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# **Death Valley: A Love Story**

By

SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER

Inspired by the journals, collages and photographs of  
Carol Emerson, LCSW, and Dr. David Nutter

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*Death Valley: A Love Story* premiered at Springfield Contemporary Theatre in Springfield, Mo., on Oct. 25, 2019.

CAST:

Andie Bottrell

Rachel Jamieson

Sarah J. Wiggin

PRODUCTION:

Founder/Executive Producer..... Louis H. Schaeffer

Managing Artistic Director .....Richard P. Dines

Director ..... Alan Souza

Set Design .....Amy Holland

Costume Design .....Samantha Morrow

Lighting Design ..... Louis Schaeffer

Sound and Media Design.....Rick Dines

Stage Manager .....Jake Vollmar

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Death Valley: A Love Story* has been a labor of love nurtured by many caring and talented people.

First and foremost, of course, are Carol Emerson and A.J. Nutter, who trusted me with the journals, patiently supported each of the revisions and so generously provided photographs, artwork and countless insights to augment various readings and performances.

My deep gratitude, also, goes to our beloved donor, who never lost faith in the healing potential of this story and made the film version and premier production possible.

Huge credit and kudos to the many casts who helped develop the script through rehearsed readings and workshops led by directors Laura Korach Howell at Mulberry Art Studios, Tellus360 and Natural Light Films (with Andrea Campbell, producer and director) in Lancaster, Pa.; Alan Souza with Fractal Productions in New York City and Springfield Contemporary Theatre in Springfield, Mo.; Amie Brockway Henson at The Open Eye Theater in Margaretville, N.Y.; Brandon Scott Boyd at Maryland Ensemble Theatre in Frederick, Md.; and Polly Edelstein at Philadelphia Women's Theatre Festival in Philadelphia.

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Heartfelt gratitude to all!

To all who love,  
and to all who grieve.

“Something good needs to come out of this battle.”  
—Dr. David Nutter

# Death Valley: A Love Story

## CHARACTERS

**CAROL:** An artist, therapist and journal-keeper in her late 40s to early 50s, stylish, sensitive, emotional, playful, energetic and loving. She is portrayed by three actors who also play the other characters indicated below as she remembers them. There is no need for the actors to look alike, but they might be costumed in a way that unifies them, perhaps with a suggestion of Southwestern color and flair.

### CAROL ONE

Also plays DAVID, RECEPTIONIST, FIRST TECHNICIAN, PREREGISTRATION CLERK, ADMISSIONS CLERK, SECOND TECHNICIAN and SECOND NURSE.

### CAROL TWO

Also plays DAVID, FIRST NURSE, ONCOLOGIST and U of PA DOCTOR.

### CAROL THREE

Also plays DAVID, FIRST DOCTOR, PARTNER, FUNERAL DIRECTOR and EXECUTOR OF WILL.

**TIME:** Winter of 2003 through early spring of 2005.

**SETTING:** Area staging on various levels, if possible. The action moves through many settings: house, cars, airport, doctors' offices, hospitals, areas of Death Valley, etc. Transitions should be fluid and achieved through lighting, music and easily repositioned set pieces.



## PRODUCTION NOTES

Humans are “torn up” by grief, and the grieving process is often one of reintegrating personality until we “feel whole” again. Throughout the play, look for places where the three aspects of Carol break apart and come together or almost come together. Show that in physical movement and gesture. Unification remains fragile until the final moments. Also look for playfulness, excitement, joy and humor—a needed release for the audience—but also significant components of Carol’s personality and of her relationship with David.

Do not neglect opportunities for raw anger in the grieving process. Fury—not sniveling.

Touch is important to Carol and David. The Springfield Contemporary Theatre director and cast discovered many moments when the actors could touch one another in ways that were affectionate, comfortable and comforting, but not overtly sexual, as that would blur the characters’ heterosexuality.

It’s imperative that David not be played by a male actor. He is gone. He and all the other characters appear only as filtered through Carol’s memory. Each of the actors may don different hats or caps when she “channels” the different iterations of David.

