

FOUR PLACES

BY JOEL DRAKE JOHNSON



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FOUR PLACES
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For Mary Ann Thebus, friend and collaborator.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This play should be done softly, without raised voices. None of the characters would ever want to pull attention to themselves or publicly express a deep emotion. In fact, they mute all their strongest emotions. They are private; they are introspective and reflective; they are emotionally riveted in place. Peggy, Ellen, and Warren have a deep bond that is so fraught with feeling that to let go of it would seem terribly dangerous.

Peggy is not a monster mother or wife; she is sometimes sweet and compassionate, often passive-aggressive, strong-willed and angry — and always resilient enough to figure out how and what to do during an incredibly desperate time in her life. Whether her method of figuring is right or wrong is NOT her point or the point of the play. It is instead a look at how choices are made and the ramification of those choices. It is also, of course, a portrait of the way in which emotional bonds both repair and damage, and the havoc that alcohol can create in that process.

Most of the silences, the pauses, are there because Ellen and Warren are trying to judge how much and how far they should go. It is important that those silences be played as silences, that pauses are played as pauses, etc. Otherwise, the play moves quite quickly.

The stage direction (*Drive.*) is something akin to a silence. (*Beat.*) is a tiny pause.

In the original production, Mozart's Piano Sonata Number 11 (the first movement) was quite effective.

FOUR PLACES received its world premiere at Victory Gardens Theater (Dennis Zacek, Artistic Director; Marcie McVay, Managing Director) in Chicago, Illinois, on March 28, 2008. It was directed by Sandy Shinner; the set design was by Jack Magaw; the costume design was by Carol J. Blanchard; the lighting design was by Avraham Mor; the sound design was by Andre Pluess; and the production stage manager was Tina M. Jach. The cast was as follows:

ELLEN Meg Thalken
WARREN Peter Burns
PEGGY Mary Ann Thebus
BARB Jennifer Avery

FOUR PLACES received its LA and West Coast premiere at the Rogue Machine Theatre (John P. Flynn, Artistic Director) in May, 2010. It was directed by Robin Larsen. The cast was as follows:

ELLEN Roxanne Hart
WARREN Tim Bagley
PEGGY Anne Gee Byrd
BARB Lisa Rothschilder

CHARACTERS

ELLEN, middle-aged woman

WARREN, middle-aged man, Ellen's younger brother

PEGGY, the mother of Ellen and Warren

BARB, a waitress, about the same age as Ellen and Warren

TIME AND PLACE

The present.

A small city just outside of Chicago.

NOTE

The play takes place in four different places, all of which should be suggested by action and minimal setting and furniture.

What is love? Truly I do not know.

*Sometimes, perhaps, instead of a great sea,
it is a narrow stream running urgently*

*far below ground held down by rocky layers,
the deeds of mother and father*

—Mona Van Duyn
“The Stream”

FOUR PLACES

The stage should be divided into four playing areas, all of which should feel separate: the car; the foyer of the restaurant; the table or booth in the restaurant; the women's bathroom, represented by a stall. All areas should have representations of these locations and that is all. We should be able to see the characters move from one area to the other. In the first scene, Ellen is in the driver's seat of a car. Warren sits next to her. There is a brief pause. They look at one another.

WARREN. Well ...

ELLEN. You want me to go in?

WARREN. How do you usually —

ELLEN. I usually walk her out.

WARREN. No, I'll —

ELLEN. She's at the door.

WARREN. (*Looking.*) She is?

ELLEN. I just saw her look out the window. She's trying to figure out who you are. She's wondering why I'm not getting out of the car. She's wondering if something is wrong, some problem.

WARREN. Okay —

ELLEN. I always walk her from the house.

WARREN. All right. (*He opens the door.*) Fuck, I don't know.

ELLEN. What?

WARREN. Fuck.

ELLEN. Well, we have to do something, don't we?

WARREN. Yes.

ELLEN. Jesus, look. (*Warren looks toward the house.*)

WARREN. (*Chuckling.*) She's crazy. What's she doing?

ELLEN. (*Also chuckling.*) I see her.

