's past, or what has happened outside of the immediate action represented in the play, the actor strives to find ways of informing, deepening, and rendering immediate the moments revealed onstage.

But consider what could happen to the way we think about creating characters if this process were reversed: what if a richly detailed character history—or the intertwined histories of two characters, say a brother and sister in their early twenties—became the imaginative impetus for not just one, but a multitude of playwrights and their texts? And what if these varied perspectives could come together to make one theatrical event?

These questions are at the heart of the challenge embraced by *Back Story*, an experiment based on a tale penned by Joan Ackermann. Ackermann's wonderfully textured and suggestive story details the adventures and misadventures of Ainsley and Ethan Belcher of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, siblings whose close relationship evolves throughout their lifetimes and reaches a pivotal moment in the year 2000. Using this narrative as a springboard, Ackermann and seventeen other talented dramatists wrote three scenes and sixteen monologues for Ainsley and Ethan. For the Humana Festival premiere of *Back Story*, the siblings were portrayed by eleven men and eleven women in Actors Theatre's 1999-2000 Apprentice Acting Company (though they could be played by as few as two actors). The spirit of collaboration inherent in the project extended to the direction of the festival production as well: *Back Story* was staged by five directors, work-

ing together to discover the larger portrait created by so many authorial (and actors') voices and styles.

This collaborative process began with the creation of the text, which required some logistical planning in order to build upon the rich foundation provided by Joan Ackermann's story. In addition to this narrative, Ackermann had been commissioned to write the first monologue and last scene of the play, which provided "bookends" for the other pieces. The rest of the playwrights, who had agreed to write either a two-minute monologue or a six-minute scene, received copies of the story, and were invited to contact us with several "moments" in the narrative that they would be interested in exploring. Over the course of several weeks, we spoke with each writer about these choices and their ideas, and coordinated their selections so that we could "cover" as much of the back story as possible, encouraging variety while also ensuring some sense of progression through time and events for both Ethan and Ainsley.

In general, we hypothesized that successful pieces would expand upon a "moment" in the story in some depth, rather than simply relating information from the story. There were a few basic guidelines as well: 1) The details of a piece could not contradict details in the story, 2) Moments from the past had to be explored actively in the present, since actors in their twenties could not plausibly play children or young teenagers, and 3) There could not be too many pieces using the same modes of address (writing a letter, for example). The playwrights generously shared their own questions and ideas about the process with us, which helped us to address many complications early on. Once everyone had "dibs" on a chunk of the story, they set out to compose their pieces.

When the first drafts began to pour into the literary office, we were delighted to discover that there was great variety in the work—the pieces ranged from outrageously funny to lyrical to philosophical in tone, and were as different as the actors who would eventually perform them. But already, a thematic coherence began to emerge. Certain images or ideas became motifs in

several pieces, and the authors had developed some of the major currents in Ethan and Ainsley's relationship: the loss of a father who goes on a fishing trip to Alaska and never returns, Ainsley's self-sacrifice in her devotion to Ethan and her relationship with music, Ethan's entrepreneurial spirit and "uncontrolled velocity." Of course, there were some rewrites and cuts to coordinate and small contradictions to iron out, and many of the pieces continued to be refined throughout the rehearsal process. But somehow, in pursuing their own passions in depth, the playwrights had been able to hop onto the same wavelength while remaining wildly diverse.

The next step was to ponder how we could thread together these individual parts to shape the whole event. So we began an ongoing discussion about the order of the scenes and monologues: What kind of trajectory were the characters following together? What were Ethan's and Ainsley's individual "arcs" through the event? In what ways would chronology be important? How would some pieces set up information that would inform others? How could we vary the energy and tone of the work while building a set of impressions that would create a story?

Rehearsals began at odd hours and in odd corners of the building, with a weekly read-through (and later, run-throughs) so that everyone could chart *Back Story*'s progress. We heard several running orders for the pieces, settling on the performance order you see in this volume after much discussion and debate. The directors worked on transitions in order to make the show as seamless as possible, and fruitful questions continued to sharpen our collective sense of the characters, both as individual constructs and in relationship with each other. Many minds continued to strive to create a unified experience.

