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LIMBO

Drama by
Jerome McDonough

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(LIMBO)

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ABOUT THE PLAY

“ . . . The undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveller returns” has puzzled, intrigued, confounded, and inspired humankind since the first reasoning being in the faint dawn of prehistory looked at a dying companion and wondered, “What now?”

What happens in that moment of death? An early movie version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* pictured Little Eva on her death bed . . . and a beam of light slowly descended from Heaven and enfolded her like a gentle loving arm, and the audiences always cried when the pure, innocent little girl's soul floated up that shaft of light like a tiny angel.

Dante gave a different picture—but his characters weren't sweet little Evas. And many of the world's other great authors contributed their versions of that mysterious moment . . . and the thereafter.

Jerome McDonough offers a new idea:

Suzanne is driving Hal to his commuter train in heavy traffic. Mrs. Braunig is fumbling in her purse for her front door key and juggling a bag of groceries at the same time. Denise is in her office, under stress, telephoning an associate. None of these people know each other. In fact, there's no indication that they live in the same city. But suddenly they find themselves in a dingy waiting room. Suzanne still has her hands in steering position; Hal is still reading his newspaper; Mrs. Braunig is still juggling her grocery sack; Denise still has her telephone in her hand. They don't know where they are. They don't know how they got there. Perhaps worst of all, they don't know how to get out.

They do eventually get out. McDonough says the hereafter is as each of us plans it, that we predetermine our destiny by the way we arrange our lives and imagine our deaths. Perhaps we should say that's what McDonough *seems* to be saying in this play. One can never be absolutely sure . . .

LIMBO

Cast of Characters

MIN, a shopping bag lady. Ageless
DENISE, manager of Weyendorf Realty
MRS. GAIL BRAUNIG, a very pleasant older woman
BRICE, a former singer, songwriter, guitar owner
SUZANNE, a highly ambitious corporate wife
HAL, a wife-motivated corporate being
TRENTON, a convincing, if sarcastic, second-hand philosopher
SHAD, a young criminal

THE GROUNDSKEEPERS

FLORA, Groundskeeper Supervisor
CASSKY, Assistant Supervisor
SPRAY, worker, money-grubber
MARKER, worker, joker
STONE, burly workman, worrier

Time: Soon

†

Dedication

*To Harvey Robert and Christopher O'Neal
whose vision differed from mine but whose faith
never wavered*

and to the Original Cast:

*Tambra Goode, Karen Towery, Missy Cross,
Robbie Dunigan, Julienne Bilbay, Loren Strickland, John Noah,
Tina Hansen, Konii Dalman, Teri Embry, Debbie Hollabaugh,
Curtis Poynor, Shannon Polk, and Renea Ho-Gland*

LIMBO

By Jerome McDonough

“Limbo” takes an environmental approach to performance. Since the look of the environment is defined by the performance space, however, any space is suitable. Ironically, a theatre is almost ideal.

“Limbo” is also an ensemble play—actually a two-ensemble play. The eight characters who comprise the Onstage Ensemble do break the proscenium line on occasion, but their area is mainly the standard performing space. The other ensemble, called the Groundskeepers, work almost exclusively around and even among the audience. As the play progresses, the Groundskeepers go about their business paying little attention to the Onstage scenes, only stopping now and again to make an observation about the other people. The Onstage performers eventually become aware of the audience members but are never conscious of the Groundskeepers. Only one character moves about freely in all realities.

“Limbo” is not a science fiction piece or a horror story. It may be a philosophical study but each director, performer, and audience participant must interpret it for him/herself.



The play is performed on a stage or in a space designed to look as much as possible like a drab, sparsely furnished room. There are very worn chairs, a few benches, and a large trash can.

The Groundskeepers’ reality uses a few ladders in the final scene.

There is no other set. Very dark stage draperies may define the Onstage area. Stage draperies need not even be used if the blank stage is at all suitable for the setting. “Limbo” is performed in the entire space, whatever that space may be.



For the convenience of the director and others using this playbook, the Onstage Reality is set in serif type (like this, *and this*), and the Groundskeepers’ Reality is set in sans-serif type (like this, *and this*).



