

DYSPHORIA

Cast of Eight

THE HOOVERS

NICK, late 30's beatnik, painfully high-strung, gaunt with wispy hair and an echo of a goatee.

COLLEEN, Nick's wife, late 30's, self-absorbed, attractive, ample but not heavyset.

BILLY, Nick and Colleen's son, age 14, tall, broad-shouldered with a naïve appearance and easy nature.

THE SALLERS

FLINT, 40's, handsome politician, intimidating but appealing, a bright smile and expertly quaffed hair.

EMILY, Flint's late wife, twenty-something, plain but sophisticated, slim hipped with a boyish figure.

TOM, Flint and Emily's son, 14, lanky with a ruddy complexion and boundless energy.

ADDITIONAL PLAYERS

NARRATOR, male in his late 40's, arrogant, emaciated, unappealing to look at, unshaven and disheveled throughout.

LANGSTON, news anchor, late 40's, African-American, elegant, dapper and reserved.

COUNSELOR, played by the actor who plays Emily, twenty-something, made to look heavy set and oafish.

DANCING GENERAL, played by the actor who plays Langston, reminiscent of George S. Patton, Jr.

The play takes place over several days in various suggested settings in Chicago and a nearby suburb.

STAGING

The set will require a secondary elevated stage, right, using approximately an eighth of the overall space and a podium far downstage (or offstage) left.

ACT I
Sewing Circle

AT RISE: A small, dilapidated room with a window overlooking the lights of Chicago. The room is an elevated sub-stage, right, where it will remain throughout the play.

The sub-stage (room) requires special attention to lighting and should, unless noted, only be lit when the Narrator speaks. Blackout and dim out as directed.

The Narrator, unshaven and disheveled, is seated in a worn recliner, which is placed in the center of the room.

Begin in darkness. Room lightens slowly, illuminating swirling feathers or dust in the air.

NARRATOR

I'm a seer. I see what is, what was and what will be. The universe is all around me, inside me, in the voices I hear, the aromas I smell – in the touch, the taste, the faces, the lines and color – in all the mindless debris that floats before my eyes, down my collar and onto my feet.

Most clearly now, I see, taste and smell you. I can sense the many measured moments of your life, the ones that you've already lived –

The Narrator lights a cigarette. Exhales.

– and the ones you've yet to see.

NARRATOR [continued]

I've been with you many times in the past – stepping in and out of your life. You may not have known it, but you've always felt it when I leave. I'm that familiar tingle in your spine that makes your shoulders shake.

He shudders.

That's not somebody walking on your grave. [*Grinning*] That's just me.

I'm almost always here, thumbing through magazines, smoking and occasionally moving dust around the room. Mostly though, I just sit here, preoccupied with visions, voices and the mixing of time and place, which, though it may sound entertaining to you, is a slip of Librium without the sound of your thoughts.

If only you could see how tiresome the universe really is. If only. You would know that I feel no pleasure in watching you, watching the past, seeing the future.

[*Fidgety*] But, when my mind is active and filled with visions, I am cloaked from your curious eyes. I move in a thicket of hallucinations.

Have you ever smelled a rose, just a whiff, when not even a single stem is in sight? Have you heard your name called out from an empty room?

The Narrator takes long drag on his cigarette and exhales.

Be grateful for what I give you. Let your mind wander and *see*. [*In the manner of a sideshow caller*] Come all! Come all! Taste the polluted flesh of America. Touch the rusty rails of cynicism. Smell the stench of revolution, devolution, war, piety, immorality and principled lunacy. Reach inward and outward to touch the collapse of culture, reel in the abundance, savor the last swallows of manifest destiny, your liberty, your dignity, your equanimity's quiet, quiet demise.

Pause. Resume softly, earnestly.

Come. Join the poets, the writers, the artists and madmen alike.

He extends his arms, fingers waving inward.

NARRATOR [continued]

Come... I've got luminosity, shimmers and glimmers in my sleeves. I've got something lethal in my pocket and something scrumptious on my mind.

He steps back.

Come.

BLACKOUT

AT RISE: *Spot on downstage left. Anchor podium, evening news. Langston is dapperly attired, expressionless, silent and staring into space. An ON-AIR sign illuminates above his head. He appears startled into speech.*

LANGSTON

Good evening, I'm Langston Hughes. We're following several stories this evening. A Chicago mother is charged with arranging the sale of her son for \$500 in order to buy the highly addictive painkiller, OxyContin. And, later this evening, Charlotte Benton will bring us a historical perspective on Valium, the wonder drug that revolutionized the treatment of anxiety 40 years ago.

For now, let's turn to Chuck Massy with the latest news from the war.

BLACKOUT

OFFSTAGE VOICE

The Pentagon reports today that 216 U.S. soldiers have died since the beginning of military operations. 78 U.S. soldiers have died on or since May 1, when the President declared major combat operations over.

Two LCED displays hanging above center stage illuminate with the numbers 216 and 78. The LCEDs remain lit throughout remainder.

NARRATOR

[*Gaily*] Wasn't that fun? That was yesterday. [*Pause*] I know what you're thinking. So what? So I can conjure up a day-old broadcast of the evening news and throw it before your eyes. Big deal. You have a VCR. You have TiVo. I know, I know. But, can your gifted little contraptions do this?

BLACKOUT

Spot on downstage left. Anchor podium, evening news.