When audiences came to see the five performances scheduled during the Humana Festival, they were faced with a choice which would impact their experience: to read Ackermann's story beforehand, or to see the play without the benefit of having already digested the narrative upon which its many parts are

based. We don't know which is the preferable choice, but we think that they deliver different kinds of pleasures. On the one hand, reading the story allows one to see how it has been adapted and to appreciate the authors' varying approaches; on the other, seeing the performance without this preparation allows an encounter with the characters which (we think) holds together on its own terms. In other words, if the back story is a colorful, high-resolution map of these characters' lives, then the play *Back Story* travels through an exploration of "stops," impressions, and turning points in their journey.

* * * *

BACK STORY
the story by Joan Ackermann

Part I

When Ethan Belcher was nearly born during a blizzard at three in the morning in the back of his father's van en route to Hillcrest Hospital in Pittsfield, Mass., his sister Ainsley chopped her toe off with a snow shovel on their front porch. She was two and a half years old, barefoot in six inches of soft snow, clad only in a motley-colored, hand-crocheted jersey with an unfinished right arm. Left in the care of her great-aunt Lou, who collapsed to sleep on the broken recliner after all the drama with the jumper cables and the van had fishtailed out the driveway, Ainsley had bolted out the front door.

She could hear Lou's fitful snoring as she stood perched on the top of eight steps. The strangled sounds of tortured breathing almost supported her tiny frame as she swayed in the cold night air, blinking at updrafts of snow in the lights from the street lamps, the tears on her face slowly freezing over. Ainsley had screamed, howled with wild blue-faced uncharacteristic force to be taken to the hospital with her parents. "It's the baby," Lou had cooed, following the toddler around, attempting to calm her hysteria as Gloria and Jim hunted desperately for a flashlight. "It's all right, sweetie. The baby is coming." But Lou was only throwing fuel on the flames. Ainsley's awareness that the baby was coming was keener than anyone's in the family, including her mother Gloria, who was now cursing her husband as he ruefully tried to dig the van out of a snowdrift.

If Ainsley had been aware that the brown van which bore the chipped letters "Belcher Electric" had skidded off the road at the bottom of the hill, she might have jumped from the lip of the porch down into the night to rescue her baby brother. As it was, Reuben, their sixty-year-old tenant, discovered Ainsley crouched

on the porch with the five-foot shovel, when he staggered home from a late night of drinking. He had the presence of mind to find her toe, frozen and preserved in the snow. Reuben was the only one in that household to realize that Ainsley's accident with the snow shovel was a mission derailed. He alone saw her intention had been to clear the way for the baby's arrival.

And so it was that Ainsley Belcher arrived at the hospital after all, in time to be there for her younger brother. As the last stitch was sewn into place on her tiny foot, a barely coherent Reuben holding her hand, she heard Ethan's first cries from down the hall. It was not the last time she would sacrifice some part of her self in his behalf. Nor was it the last time that he would arrive late, that his movement would unleash havoc and drama, and that he would be unaware of his sister's efforts.

They all stayed in the hospital that night, the bad weather preventing travel. Long after Gloria, Jim and Reuben had escaped their disjointed lives in deep slumber, Ainsley remained awake on a cot in the hall, listening for every sound from the baby. As Ethan blindly waved tiny punches in the air, his body involuntarily twitched in her direction, turned by the sound of her small voice, singing to him.

Part II

In the summer of '81, Jim Belcher took off for a two-week fishing trip in Alaska. Ainsley was seven and Ethan was five. Gloria had just been promoted to dining room manager at Captain Toss's seafood restaurant and was in unusually good spirits, frosting her hair and buying short suits at Filene's Basement at the Holyoke Mall. Even at home her gait had a gyrating spring to it, as if her backside were still the viewing target of a counter full of lunching tradesmen. She cheerfully helped Jim pack for his lifelong dream trip. Bought him a quilted reversible jacket. Hand warmers. When the family loaded him and his poles onto

the Bonanza bus for New York City, not even Jim, embarrassed by unexpected tears, had an inkling he wasn't coming back.

