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Dramatic Publishing

HELIUM



By
Julian Wiles

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“Charleston Stage presents *Helium*, a humorous and emotional tale that explores the world of ... 80-year-old Molly Kingsley’s imaginary journeys through space and time.” —*Charleston City Paper*

HELIUM

Comedy. By Julian Wiles. *Cast: 3m., 3w.* *Helium* is the moving and uplifting story of a brilliant, humorous and creative chemistry teacher who braves the trials of frailty and aging, all the while keeping her imagination, charm and dignity intact. “Hysterium” and “preposterous” are two of the imaginary elements that Mrs. Molly Kingsley, a former and beloved high-school chemistry teacher, “discovers” in the laboratories of her old age. Mrs. Kingsley’s mind has begun to wander—an 80-year-old mind that is no longer bound by space and time. With the help of colorful bunches of helium-filled balloons, she takes off on imaginative flights of fancy visiting the seashore of her youth, her old high-school chemistry classroom—even dropping in on an old episode of *Star Trek*. Back on Earth, Alice, Mrs. Kingsley’s daughter, struggles to keep her headstrong mother’s feet firmly on the ground and her mind solidly anchored in reality. It is a losing battle. As sparks fly between mother and daughter, Josh and Ethan, Mrs. Kingsley’s grandsons, watch in wonder and amazement as their mischievous grandmother, once a brilliant teacher of chemistry, slips away day by day into the mysterious and unfathomable clouds of dementia. *Unit set. Approximate running time: 90 minutes. Code: HF9.*

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(l-r) Samille Basler and Taylor Carnie. *Photo: Julian Wiles.*
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JULIAN WILES



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In memory of my grandmother, Debbie Black,
and of my mother-in-law, Margaret Hane,
and the wonderful flights of fancy that they shared with me.

This version of *Helium* was produced in 2011 at the Charleston Stage • Dock Street Theatre in Charleston, S.C., the cast included:

Gramms	Samille Basler
Alice, her daughter	Amber Wagner
Gramms' oldest grandson.....	Luke Whitmire
Gramms' youngest grandson.....	Taylor Carnie
Ruth, Gramms' nurse	Teresa Smith
Johnny, former chemistry student of Gramms	Mikey Nagy

Helium

CAST

GRAMMS (MRS. KINGSLEY): An elderly, retired high school chemistry teacher

RUTH: Gramms' nurse

ALICE: Gramms' daughter

ETHAN: Gramms' oldest grandson, age 16

JOSH: Gramms' youngest grandson, age 9 – 10

JOHNNY: One of Mrs. Kingsley's former students, age 17

SCENES

ACT I

Scene 1: A noble gas

Scene 2: Star fruit, *a week later*

Scene 3: Helios, god of the sun, *the next morning*

ACT II

Scene 1: Dilithium crystals, *a few weeks later*

Scene 2: Sleepy balloons, *a few days later*

Scene 3: Turning the world upside down, *a few weeks later*

Scene 4: Lighter than air, *the next day*

PRODUCTION NOTES

Each performance will need 1 flat yellow bunch and 4 full bunches of balloons: 1 multicolored, 2 yellow and 1 final yellow bunch that is not tied together.

AFTERWORD

Of all the plays I have written, this is my favorite. It is the most personal and the one that has taken the longest to come into being. In many ways, I lived this play as I wrote it. For me plays often come from a germ of an idea and for me that germ came to me in 1990, after reading, *Growing Up* by *The New York Times* humor columnist Russell Baker. Mr. Baker opened his Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir by observing that his 80-year-old mother's mind "could wander free through space and time. Some days she went to weddings and funerals that had taken place a half-century earlier ... she moved across time ... with a speed and ease beyond the gift of physical science." While Mr. Baker certainly saw the sadness of his mother's affliction, he also saw that there was a freedom there as well. This perspective struck me, for it was such an interesting way to look at aging. From this, Mr. Baker's inspiration, my play *Helium* was born.

