



**THE GOSPEL ACCORDING
TO THOMAS JEFFERSON,
CHARLES DICKENS AND
COUNT LEO TOLSTOY:
DISCORD**

BY SCOTT CARTER



**DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.**



THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THOMAS JEFFERSON, CHARLES
DICKENS AND COUNT LEO TOLSTOY: DISCORD
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Dedicated to my friends Stephen Mitchell (with whom nothing is lost in translation) and his wife, Byron Katie (sanity's siren).

In the published edition of *Strictly Dishonorable* (1929), playwright Preston Sturges wrote: "A play, as produced, is rarely the work of one individual. During the rehearsal period, suggestions are accepted from everyone within shouting distance. Many of these suggestions are excellent, and all of them are used. It is impossible to list here the names of all the people responsible for *Strictly Dishonorable* as it stands; I thank them all, and spend my royalties to their good health."

Exactly my sentiment.

Since the first mustard seed of this script implanted in my brain on October 5, 1988 (thank you, PBS; thank you, Bill Moyers; thank you, Rev. F. Forrester Church), this project has profited from the direct or indirect counsel of artists, historians and theologians too numerous to thank here. But, if you go to www.JDTProject.com, you will find a provisional roster of those to whom I am indebted. May their lives be long and happy.

—S.C., *Los Angeles, CA*
February 16, 2015

The first performance of THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THOMAS JEFFERSON, CHARLES DICKENS AND COUNT LEO TOLSTOY: DISCORD was presented by Efficiency Studios, the Independent Shakespeare Co. of Los Angeles and Kevin Bailey at the NoHo Arts Center, in Los Angeles, California on January 17, 2014, and at the Geffen Playhouse (Randall Arney, Artistic Director; Ken Novice, Managing Director), also in Los Angeles, on October 15, 2014. Both productions were directed by Matt August; the designer was Takeshi Kata; costumes were by Ann Closs-Farley; the lighting design was by Luke Moyer; the projections were by Jeffrey Elias Teeter; and the sound design was by Cricket S. Myers. The cast was as follows:

THOMAS JEFFERSON Larry Cedar
CHARLES DICKENS.....David Melville
COUNT LEV NIKOLAYEVICH TOLSTOY Armin Shimerman

CHARACTERS

THOMAS JEFFERSON

Circa 1789, age 46. Tall, handsome, mild-mannered, graceful. A soft Southern accent. For his contradictions, historians liken him to the Sphinx, Mona Lisa and Hamlet: Aloof yet engaged. Humorless yet good-humored. Even-tempered yet iron-willed. A sensitive Stoic. A skeptical Deist. An order-obsessed radical. A forward-looking classicist. A visionary with blind spots. A reclusive reader yet a generous host. A private man yet a public servant. A patrician advocate for common rights. A political pro who thought himself above politics. A tentative speaker who meant each carefully chosen word he uttered. A fiscal conservative with public funds who blithely mismanaged his own. A reason-worshipping son of the Enlightenment who was not immune to the prejudices of his day. He was, at once, Sherlock Holmes, Ashley Wilkes and Spock.

CHARLES DICKENS

Circa 1856, age 44. Compact, vibrant. Original ambition? To be an actor. Later, after establishing himself as a writer, he became a performer. Indeed, his life was a performance. People complained that his clothes seemed to scream at them. He was a spurting, spewing volcano, a bursting supernova, a Big Bang, bow-wow man-child who was as eccentric as any of his characters. Called himself “the Inimitable.” As always, he got it right. He was, at once, Cyrano de Bergerac, Émile Zola and Oscar Jaffe.

COUNT LEV NIKOLAYEVICH TOLSTOY

Circa 1878, age 49. Both soldier and saint, high birth gave him a God-like panorama. Went toe-to-toe with Dostoevsky, then hung it up at the top of his game. A complex curmudgeon (of equal parts self-confidence, self-doubt and self-loathing) who dreamed of a simple, peaceful world where all would obey him. He was, at once, Marcel Proust, J.D. Salinger and Yosemite Sam.

PLACE

A room.

TIME

Yes.

EXTRACTS BY A SUB-THEOLOGIAN:

“And if Christ be not raised, your faith is in vain, ye are yet in your sins.”

—Paul, *I Corinthians 15:17*

“If Jefferson was wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right.”

—James Parton, 1874

“If you over-estimate great men, people become powerless.”