Reuben, the Belchers' tenant, introduced Ainsley to the clarinet that summer. For thirty years he had played with the Boston Symphony Orchestra before a complete physical and mental breakdown had broken him permanently. She would lay the instrument flat on his bed with the mouthpiece hanging over the edge and toot into it, standing, playing an open G while he sat in an unraveling rattan chair and mumbled encouragement. Outside, Ethan would throw up gravel. Every now and then a small white piece would sail through the open window and Ainsley would go down to keep him company.

Like a goat, Ethan had eradicated any sign of greenery in the fenced-in yard. Possessed of a mind that was a train yard of derailing and colliding engines, his body had its own uncontrolled velocity. His ability to effect total change on his surroundings in seconds was noteworthy for one so small. At five, he was forbidden from the local supermarket. An electrician's son, he aimed for current, plugging in and turning on anything that bore a cord. The Doberman next door lost all control of its bladder when in view of the towheaded boy. Only Ainsley could contain and calm her brother. Her love for him was predicated on a need so great, she was not to be budged from it. She forgave him for putting her hamster in the freezer. (He said he thought it would hibernate.) For washing all her stickers in the bathtub.

By the fall of '81, Gloria's bright spirits had dimmed, her backside uncoiled. She was working twelve-hour days and had exchanged her high heels for sneakers. Jim's last card, a picture of disoriented caribou grouped by the pipeline, offered one sentence expressing a need for time to think. She was rarely home and when she was, she slept. The household subsisted on a steady seafood diet from the restaurant—coquilles St. Jacques for breakfast, clam chowder for snack. great-aunt Lou did the housekeeping, moving with the Hoover slowly, steadily, from

room to room and floor to floor like a sea snail in an aquarium, sucking up debris.

The day before he was to enter kindergarten, Ethan disappeared. Ainsley found him after midnight buried in the back of the cake room. A professional cake decorator, great-aunt Lou had saved every cake that hadn't sold or been picked up. The sewing room on the third floor had become storage for hundreds of cakes in white boxes, some as old as thirty years, sculptures of hardened wedding cakes, Fourth of July cakes, ornate icing designs now rigid as set plaster. After Ainsley had helped Ethan crawl out, she tucked him into bed with the three clam shells he had guarded from dinner the day before.

It was chilly that night. A frost was predicted. She closed the window down hard on the rake rigged out the window with a twenty-foot piece of string tied at the tip. "I'm fishing for daddy!!" Ethan would wail at Gloria every time she tried to take it down. Cold wind ripped through the room in the crack past the rake handle, as Ainsley burrowed deep in her bed. She pictured her father on an ice floe, with a polar bear, surrounded by time to think. Ethan's eyes were closed and twitching. His fearful dread of his imminent academic career was in fact wholly justified, in actuality not an unadmirable indication of self-knowledge and awareness of his own limitations.

Part III

By the time Ethan dropped out of high school the day he turned sixteen, he had four business cards—one for a lawn mowing business, a bicycle messenger service, a VCR and television repair service, and a "Pittsfield, the Heart of the Berkshires" information hot line. Pittsfield was more the liver of the Berkshires with the General Electric plant pumping the bile, and Ethan rarely received calls on his hot line, but his other endeavors turned over handy profits. His sixteenth year he made more money than his mother who now worked the night shift at

Dunkin Donuts. The used scuba diving gear he'd invested in to retrieve golf balls from a pond across from the golf course had been paid off twice over just from the sale of the balls. (Though he'd nearly drowned on a moonless night when his tank was empty and he was full of beer, unable to tell which way was up. His friend Willis hauled him out.)

He went through a tour-guiding period, bicycling fifteen miles down to Stockbridge to give tours at the Norman Rockwell Museum (Gloria used to take her children there after Jim left, feeling both comforted and shattered by the heartwarming scenes of domestic normalcy); to Glendale, to guide visitors at Chesterwood, home of sculptor Daniel French (he was seduced by a trustee in French's studio who later accused him of chipping the plaster model of the Lincoln Memorial when in fact she had flailed it over); and to Pittsfield's own Arrowhead, home of Herman Melville. Ethan had a gift for memorizing large chunks of text which proved useful because he was never able to learn to read well. Ainsley, who had read him thousands of pages since childhood, read him all the literature of these establishments, and he repeated it verbatim with a great charm and grin that endeared him to vacationing New Yorkers. He enhanced his tours with wildly creative and interesting lies.

