



# DEATH TAX

BY LUCAS HNATH



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DEATH TAX  
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DEATH TAX received its World Premiere in the 2012 Humana Festival  
of New American Plays at ACTORS THEATRE OF LOUISVILLE.

*This play is dedicated to Rev. Dana Higginbotham.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dana Higginbotham (for giving me the idea for this play and keeping me accurate in the parts where accuracy matters), Marisa Viola (for reading draft after draft, giving me feedback and advice), Sarah Lunnie (for championing the play and for being my compass as I continued develop it), and Ken Rus Schmoll (for his questions and for knowing what to add and, most importantly, what to take away).

I am also enormously indebted to the actors — Quincy Tyler Bernstine, Paul Niebanck, Judith Roberts, and Danielle Skraastad — for their input and patience and blind faith.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

In DEATH TAX, less is always more. The play requires only a bed, a couple of ordinary props and perhaps a chair and an end table. Avoid having to have complicated scene transitions, incidental music and blackouts. Let the play move swiftly. The ellipses show you where you can have a beat or take a breath or give the characters a chance to exchange silent glances. Otherwise, keep the pacing tight. This is a play about the actions people take when they're caught up in a whirlwind. If the play runs much longer than eighty-five minutes, you're probably missing the whirlwind.

Keep the blocking simple. The text is extremely dense; it requires the audience's undivided attention. Give the play too much business and the audience won't be able to parse the language.

Lastly, resist the temptation to give Scene 5 a "futuristic" look. Again, less is more. Yes, Tina and Todd should change their costumes to reflect their new "roles," but the clothes should look no different from the clothes folks wear today. Also, in production, we decided that Maxine should wear an elegant robe in Scene 1, but in Scene 5, she should appear unkempt and wear a plain white patient's gown. If you make the scene look too different from the rest of play, you will raise irrelevant questions about the world of the play and its logic, distracting the audience from the characters' problems.

DEATH TAX received its world premiere at the 2012 Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville (Les Waters, Artistic Director; Jennifer Bielstein, Managing Director). It was directed by Ken Rus Schmoll; the set design was by Philip Witcomb; the costume design was by Kristopher Castle; the lighting design was by Brian H. Scott; the sound design was by Matt Hubbs; the dramaturgy was by Sarah Lunnie; and the stage manager was Christine Lomaka. The cast was as follows:

NURSE TINA ..... Quincy Tyler Bernstine  
MAXINE ..... Judith Roberts  
TODD ..... Paul Niebanck  
DAUGHTER ..... Danielle Skraastad

## **CHARACTERS**

NURSE TINA: a nurse, Haitian, speaks with an accent, 30s

MAXINE: wealthy, near death, elderly

TODD: nurse supervisor, 30s

DAUGHTER: Maxine's daughter, 30s

## **THE STAGE**

It should be mostly bare. Except for a bed or a chair or chairs, when needed. Whatever is needed. Nothing more.

*For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.*

*—Hebrews 9:17*



# DEATH TAX

## 1.

*A bed.*

*An old woman in the bed.*

*Old woman in bed wearing a nasal cannula.*

*A nurse.*

*A radio. On a table. It plays "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring."*

*A late night Christmastime broadcast.*

*The nurse slips the blood pressure cuff on the old woman's arm.*

*As she takes the woman's blood pressure, the nurse speaks to the audience:*

TINA. This play has five scenes. This is scene 1.

Scene 1: It's December, 2010.

I am a nurse.

This is a room in a nursing home.

This is a patient.

I am taking her vitals.

The patient is looking at me.

She says to me ...

MAXINE. People who have money are preserved.

They get old, they have money, they are preserved.

People who do not have money, they are not preserved.

If one does not get preserved, things get messy.

TINA. ...

MAXINE. ...

TINA. ... I turn to her and say:

I am going to take your blood pressure now.

MAXINE. Okay.

TINA. ...

*(Tina takes Maxine's blood pressure.)*

MAXINE. ...

TINA. How are you feeling today, Ms. Judson.

MAXINE. Terrible.

TINA. Have you been feeling any pain or discomfort?

MAXINE. Yes.

TINA. Where?

MAXINE. All over.

TINA. ... Can you be more specific.

MAXINE. Specific?

TINA. Yes.

MAXINE. ... No.

TINA. ...

MAXINE. ...

TINA. I will tell the doctor.

MAXINE. What will you tell the doctor?

TINA. That you are having general discomfort.

MAXINE. And pain.

TINA. And pain.

*(Tina finishes taking the blood pressure, she removes the cuff, she writes down what she writes down ...)*

I am going to check your ankles for swelling.

I am going to pull back your sheets.