[The curtain, if one is used, opens in the darkness. Stage lights and house lights come up enough for minimum visibility—house and stage are at the same low level. “Limbo” considers the proscenium opening strictly an architectural feature.

As soon as sound begins, a very old, very dirty woman starts moving about in the auditorium, among the audience, having descended from the stage area. Above all, she must not be heard entering, especially through a doorway. This woman, MIN, is seen picking her way among the audience. Anything attracts her attention—she will take leftover programs, candy wrappers, whatever. Any purses left in the aisle will be approached, looked at closely, then the owner seen. MIN will smile at the owner and move on. MIN is a Shopping Bag lady and will scavenge anything that falls during “Limbo.”

The three opening episodes on this page are independent, but may feel interlaced. The participants are not fully aware of the circumstances until full lights snap up at the end of this introductory sequence]

SUZANNE. [*She is driving. To Hal:*] Are you certain that you gave me everybody’s name?

HAL. [*Attentive, but also reading a newspaper*] Everybody’s.

SUZANNE. This traffic is ridiculous.

DENISE. [*On phone*] Melissa, we can’t sell every customer, but people still need houses. So keep working. [*She listens to other party on phone*]

MRS. BRAUNIG (GAIL). [*Fumbling for keys, calling out, juggling a grocery bag. A very pleasant lady*] Marvin? Marvin, are you in there? My keys have fallen to the bottom of my purse again.

SUZANNE. If I invite everybody but one person, it’s the same as torpedoing your career all by myself. You checked the executive list twice, didn’t you?

HAL. Yes.

MRS. BRAUNIG (GAIL). I swear if I cleaned this thing out five times a week, it’d still fill up by the next morning. Clutter has a life of its own, I know it.

SUZANNE. I’m not supporting every liquor and onion dip dealer in this county to have anybody left out.

DENISE. But, if the customer says “No,” try not to burst into tears.

HAL. The party’ll be a smash, Suzanne.

SUZANNE. I’m only doing it for you.

HAL. [*Putting down the paper*] And I appreciate it.

[Lights snap up to full illumination onstage and in the house. Stage and house seem to be one continuous space. MIN has re-arrived on-

stage and is seated Center. The audience can see the stage, such as it is. The effect is that of a very dingy waiting room of the type that preceded the end of rail passenger service in America. There is dirt everywhere. The furniture is in disarray.

Now that the light is brighter we see that DENISE is far Down Right holding a telephone receiver. HAL and SUZANNE are seated side by side Right Center, as if in a car. He has a suburban morning newspaper. She has been driving, juggling a coffee cup as she did so. BRICE sleeps Down Left in a chair, his hard-shell guitar case cradled between his legs, his chin resting on the case. MRS. BRAUNIG is at Left Center, trying to balance a large bag of groceries while searching through her purse for a key. SHAD crouches behind a bench, toward Up Left, as if hiding from someone. TRENTON sits just out of sight, far Up Right, in shadows, unmoving. Neither he nor Shad are seen by the others at first.

There is dead silence as each person tries to decide what has happened. No eyes meet, but each character views each of the others. MIN does not participate. BRICE is also passive. Positions change slightly, each character withdrawing from the others as much as possible without being too obvious about it]

DENISE. [Into phone, quietly] Hello? Hello? [No one else speaks. DENISE places the phone on its cradle and starts to look about the area, cautiously. She is inspecting everyone and every place. She looks off Right and moves quickly that way, as if seeking a way to escape from this place. At the same time, SUZANNE drags HAL up from their seats and she begins to explore the area, HAL following reluctantly. They peer into the Left wing. GAIL, meanwhile, is discreetly looking out over the audience, trying to see if there is any place to go. She is too timid to actually move around much. BRICE is still asleep. GAIL takes a step toward him, but he stirs slightly and she retreats to her Left Center position. During the above action, the following scene will be played by the Groundskeepers. The Onstage Ensemble is not aware of the existence of the Groundskeepers]

[CASSKY, SPRAY, MARKER, FLORA, and STONE enter from the back of the auditorium, arriving for work. Shovels lean against the front of the stage. There is also a clipboard with a sign-in sheet and work sheets. Action includes signing in, picking up work sheets, and shooting the breeze]

CASSKY. How many today, Flora?

