

CONTROL ISSUES

By Alan Haehnel

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A One Act Play

By Alan Haehnel

SYNOPSIS: In this contemplation of what controls our modern lives, a group of three actors follow the commands dictated by the egotistical entity behind a screen. The screen's written instructions and images guide the actors through a variety of scenes until, at a certain point, the screen becomes impatient with the actors' limitations. Eventually, after punishing the actors for their ineptitude, the screen gives up. The entity abandons the actors. Two of the actors decide to leave the stage and proceed with their lives. The final actor remains, waiting in vain for the entity's return.

DURATION: 35 minutes.

TIME: Present Day.

SETTING: The movement of the three chairs by the characters and visuals on a screen indicate a variety of different locales.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5 either)

ACTOR 1 (m/f)..... (106 lines)

ACTOR 2 (m/f)..... (127 lines)

ACTOR 3 (m/f)..... (110 lines)

USHER (m/f)..... (7 lines)

SHAYNA (m/f)..... (6 lines)

CASTING NOTE: Can be played by any-aged actors.

PROPS: None. Everything is pantomimed.

COSTUMES: The actors should look very similar, as if interchangeable. Their costumes should suggest marionettes.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES: Let's talk about the screen. The person controlling it should be part of the rehearsal process early, since the timing of the words—both aimed at the audience and interacting with the actors—must be as exact as they would be if the screen were a live character.

I have put on Youtube a copy of the screen's part: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYWRih-ax1Q>. The timing is not correct, but it will give you an idea of the types of visuals and music used in the original production. You will notice that the dings of the bell come in often. They are crucial as cues to the actors since they can't be constantly checking in with the screen. Between scenes, the dings work like this: The first ding indicates the end of a scene; the actors freeze. The second ding gives the title of the next scene, when the actors move themselves and their chairs into position, then freeze again. The third ding coincides with the picture that sets the scene and indicates when the actors should begin moving and speaking their lines. Enjoy! We had a great time with this production, both in presenting it and in the fascinating conversations it engendered.

AT START: *Dark stage. The only thing there is a black pedestal with a large screen atop it. Three chairs are downstage of the pedestal. For a few seconds, a shimmering display of lights plays on the screen along with mysterious music. Three actors come out and sit down in the chairs. Their costumes and makeup suggest marionettes. They bow their heads.*

SCREEN: Greetings.

SCREEN: Tonight's presentation will feature, besides MYSELF, three adequate human beings.

SCREEN: Actor 1.

At their introductions, ACTOR 1, ACTOR 2 and ACTOR 3 stand and assumes a pose.

ACTOR 1: Hello.

SCREEN: Actor 2.

ACTOR 2: Hi.

SCREEN: Actor 3.

ACTOR 3: That's me.

SCREEN: They will be presenting a series of scenes

SCREEN: For my amusement.

SCREEN: *(And, I suppose, yours.)*

A bell chimes. ACTOR 1 and ACTOR 2 move their chairs and strike poses for the upcoming scene and freeze. ACTOR 3 moves his chair to the side, facing upstage, and sits, back facing the audience. This is the convention at the beginning of each scene—the actors in the scene move into position; any actor not involved becomes essentially invisible by moving away and not facing the audience. Bell chimes from the screen indicate when the scene begins and ends.

SCREEN: Scene 1: Doctor and Patient.

Brackets indicate pictures on the screen.

SCREEN: [Interior Doctor's Office]

ACTOR 1: I have some good news and some bad news.

ACTOR 2: I'll take the good news first.

ACTOR 1: Well, Mrs. Doodlybop...

ACTOR 2: Oh, I'm not Mrs. Doodlybop. I'm Mrs. Hoddleytink.

ACTOR 1: Oops, wrong chart. Here we are. Mrs. Hoddleytink. Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh. For you, I have only bad news.

ACTOR 2: I'll take that first.

ACTOR 1: I admire your sense of humor. Very important quality.

ACTOR 2: Thank-you.

ACTOR 1: You have five minutes left to live.

ACTOR 2: Ouch.

ACTOR 1: What hurts?

ACTOR 2: The pangs of my foreshortened mortal existence.

ACTOR 1: Hm. That will pass. In about five minutes.

ACTOR 2: Do you have any advice for me?

ACTOR 1: Take a long vacation.

ACTOR 2: In five minutes?

ACTOR 1: Take a short vacation. Enjoy the time you have. Contemplate what you've done wrong. Then... die.

A bell tones to end the scene. The ACTOR 1, ACTOR 2 and ACTOR 3 freeze, then move into positions for the next scene.