Gray has been added to Langston's hair. He sports reading glasses and appears thicker about the waist.

The ON-AIR sign illuminates.

LANGSTON

Good evening, I'm Langston Hughes. Dominating our news this evening, homegrown terrorism strikes a devastating blow in downtown Chicago. At this hour, officials are sifting through rubble, looking for clues after this morning's rush-hour attack on three elevated train platforms. Dozens are wounded. At least 19 are dead. The blasts blew out windows in skyscrapers and hurled debris onto the crowded sidewalks below.

BLACKOUT

The sounds of three loud, nearly simultaneous explosions. People and shadows run frantically across the stage in flickering lights. The sound of sirens. Thick smoke.

NARRATOR

I love explosions. Nothing is hidden in an explosion – everything is clear upon clear upon crystal clear...

Narrator snaps his fingers.

BLACKOUT

AT RISE: *Center stage in bright afternoon light. The sound of birds. A sign reading CAMP CHECAGOU hangs overhead and a poster board, thick with fliers, is placed at the rear of the stage. Billy, Nick, Colleen enter, dressed for a picnic. Billy carrying sleeping bag and backpack.*

Colleen fiddles irritably with Billy's shirt collar.

COLLEEN

I should have ironed this again.

BILLY

It's fine.

COLLEEN

Here. No, it isn't.

Ignoring Colleen, Billy walks upstage left.

Billy, where are you going?

BILLY

To sign-up for canoeing.

Billy dons earphones and walks to the poster board. Nick watches Billy for a moment, smiles then looks to Colleen, who has a dour expression.

NICK

What?

Colleen gestures toward Billy.

Let him go. He'll be scuffed up soon enough.

COLLEEN

Not while the other parents are here.

NICK

[*Concerned*] Colleen, I don't like this place.

COLLEEN

Do you want them to think we didn't raise him properly?

NICK

It gives me the creeps.

COLLEEN

Parents are so judgmental.

NICK

A bad feeling.

COLLEEN

[*Irritated*] A bad feeling about what?

Nick shrugs.

Oh-my-God, Nick. We've been over this a hundred-hundred times. What more do you want me to say? Do you want me to stay here, with Billy, to make sure nothing happens? Hold his hand? Tuck him in at night? For the love of Christ, he's fourteen!

NICK

I'm uneasy –

COLLEEN

And we know why. It has nothing to do with Billy.

NICK

About this place.

COLLEEN

Nick, it's a summer camp. Nothing more, nothing less. Just a summer camp. For Christ's sake – you see conspiracies around every corner, behind every shrub – and it amounts to nothing. Nothing! It's all in your mind.

Nick pales – his stomach tightening.

COLLEEN [continued]

The YMCA is just that: The Young Men's Christian Association. It's not a right-wing plot to brainwash anybody. The Boy Scouts: it's just a bunch of kids camping out. The Salvation Army – guess what? It's not really an army. Get it?

NICK

This isn't the YMCA. This isn't the Boy Scouts.

COLLEEN

[*Accusingly*] It's what we can afford.

NICK

But, it's just that –

COLLEEN

No. No-no-no-no-no. Look. This wasn't my choice either. You're the one who needs time off. You're the one who's getting sicker by the day. I'm not the one tinkering with your medication – you are.

NICK

I can cope.

COLLEEN

But *he* can't. Billy can't. He can't see you, day after day, moping about the house, brooding. Pacing. Always pacing... kicking things.

NICK

I get angry. I've every right to be angry.

COLLEEN

You've every right to act like a man. You've every right to face up to a challenge now and then and not drag your family into your melodramas and wild-eyed conspiracies. Do you have any idea of what kind of effect you're having on Billy?

NICK

You're exaggerating.

COLLEEN
On his mind?

NICK
You always exaggerate. You're hysterical.

COLLEEN
[*Excitedly*] I exaggerate? I'm hysterical?

Billy returns from the poster board and removes his earphones. He looks to Colleen, who is gesturing hysterically.

If I worry too much, if I'm hysterical, it's because somebody's got to be.
Somebody here has got to worry. Somebody has to keep this family together.

BILLY
Stop!

COLLEEN
[*In prickly, sing-song. Taunting*] And it ain't going to be you. We've already established that. It's not you. You can't. You're too fragile. Mustn't upset Nick.

Nick walks away and covers mouth with hand, as if holding back sickness.

That's right—walk away. I stay!

Startled by the volume of her voice, she softens.

I stay.

Billy crosses to Nick's side and cradles his shoulders. He glares at Colleen.

BILLY
Stop it. Just stop it.

DIM OUT

NARRATOR

Would you like to see how this began? Nothing ever begins like it ends. This I've learned: best intentions go awry. People change – the pendulum swings and such is the nature of love.

I suspect I've never loved – at least not that I can remember... I have no love for humanity with all its conceited expectations. It's ugly in youth, when wide-eyed optimism, free-love and lofty goals hang like low fruit. And uglier still, in middle age, when life bitters with missed dreams and ignored opportunities.

And yet, here we are – a dysphoric nation, riding a super-sized wave of baby-boomers. Most of them staring accusingly at their wrinkled penises and vaginas – wondering – how could we have been led so far astray?

Pause.

But, enough of that. Let's pour the syrup on thick – sweetness in exchange for a bit of tooth decay. Let's visit the saccharine lexicon of youth just once – only once – and get it out of the way.

DIM OUT