FLORA. The boss wouldn't give me a count . . . [*gesturing, indicating the audience*] but look at the mob of them.

MARKER. Hello, overtime, huh, Spray?

SPRAY. Overtime is *my favorite* time.

STONE. [*Rushing up to them*] Am I late?

CASSKY. Not today, but a little too often the last few weeks, Stone. I'd hate to have to report you.

FLORA. If there's any reporting to do, Cassky, I'll do it—the Supervisor. Not [*pointing to Cassky*] the Assistant Supervisor.

CASSKY. [*Turning pale*] Oh, sure, Flora. I didn't mean to overstep.

STONE. [*Looking at audience*] Quite a crop today.

MARKER. [*Gesturing toward stage*] How about those up there?

FLORA. I'm not sure yet. And they don't know either, so let's just take this one step at a time, Marker. [*MARKER nods. STONE, SPRAY, and MARKER carry shovels and work sheets as the GROUNDSKEEPERS exit. As they leave, we hear STONE commenting:*]

STONE. Quite a crop. Quite a crop.

DENISE. [*She returns and speaks hesitantly to Gail*] This isn't going to make any sense, but I—nothing.

GAIL. [*Thinking Denise may be as confused as she is*] What is it?

DENISE. I'm not sure yet.

GAIL. I'm not either. [*She sits. Her chair shifting awakens BRICE. He looks around, then speaks to Gail*]

BRICE. Did you ever find yourself in some unfamiliar place and yet have the feeling that you'd never been there before?

GAIL. Uh . . . ?

BRICE. I do that—turn old sayings around. See the other side.

GAIL. That's . . . nice.

BRICE. It doesn't pay well. [*Starts to settle to sleep again. SUZANNE re-enters with HAL, speaking loudly*]

SUZANNE. Hal, I do not understand this.

HAL. [*Very apprehensive*] Suzanne, shhhh.

SUZANNE. Well, do something.

HAL. Like what?

SUZANNE. Find out how to get us out of here. Find out who's in charge.

HAL. Let me get my bearings first.

SUZANNE. You are hopeless. *[Calling out]* Who's running this mess? *[Looking around at the people on stage]* Is it one of you? *[No one responds. SUZANNE starts offstage, seeking an exit again. HAL follows, afraid not to. DENISE tries the phone again]*

DENISE. Melissa, can you hear me? Melissa? I'm . . . Hello? *[Pushes button on phone]* Hello?

BRICE. I think I see your problem. *[DENISE hears him and turns. He points to cord, which is connected to nothing. DENISE starts to hunt for a place to plug the phone in. She finds nothing]*

DENISE. No socket. *[Pause. To others]* You're all probably going to think I'm crazy—but—does anybody know where we are?

GAIL. Oh, thank heavens it isn't just me. *[SUZANNE and HAL re-enter and watch the next exchange]* I was looking for my keys—I can never find them. They get down in the—Oh, I'm rattling again. Marvin jumps me about it all the time. *[During the above, MIN has moved next to her and is looking longingly into her grocery sack. GAIL notices her; a bit apprehensively]* Uh, may I help you? *[MIN just smiles and moves back to her space; Center, checking her belongings again. GAIL moves her groceries to the Left side of her chair]*

BRICE. She's harmless. I wouldn't lay anything down, though. *[Starting to put his head down again]* Good night.

SUZANNE. Hold it. How can you just go to sleep?

BRICE. I fell asleep in the park and I woke up here. If I fall asleep here, maybe I'll wake up back in the park—or some place recognizable. So, once again, good night.

SUZANNE. Not yet. You seem to know what's going on.

BRICE. I don't know what's going on. I just don't *care* what's going on.

SUZANNE. Well start caring. I have things to do, places to be.

BRICE. I've got no place to be.

SUZANNE. If I miss my appointment with the caterer, there's going to be trouble for somebody. Big trouble. So you just stay awake and help get us out of here.

