

TRANSCENDENCE
By Tom DeTitta
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CHARACTERS:

JIMMY: Jimmy Carter, 39th President of the United States

ROSALYNN: Rosalynn Carter, former First Lady

MAN: Assumes many roles throughout the play; African-American actor.

The play moves about through time and place, which is mostly established through the dialogue. Depending on the production design, projections could be used to establish scenes or comment on their intention. Levels of the stage or moveable platforms should be a part of the design to help achieve suggested differentiations. Other set pieces, such as the frame of a television, a luncheon table and chair, and working desk, can also move on and off the stage as required by the needs of the scene, or can be part of a more elaborate, permanent design.

Depending on the music for the play can be approached any number of ways, from the development of a chorus, to distributing the parts among the three actors, to taped accompaniment. The selections may also vary depending on the production's preferences.

NOTE: The term 'beat' used as a stage direction throughout refers to a short pause which suggests a shift in emphasis in the dialogue or the character listening to other implied dialogue.

ACT ONE
SCENE ONE:

(Light on JIMMY, alone, talking to audience)

JIMMY:

About three years after I was forced into “an altogether new, unwanted, and potentially empty life” -in other words, three years after I lost to Ronald Reagan - I was traveling in the Middle East meeting with various heads of state, Syria’s President Assad, and King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, as well as with members of the PLO. A lot of people thought I shouldn’t have been meeting with those particular leaders. A lot of people thought I shouldn’t be involving myself in world affairs when I was no longer President. I thought I should.

In Egypt, one of my destinations was the small out of the way town of Mit Abul-Kum, the boyhood home of Anwar Sadat. It was Sadat, then President of Egypt, who, in one of the most dramatic events of modern history, became the first Arab to break the shell around Israel and meet face to face with the Israeli Knesset. It was Sadat who boldly met with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and me to hammer out the Camp David Accords , the historic framework for peace between Arabs and Jews. It was Sadat who wanted an agreement; it was Sadat who pushed for peace. It was Sadat, too, who was killed by an Arab assassin just less than three years after signing the agreement: Not a Jew, but an Arab: One of his own people.

(Pause)

Did his heroic stand and his participation in the Camp David Accords lead to his assassination?

(Pause)

Put another way, would he have been alive if he hadn’t gone to Camp David?

(Then to the audience, as if addressing a Sunday school class)

Answers, anyone?

(Pause)

I keep his picture on my desk. There is not a day that goes by when I do not think of him.

(Beat, reflective, then back with the same vigor:)

In Mit-Abul-Kum, Sadat’s wife, Jehan, said she had come across something Anwar had written about me just before he died.

(JIMMY takes out, then reads from a letter)

“Jimmy Carter is my very best friend on earth, He is the most honorable man I know. Brilliant and deeply religious, he has all the marvelous attributes that make him... that make him inept in dealing with the scoundrels who run the world.”

(Pause)

“Well, maybe,” I said to her, “but I’ll never change.”

(MAN enters, begins challenging JIMMY, almost taunting)

MAN:

“There he goes again.”

JIMMY:

(Bothered)

Ronald Reagan...The 1980 Presidential debates.

MAN:

“He embarrassed the nation when he failed to attack the Iranians who were holding our citizens hostage.”

JIMMY:

We brought them home alive.

MAN:

“We were in such need after Nixon.”

JIMMY:

I never did lie.

MAN:

“He was the best ex-president we ever had.”

JIMMY:

There is nothing I hate to hear more than that!

MAN:

“There he goes again.”

JIMMY

Except maybe that.

(MAN shifts to Southern dialect, becomes more familiar.)

MAN:

Yes, sir, in that Presidential debate, that Mister Reagan he sure did good. Seemed to know what you were going to say even before you ever said it.

(Enter ROSALYNN in reaction to the conversation)

ROSALYNN:

They stole Jimmy’s notes for the debate.

JIMMY:

Rosalynn!

MAN:

And just who is ‘they?’

ROSALYNN:

They are -all of them! Republicans, even Democrats! They hated Jimmy -all of Washington did. And his debating notes, you ask George Will about who stole...

JIMMY:

(Interrupting)

Rosalynn, forgiveness! (Beat) There’s no point in it.

MAN:

(Exiting)

I tell you what, I’m sorry I even asked.

(JIMMY and ROSALYNN are left alone in the silence. Pause. Eventually they ask questions into the surrounding darkness)

ROSALYNN:

But the people, you know -outside of Washington...

JIMMY:

The American people.

ROSALYNN:

They voted for us.

JIMMY:

The first time.