The first production of *Helium*, which appeared in 1990, was a much simpler play. I based much of it on my grandmother, Debbie Black. She was 94 at the time. While my mother and aunt did have their challenges as caregivers, Grandma Black only had touches of dementia. When she passed away in 1996 at the age of 100, she still knew all of her children and grandchildren and her delightful sense of humor was pretty much intact. As she approached her final years, she would often say she was so old because "the Lord has forgotten about me and the devil doesn't want me."

A few years later, our family faced new challenges with an aging loved one when Margaret Hane, my wonderful mother-

in-law, began to find herself lost in the fog of dementia. It was a challenging time for our family, especially for my wife, Jenny, who became Margaret's primary caregiver. Our children, Marianna and Nicholas, were quite young at the time, and they marveled at Granny's wandering mind and her flights of fancy. To them it was not all that odd or tragic; this was just the person their beloved Granny had become. Sometimes Granny's flights were heartbreaking. There were times when we wanted to cry. But at other times her imaginings were so absurd, so silly, so human, that we just had to laugh. We learned that sometimes the best way to be with her was to join her in the imaginary world she inhabited.

Like Russell Baker's mother, Granny spent much of her time time-traveling. As is often the case with many patients who suffer from dementia, much of Granny's long-term memory remained intact. She could remember things in detail if they were from long ago but couldn't remember what happened five minutes ago. This often led to her quickly changing subjects and moods, the quixotic behavior I gave Gramms in *Helium*.

After Granny passed away, I decided to revisit *Helium* and the play underwent major revisions, for now I knew so much more about what I was writing about. The new version was produced in 1997 at the Historic Dock Street Theatre in Charleston, S.C. to much acclaim. As the play became more serious it also became more humorous—humor I feared I might be taking too far. But audiences thought otherwise. The humor struck a chord especially with those who had experienced aging and dementia first hand. Often, audience members would grab me in the lobby after the show—

“let me tell you what my aunt, what my mother, what my uncle, what my spouse said—let me tell you what they used to do.” They’d tell their stories and we’d laugh and cry together. They were anxious to relate the trials and joys that they, too, had experienced as caregivers. Best of all, they would share with me the imaginative flights of fancy that their loved ones had taken.

After listening to those caretakers and hearing their stories I once revised the play and mounted a third and much enhanced production in 2010. It is from that production that this script is drawn.

The world has become much more aware of Alzheimer’s and dementia since 1990, but much is still unknown. Patients and their caregivers still struggle to find their own way. And each way is different. In *Helium*, I simply wanted to share one family’s journey, its joys and its sorrows as they dealt with an aging loved one. I wanted to invite audiences to journey with this family as they faced the challenges of caregiving while, at the same time, marveling at how the human spirit and the human mind, even in the face of great adversity, can still take flight.

Summer 2012

Helium

ACT I

SCENE 1: A NOBLE GAS

AT RISE: The set is an inviting beach scene. The stage floor (perhaps slightly raked) is covered with a ground cloth painted to represent sand. UL and UR are the semblances of sand dunes. Behind these are additional panels of fabric painted to look like the sky.

R there is an old overturned boat that will serve as a seating area from time to time. UC a white weathered wooden lifeguard box. It has a faded red cross painted on it. Left of the lifeguard box are two canvas beach chairs covered with striped fabric. Between the chairs and the box is a wooden spool that serves as a table. Stuck in the middle of the spool is an old beach umbrella. Far DL is an old wooden piling emerging from the sand. Far DR is an old wood crate. Both the crate and the piling will be used as seating throughout the play.

Floating above this scene, suspended from almost invisible monofilament lines, are: a 1937 refrigerator hanging upside down, a rocking chair, a grandfather clock, a giant pizza and a school of peanut-butter-and-jellyfish that swim across the sky.