When he was fired from Arrowhead for adamantly arguing against the in-house speculation that it was the distant rounded form of Mt. Greylock, seen from the second-story window, that had inspired Melville to write a book about a whale there ("Oh, and the fact that he had been on several whaling expeditions had *nothing* to do with his choice of subject?"), he gave up tour-guiding. The money wasn't that great, and Willis had stopped trying to commit suicide and was now fooling around with computers. They joined forces.

Whereas Ethan's energies were manic and outwardly directed, Ainsley's were ingrown and unprofitable. As an adolescent, she drifted in a perpetual haze of longing, finding some release in her journal, the occasional poem. She was an unremarkable student, slipping by her teachers unnoticed, aiming pri-

marily for invisibility. Only when defending her brother did her will surge to the forefront. At fourteen, she railed at the teacher who had scrawled the word "moron" on one of his rare attempts at writing. In a jailhouse in Danville, New Hampshire, she gave the cop such a headache he let Ethan out of his cell. (He'd been arrested for hitchhiking and drinking under age. She'd borrowed Reuben's car to drive up and retrieve him.) She went to the house of the thirteen-year-old kid who was supplying Ethan with pot and acid, and smacked him out of that inclination. Only once did she have a major run-in with her mother, over something inconsequential. It was a token gesture of rage; for the most part, her mother was too deflated to engage in battle. Her sad face already declared, "I have lost."

Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Reuben occasionally took Ainsley to Saturday morning rehearsals at Tanglewood, summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Several of the musicians remembered Reuben, he'd been first clarinetist, including visiting conductor Leonard Bernstein who kissed the back of Ainsley's hand. Bernstein was her first love; tanned, aged, Byronic. She sat, eleven years old, transfixed—pigeons cooing above in the open-aired shed—and stared at his impassioned conducting, his expressive hands, his long white hair. At home, she practiced the clarinet, shut up in the cake room, imagining him conducting her in Beethoven's "Ode to Joy."

In high school, Ainsley joined the track team and was startled to break a short distance record in her first meet. But she preferred long distance, running the old logging roads up October Mountain, the smell of wet, decaying leaves underfoot, the descent in the dark as the days grew shorter. She eventually quit the team because everyone pressed her to compete and she really didn't want to. Her best friend Helena (whose parents owned Sophia's, a Greek restaurant where Ainsley bussed tables) talked her into joining the school band. Ainsley's bruising crush on the unattainable Mr. Harnette, the music teacher whose witty sarcasm took her breath away, caused far more pain than pleasure. Her junior year, after Helena had graduated and gone off to

Smith College, he encouraged Ainsley to take up the oboe. It was a life-changing event. The instrument—which Mr. Harnette rented for her with his own money (the band lacked an oboist and funds)—answered her soul's cry for reciprocity. She gave it her breath and it responded; spoke back to her in plaintive harrowing notes. Mossy night sounds from deep moonlit forests. It was harder to play than the clarinet, the reed more complex and strange. She'd stare at it by candlelight as it soaked upside down in a glass of water.

She practiced night and day, playing woodwind duets with Reuben, who was gaining weight from all the boxes of Dunkin Donuts. The old Doberman next door (who had survived being run over by Ethan's Suburban; he'd apologized to the Grundys), hid in the basement from the unbearable strains. Ainsley composed her own music, traveled boldly and instinctively into uncharted territory. Her new-found voice brought her ashore. By the time she was nineteen, her haze had lifted. Her force field repolarized, she became visible, attractive; acquired sardonic wit. She was accepted at the Boston Conservatory of Music (Mr. Harnette, who, unbeknownst to Ainsley, was deeply in love with her, arranged the audition), but she declined their offer of admission.