ROSALYNN:

They loved us.

JIMMY:

And then?

(Pause)

ROSALYNN:

Why?

JIMMY:

And Sadat.

ROSALYNN:

Why?

(Pause)

Play continues.

The race issue seemed central to the development of Jimmy Carter's political perspective. Here, he and an African-American man from Plains each remember the same event from Jimmy's childhood.

From Act One, Scene Two:

(Each turns aside and reflects out loud but to themselves about Earl Carter. The effect is a sort of choral reading with each incidentally commenting on what the other is saying, but in different monologues)

MAN:

(Reflecting)

Yes, sir, Mister Earl.

JIMMY:

(Reflecting)

Daddy. (Beat) Daddy was my idol. I followed his examples on work habits, business dealings, community service...life.

(Both MAN and JIMMY remain in separate lights)

MAN:

I remember once, there was a fight between a white man, Max Schmeling, and a black man, Joe Louis.

JIMMY:

I remember when he invited all of the workers into the yard to hear the fight between Max Schmeling and Joe Louis. Daddy had one of the few radios around.

MAN:

He had a radio, see, and he set it right up there on the window sill. We all sat there in the yard - wives and kids -and we listened to that fight.

JIMMY:

It seemed odd that most of the white people in south Georgia rooted for a German, Schmeling, over the American, Louis.

MAN:

That white man Schmeling was supposed to whoop- up on that black man Louis, see. Cept it didn't happen that way.

JIMMY:

Louis knocked him out in the first round.

(MAN is stifling his reaction to this memory)

MAN:

(Polite)

Well, we all thanked Mister Earl real good: That was a right nice thing you done. Mighty nice indeed.

JIMMY:

“We sure appreciate it Mister Earl,” and they left quietly, without another word. Then the moment they got home...

MAN:

(Yelling)

Ye-hah! Did you see that black man take to whipping on that white boy!

JIMMY:

...they all let out a yell you could hear into the next county, and began a celebration that went all night and into the next morning.

MAN:

(Acting out a knockout punch)

Boom -down! He wasn't standing long enough for folks to know how tall he was.

(MAN exits)

JIMMY:

My mother had a reputation as being very liberal when it came to race. As a nurse, she would go into black people's homes and tend to their sick; as a housewife, she would meet them at the front door of our house -something no white person in south Georgia would ever consider doing. While I was in the Navy, I came home on leave. Earlier that year, we had been on duty in the Carribean. When docked in Nassau, the Governor of the Bahamas invited us to a dance -white men only. We took a vote and unanimously declined the invitation. When I came home, I told the story to my parents. My mother seemed pleased. My Daddy stood up and left the room. “The Governor of the Bahamas was right!” he said

(JIMMY begins to exit in thought, then hesitates)

Right after my father died, I left the Navy and came back to Plains. At his funeral, there must've been a hundred people who came to me with stories of things my Daddy had done for them, and he never asked for anything in return.

(MAN sings song about having to rise above; reaching for righteousness; the fight to do what is right. Suggested song, “Help Somebody”)

SONG:

If I can help somebody as I pass along
If I can cheer somebody with a word or song
If I can show somebody he is traveling wrong
Then my living shall not be in vain

If I can do my duty as a good child ought
If I can bring back beauty to a world up wrought
If I can spread God’s message that the Master taught
Then my living shall not be in vain

Then my living shall not be in vain
Oh my living shall not be in vain.

(Lights out)

President Carter believed the executive branch of government was the one that had to somehow articulate and execute the greatest good. It was up to the president to show the American people the right thing to do, despite whatever political cost doing so might exact on his presidency. The spiritual roots fundamental to this orientation are here articulated by the character in reaction to his inauguration as president.

From Act One, Scene Four

(Lights cross-fade to JIMMY, alone, considering)

JIMMY:

An America as good as it's people. Can we be that good?

(Begin chant under the speech)

CHANT:

Love, love, love, love
The Gospel in one word is love
Love thy neighbor as thy brother, love, love, love

JIMMY:

As Christians we believe in the transcendent life. Being born again is not about being right all the time, but it is about striving, stretching, and searching; wanting to know, understand, and experience God: transcendence. We find all of this in Jesus, who showed us what it means to live the transcendent life: a life of higher expectations, searching, stretching the boundaries of who we are, doing not only what we have to do, but what we set as a goal for what we should do. The most beautiful acts of Jesus as recounted in the Bible do not relate to compliance with existing laws, but they were the extraordinary acts where he reached beyond what was required or expected. (Beat) Transcendence.