GAIL. Now, now, let's not be unpleasant.

SUZANNE. This is mild annoyance. Keep me in this sewer for half an hour and I'll show you unpleasant.

HAL. Don't make waves, Suzanne.

SUZANNE. Where are the exits?

DENISE. I couldn't find any.

SUZANNE. Hal, go look off that way again.

HAL. There was nothing there. [*He's afraid to go. SUZANNE lets out a disgusting sound*]

SUZANNE. Why do I put up with you?

DENISE. This is getting us nowhere.

GAIL. Exactly. And let's at least try to be civil.

SUZANNE. [*Sarcastically*] Then can we have a cookie?

GAIL. [*Looking in her sack*] Why, certainly. I picked up a big package of those double stuff things. Marvin loves them.

SUZANNE. [*Appealing to the skies*] Help me.

DENISE. Now, if we just . . .

SUZANNE. Who put you in charge?

DENISE. Seven pending house contracts.

SUZANNE. We should vote on a leader. Hal is an Assistant Vice President at Protemco. I nominate him

HAL. Suzanne stop it.

BRICE [*To Denise*] I vote for you, house contracts.

GAIL. So do I. [*SUZANNE turns away, pok'ng Hal to do something, which he does not*]

DENISE. OK. All I know is that I was on the phone with a very nervous girl and then I was here. Boom. [*SUZANNE nudges Hal emphatically*]

HAL. Suzanne was driving . . .

GAIL. Suzanne's a lovely name. It has a sort of flair. And who are you?

HAL. Hal Gordon.

GAIL. Hal. My father's name was Harold

SUZANNE. Not Harold—Hal. It's not short for anything.

GAIL. Oh [*Pause*] It is short, though. [*SUZANNE shakes her head in resignation*] Let's just find out who everybody is. I'm—

SUZANNE. And tell how we spent our summer vacations?

GAIL. [*Almost to herself*] So rude.

DENISE. We might find a thread at that. Denise Mills, manager of Weyendorf Realty.

GAIL. I'm Gail Braunig, Marvin's wife.—He runs the little butcher shop out near the new mall. Everybody said the traffic would pass us by, but we've done just fine. You can't listen to those negative nellies.

BRICE. [*Raising his head momentarily*] Brice Hitchcock—former singer, former songwriter, former guitar owner.

DENISE. [*Pointing to guitar case*] Former?

BRICE. [*Patting the case*] My clothes.

GAIL. Wouldn't a suitcase be more practical, Brice?

BRICE. Wrong image, Gail.

SUZANNE [*To Brice*] Currently specializing in sleep.

BRICE [*Sarcastically*] It's an era of specialization.

GAIL. [*To Suzanne, trying to stop this bickering*] And your name is . . . ?

SUZANNE. Suzanne Gordon. Homemaker.

BRICE. In the building trades, are you?

SUZANNE. [*Indicating guitar*] Did you ever really play that thing or was it always just a personality substitute?

BRICE. At least I had something to substitute. [*MIN has sneaked up to Brice's guitar case and opened it, revealing a guitar inside BRICE finally notices her*] Hey! Leave that alone! [*MIN scurries away*]

GAIL. There is a guitar in there. Why did you deny it?

BRICE. [*Closing case*] I don't want to play it any more. I'm sick of lying.

GAIL. Lying?

BRICE. Say a song appeals to you. *Why* does it appeal to you?

GAIL. Because—I like it.

BRICE. No. It's because you *believe* in it.

SUZANNE. How utterly stupid.

BRICE. I'll try to ignore that. [*To Gail again as he picks up guitar case*] Nothing but lies come out of this thing now. My songs are the same but they aren't true any more. So I don't sing. I don't play [*Beat*] But I keep the guitar. There might be some truth some place. I keep listening for it.

SUZANNE. Or maybe you're too gutless to make a comment at all.

BRICE. [*Flaring, then forcing calmness or backing down—it's hard to tell which*] Why don't you just—just let it drop.

GAIL. [*To Min, still trying to defuse any problems by changing the subject*] Uh...what's your name, dear? [*No response from Min*]

BRICE. They won't talk to you.