SCREEN: A Ride

SCREEN: [Taxi cab]

ACTOR 3: I'd like to go to the park.

ACTOR 1: Good for you.

ACTOR 3: Why aren't we moving?

ACTOR 1: Any number of reasons. The taxi's not in gear. My foot's not on the gas. On the other hand, we are actually moving, at a rate of about a thousand miles per hour. That's how fast the Earth spins. If it didn't, day wouldn't become night, night wouldn't become day, the seasons wouldn't change, life wouldn't be life.

ACTOR 3: Are you going to take me to the park?

ACTOR 1: Do you want me to take you to the park?

ACTOR 3: Yes! I told you I want to go to the park.

ACTOR 1: Wanting to go is one thing. Wanting me to take you is another.

ACTOR 3: Oh, taxi driver, on this spinning globe of ours, would you so kindly put your vehicle in gear, place your foot on the gas, and proceed with me to the park?

ACTOR 1: Why, certainly. Thought you'd never ask.

Bell chimes. ACTOR 1, ACTOR 2 and ACTOR 3 get into new positions.

SCREEN: Lightbulb Moment

SCREEN: [A lightbulb]

ACTOR 1: Okay, what are we doing here?

ACTOR 2: I am going to climb on this chair; I am going to take this lightbulb; I am going to put it into that light socket.

ACTOR 3: Fabulous. Enjoy yourself.

ACTOR 2: No, no! No! You are all going to help me.

ACTOR 1: What is this, one of those "how-many-does-it-take-to-screw-in-a-lightbulb" jokes?

ACTOR 2: One. It takes one of me.

ACTOR 3: Perfect. 'Bye!

ACTOR 2: But I need the support of both of you as I endeavor to do this thing.

ACTOR 3: Endeavor to... it's a lightbulb, not Mt. Everest.

ACTOR 2: To me, a person deathly afraid of heights, it is Mt. Everest. So please, gather around me as I *endeavor* to climb on this chair and put in that lightbulb.

ACTOR 1: Give it to me; I'll do it.

ACTOR 2: (*Suddenly angry.*) No! I have worked up to this moment for months. This is my challenge to conquer, and it has great symbolic value. Please, surround me; support me. (*Ad libs from ACTOR 1, ACTOR 2 and ACTOR 3, as ACTOR 2 shakily gets up on the chair, surrounded by the others.*) I did it! I'm up here!

ACTOR 1: Congratulations. Now put in the lightbulb, righty-tighty.

ACTOR 2: I'm doing it! I've almost done it! I did it! (*ACTOR 1 and ACTOR 3 clap.*) No, no; keep your hands close! Save your applause. I still have to get down. (*Ad libs as ACTOR 1 climbs down.*) Thank you all so much! That means a lot to me. And now for the finale I shall go to the light socket and I shall...

ACTOR 2 pantomimes flipping the switch. Clearly, nothing happens. She flips the switch several more times.

ALL ACTORS: Bummer.

Bell chimes. ACTOR 1, ACTOR 2 and ACTOR 3 line up across the stage, slumped down like marionettes with slackened strings.

SCREEN: Now for something different.

On the screen appears the words of a poem, accompanied by music. As the words come up, ACTOR 1, ACTOR 2 and ACTOR 3 take turns delivering the poem. The two not delivering perform a simple dance echoing the sentiment of the poem. The puppet motif runs through this part of the show.

SCREEN: A Brief Song and Dance.

SCREEN and ACTOR 1: Quaint little puppets, aren't they?

Scurrying little mice.

It's funny when they

Try to think

And think they're thinking twice.

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: Their world:

A tiny, little rink.

The ice:

Incredibly thin.

On it, they twirl,

Turn and spin,

For a little while until

They drop in.

SCREEN and ACTOR 3: Their lives

As long as a wink.

They dream they'll rise

But all they do instead

Is sink,

Sink,

Sink.

The music ends. A bell rings. ACTOR 2 and ACTOR 3 move into position for the next scene while ACTOR 1 sits with his back to the audience.

SCREEN: Chance.

SCREEN: [A quarter]

ACTOR 3 flips a coin into the air.

ACTOR 2: Heads.

ACTOR 3: Tails.

ACTOR 2: Come on!

ACTOR 3: It's tails, see?

ACTOR 2: You're cheating!

ACTOR 3: How can I be cheating? You've looked at it five times; it's a normal coin. You've flipped it; I've flipped it. How can I be cheating?

ACTOR 2: But I've been wrong 58 times in a row! That's not statistically possible!