This is the world that 80-something GRAMMS lives in, but in reality, it is the living room in which she has lived all her life. The lifeguard box is actually a sofa, the umbrella is a table lamp, the beach chairs are side chairs in her living room, etc. The audience sees these as GRAMMS sees them. The other characters in the play don't see this beach scene, they see the set as GRAMMS' realistic living room. All doors are imaginary. The entrance DL represents the front door, an entrance UR and upstage of the overturned boat represents the way to the offstage kitchen, and an entrance UL represents a hall that leads to GRAMMS' offstage bedroom and bathroom.

(As the play begins, the sound of ocean waves is heard. GRAMMS enters carrying a multicolored bunch of helium filled balloons. She wanders about the beach for a moment, then crosses downstage. A school bell rings and she becomes MRS. KINGSLEY [GRAMMS in her younger years], a foreboding high-school chemistry teacher. She turns to address the audience as if they are members of her long ago chemistry class.)

MRS. KINGSLEY. All right quiet down, hush back there.

This is a classroom, not a gymnasium. These balloons are filled with helium. A colorless, odorless, tasteless gas. Almost pure spheres of nothingness—not unlike your empty minds. And helium is inert, just like your inert imaginations—but look at these balloons. Look at the wonder their near nothingness can produce. Your empty heads have that capability—to make something of nothing. *If you use them, that is. If you don't, you'll be lost in my class. Is that understood? Good. Now get to work. (As she*

turns to go.) Your first quiz is Friday. Of course, you will all probably fail it.

(GRAMMS starts to exit. The sound of a brisk wind is heard. RUTH, GRAMMS' nurse, enters anxiously.)

RUTH. Oh, there you are Mrs. Kingsley, we've been looking all over you.

GRAMMS. I've been right here in my classroom.

(In RUTH's world it is winter, cold, so she puts her coat around GRAMMS, who just through body language now becomes her true age of 80.)

RUTH. First day of class again?

GRAMMS. You see the balloons.

RUTH. Yes, ma'am, but I'm going to be sure Alice doesn't see them.

GRAMMS. Alice is a troublemaker. I should send her to the principal's office.

RUTH. Well, you can do that later. School's out, let's get you home.

GRAMMS *(confused)*. School's out?

RUTH. Yes, ma'am, come along.

GRAMMS *(as they exit UL)*. But I was just getting started.

ETHAN *(from offstage L)*. Gramms?

JOSH *(from offstage R)*. Gramms?

(As GRAMMS and RUTH exit UL, ETHAN enters DL and JOSH enters UR.)

ETHAN *(annoyed, but with a sense of urgency)*. Any luck?

JOSH. Nah.

ETHAN. Jeez. I've got a date.

JOSH. Well, I have a game.

(ALICE frantically enters from U, talking on her cell-phone. As she enters, she waves her hand to tell ETHAN and JOSH to be quiet.)

ALICE. Yes, officer.

ETHAN *(trying to interrupt)*. Mom—

ALICE *(cutting him off as she talks to the police officer on the phone)*. I know this is the second time this week.

ETHAN *(sarcastically, to JOSH)*. She needs a leash. *(He means his grandmother.)*

ALICE *(still on the phone)*. Yes, officer. Thank you.

ETHAN *(under his breath, but ALICE hears him)*. I don't need this tonight.

ALICE *(put out with ETHAN, she covers the phone to speak to him)*. I don't need this tonight, either, Ethan.

ETHAN. You promised me the car, remember? I have a date with Ginger.

ALICE *(annoyed at his self-centeredness, an argument brewing)*. I didn't know your grandmother was going to wander off.

ETHAN *(petulantly)*. Why not? She's been wandering off for the past month.

ALICE *(biting her tongue, trying to contain her anger)*. That's why we hired Ruth.

ETHAN *(turning and walking away from her)*. A lot of good that has done us.

ALICE *(about to say something to ETHAN but the policeman is suddenly back on the line. She returns her focus to the phone)*. Officer, I don't know what she was wearing, I

don't even know if she had a coat. Yes, I know it's freezing out.