Actors speak directly to the audience except where dialogue is italicized, in which case they speak to one another within a scene. When playing characters other than Carol, they indicate the difference with minimal changes. Articles of clothing, props, stance, gesture and tone of voice are often enough.

Words are important to Carol. At every moment until the shift after David’s death, we are hearing and seeing what’s been recorded in her journal. As each actor takes on the role

of journal-keeper, she refers often to the journal, sometimes actually writing in it or reading from it, except when participating in a scene. At times, simply holding a pen can indicate journaling.

Images of David's photography are projected on a screen before the show, and Carol's collages are similarly projected at the end of the play. Both sets of images end with David's photograph of a raven—a symbol of death, but also of creative change. Filmed images of David's photos and Carol's collages set to piano selections from Chopin are available on request. Other music indicated in the script may be drawn from the artists mentioned in the dialogue. Because David played the piano, piano solos are especially appropriate.

A list of the Springfield Contemporary Theatre sound and musical cues is located in the back of the book. SCT also used an edited, shorter version of the opening and closing montages and still photos projected on TV screens onstage throughout the play. These cues are noted at the end of the script.



Carol and David in Death Valley, 2003

## Death Valley: A Love Story

BEFORE RISE: *Music. Projections of David's photographs of Death Valley, ending with an image of a raven that fades out as lights come up.*

AT RISE: *Lights up. Music fades. CAROL ONE is seated C, writing in a journal. CAROL TWO sits or kneels on the floor directly in front of CAROL ONE. CAROL THREE stands directly behind the chair. All face the audience. They do not touch or relate to one another, but they are the same person. Throughout the following, they are truly afraid and also surprised and confused by their unexpected, overwhelming and unmanageable terror.*

ONE. I am afraid.

TWO. I am afraid this pounding, heavy heart will never go away.

THREE. I am afraid it will go away.

TWO. I am afraid the day will be too long.

ONE. I am afraid it won't be long enough.

TWO. I am afraid of the future moments ...

THREE. And hours ...

ONE. And days.

TWO. I am afraid of the present second.

ONE. I am afraid I'll never feel wrapped in friendship and love as before.

TWO. I am afraid of the emptiness.

ONE. I am afraid I'll lose others.

THREE. I am afraid more things will change.

TWO. I am afraid I'll inhale ...

ONE. And hold my breath ...

THREE. And forget to exhale.

TWO. I am afraid I will never stop crying.

THREE. I am afraid I won't cry enough.

ONE. I am afraid I'll forget how to laugh from my belly.

THREE. I am afraid I won't believe in good things lasting.

TWO. I am afraid I'll be swept away by this pain.

THREE. That the love I knew was a dream.

*(A beat. TWO and THREE break away, moving into separate areas of the stage as if forcefully jerked apart from ONE. All speak individually at first and then overlap as the phrases repeat.)*

ONE. David ...

TWO. David is ...

THREE. Dead!

TWO. David ...

ONE. David is dead.

THREE. I will never ...

ONE. Never ...

TWO. I will never be the same.

THREE. David!

ONE. I will never ...

TWO. David is ...

ONE. Never ...

THREE. David is dead ...

ONE. I will never be the same.

*(A pause. TWO and THREE take up positions at a distance from ONE and from each another.)*

ONE *(cont'd, indicating a journal)*. So much needs to be captured here to voice all that occurred between us ...

ALL *(announcing with a sense of purpose, as ONE writes)*. Carol and David.

*(Beat. ONE continues writing. She speaks in the past tense, smiling at the memory. TWO and THREE speak in the present tense, in the moment being remembered, playful, upbeat, flirtatious.)*

TWO. I've been attracted to him since the first time we met.

ONE. When we worked at the hospital, we often talked over coffee.

THREE. We take turns praising and lamenting our daughters—mine, a teenager; his, still a child.

ONE. He was having difficulty in his marriage; I was divorced.

TWO. He interests me in a way I've never experienced before.

THREE. He's quirky, with a wonderful sense of humor.

TWO. Our friendship makes me feel hopeful that I will love someone again.