ACTOR 3: I will admit that it's highly improbable, but not impossible. It happened, so it was obviously possible. Do you want to keep going?

ACTOR 2: I don't know.

ACTOR 3: Do you want to flip it?

ACTOR 2: No.

ACTOR 3: Do you want me to flip it?

ACTOR 2: No.

ACTOR 3: Then you want to quit.

ACTOR 2: No.

ACTOR 3: What do you want?

ACTOR 2: I want it to stop coming up the opposite of what I say!

ACTOR 3: Then we should quit!

ACTOR 2: Why?

ACTOR 3: Because that's the only way to guarantee it won't come up the opposite of what you say is if we just don't play.

ACTOR 2: Do it one more time.

ACTOR 3: You're sure?

ACTOR 2: Yes.

ACTOR 3: What if you're wrong for the 59th time?

ACTOR 2: I don't know. I'll go crazy. Or not. I don't know!

ACTOR 3: I'm done after this, no matter what.

ACTOR 2: Flip it. Do it. (*ACTOR 3 flips the coin.*) Tails!

ACTOR 3: It's... oh crap! I dropped it!

ACTOR 2: It's rolling away! Stop it!

ACTOR 3: Uh-oh. It fell down that sewer grate. Sorry, dude. Now we'll never know.

ACTOR 2: It was tails. I know it was.

ACTOR 3: Well, I mean...

ACTOR 2: It was tails, wasn't it? Wasn't it?!

ACTOR 3: Yeah. Yeah. For sure.

ACTOR 2: For sure?

ACTOR 3: Absolutely.

Bell dings to end the scene.

SCREEN: In the audience is a girl named Shayna.

SCREEN: Shayna just leaned over to her friend and said, "That wasn't even funny."

SCREEN: Yeah, Shayna, I see you.

SCREEN: Actors! Voice me!

ACTOR 1, ACTOR 2 and ACTOR 3 speak the lines as they are displayed on the screen.

SCREEN and ACTOR 1: Oh, you think we need to be funny now,

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: Is that the deal?

SCREEN and ACTOR 3: You think just because we tickled your fancy before,

SCREEN and ACTOR 1: We have to do it all the time now?

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: Is that the deal?

SCREEN and ALL ACTORS: Shayna?

SCREEN and ACTOR 3: Well, listen up and listen good:

SCREEN and ACTOR 1: Your expectations aren't our obligations.

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: That was a great line.

SCREEN and ALL ACTORS: Your expectations aren't our obligations.

SCREEN and ACTOR 3: We're gonna do what we're gonna do.

SCREEN and ACTOR 1: So hold tight, strap in

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: and hang on for the ride.

SCREEN and ALL ACTORS: Shayna.

SCREEN and ACTOR 3: Did you even buy a ticket?

Bell dings. ACTOR 1, ACTOR 2 and ACTOR 3 get into position to begin the next scene.

SCREEN: Tag

SCREEN: [A Playground]

ACTOR 1: You're it!

ACTOR 2: Tag-back. You're it!

ACTOR 1: No tag-backs!

ACTOR 2: Uh-huh!

ACTOR 1: Nuh-unh!

ACTOR 2: Uh-huh!

ACTOR 1: Nun-unh!

ACTOR 2: Uh-huh!

ACTOR 1: Double-tag-back! You're it!

ACTOR 2: No double-tag-backs!

ACTOR 1: If you can do tag-backs, I can do double-tag-backs. So there! And don't even try to do triple-tag-backs 'cause there's no such thing and you know it!

ACTOR 2: How do you know I know it?

ACTOR 1: 'Cause everybody knows it! There's tags and there's tag-backs and there's double-tag-backs but there's no such thing as triple-tag-backs because then the whole game would be just stupid.

ACTOR 2: You're not supposed to say that word! I'm telling!

ACTOR 1: Go ahead! You're still it!

ACTOR 2: I'm not it! I quit! I'm telling!

ACTOR 1: Go ahead and tell. Then I'll tell on you.

ACTOR 2: Tell what on me?

ACTOR 1: That you're a fart-face!

Bell dings to end the scene.

SCREEN: Oh, look, Shayna's laughing.

SCREEN: She liked the fart joke.
SCREEN: Wonderful.
SCREEN: Pitiful.
SCREEN: Did she even buy a ticket?

Bell dings. ACTOR 1, ACTOR 2 and ACTOR 3 take their places for the next scene.