*(Tina lifts the bedsheets covering Maxine's legs.)*

Are you cold?

*(Shakes her head no.)*

My hands are warm so you should not feel any discomfort.

I am going to check the ankles for swelling.

*(Beat.)*

All right.

There is some swelling, Ms. Judson.

Not much. Nothing to worry about.

I will let the doctor know.

I am writing it down for him.

MAXINE. ... Uh-huh.

TINA. ...

MAXINE. ...

TINA. I am checking your catheter now.

MAXINE. Go for it.

TINA. I am making sure the point of insertion is clean,  
no infections ...

MAXINE. ...

TINA. ...

MAXINE. ...

*(Tina is done checking the catheter.)*

TINA. All of that looks fine.

MAXINE. It does

TINA. I see no problems.

*(Tina finishes her notes.)*

Nurse Tina?

TINA. ... Yes?

MAXINE. I know that you are killing me.

TINA. ...

MAXINE. ...

TINA. ...

MAXINE. I know.

TINA. ...

MAXINE. Didn't know I knew

TINA. I don't know

MAXINE. what?

TINA. That I am killing you. I did not know this.

I am not aware of this.

MAXINE. Uh-huh.

TINA. Killing?

MAXINE. Murder.

TINA. ... Why are you saying that, Ms. Judson?

Ms. Judson, that is not something to joke about.

MAXINE. ... I'm not joking.

TINA. You are joking.

I am not killing you, do not say things like that.

It is dangerous, you understand, to say things like

MAXINE. Turn off the radio, please.

*(Tina does so.)*

shut the door.

TINA. ...

MAXINE. Shut the door. So no one will hear us talk when we talk.

TINA. No.

MAXINE. Shut the door and we will

TINA. We cannot talk, you are not

MAXINE. *We will* talk,  
door shut or not.

TINA. ...

*(Tina shuts the door.)*

MAXINE. Lock the door.

*(Tina locks the door.)*

... Do you know about taxes?

TINA. Taxes?

MAXINE. Yes, taxes.

TINA. Yes. I know about taxes.

MAXINE. What do you know about taxes?

TINA. ... People pay them.

MAXINE. And when you've paid them?

Then what?

TINA. ...

MAXINE. Then what?

TINA. We pay them again.

MAXINE. Yes. You pay the taxes and what happens to the money  
that you have?

TINA. It is gone.

MAXINE. It is gone, yes, it is gone.

You have money, and then after the taxes, you have less money.

And the bigger the pile of money, the more money that goes away.

Sometimes. Sometimes that's how it works.

Today, that is not how it works.

Today, if I were to die today, my daughter,

my only daughter, my only family,

would get all the money that I have left.

This much.

*(Shows with her hands.)*

If I were to die after the first of January,

the tax laws change.

And because these tax laws change,

my daughter will only get this much money.

*(Shows with her hands a much smaller amount.)*

That is, if I die after the new year.

This much is much less than this much.

You see?

And I know what happens.

I have heard what happens.  
I know of women like myself  
who have died in the past couple of months.  
And they did not need to die.

And I know that nurses, like you,  
nurses like you make very little.

You make ...

*(Shows with her fingers.)*

... this much.

TINA. ...

MAXINE. So it's not hard for a family member to come along  
and offer you some money  
and say, "well, if there's anything you can do to speed things along,  
there's more where that came from."

And I know, I know there are ... things you can do,  
small things, to speed things along.

Small adjustments in my care.

Or small steps taken or not taken.

You lie a patient on her side,  
her left side,

just at the right moment, the patient will die. Yes?

See, I know about that trick, I know about it.

I've heard.

Or maybe better yet:

a little extra morphine here and there,

over the course of a month, relaxes the patient,

relaxes the body, makes the body fight just a little less.

And when the body stops fighting,  
the body starts dying.

You see?

... You see.

You know.

And I know, I know my body.

I know the feeling of my body fighting,

and I think I know the feeling of what I think

# DEATH TAX

by Lucas Hnath

2M, 2W (doubling)

It's December 2010. Infirm Maxine thinks her daughter is paying Nurse Tina to gently nudge her into the grave before the new year. Maxine thinks Tina's doing this so her daughter doesn't have to pay hefty estate taxes, taxes that take effect on January 1. Nurse Tina adamantly denies Maxine's accusations, but when Maxine offers Tina a portion of her sizable estate on the condition that she lives until the 1st, Tina changes her tune. But of course, the plan doesn't go according to plan.

*"Sobering, shattering ... Hnath's incisive script examines the moral questions raised when the issues are muddy."*  
—**BackStage**

*"Hnath's compelling drama examines American ideas about death, dying and money."*  
—**The Louisville Courier-Journal**

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