—Lao-Tzu, translated by Stephen Mitchell

“For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”

—Paul, *I Corinthians 13:12*

“A [half-free, half-slave nation] ... kindles ... eternal discord.”

—Thomas Jefferson

“Let the heart swell into what discord it will ...”

—Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*

“Children ... were not only the object of discord but the weapons of our strife.”

—Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, “The Kreutzer Sonata”

“With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.”

—Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.”

—Jesus of Nazareth, *Matthew 13:9*

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ACT ONE

Scene 1: “DON’T CLOSE THE DOOR!”

(Note: scene titles project on the set’s header.)

SFX: Heartbeats.

Lights up on: interrogation room. Blank walls. Overhead lights. Long metal table center stage with a drawer downstage center. Three metal chairs. A door, downstage right. (Note: the characters refer to a mirror on the fourth wall which is, in fact, a two-way mirror.)

Heartbeats out as the door is opened by Thomas Jefferson, dressed with a casual elegance: long coat, vest, opened shirt, breeches, stockings, slippers and robe. He enters and shuts the door.

JEFFERSON. For God’s sake, where am I got to? *(He whistles Daniel Purcell’s “St. David’s Tune” as he surveys the mirror, chairs, lights and table. He tries to open the table drawer, but it is locked. He tries to leave, but now the door is locked.)* Benevolent author and regulator of the universe: My current state astounds me. Is this my reward? Or my punishment? If challenges await me to determine my eternal fate, I yield to Your will. *(Heartbeats. The door opens.*

In bursts Charles Dickens. He is bearded and dressed in bright colors. Jefferson spins around as Dickens closes the door.

DICKENS. Hardly a “far, far better place than I have ever known.”
(He sees Jefferson.) St. Peter, I presume?

JEFFERSON. You mistake me for my better, sir. *(Dickens spots his reflection in the mirror.)*

DICKENS. His emissary then? I would prefer to be greeted by a sprightly cherub.

JEFFERSON. Sir, are not *you* greeting *me*?

DICKENS. You take me for some celestial clerk?

JEFFERSON. I know not who you are.

DICKENS. Impossible.

JEFFERSON. Or why you are here.

DICKENS. Unacceptable.

JEFFERSON. Or, in fact, why I am here.

DICKENS. Clearly I am in the wrong room! By your leave! *(Tries to go, but the door is locked. He darts about the room, spots the table drawer and tries to open it — but can't.)* What exactly is your game, sir?

JEFFERSON. Sir, I am no gaming man.

DICKENS. So: An eternity of philosophers, prophets and poets all got it wrong?

JEFFERSON. I beg your pardon?

DICKENS. The eternal question: What happens when we die? Turns out you just go to a room. And not even a room of one's own. A shared room. Like a boarding house. Am I to be joined in eternity by others? Shall I soon be crammed in here like a sardine in a tin? Do I deserve that fate?

JEFFERSON. Perhaps our fate is not yet determined. Let us assess our situation, grateful for what benefits us. For one thing, we speak a common language.

DICKENS. Not really: You're American. *(But now: Heartbeats, and Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy enters. Though an aristocrat, he dresses as a peasant. Jefferson and Dickens spin around.)*

JEFFERSON.

DICKENS.

Please, sir, do not close the door! Don't shut the door, please!

TOLSTOY. *(Shuts the door. He turns.)* I do the opposite of what men ask! Now, where do I sign?

JEFFERSON. I beg your pardon?

TOLSTOY. My confession of sins. Mortal and venial. If you are my prosecutors, proceed.

JEFFERSON. I am not your judge.

TOLSTOY. My advocates then?

DICKENS. I am not with him.

JEFFERSON. I have no assignment.

TOLSTOY. Then I am free to go?

DICKENS. If you can.

TOLSTOY. Do not stop me. (*Tries to open the door. He fails.*) At this point in life, I'd hoped to be dead.

DICKENS. (*To Tolstoy.*) If we are not your judges, nor you ours, maybe you are sent to serve us.

TOLSTOY. I serve no man. And let none serve me. (*Winces at his reflection in the mirror.*)

DICKENS. Excuse me, sir: Your attire suggests that you are a peasant.

TOLSTOY. As yours suggests that you are a clown.

JEFFERSON. Gentlemen, be not drawn into controversy.

DICKENS. Excuse me: I've not been dead before.

TOLSTOY. You think I have?

DICKENS. I do not know. You could be Hindu. A regular to this room.