(Moment of song)

We got out of the limousine, and we walked down Pennsylvania Avenue. If this country was to find itself, its leader would have to disavow the arrogance and abuse of power that had brought shame to our nation, and would have to reach for something better. Rosalynn and I truly believed that so long as we continued to make the hard choices and do the right thing, there was nothing we could not achieve for our nation.

(Blackout. Song transition: One of hope, but perhaps foreshadowing difficult times as well. End of Act One)

The problems his somewhat a-political perspective would cause the president were apparent shortly after he arrived in Washington. In Panama, I met the son of former Panamanian Ambassador, Gabriel Lewis, who recalled being party to the following event as a young boy:

ACT TWO:

(Begin with a moment of the Star Spangled Banner, which then dies down with the dialogue)

(MAN enters as Chief of Protocol, along with ROSALYNN)

MAN:

Now, Mrs. Carter, when heads of state arrive on the White House lawn, there is a particular protocol: first, the band will be playing "Hail to the Chief." No, wait, excuse me. Your husband has eliminated that. Instead what will happen is...

(MAN continues but can't be heard. Music of Star Spangled Banner plays over him. Then light out on MAN, who exits.)

(ROSALYNN is alone, making very certain steps and very deliberate movements, as though taking part in a ceremony with other people -practicing the steps required to meet a head of state. The Star Spangled Banner continues in the background as she continues these movements, exact, glowing, proud)

(MAN as the same Chief of Protocol is now talking into a walkie talkie on another part of the stage.)

MAN:

(Into walkie-talkie)

Base to one-nine, it is now exactly zero, eight-hundred hours. Continue automobile tour of Washington monuments with the ambassador from Switzerland until zero, nine-hundred hours, then proceed to the White House for three-minute meet and greet with the president at zero, nine, zero, eight -copy?

(JIMMY enters)

(Begin taped voice-over of ambassadors from different countries. This progression continues under the conversation)

VOICE-OVER:

The ambassador from Niger. (Beat) The ambassador from Nigeria. (Beat) The ambassador from Norway. (Beat) The ambassador from Oman. (Beat) The ambassador from Pakistan...

MAN:

Mister President, the reception of diplomatic credentials is strictly ceremonial. We have a lot of ambassadors to receive in a very short time, so each has been told to save whatever concerns they might have for proper diplomatic channels. Any discussion should be small talk -the weather in Washington, the weather in their country -etc. We simply need for you to fill the very short period of time between shaking their hand and having their picture taken with you. Again, let me emphasize, we have ambassadors in various holding patterns throughout the city so timing is of the essence. If you run into problems, simply motion, and we have Secret Service men who will...

VOICE-OVER:

(Interrupting)

Ambassador from Panama, Mister Gabriel Lewis.

(JIMMY breaks from MAN and addresses implied GABRIEL LEWIS, immediately breaking protocol)

JIMMY:

Yes, Mr. Lewis, I know, we do have a problem with the Panama Canal -a big problem.

MAN:

(Attempting to intervene)

Excuse me, Mister Ambassador, but this is not the time to...

(JIMMY holds up hand to stop MAN)

JIMMY

I know how frustrated you and your countrymen must be. (Beat) No, it isn't right. The Panama Canal is a violation of your sovereignty and your rights as people. Johnson failed to fix it, so did Nixon. We are going to have to do this in my first term -right off the bat - while I still have the support of Congress. (Beat) Yes, it will be a huge fight, but it's the right thing to do.

(JIMMY then strolls off with implied GABRIEL LEWIS)

Yes, I know you are a businessman. Do you know I was a peanut farmer? I guess neither of us are politicians, then, are we?

(JIMMY exits leaving MAN stunned)

MAN:

Excuse me, Mister President, we have the Ambassador from Papua New Guinea and then the ambassador from...actually several ambassadors from...forty all told. (Beat) Mister President? Mister President!

VOICE-OVER:

The ambassador from Papua New Guinea. The ambassador from Papua New Guinea. The ambassador from Papua New Guinea... The ambassador from Papua New Guinea.

(The voice-over continues -stuck -under the MAN's dialogue)

MAN:

Base to one-nine. Ah, see if you can maintain holding pattern with Swiss Ambassador. (Beat) I don't know. (Beat) I don't know. (Beat) I don't know. (Beat) I would suggest taking him to the Smithsonian to see the Constitution -and having him memorize it. .

(Concurrently, ROSALYNN has mastered the protocol and steps forward to sing the Star Spangled Banner, bursting with pride)

ROSALYNN:

Oh say can you see
By the dawn's early light
What so proudly we hailed...