*(Beat.)*

ONE. I didn't realize it was going to be him.

TWO. He has his eye on me, too.

ONE. When he finally asked me out—after his divorce—I paused before answering. He noticed.

*(THREE puts on a hat and turns toward the audience, becoming DAVID. He may look sexy and confident, but he's feeling shy and awkward.)*

THREE (*as DAVID, to TWO*). *I thought you were going to say no.*

TWO (*laughing*). *Did you really?*

ONE. He stood in the doorway of my office, leaning against the frame. I caught my breath.

THREE (*as DAVID*). *You're the first woman I've ever asked out.*

TWO. *You have got to be kidding!*

THREE (*as DAVID*). *No. All the women in my life have asked me out.*

TWO. *You're very spoiled! But I'm glad I'm the first for something.*

*(TWO and THREE smile and separate as ONE speaks to the audience.)*

ONE (*smiling*). When you're forty-nine and dating a fifty-six-year-old man, most firsts have been taken.

TWO. Our first date.

THREE. The Fulton Bar, Sunday afternoon. Snow falling forever.

TWO. We nestle into a corner nook. We are so new.

ONE (*grappling with the fear that has broken through*). I am afraid.

I am afraid this pounding, heavy heart will never go away.

*(Beat.)*

ONE (*cont'd*). I am afraid it will go away.

*(ONE continues writing.)*

TWO. He loves my playfulness, a direct result of my tomboy childhood. I was always running, bruises up and down my legs.

THREE. We both climbed trees as children, each of us going to the top and sitting there in wonder.

ONE. I am afraid the day will be too long.

I am afraid it won't be long enough.

TWO (*as if to DAVID*). You capture the story within the picture ... like my walking down the beach and looking out at the ocean ... and there you are looking at my back through the camera lens. It's as though you capture the world as I see it, freezing a moment ... and yet there's nothing frozen about the picture.

THREE. While I walk, I get drawn into the sand, the waves, the space and distance. All of a sudden, I turn around ... because you are back there.

ONE. I am afraid of the future moments and hours and days.

TWO. My journeying down beaches has always been a search, a longing for someone I would be drawn to.

ONE. I am afraid of the present second.

THREE. How much work went into past relationships that left me exhausted or sad or even more lonely than alone! Life is meant to be lived, not suffered. So I chose to be happy on my own.

TWO. Then you arrived—this dream I've had all my life.

THREE. Finally, I have my partner.

TWO. Finally, I have my friend and lover.

THREE. I think you've been heading toward me all your life as well.

ONE. I am afraid I'll never again feel wrapped in friendship and love.

I am afraid of emptiness.

I am afraid I'll lose others.

I am afraid more things will change.

THREE. He needs to clean up certain messes, just as I did. I must try to understand.



TWO. But when we're together, we're relaxed ... natural ... kind ... loving ... playful ... creative.

THREE. He indulges me in music: Chopin, Mahler, Ives.

TWO. When we spend the night together, I write poems in the waistbands and pocket linings of his pants. I figure he'll either love it or think I don't have enough to do.

THREE. He loves it.

*(Beat.)*

ONE. One year later ... we were together ... in Death Valley.

*(Music. ONE puts down the journal and pen, picks up a carry-on bag and moves C. TWO arranges two chairs to indicate the airport. THREE picks up the journal and pen, becoming the journal-keeper. Music fades.)*

THREE. We arrived at the airport in Baltimore on Thursday morning, January 22.

ONE. We've been so looking forward to getting away. He wants a few days of photography in a place he's grown to love. His family first visited when David was ten. He's been back since, but this time we're going together. First, he'll attend a psychopharmacology conference in Las Vegas. Then we'll rent a Jeep and drive on.

*(TWO [as DAVID] picks up a carry-on bag and enters the scene.)*

TWO *(as DAVID)*. Strange, I'm getting short of breath. This suitcase feels as if it weighs a hundred pounds.

ONE *(indicating the chairs at C)*. Here's our gate. Sit down.