(GRAMMS enters through the front door DL, being led onstage by RUTH who holds GRAMMS' arm. GRAMMS no longer has the balloons.)

RUTH. Miss Molly, I know you must be cold.

GRAMMS. Oh, I'll just sit out here in the sun for a bit and I'll be fine.

ALICE *(into the cellphone)*. Officer, it looks like her nurse found her.

RUTH. Josh, will you help me sit her down?

ALICE *(still talking to the policeman on the phone)*. Yes, thank you. *(Turns the phone off and puts it down on the boat then turns to RUTH.)* Is she all right?

RUTH. Yes, I think so, but we need to warm her up. Here sit down, Miss Molly.

GRAMMS *(angrily pointing to the upstage beach chair with her cane)*. No, not this chair—the other one. I want to be under the umbrella.

(JOSH takes GRAMMS' arm and leads her to the other beach chair.)

ETHAN. Umbrella?

RUTH. I think she means the lamp. *(Reaches up underneath the umbrella, as if it is the shade of a floor lamp and "turns on" the light. A blaze of light appears from beneath the umbrella.)*

ETHAN *(aside, sarcastically)*. Off in la-la land again.

ALICE (*overhearing*). Hush, Ethan. (*Rubs GRAMMS' arm and discovers she's shivering.*) She's shivering, Ruth.

(*Puts a beach towel over GRAMMS' legs, as though it were a blanket.*)

GRAMMS (*with a smile*). Oh, it's just a little chill from the sunburn. I should have worn some suntan lotion. The zinc oxide would have blocked the ultraviolet rays. You see some compounds, class, are photosensitive.

ETHAN (*annoyance gone from his voice, just a simple realization*). Mom, she thinks she teaching again.

ALICE. She's just a little confused from being out in the cold.

RUTH (*taking a Tootsie Roll Pop out of her bag*). I think she'll be fine. She was only out for a few minutes. Here, Miss Molly, let me check your temperature.

(*RUTH puts the Tootsie Roll Pop in GRAMMS' mouth. RUTH, ALICE, JOSH and ETHAN see this as a thermometer. The emergency over, the urgency and pace of the scene slows down a bit.*)

ALICE. Where did you find her, Ruth?

RUTH. She was just over in Miss Poulnot's (*pronounced "pool-not"*) front yard.

ETHAN (*sarcasm returning*). Oh, jeez.

JOSH. Ethan.

ALICE. Here, Mama, these will warm you up. (*Puts more beach towels—more blankets—around GRAMMS.*)

GRAMMS (*suddenly annoyed again*). Warm me up? It's hot as Hades out here, get these covers off of me. (*Throws*

the beach towels off. Who needs a blanket over them at the beach?

JOSH *(crosses and kneels beside GRAMMS, tenderly)*.

You're not at the beach, Gramms.

GRAMMS *(gently, just trying to set JOSH straight)*. Of course we're at the beach. Can't you hear the waves crashing, the seagulls calling?

JOSH. Gramms—

GRAMMS. We always come to the beach the second week of July. Did you see those lifeguards, Grace? If they aren't the cat's pajamas!

RUTH. Miss Molly, I'm Ruth. Grace is your sister.

ETHAN. I give up.

ALICE. She's just confused, Ethan.

ETHAN. Confused? *(Angrily going on the attack again.)*

She can't tell me and Josh apart anymore.

JOSH *(trying to intercede)*. She just gets our names mixed up, Ethan. Mom even does that sometimes.

RUTH *(checking the reading on the Tootsie Roll Pop "thermometer")*. I think her temperature's fine.

ALICE. Are you sure she's all right?

RUTH. Let's check her blood pressure just to be sure. *(Goes to check GRAMMS' blood pressure.)*

ETHAN *(sarcastically)*. Why don't you check Mom's too?

JOSH *(admonishing)*. Ethan.

(RUTH checks GRAMMS' blood pressure, but to GRAMMS the blood pressure cuff is actually a stuffed octopus. GRAMMS is suddenly startled, not understanding what RUTH is doing.)