(Pause, and then:)

What so proudly we.
So proudly we.
So proud!

(Light out on scene)

Play continues.

In writing the play, I also relied a great deal on members of the Carter administration who recalled the following:

JIMMY:

(As though giving a speech)

As we begin our first few weeks in office, we are faced with many challenges which we must meet head-on. We must make America a beacon of light in the world in our quest for human rights; we must reduce our nuclear arms. We must achieve maximum bureaucratic efficiency, we must facilitate openness in government.

(As he is speaking, MAN becomes Staff Member and begins taking papers from a table marked, "Position Papers", and is either sorting them, or handing them out to the audience. As JIMMY continues, activity of MAN becomes increasingly frantic and comic, as he tries to keep up with all the positions that JIMMY is expounding)

We need a Department of Energy, a Department of Education. We need to deregulate banks, airlines, trucking, communications, and railroads, hold down the number of federal employees, reduce paper work, give the Panama Canal back to the Panamanians, and consolidate or eliminate as many of the small agencies and advisory groups as possible.

(The speech borders on self-parody through the massive expanse of the agenda, which begins to all run together as the pace of the speech quickens, and continues as a voice over and JIMMY steps down from the platform and continues)

(The next part of dialogue continues under the activity by MAN and into his conversation with ROSALYNN)

We need to restore faith in the integrity of government, we need a lasting Peace in the Middle East for the stability of mankind, we need to create jobs. We need to make environmental concerns the concerns of every American, we need to waste less and use more carefully, we need a Strategic Arms Limitation Agreement with the Soviets, we need to lower the speed limits on our roads to promote energy conservation and safety. We need a national energy policy, we need to beat down the special interests and make people aware of the need for conservation of fuel. We need a new program of health care for all Americans. We need to eliminate all wasteful water and dam projects, we need to improve relations with Congress. We need to wipe-out the tax legislation they traditionally pass as a Christmas tree full of goodies for special interests. We need to kill the B-1 Bomber program and replace it with more efficient and newer weapon systems. We need to lessen the inequity between rich and poor in this country. We need to...

(MAN, exhausted and disheveled begins to complain.
ROSALYNN enters)

MAN:

How is Congress going to keep up with him if his own staff can't keep up with him? I don't even have time to read all the bills he's come up with. Nobody puts this much comprehensive legislation before Congress!

ROSALYNN:

Jimmy just did.

MAN:

All right, here is what we're going to do: we're going to take each of these bills (takes stacks) and we're going to put them in three little folders -red for top priority, blue for middle priority, and green for low priority -and we're going to give him each bill and ask him to put it in one of these three folders. This way we know what to do first, what to do second, and then, what doesn't matter as much if we can't get to it.

(JIMMY enters)

JIMMY:

I have an announcement. I understand that the amount of legislation we are putting before Congress has placed a burden on all of us in regard to paperwork.

MAN:

(Aside)

Thank goodness he's seen the light.

JIMMY:

It has become nearly impossible for us to read all of the bills we are submitting and also to know the language of every bill that comes to us from Congress. So therefore...

(JIMMY begins handing out paper to everyone in the room - ROSALYNN and MAN)

MAN:

(Reading, then aside)

I don't believe it. He's got to be kidding.

(ROSALYNN doesn't have to look at the paper. She addresses the audience directly)

ROSALYNN:

Jimmy offered his staff classes in speed-reading.

JIMMY:

Thanks you for your time and I hope these classes will help all of us to better serve the American people.

(JIMMY continues off but is quickly pursued by MAN)

MAN:

Excuse me, Mister President, may I speak to you for a moment?

(As ROSALYNN is speaking, JIMMY and MAN meet on the side,
MAN showing JIMMY the “priority folders”)

ROSALYNN:

Jimmy was driven, dogmatic, principled, obsessed with time: When a plan was made, everybody in the room would look at their calendar while Jimmy would look at his watch. Jimmy Carter was very much the son of James Earl Carter, whose obsession with punctuality was so extreme, it kept him from being able to see a doctor: As soon as the doctor made Mister Earl wait a minute or so past his scheduled appointment, he would leave.

MAN:

But Mister President....

JIMMY:

(Exiting)

Thank you.

ROSALYNN:

Suddenly I had a distinct advantage over all the staff, members of Congress and everybody else in Washington: I knew the President of the United States better than any of them.

(JIMMY exits, and MAN returns, stunned. ROSALYNN
addresses him)

Well, what happened?

MAN:

He put every single one of the bills in the red file -“most important.”

ROSALYNN:

Of course he did. You should’ve asked me and saved yourself a trip.

Play continues.