JEFFERSON. Let us be courteous.

DICKENS. But who knows how to act here? Must we be patient? Then I shall be patient. (*He sits. Jefferson sits. Pause. Then Tolstoy sits as ... Dickens stands.*) I can't be patient. I'm a man of action. For every hour I write, I walk an hour. If I cannot walk, I will explode!

JEFFERSON. A man of letters and a man of action — were you a postman?

DICKENS. Do you really not know who I am? I was, am, and, no doubt, will always be the world's greatest novelist.

TOLSTOY. Charles Dickens.

DICKENS. In the flesh.

JEFFERSON. I fear none of us is in the flesh.

TOLSTOY. You were my favorite Christian author: *Pickwick*, *Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*.

DICKENS. Bless you, peasant.

JEFFERSON. I am lost.

DICKENS. Illiterate!

JEFFERSON. On the contrary, I owned over eight thousand books.

DICKENS. And no Dickens?

TOLSTOY. The only American to whom such a library could have belonged was Thomas Jefferson.

DICKENS. President of America?

JEFFERSON. I so served my country.

DICKENS. A land of expectorating cowpokes!

JEFFERSON. Cowpokes?

DICKENS. And pirates —

JEFFERSON. Pirates?

DICKENS. — who published and performed my works without permission or payment.

JEFFERSON. Sir, surely there were courts of law where —

TOLSTOY. You purchased the Louisiana Territories from France!

JEFFERSON. Thus doubling the size of America without firing a shot. I established an Empire for Liberty.

TOLSTOY. You bankrolled Napoleon's invasion of Russia!

DICKENS. A blessing for the Dickens family: My father was a naval clerk as Britain prepared to defeat Napoleon.

TOLSTOY. Russia defeated Napoleon!

DICKENS. Wellington defeated Napoleon!

JEFFERSON. Please, Mr. Dickens and Mr. — ?

TOLSTOY. Lev Nikolayevich.

JEFFERSON. Mr. Nikolayevich.

TOLSTOY. (*Interrupting.*) *Nyet.* Surname: Tolstoy. Patronymic: Lev Nikolayevich. Familiar: Lev. There is no Russian for “mister.”

JEFFERSON. Then mark you, Lev Nikolayevich and Mr. Dickens: the room in which we are locked. The metal of the table and chairs mystifies me. And how murky is the glass.

TOLSTOY. Torture to be trapped with a mirror.

DICKENS. Oh, I always worked with mirrors about me. I would look up from my writing and: There I was!

JEFFERSON. It does not hang from the wall but is fixed to it. And, magically, the face it reflects to me is not the dying ex-president but the ambassador, prime of life, returning from Paris to his beloved Virginia.

DICKENS. (*Regards his own image.*) I appear as when I first grew my beard to star in my play *The Frozen Deep*.

TOLSTOY. (*Glares at the mirror.*) And I when I first found God ... and still had all of my teeth. (*Dickens tries the door again.*)

JEFFERSON. Let us accept, for now, we are in this room by some force. Let us be a corps of discovery to assess this, our new world. Shall we classify its temperature as “moderate”?

DICKENS. But will it become hot as Hell or cold as — is Heaven supposed to be cold?

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A Founding Father, a Victorian novelist and a Russian revolutionary walk into a ... stop me if you've heard this one. Thomas Jefferson (yes that one), Charles Dickens (the very same) and Count Leo Tolstoy (who else?) are brought together in a blistering battle of wits. From Scott Carter (executive producer of *Real Time with Bill Maher*), this whip-smart comedy examines what happens when great men of history are forced to repeat it.

"... sparkling ... Carter knows something about assembling a sharp, entertaining meeting of minds, and his variation on Sartre's No Exit ... should be catnip for [audiences] yearning for a little food for thought with their fun." —**Variety**

"In a compact 85 minutes, [DISCORD] ambitiously wades through life's most primal, yet endlessly perplexing concepts (morality, mortality, etymology) from the prism of the three eponymous philosophers. ... At once uproarious, raw, and painfully honest, DISCORD unveils the many virtues and vices of these towering icons." —**The Daily Beast**

"[Scott] Carter knows a thing or two about lively, accessible formats for the engagement of ideas ... Imagine the dramaturgical love-child of Steve Allen's Meeting of Minds and Jean-Paul Sartre's No Exit." —**LA Times**

"If religion and comedy had a baby, this would be it." —**Huffington Post**

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