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Dramatic Publishing

SOMETHING IN THE AIR

A Play in Two Acts

by

RICHARD DRESSER



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(SOMETHING IN THE AIR)

For inquiries concerning all other rights, contact:
Joyce Ketay, The Joyce Ketay Agency,
1501 Broadway, Suite 1908, New York NY 10036
Phone: (212) 354-6825, Fax: (212) 354-6732

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Bay Street Theatre, Sag Harbor, New York, presented the world premiere of *SOMETHING IN THE AIR* June 16 to July 4, 1999. The production was directed by Melia Bensussen and included the following artists:

CAST

Neville JUDE CICCOLELLA
Walker STEVEN WEBER
Cram MARK BLUM
Sloane JANET ZARISH
Holloway ANNE O'SULLIVAN

PRODUCTION STAFF

Set Design CHRISTINE JONES
Costume Design DAVID ZINN
Lighting Design DAN KOTLOWITZ
Sound Design RANDY FREED
Production Stage Manager RICK BORUTTA
Production Manager GARY N. HYGOM
Casting JUDY HENDERSON

SOMETHING IN THE AIR

A Play in Two Acts
For 3 Men and 2 Women

CHARACTERS

NEVILLE a man

WALKER a man

CRAM a man

SLOANE a woman

HOLLOWAY a young woman

PLACE: Various locations throughout a large city.

TIME: The present, except more so.

Approximate running time: 2 hours (with intermission).

ACT I

SCENE 1

(IN DARKNESS, the sound of a VIOLENT STORM with wind, rain, thunder and lightning. LIGHTS UP on Neville's office. NEVILLE is at his desk. WALKER enters, drenched, bedraggled, clutching an umbrella turned inside out by the wind.)

WALKER. Dr. Neville, is it not?

NEVILLE. Just Neville.

WALKER. Not *just* Neville. Neville the magnificent. Neville the extraordinary. A Neville to end all Nevilles.

NEVILLE. What have you heard?

WALKER. You save lives.

NEVILLE. Do you have an appointment?

WALKER. An appointment with destiny. My name is Walker.

NEVILLE. Well then. How are you, Walker?

WALKER *(tries not to cry)*. I need help.

NEVILLE. Who doesn't? Exemplary coat. Cashmere?

WALKER *(pulling himself together)*. Vect-O-Lene. Synthetic, easier to clean.

NEVILLE *(touches it)*. Nice.

(WALKER sits.)

WALKER. I borrowed my ex-wife's car. The cops pulled me over, busted taillight. They looked in the trunk. Handcuffs, a snub-nosed revolver, two bungee cords, a nurse's uniform. My ex-wife isn't a nurse.

NEVILLE. I see.

WALKER. I've known her eleven years, but do you ever really know another person? I drove over to the harbor, had a drink on the deck at Callahan's, my God, the unbearable sadness of boats at their mooring.

NEVILLE. Why are you here?

WALKER. Four gimlets, a bowl of salted nuts, sunset, the harbor's glowing. An enormous shiny eel had washed ashore. Three children at play, but one of them was always odd man out. Breaks your heart, doesn't it?

NEVILLE. Why are you here?

WALKER. I'm all alone, night coming on, squeezing my glass so hard it cracks, watching the twinkling lights of the harbor. People on one of the boats singing a song my mother used to sing to me. What in God's name happened to my life?

NEVILLE. Why are you here?

WALKER. I'm not doing this right. When you've spent your entire life building a fortress, it's hard to lay down your weapons and throw open the gates.

NEVILLE. Why are you telling me this?

WALKER. Don't quit on me, please. I can do better. You think I'm not being honest?

NEVILLE. I don't know why you're talking to me.

WALKER. You mean why do I lack the intimacy in my life that I must bare my soul to a stranger?

NEVILLE. No, I mean why are you talking to me?

WALKER. You're encouraging me to explore these issues on my own?

NEVILLE. I want to know why you're talking to me.

WALKER. You're obviously trying to knock down some resistance, but I swear I don't know what it is, Dr. Neville.

NEVILLE. Just Neville. And I'm not interested in your intimacy or your resistance or your Vect-O-Lene coat.

WALKER. I'm new at this. Do I just talk?