GAIL. They?

BRICE. Shopping bag ladies. They live out of those sacks. Sleep in the open or on heating vents.

GAIL. [*Trying again*] You won't even tell us your name? [*MIN just smiles. To others*] She has a lovely smile.

DENISE. That's everybody, then.

TRENTON. [*Speaking from the shadows Up Right*] Not quite. [*All turn toward him. He comes into full view and moves downstage slowly*] An interesting scene. All scratching around trying to add things up. Fine. Here's the total. You were some place else and now you're here. Nobody knows anybody and nothing makes any sense.

DENISE. Where *are* we?

SUZANNE. And how do we get out of this swine pen?

TRENTON. Why ask me.

DENISE. You know, don't you?

TRENTON. Do I? Perhaps I have questions, too.

SUZANNE. Such as?

TRENTON. Such as, "What time were you driving?"

SUZANNE. [*Ready to play whatever game will get her out*] Morning. Six forty-five maybe.

TRENTON. And the time now is . . . ?

HAL. [*Looking at watch, fear building even more*] Six-fifty.

SUZANNE. Don't be stupid, Hal. Your watch just stopped.

DENISE. Mine stopped, too—at two thirty in the afternoon.

GAIL. Two thirty! [*Panicking, looking in her sack*] I got home from shopping before noon. My fudge ripple will be soup by now. [*Finds it and checks it*] Hmmmm. Still frozen.

DENISE. Perhaps we all are. [*To Trenton*] Is that it? Is time frozen?

TRENTON. What do you think?

DENISE. Maybe not all time—maybe just ours.

SUZANNE. Ridiculous. That would mean that we're . . .

TRENTON. My, we were slow coming up with that. It would mean that you're . . . what?

DENISE. Dead.

TRENTON. A cigar for the lady! Possibly.

HAL. [*To Trenton, near panic*] Is that true? Are we dead?

TRENTON. [*Pause. Then:*] You are all dead. [*HAL sinks down in his chair. There is fear in the others, too. Beat. TRENTON drops the pose*] Or you're not . . . Really, how should I know? I could be in exactly the same position you are.

GAIL. Then how can you be so calm?

TRENTON. Because what cannot be changed must be endured.

SUZANNE. I think that what cannot be endured should shut his mouth.

TRENTON. Or hers. *[The tension stills the people Onstage. They study each other or escape within themselves. The separate reality takes over again, unnoticed by the Onstage Ensemble]*

STONE. *[Enters carrying several boards—each about seven feet long by one foot wide—assisted by MARKER]* Marker, have they raised the specs on these planks? They seem to be getting heavier.

MARKER. They feel lighter to me.

STONE. Yeah?

MARKER. Yeah. I was carrying a whole bundle of them yesterday.

STONE. *[Placing a board against the sides of a few rows of seats, or between seats, as if putting the sides of a coffin in place]* Yeah?

MARKER. *[Placing a board in a similar position on the opposite side of the audience, or seats. The audience members are now “boxed” in]* You don't suppose you're getting sick, do you, Stone?

STONE. I feel great.

MARKER. You look kind of pale to me. *[As they start to exit in opposite directions]*

STONE. Yeah?

MARKER. Maybe you ought to get looked over.

STONE. I didn't think we ever . . . But maybe you're right. Pale, huh?

MARKER. Pale.

STONE. Yeah?

MARKER. Yeah. *[They exit as SPRAY and FLORA enter carrying large floral arrangements, or buds in vases. SPRAY is upset]*

SPRAY. . . . and not one penny extra for any of it?

FLORA. Don't climb all over me, Spray. I'm not in charge of complaints.

SPRAY. Then who is? You're the Supervisor.

FLORA. *[Putting her arrangement down at the feet of the first row of the audience]* That just means I get sweat from both directions. You want to be Supervisor? You've got it.

SPRAY. All I want is full pay for all work done.

FLORA. Great. Use your supervisor's bonus.

SPRAY. *[Putting her arrangement down at the audience's feet, farther Right]* Oh, just forget I said anything.