TWO *(as DAVID, sitting)*. OK ... yeah ... this feels better. *(Laughs.)* I must really be out of shape.

ONE. *We'll eat dinner at the hotel and make it an early night.*

TWO (as DAVID). *Fine. It's probably a bug. I'll feel better in the morning.*

THREE. *By the time we arrived in Las Vegas, he couldn't walk at all without feeling out of breath.*

*(TWO leaves the scene.)*

ONE. *His chest hurts. His ankle is swollen. He's getting headaches. The dry air, maybe?*

THREE. *Finally, the conference ended. He put on his Australian hat, and we drove west.*

*(Music. ONE and THREE move chairs to become a car. ONE sits in the car. TWO [as DAVID] enters the scene, carrying a camera, and sits in the driver's seat. Music fades.)*

THREE (cont'd). *The day was bright as we entered the canyons and drove up the mountain pass.*

TWO (as DAVID). *Beautiful, isn't it?*

ONE (as both laugh at her tears). *I am reduced to tears.*

*(Beat.)*

TWO (as DAVID). *Pahrump, Nevada. Note the sign ...*

ONE (reading the sign). *Madame Butterfly ... and the ... Brothel Museum! Brothel ... Museum?*

*(They laugh.)*

THREE. *We headed into the desert.*

TWO (as DAVID). *You can see where there've been flash floods. I remember my father racing our car through the desert in a downpour.*

ONE. *That must have been frightening.*

TWO (as DAVID). *Terrifying! And kind of exhilarating.*

*(Beat.)*

TWO (cont'd, as DAVID). *Look, a dirt road. Let's take it.*

ONE. *Are you sure?*

TWO (as DAVID). *We have four-wheel drive. Let's go.*

THREE. *We discovered an aquifer—brilliant azure blue surrounded by white sand.*

TWO (as DAVID, stops the car and takes up the camera). *This light is dazzling. Hang on—*

*(He leaves the car, kneels facing the audience and takes a photo. He continues taking photos as THREE speaks.)*

THREE (referring to the journal). *The wind picked up. Sand was drifting in clouds. Tumbleweed blew across the road.*

ONE. *You are in a picture-taking frenzy!*

TWO (as DAVID). *Why not? We're here!*

*(THREE speaks as TWO [as DAVID] takes a last photo, puts down the camera and climbs back into the car.)*

THREE. *Back in town, he took photographs of buildings ... doors ... windows. Then we traveled west again.*

TWO (as DAVID). *Twenty-Mule Team Canyon.*

ONE. *Amazing! The formations ... they're ... otherworldly. Prehistoric animals. Egyptian temples.*

TWO (as DAVID, stops the car and points). *Climb up. Over there.*

ONE. *Aren't you coming?*

TWO (as DAVID). *I ... don't trust myself to climb.*

ONE. *David—*

TWO (as DAVID). *I've done it before. Go on! To the top! I'll take your photo.*

*(ONE gets out of the car, uncertain at first, but quickly caught up in the experience.)*

ONE. Dead silence ... except for my footsteps on the gravel. Abstract formations all around ... gold ... black ... white ... gray ... red. On my left, the sky is clouding over; on my right, it's bright crystal blue.

*(TWO [as DAVID] acts out the shot as THREE speaks.)*

THREE. David took a shot of my profile. A small figure on top of the world.

ONE. *I can't believe this. I want to capture this in my mind—for my artwork.*

TWO (as DAVID). *My favorite piece of your artwork looks remarkably like this. Somehow, you already had it in your mind.*

ONE. *You're right! I did!*

*(Music. TWO [as DAVID] and ONE move upstage. THREE moves a chair to a new position. Music fades.)*

THREE. The next morning, we drove out toward Scotty's Castle. Everything was sparkling in multilayered pastels.