NEVILLE. I want to know why you came into my office.

WALKER. This is not a life I'm living. I cannot bear another rumpled, joyless night of agony and perdition. I need some ... connection.

NEVILLE. You must have gotten my name somewhere. Where did you get my name?

WALKER. They were turning off the lights at Callahan's. Two suits were huddled in the dark at a nearby table. Florid, sweaty apparitions, one of them saying how you'd saved his life. He wrote your name on a napkin, but I got it. *(Pulls out crumpled napkin.)* I want you to save my life. Is my life worth saving?

NEVILLE. I have absolutely no idea.

WALKER. He said you were the very best analyst in the city.

NEVILLE. That's true. I am a financial analyst.

WALKER. My God, that's the wrong kind! *(Jumps up.)* How stupid and unforgivable! Forgive me! I'll go.

NEVILLE. Thank you.

WALKER. You'll never see me again.

NEVILLE. Much appreciated.

(WALKER hesitates by the door.)

WALKER. Dr. Neville? How did you save that man's life?

NEVILLE. It was a financial matter. I offered him an iron-clad return on his investment.

WALKER. Impossible. There's always a risk. (*Beat.*) Isn't there? (*Beat.*) How, pray tell, do you avoid risk?

NEVILLE. Invest in something certain.

WALKER. But nothing's certain. My life is sorry testament to that.

NEVILLE. Death is certain.

WALKER. It's all I have left on my calendar.

NEVILLE. No job? No woman?

WALKER. All in the past, I'm afraid.

NEVILLE. No hope?

WALKER. Hope is what makes it so excruciating. I hope someday to rid myself of hope. Then perhaps I could hope to be happy with nothing.

NEVILLE. How can you live on nothing?

WALKER. I'll get another job. I sell airspace.

NEVILLE. Oh?

WALKER (*backing down*). All right, I don't actually sell it. I put people who want to buy air together with people who want to sell air.

NEVILLE. A middleman.

WALKER. Till the bottom fell out. Lost my nerve. The air didn't change, the people did.

NEVILLE. Seems to me the air changed. So you lost your nerve and now you're out in the cold.

WALKER. I have a little nest egg.

NEVILLE. And you'll settle for that?

WALKER. What can I do? I've never been lucky with money.

NEVILLE. Help that little nest egg hatch into a glorious financial bird. Let it spread its wings and fly into a fortune. Look around you! Anyone who isn't rich should be ashamed of himself.

WALKER. You guarantee results?

NEVILLE. A man is dying. He has no money. You buy his life insurance policy. Keep up the premiums, pay his expenses, when he dies you're the beneficiary. Windfall, my favorite season. Does the prospect of a few million make your heart beat faster?

WALKER. It sounds barbaric.

NEVILLE. You wouldn't help someone in dire need? You wouldn't make someone's last days bearable? You heartless bastard.

WALKER. I'd be investing in someone's death.

NEVILLE. Everyone's entitled to a piece of the pie, but you have to have the stomach. Do you have the stomach for the pie, Walker?

WALKER. I don't know about my stomach anymore. I don't know about anything anymore.

NEVILLE. Goodbye, Walker. I'd wish you everything you deserve, but it appears you already have it.

WALKER. Dr. Neville? No one's forcing these terminal people to make such an arrangement. And it does offer them comfort in their time of need. Death is quite a setback, but poverty is intolerable.

NEVILLE. Finding our stomach, are we, Walker?

WALKER. If it's not too late, I'd like my piece of the pie.

NEVILLE. Sadly, I have only three terminals left. And they've been promised to others.

WALKER. Then why did you dangle this in front of me, torturing me with hope?

NEVILLE. You wanted to know how I save lives.

WALKER. You must save mine. Please. So many opportunities have slipped through these trembling fingers. And if there's really no risk...

NEVILLE. It's the safest investment you'll ever make. Look at my clients, they have the fattest assets in town. I might be able to free up one terminal.

WALKER. What do I have to do?

NEVILLE (*holds up three folders*). Choose.

WALKER. I'd like the most terminal terminal, if I might.

NEVILLE. Excellent! More capital up front, but a bigger payday when your man crosses the finish line. I'll arrange a meeting so papers can be signed. You'll be laughing all the way to the bank, my friend!