WARREN. What is that? It's like some kind of dumb show, what is she doing? (*He chuckles. Then.*) Jesus. Shit. Fuck, fuck. (*Opening*

door.) Fuck. Okay! (*He's gone. Ellen listens intently to a Mozart piano sonata, but without any visible reaction. This goes on for a bit. She looks off. She turns off the music as we see Warren and Peggy approaching the car.*)

PEGGY. What a surprise. Ellen didn't tell me you were coming. You're the reason we're late!!!

WARREN. There's no school today —

PEGGY. What?

WARREN. Ride up front.

PEGGY. I don't mind the back.

WARREN. Ride up front, Mom. (*He opens the door.*)

PEGGY. You've got those long legs.

ELLEN. Get in back, Mom.

WARREN. I don't have long legs. When I was ten, I think I had long legs. Now they're just legs. And they bend.

PEGGY. (*Chuckling to herself.*) They bend. I know they bend. (*She gets in. Warren shuts the door and gets in back. They mime putting on seat belts as Ellen pulls away. They drive for a bit.*)

ELLEN. Those were funny faces you made.

PEGGY. What funny faces?

ELLEN. Looking out the window.

PEGGY. Did you see those? (*Drive.*) I didn't think you saw those.

ELLEN. Right.

PEGGY. I didn't. (*Drive.*) Did you notice what the neighbor did?

ELLEN. I saw.

PEGGY. All those bushes. Pulled them out. And they came close to getting the mock orange but I went out and I told them: That's my mock orange. You remember the mock orange, Warren?

WARREN. What?

PEGGY. The mock orange. You trimmed it every year.

WARREN. I hated the mock orange. You should have let them cut it down.

PEGGY. (*To Ellen.*) I made him trim that bush every year.

WARREN. (*As Peggy chuckles.*) What?

PEGGY. He'd shoot me these dirty looks —

WARREN. What?

PEGGY. (*Continuing.*) — the entire time. Are you all right in the back?

WARREN. I'm fine. Very comfortable. (*Drive.*)

PEGGY. Your car still smells like new.

ELLEN. I've had it a year.

PEGGY. It smells like new.

WARREN. I hate that mock orange. (*Drive.*)

ELLEN. Look at that girl, Mom.

PEGGY. Ohh, my God, I can see her crack!

WARREN. What?

PEGGY. (*Loudly.*) I can see that girl's crack! Oh my God! That's not one of your students, is it, Warren?

WARREN. No.

PEGGY. If it was, I'd say she needs to stay after school. (*Beat.*) But not with Warren. (*Peggy and Ellen chuckle as ...*)

WARREN. What? (*Drive.*) Not much traffic.

PEGGY. No. (*Drive.*)

WARREN. Did you see what they did to the post office?

ELLEN. It looks stupid.

PEGGY. Where are we looking at?

ELLEN. The new sculpture.

PEGGY. Oh.

ELLEN. It's moronic. It's cheap.

WARREN. It is cheap.

PEGGY. What is it?

WARREN. It's called "On Earth as It Is in Heaven."

PEGGY. Oh. I like it.

ELLEN. Oh, Mom, it's terrible. It makes us look moronic. (*Drive.*)

PEGGY. I guess it's religious then ... Amen.

ELLEN. What?

PEGGY. Amen. (*Drive.*) I hadn't seen it.

WARREN. Just went up. (*Drive.*)

PEGGY. (*Referring to a new place.*) I wonder how they're doing?

WARREN. Okay, I think.

ELLEN. I like it there.

WARREN. Never been.

ELLEN. It's not bad.

PEGGY. Jackie told me it gave her indigestion.

ELLEN. Did she?

PEGGY. She's never going back. Have you seen her? She's gained so much weight. My God. I don't know how she gets around. I worry for her, pulling all that weight around. (*Drive.*) Oh, ah, Paul Pierce died.

ELLEN. Really?

WARREN. Who?

ELLEN and PEGGY. Paul Pierce.

WARREN. He died?

PEGGY. He was sixty-eight and had cancer.

WARREN. Boy, that's young.

PEGGY. I'll say it's young.

WARREN. What kind of cancer?

PEGGY. Esophagus.

WARREN. Did he smoke?

PEGGY. He smoked. They found it and then a month later he was dead.

WARREN. Really?

PEGGY. Thirty days. That's what I want; I want them to find it and then give me a month to make my arrangements. (*Drive.*) Don't hook me up to anything. (*Drive.*) Or I'll come back to haunt you.