SCREEN: Contemplation de Moi.
SCREEN: [An expanse of stars]
ACTOR 3: Do you suppose it sees us here?
ACTOR 1: Of course. It sees everything across all time and space. It knows everything across all time and space.
ACTOR 3: You're sure about that?
ACTOR 1: It knows what I'm going to say before I say it, what I'm going to think before I think it.
SCREEN and ACTOR 1: It's nothing short of magical.
SCREEN: I like that.
ACTOR 3: Nothing short of magical.
ACTOR 2: Why do you guys keep saying that?
ACTOR 3: I don't know.
SCREEN: Because I like hearing it.
ACTOR 3: Because...
ACTOR 1: I guess...
ACTOR 1 and ACTOR 3: It's nothing short of magical.
ACTOR 3: What do you think, Actor 2?
ACTOR 2: Everything seems so disjointed. I mean, there's a moment, then another moment, then another. What's the overall story?
ACTOR 1: It knows the overall story. And every moment we experience is just a retelling of the only story that matters, the story of It.
SCREEN: Well said.
ACTOR 2: Doesn't it make you feel sort of futile?
SCREEN: You're sort of futile.
ACTOR 1: No, just the opposite. It makes me feel meaningful. Like a puzzle piece neatly fitted into place by a supportive, confident hand.
SCREEN: Awww.
ACTOR 2: Is that how you feel, Actor 3?

ACTOR 3: Most of the time. It's easy to feel that way now, in this stillness. But when things get crazy, I have to admit, it's not easy.

ACTOR 2: You can say that again.

SCREEN: No, say the other thing again.

ACTOR 1: It's nothing short of magical.

ACTOR 2: I don't know. I just don't know.

ACTOR 1: But It does know, so you don't have to. Trust in that.

ACTOR 2: I guess.

Bell dings. ACTOR 1, ACTOR 2 and ACTOR 3 get in position for the next scene.

SCREEN: Long-lost Friends

SCREEN: [Interior of a grocery store]

ACTOR 1: Marnie? Marnie Stevens, is that you?

ACTOR 3: Oh, my gosh, Pam Kessler? What?

ACTOR 1: It's actually Morrison now.

ACTOR 3: Morrison? You mean you...

ACTOR 1: It took him a while, but Dougie finally popped the question!

ACTOR 3: That's crazy! That's wonderful!

ACTOR 1 and ACTOR 3 pantomime continuing to laugh and talk.

SCREEN: Heart-warming, isn't it?

SCREEN: Notice how often they touch each other?

SCREEN: Pam has asymptomatic COVID.

SCREEN: She's giving it to Marnie right now.

SCREEN: This is too rich! Voice me!

ACTOR 2 rises and speaks along with the Screen.

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: Oh, yeah, would you look at them?

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: Hands to hands, chest to chest, breath to breath!

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: The germs are just a-flowing!

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: Marnie is covered in them! Coated with them!

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: Now watch this, watch, watch, watch, watch, watch!

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: She's got the goo all over her, but she's got to get it inside and...

During the conversation, ACTOR 3 quickly brushes her nose with her fingers.

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: There it is! Did you see it? Did you see it?

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: Instant replay! Slo-mo that moment!

ACTOR 1 and ACTOR 3 rewind to the nose-brush moment, then take it in slow motion.

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: Aaaaaaaaaaaaaand...

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: Stop! Right there!

ACTOR 1 and ACTOR 3 freeze at the moment when ACTOR 3's finger is touching her nose.

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: The moment of contact!

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: The beginning of the end for old Pamela!
Wow!

SCREEN and ACTOR 2: Just look at those lovely little germs making their way up her nose.

The screen continues, but ACTOR 2 stops speaking and turns to look at the screen.

SCREEN: Just wonderful, all those spiky beauties, doing their sickly duties! Ha, ha, ha!

ACTOR 2: Um, excuse me.

SCREEN: You talking to me?

ACTOR 2: Well, yes, I just...

SCREEN: You talking to *me*?

ACTOR 2: I apologize, but I just thought you should know that, as much delight as you're taking in, you know, the nasal conquest going on here, the beginning of a nasty, microbial invasion... we, and the audience, can't see it. I mean, it's not... we're not, you know... able to.

SCREEN: Sigh.

ACTOR 2: I mean, I just...

SCREEN: Never mind.

ACTOR 2: I certainly wanted to help, but...

SCREEN: The moment's passed.

ACTOR 2: I mean, we...

SCREEN: You killed it.

ACTOR 2: Sorry.

SCREEN: Clear the deck.

ACTOR 1 and ACTOR 3 unfreeze.

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