(WALKER and NEVILLE shake hands as LIGHTS FADE.)

SCENE 2

(LIGHTS UP on CRAM sitting at a table in a coffee shop. He's loudly slurping soup from an enormous bowl. NEVILLE leads WALKER to the table.)

NEVILLE. Still alive, are we?

CRAM. What did you pull up in your net, you vile man?

NEVILLE. Walker. (*To WALKER.*) Cram.

WALKER. A pleasure, Cram.

CRAM. A "pleasure"? This is a "pleasure," you ruthless pigeon? Rolling my cold flesh over into your retirement account?

NEVILLE. Easy does it, Cram. Nothing's been signed. And you're not the only terminal in the hopper.

CRAM. A noble victim, is that what you want? (*Belches.*)
I've been a disgraceful coward and a two-faced louse my entire life, why should I change now?

WALKER. No need to change on my account. I accept you as is.

CRAM. I'm so relieved. I thought I might have to improve.

NEVILLE. Sign next to the little pink flags and we'll leave you in peace. (*He produces papers which CRAM and WALKER sign.*)

WALKER. I look forward to a mutually beneficial arrangement, Cram. I'll happily pay your rent and your expenses and your premiums until such point as you...

NEVILLE. Yes, yes, when Cram dies, hip hip hooray! You get the insurance money and the deal is done.

CRAM. Wonderful. And now I think I'd like to vomit.
Anyone care to join me?

WALKER. I'm fine, thanks.

(*CRAM leaves.*)

NEVILLE. Well? Suitably ill?

WALKER. He clearly hasn't much time left.

NEVILLE. He'll be lucky to finish his soup. I wonder why he ordered such a large bowl. (*Sounds of vomiting off.*)
Music to your ears, eh, Walker?

WALKER. A glorious symphony. Thank you, Dr. Neville.
This is easily the soundest investment I've ever made.

(*A final explosive vomiting sound.*)

NEVILLE. Yes sir! I'm getting an appetite. Care to join me at my club?

WALKER. Shouldn't we wait for Cram to finish his vomiting and his meal?

NEVILLE. Suit yourself. Our business is done.

(NEVILLE leaves. WALKER sits down at the table to wait. CRAM returns.)

CRAM. You're still here? That's an unpleasant surprise. That doesn't sit well with me at all.

WALKER. I thought it would be rude to leave you in mid-vomit.

CRAM. Ruder than invading my mealtime like this?

WALKER. I could make arrangements to leave, if you like. Whatever's best for you.

CRAM. Do you know what's best for me? What's best for me is if you were sick and I were well.

WALKER. I'm sorry. The only reason I'm even involved in this nasty business is I hit a patch of hard luck much like you. But maybe not quite as bad.

CRAM. Do you know what I like about talking to you, Walker? It makes death seem like a welcome alternative.

WALKER. I'm sorry to offend you. I'm seeking common ground but everything feels like quicksand.

CRAM. Make no mistake about this, Walker. I'm only interested in your money and you're only interested in my death. I hardly think that's the basis for being palsywalsy.

WALKER. I'll bet if we both knew how we came to be sitting at this table we'd find a certain rapport. I don't even know the cause of your little predicament.

CRAM. In the travel agency where I worked I was the winner of a sales contest. The prize was a safari. My last day in the outback I was bitten by an evil little rodent. An ugly creeping jungle fever set in. By the time I got home, the doctors discovered three things. First, my illness was fatal. Second, there was no hope of a cure.

WALKER. What was the third thing?

CRAM. They wouldn't say. They thought it would depress me.

WALKER. In addition to my heartfelt money, you have my deepest sympathy.

CRAM. My medical group surgically removed my health benefits on a Standard Technicality-Leading-to-Dismissal-of-Claim Clause. The only way for me to continue living indoors, which I've come to enjoy, was to sell my life insurance policy.

WALKER. I'm delighted to help out.

CRAM. Day by day I grow weaker. It takes every bit of strength to stop my head from plunging into my soup. You've invested wisely, Walker.

WALKER. Thanks! No one's ever said that to me before.

CRAM. I'm going to make you a wealthy man.

WALKER. Can't wait.