GRAMMS. Ruth, why are you wrapping that octopus around my arm?

RUTH (*with a smile*). This isn't an octopus, Miss Molly. This is a blood pressure cuff.

ALICE. How is it?

ETHAN. Probably better than yours.

JOSH (*admonishing*). You're not helping, Ethan.

RUTH. Her temperature is up just a bit—nothing to worry about. I'm sorry I called you to come over here. I only left her for a minute. I just went in the kitchen fix to her some hot tea.

ALICE. Hot tea? But Mama doesn't like hot tea.

GRAMMS (*cheerily*). Oh, the hot tea was for the Queen.

ETHAN (*frustrated. He would bang his head against a wall if there were one nearby*). Here we go again.

GRAMMS. I told Ruth not to bother. I told her that the Queen Elizabeth and I could just pop open a couple of cans of Budweiser.

ALICE. Mama!

GRAMMS. But Ruth thought tea was more appropriate. I don't really like tea but when a queen shows up you have to offer her something to drink. It's only polite. Ruth agreed with me.

ALICE (*rises and crosses to RUTH*). Ruth, you probably shouldn't humor her like that. You see where it leads.

RUTH (*trying to make light of the situation*). I'm sorry—it's just easier to go along with her sometimes.

ALICE (*firmly*). I think that just adds to her confusion. (*With more emphasis.*) And the last thing she needs is more confusion. We've discussed this.

RUTH (*meekly*). Yes, ma'am.

ALICE (*turns back to her mother and tries to reason with her*). You can't just wander off, Mama—it worries us.

GRAMMS. Ruth always finds me.

ALICE (*gently*). Ruth wasn't hired to play hide and seek with you, Mama.

ETHAN. She might as well have been.

(ALICE gives him yet another look of disapproval. He then decides to try a different tact.)

ETHAN (*cont'd*). Mom, can we go?

ALICE (*throwing her hands up in frustration she surrenders*). All right, all right. Just let me talk to Ruth for a minute.

ETHAN. A minute? The movie will probably be over before we get there.

ALICE (*giving him a look that could kill, speaks slowly for emphasis*). Just a minute.

ETHAN (*realizing he's gone too far*). OK, OK.

(ALICE and RUTH exit UR to the kitchen [past the boat, R]. After they're gone, ETHAN turns back to JOSH.)

ETHAN (*cont'd*). Jeez.

JOSH. Ethan, what do you expect Mom to do?

ETHAN. I expect her to do something with Gramms. Put her in a home or something.

JOSH. Mom will never do that. Gramms has lived in this house all her life. She'd miss it.

ETHAN. Miss it? She hardly even knows she's here anymore.

JOSH (*more sadly than defensively*). She knows sometimes.

ETHAN (*disdainfully*). Yeah, sometimes.

(The doorbell rings. The boys look at each other wondering who that could be.)

JOSH. I'll get it. (*Exits DL as if to go to the front door.*)

GRAMMS (*to ETHAN, as if continuing an unfinished conversation*). Prince Philip couldn't come. He was playing polo—why anyone would want to play golf with horses I don't know.

JOSH (*re-entering with a bunch of yellow, helium-filled balloons. A gift card hangs from one of the strings*). Mom, balloons again.

ETHAN (*to JOSH*). Third time this week.

(But they both know that GRAMMS sent them to herself. ALICE re-enters.)

JOSH (*to ALICE*). I thought you took Gramms' credit cards away.

ALICE. I did. Mama, how did you order these balloons?

GRAMMS. I didn't order them, Alice.

ALICE (*as curious as she is angry*). Then who did?

GRAMMS. Your father. He always sends me a bunch of yellow balloons; he knows they're my favorite. Aren't they pretty? They're for my birthday.

(ETHAN smiles, ALICE sighs. As in so many of these flights of fancy, ETHAN and ALICE's anger and frustration often give way to fascination with how GRAMMS' mind works.)