ONE. *It's cold at three thousand feet!*

TWO (as DAVID). *It is. Makes it hard to breathe. (Sits.)*

ONE. *What's wrong with you? I'm freezing and you're perspiring.*

TWO (as DAVID, improves noticeably when he's seated). *I'm all right if I sit. You go explore.*

ONE. *We should go back—*

TWO (as DAVID). *No. I want you to see it.*

ONE. *But I'm worried about you.*

TWO (as DAVID). *How bad could it be? I've never had a heart problem ... I'm not overweight ... I have no history of high blood pressure ...*

ONE. *I just don't think we should go on.*

TWO (as DAVID). *But there's still so much to see and do!*

THREE. *He could not stay still. We went on to Bad Water and walked out onto the salty surface. High above us, on the mountain face, there was a sign—*

ONE (pointing way up and reading). *"Sea Level." (Beat, looking around; joyfully.) This is like ... like being on the moon!*

*(TWO [as DAVID] gets out his cellphone.)*

ONE (cont'd). *Who are you calling?*

TWO (as DAVID). *My daughter. (On phone.) Sweetheart! I'm calling you from the lowest point of the United States. (Beat.) Yes ... there's a sign: two hundred and eighty-two feet below sea level. I hope you'll always remember this call.*

ONE. *She will!*

TWO (as DAVID, shakes his head, continues listening another moment, then speaks into the phone). *I'm fine, honey. It was a dream, that's all. Yes. I love you, too. Bye, now.*

ONE. *Is something wrong?*

TWO (as DAVID). *She had a nightmare.*

ONE. *Oh?*

TWO (as DAVID). *About me. I was sick. She was afraid I was dying.*

ONE. *Wow.*

TWO (as DAVID). *I am not dying! (Beat.) I'd like to go to Zabriskie Point and walk to the top of the overlook.*

*(THREE moves her chair to a different area as she speaks, and ONE and TWO [as DAVID] circle slowly.)*

THREE. The walk was more like a climb for him.

TWO (as DAVID). *My head is pounding. There's a bench. Sitting will help.*

ONE. *David ... maybe we should go home early—*

TWO (as DAVID). *As long as I'm sitting down, I feel pretty good, even driving. I want to stay.*

*(THREE speaks as TWO [as DAVID] and ONE move to a new position.)*

THREE. We went on to Dante's View, following a dark valley through the Amargosa Range. The road twisted and turned. David stopped the Jeep.

TWO (as DAVID, as he and ONE stand facing forward, transfixed). *Listen ... to the silence.*

THREE (a pause for the silence). Suddenly, a huge, black bird descended from the sky and perched on a rock right in front of us. It looked directly at David.

*(Very slowly, TWO [as DAVID] raises his camera and takes photos of the raven. Slowly, he lowers his camera, still watching the bird. TWO [as DAVID] and ONE speak softly, in awe and delight.)*

ONE. *It's a symbol—a sign.*

TWO (as DAVID, smiling). *Not a good one!*

ONE. *It can be. The raven is a sign of change. Creative change.*

TWO (*as DAVID*). *All right! We'll go with that.*

ONE (*as they watch the bird fly away*). *And it's off—message delivered!*

*(They laugh and walk away together.)*

THREE. The next day was our last in Death Valley. That evening, black storm clouds were forming over the Panamint Range. Suddenly ... the sun hit the side of the range. The foothills turned bright gold. David stopped the car and shot the picture ... (*Beat.*) just before the sun disappeared behind the clouds.

*(Music. THREE puts down the journal and pen. ONE carries suitcases upstage. THREE move chairs to one side to represent the FIRST DOCTOR's office. TWO takes up the journal and pen, becoming the journal-keeper. Music fades.)*

TWO. We got home at midnight on January twenty-ninth. David saw his doctor the next day.

ONE. His chest is clear. The EKG was normal. His temperature and vital signs are all normal. The swelling in his feet has decreased.

TWO. We spent a quiet evening, figuring he needed a good night's rest before returning to his very busy practice. Around nine o'clock, his doctor called.

THREE (*as FIRST DOCTOR, on the phone*). *Dave, I've just received the results from your blood tests. The numbers aren't good. We need to get you to the hospital.*

TWO. We grabbed his suitcase, still packed from Death Valley, and went out into the cold night air. I drove to the hospital ... where David was born ... and where his father died.