FLORA. *[They are exiting]* Whatever you like, boss.

SPRAY. Flora, you really tick me off sometimes.

FLORA. Gosh, chief, I'm sure sorry. *[SPRAY makes a frustrated sound as they exit]*

[DENISE drifts toward the edge of the stage, Right, peering out into the audience as BRICE looks around studying the situation. He then speaks, as if suddenly "catching on"]

BRICE. How could we have been so stupid? *[Rising, speaking to Trenton]* OK, the joke's over. Show us the cameras. You've had a good laugh and now it's done.

TRENTON. Do you seriously think that someone would go to that much trouble for this pack of misfits?

BRICE. Wouldn't you?

TRENTON. Would I? On the other hand, perhaps someone is manipulating a great deal more. *[Indicating Denise]* She seems to be noticing something.

BRICE. *[To Trenton]* You can stop that. The gag is finished.

DENISE. *[Looking out into the house. To Brice]* Shhh!

BRICE. *[To Denise]* The gag is finished.

DENISE. Will you be quiet! *[Moving back to Trenton. Speaking, quietly, of the audience]* Who are those people? The ones out there—in the chairs? *[Onstage people tense as they see the audience. The same apprehension which gripped them during the opening rises again]*

TRENTON. Why not ask them? *[To Brice]* A bigger joke than you thought, isn't it?

BRICE. *[His theory shaken; to Trenton]* Those people. Have they been here all the time?

TRENTON. I wonder. *[TRENTON says no more, leaving BRICE to sort things out. DENISE, moving toward audience, hesitantly:]*

DENISE. Who . . . who are you? *[No response, or at least the Onstage people hear no response]*

HAL. Don't. They haven't bothered us.

DENISE. Can you tell us where we are? *[Nothing]*

SUZANNE. Never mind that. *[To audience]* Can you get my husband and me out of here? We'll pay.

HAL. Stop!

SUZANNE. Hal, shut up. *[DENISE has been studying the situation. She cautiously moves closer toward the audience and points to an audience member]*

DENISE. I saw her speak.

BRICE. *[Moving to apron]* She did.

DENISE. *[Very close to the audience member]* Did you speak? Nod if you spoke to us. *[Reaching to touch the person]* You're . . . *[Even if*

the audience member responds, DENISE and the others cannot hear her]

SUZANNE. Price is no object. *[As DENISE tries to touch the person, she finds she can circle her hand around the person's arm, but she cannot feel the flesh. She pulls her hand back, startled]*

DENISE. I—it's like nothing's there.

BRICE. *[At edge of stage]* Can you hear us?

DENISE. *[Moving back toward the stage]* I don't think it matters if they can hear us.

SUZANNE. Name your figure. Get us out of here and it's yours.

DENISE. Will you stop it! It doesn't matter if they can hear you or not!

SUZANNE. Why?

DENISE. Because they are not here. Not where we are, anyway. We can see them but it's like a . . .

TRENTON. Window?

DENISE. Yes. But a three-dimensional window—on another place. Am I right?

TRENTON. I have no idea.

SUZANNE. I hope you're not dead. I want to kill you myself.

TRENTON. I wonder if violence is possible here. Care to try? *[Moving to SUZANNE; she turns away fuming]*

DENISE. A window—on another place. There could be hundreds of these places.

TRENTON. Or billions.

DENISE. Or only two. If we're all that's left.

GAIL. Left? Of what?

DENISE. Of everything. Or nothing. Does it matter? They are in their place and we're in ours. *[Pause]* And we can't reach them. *[To Trenton]* This is maddening. Can you give us any answers or can't you?

TRENTON. You aren't even through with the questions.

SUZANNE. Like what?

TRENTON. Like who is that man crouching behind those chairs? *[SHAD jumps up, pistol drawn. He is a frightening figure, reacting to the threat of his discovery by returning the threat. Alarm from everyone except Trenton]*

SHAD. Nobody move! *[SHAD moves toward the group, gun levelled at them. He moves between Gail and Brice, Left]*

TRENTON. Quite a menagerie, aren't we?