In the spring of her senior year, she lost her virginity to an Appalachian Trail thru-hiker who lost his heart to her and wanted to quit the trail, but she levelheadedly convinced him to continue. She'd picked him up hitchhiking into town to buy groceries and he'd hung around for a month. After he left, every few weeks she'd send a package of chocolate and Little Debbies to the next P.O. on the list he'd given her of post offices that dotted his route down to Springer Mountain. She addressed the packages to his trail name, Mango Madness.

After high school, she worked first at General Electric, then at Grossman's Lumber, then at Canyon Ranch, a forty-million-dollar health spa where, as a program coordinator, she set up individual programs for guests (including Barbra Streisand who changed her massage appointment every ten seconds), and then

back at Grossman's Lumber where she dated the yard foreman. At home, great-aunt Lou was bedridden, but Reuben, now eighty-three and recharged by playing duets with Ainsley, joined the community orchestra and was making an effort to comb his hair and to remember to wear his dentures. Gloria was running her own video store, set up in business by Ethan, who was making excellent money installing and servicing computers with Willis.

On Thanksgiving morning in the year 2000, Ethan told Ainsley that his eighteen-year-old girlfriend Kimmy was pregnant and asked her what they should do. Ainsley said that Kimmy should move in with them and have the baby there. Gloria, after her initial shock, grimaced but then warmed to the idea. That evening, with great-aunt Lou halfheartedly protesting from the second floor, the three of them cleared out the cake room to be the baby's room. They pitched the white boxes out the window and swept the oak floor, exposed for the first time in nearly fifty years. Later, after everyone had gone to bed—Reuben, with bad indigestion from the creamed onions—Ainsley and Ethan sat down at the kitchen table and wrote their father Jim a letter, advising him he was going to be a grandfather and sending congratulations.

* * * *

BACK STORY

Time to Think

Joan Ackermann

(AINSLEY, age eighteen, enters, wearing an unbuttoned winter coat, sorrel snow boots, a scarf around her neck.)

AINSLEY. August twentieth, the summer I was seven, my dad was supposed to come home from a fishing trip in Alaska. He didn't. Some time around the middle of September we got a postcard from him saying he needed time to think. That was all he wrote. "I need time to think."

(Yelling upstairs.) Ethan! We're leaving in two minutes!

My mother was in no mood to explain what his message meant, and I couldn't figure it out. "Time to think." When I was seven, all I *had* was time. If only I could have given some to my dad. The fact that he never came home created a whole lot of more time. Time to miss him. Time to try to figure out why he couldn't just come back and think in Pittsfield, Mass.

(Yelling up.) I'm not kidding! Ethan!

(She does the buttons up on her coat and whips her scarf around.)

I wondered, was there a particular quality to time in Alaska that made him need to do his thinking there? I knew he was in a *different* time. My mother said we couldn't call him first thing in the morning because he'd still be asleep. That in itself was weird. Being an electrician, he was always up hours before the rest of us, at the crack of dawn, fooling with his tools in the back of his van. Belcher Electric. It was disconcerting, actually, to wake up and know he was still asleep. The problem was we were always ahead of him, at any point in the day. In some ways that made us older than him. Less protected.

(She takes a wool hat out of a pocket. Pulls it on. Takes out mittens and puts them on. Glances upstairs.)

The postcard was a picture of a bunch of depressed caribou hanging out by the pipeline in winter. My little brother thought they were Santa's reindeer. I knew they were not. Santa's reindeer were happier. Santa's reindeer were going places. These caribou weren't going anywhere. I taped them up over my bed. I wondered why he'd picked this particular picture for his message. Was he there, with those caribou? Was he planning to stay with them, and think? The key question was, was he thinking about us? Was he thinking about me? *(Pause.)* If he'd chosen a different card it would have been better. And maybe he was wildly happy.

(Yelling up.) Okay I'm leaving! Bye! *(Pause.)* You're walking! Enjoy the freezing rain! *(Pause.)*

People always say, oh how sad, you grew up without a father, your dad left you. It's really not so bad. I don't hold it against him, I really don't. He did what he had to do. And I admire him for that. Probably, at first, he did need time to think. Time to figure out he didn't want to come back. *(Pause.)* Honestly...? I don't think about him anymore. I don't have the time. *(Pause.)*

(She doesn't move. Waits for him, all bundled up, still thinking...)