CRAM. I have just one favor to ask.

WALKER. Anything! *(Beat.)* Well, not *anything*. *(Beat.)* Almost anything. *(Beat.)* I mean I'll try to help you out... within reason...

CRAM. Can you please shut the hell up about our arrangement? I don't want my former beneficiary to know there's a change.

WALKER. It's our secret, Cram. If tortured, I'll reveal nothing.

CRAM (*stops eating*). Don't wait for me. I must gather my strength. It's a raw night outside and not all of us have such a fine cashmere coat to wear.

WALKER. Actually it's Vect-O-Lene. Versatile, you can wear it anywhere.

CRAM (*touches it*). Nice.

WALKER. My last memento of more prosperous days. But I'm sure there are many expensive coats in my future, after you, well, you know. So, I guess this is goodbye, Cram.

CRAM. Take a good look. The next time you see me you'll be identifying the body.

WALKER. Excellent. Until then...enjoy!

(*WALKER leaves as LIGHTS FADE.*)

SCENE 3

(*LIGHTS UP on SLOANE alone at a table in a restaurant, dressed for a glamorous night out. She sips a martini, then smiles and gestures in the direction of the bar. WALKER comes to her table, a bottle of beer in hand.*)

SLOANE. Are you the one?

WALKER. The one what?

SLOANE. I was supposed to meet someone here. But you seem to be someone else.

WALKER. I am someone else. But I'd be willing to meet you here.

SLOANE. But you're not the one. I saw you over at the bar in your cashmere coat.

WALKER. Actually it's Vect-O-Lene. Comes in a variety of lively colors and it's reversible.

SLOANE (*touches it*). Nice. There you were, drinking your beer and stealing glances in my direction.

WALKER. I couldn't take my eyes off you. You're very well assembled.

SLOANE. I don't like sitting by myself. I'm afraid of what I might do.

WALKER. I've got a solution. I could sit down. (*He sits down with SLOANE.*)

SLOANE. You don't even have to talk. We could sit here in silence.

WALKER. Except people might think we were married.

SLOANE. I'm Sloane.

WALKER. Walker. Whoever stood you up is insane.

SLOANE. Perhaps it's unavoidable. Sometimes a person will get off a bus and just disappear into thin air.

WALKER. That's very rare. Anyway, *I'd* avoid it. I wouldn't leave a beautiful woman sitting here all alone. If I were that other guy I'd get here early so a guy like me wouldn't get swept off his feet and decide he'll do whatever it takes to get you away from me, if I were that other guy.

SLOANE. You don't know me from a gaping hole in your head.

WALKER. I'll worm my way into your life. You'll think I've gone but I'll be creepy-crawling toward you in the dark. That guy doesn't stand a chance and neither do you.

SLOANE. Would it change anything if I told you I was a prostitute?

WALKER. It's the week-end. Let's not talk about work.

SLOANE. You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?

WALKER. I'm onto a sure thing. I'm coming into bucks.

I'd like to celebrate with a moist kiss.

SLOANE. You and what army? This wasn't a good idea.

He'll get upset when he sees you sitting here salivating.

WALKER. I'll coldcock him. I'll rattle his brains. He'll go down hard.

SLOANE. Jesus, don't say that! Anger terrifies me. My father used to get angry.

WALKER. Everyone gets angry.

SLOANE. Not like my father. Once he was so angry his face turned red and it looked as if his head would explode and then ...

WALKER. What?

SLOANE. No. It's too too awful. I couldn't.

WALKER. Tell me.

SLOANE. Oh, all right, if you insist. But it isn't pretty.

Something flew out of his ear and landed on the floor. It made a clicking sound when it hit the linoleum.

WALKER. What was it?

SLOANE. A glistening gray orb, trembling slightly. We left it where it landed. The next morning my brother found it in the vestibule. It had moved in the night, pulsing with its own savage energy.

WALKER. Whatever did you do with it?

SLOANE. My brother put it in a shoebox under his bed. It was a monstrously hot summer, and there it stayed, week after languid week. One night my brother heard a tap-tap-tapping so we got a flashlight and looked under the bed and the top of the shoebox was moving up and down, tapping against the wall.

WALKER. You don't see that very often.