ELLEN. We won't.

PEGGY. Warren? (*Drive.*) Warren?

ELLEN. Warren —

WARREN. What?

ELLEN. Mom's talking to you.

WARREN. What?

PEGGY. Never mind.

WARREN. What did you want?

PEGGY. I don't want to be hooked up.

WARREN. To what? What are you talking about?

ELLEN. Never mind. It's called life support.

PEGGY. To one of those life pipes, whatever, you call them. The name escapes me.

(*Drive.*)

WARREN. I don't either. (*Drive.*)

ELLEN. I saw him, you know, just a couple of weeks ago. He was speaking through a kind of tube speaker in his throat —

PEGGY. Did you say hi?

ELLEN. I did.

PEGGY. Did he know you?

ELLEN. I doubt it.

PEGGY. They say it's one of the worse kind of cancers.

ELLEN. Why do they say that?

PEGGY. I don't know. It's painful, I guess.

ELLEN. Some cancers are painless?

PEGGY. I don't know, I just read that it's one of the worst. (*Drive.*) I don't know if Patty is working out.

ELLEN. Why is that?

PEGGY. She bought me this family-size container of ketchup.

ELLEN. So?

PEGGY. I don't want a large container of ketchup. I want a small container.

ELLEN. Did you tell her?

PEGGY. I told her, but she told me she was saving me money. And I said, well, Patty, how much did you save me and she said she figured I saved twenty cents and so I just laughed and I said Patty, just buy me the small ketchup. I can handle a smaller container better than the large, and so I would prefer the small. You know what she did?

ELLEN. What?

PEGGY. She started to cry.

ELLEN. Why would she cry?

PEGGY. I think she might be just a little bit unstable. Not a lot, just a little. You know, her sister is a schizophrenic.

ELLEN. I didn't know.

PEGGY. She lived in a halfway house for years — until she woke up one night and burned the place down.

ELLEN. Oh, come on.

PEGGY. It's what I heard. Five people died. Now she's in prison. It's a sad thing, but insanity runs in the family, in the genes, unavoidably Darwinian and I think you and your brother need to know that —

WARREN. (*On "know that."*) What was that?

PEGGY. (*Not stopping.*) — You should also know that she was very keyed up today.

WARREN. Who are you talking about?

ELLEN. Patty.

WARREN. What happened?

ELLEN. Mom made her cry.

PEGGY. I didn't make her cry. She's a schizophrenic. She has no control of her emotions.

WARREN. What did you do, Mom?

PEGGY. I told her I preferred small containers to large containers. That's all that I said. That's it.

ELLEN. She tries too hard.

PEGGY. I think she tries too hard. (*Drive.*) But I like her. She's very nice. For a schizophrenic. (*Drive.*) She gets bossy, but I don't mind much.

ELLEN. You call me when she starts chasing you with a knife.

FOUR PLACES

by Joel Drake Johnson

1M, 3W

When Peggy's two adult children take her out for lunch, they quietly begin to take apart her life. The drinks come fast, the tempers peak, the food flies.

"The communication between the siblings (long united in fending off 'the common enemy') is priceless — at times hilarious, but at other moments filled with deep anguish and pain. And it is a sense of loss, of course, that infuses everything in Peggy's dwindling life."

—Chicago Sun-Times

"FOUR PLACES is a meticulously structured work that captures a decades-long history of paralyzing family resentments, depleted affections, and sublimated cruelties in a single, uninterrupted 90-minute scene. With excruciating patience, Johnson lets two middle-aged siblings and their elderly mother lead one another — with the best intentions — to a place where forgiveness, understanding, and even love may no longer be possible."

—Chicago Reader

"... like watching George and Martha's kids take their mom out to eat. Gradually we learn how Peggy and her husband have been living, and why. Their wounds are ancient, but they're being reopened. The children struggle to wrap their minds around this fresh hell: Is Peggy abusing her husband — or is it the other way around?"

—Los Angeles Times

"FOUR PLACES is intense, remorseless drama at its finest. As in life, at play's end there is resolution and compromise but little sign of happiness."

—Backstage

Also by Joel Drake Johnson
RASHEEDA SPEAKING

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