

THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT

BY JEREMY KAREKEN
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GORDON FARRELL

BASED ON THE BOOK BY
JOHN D'AGATA AND JIM FINGAL



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT

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The Lifespan of a Fact

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THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT was originally produced on Broadway by Jeffrey Richards, Norman and Deanna Twain, Will Trice, Barbara H. Freitag, Suzanne Grant, Gold/Ross Productions, Jamie deRoy, Jennifer Manocherian, Barbara Manocherian, ManGol Productions, Carl Moellenberg/Wendy Federman, Ken Greiner, Van Kaplan, Dominick LaRuffa Jr., Marc David Levine, WitzEnd Productions, Eric Falkenstein/Moreland Mott, Caiola Productions, Rimmel T. Dickinson, and Jayne Baron Sherman, at Studio 54, opening on October 18, 2018. It was directed by Leigh Silverman, the scenic design was by Mimi Lien, the costume design was by Linda Cho, the lighting design was by Jen Schriever, the original music and sound design were by Palmer Hefferan, the projection design was by Lucy Mackinnon, and the production stage manager was Martha Donaldson. The cast was as follows:

JIM FINGAL Daniel Radcliffe
EMILY PENROSE Cherry Jones
JOHN D'AGATA Bobby Cannavale

CHARACTERS

JIM FINGAL

EMILY PENROSE

JOHN D'AGATA

NOTES

Although the emails are written to be projected “on screen,” projections are not required. Any theaters for which projecting text is prohibitively difficult are encouraged to find their own methods for bringing the emails to life.

Text in brackets [] is meant to be unspoken, a guide for the actors only.

THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT

As the house lights dim we hear the voice of essayist John D'Agata (40s–60s). There may be one or two large projection screens suspended.

JOHN. (V.O.) “On the same day in Las Vegas when sixteen-year-old Levi Presley jumped from the observation deck of the 1,149-foot tower of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino, lap dancing was temporarily banned in the city’s thirty-four licensed strip clubs, archaeologists unearthed parts of the world’s oldest bottle of Tabasco-brand sauce from beneath a bar called Buckets of Blood, and a woman from Mississippi beat a chicken named Ginger in a thirty-five-minute long game of tic-tac-toe.”

As John continues, the lights come up on the Manhattan office of a high-end magazine, the sort that sells advertisements for expensive watches, cars, clothing, liquor, and jewelry, while covering celebrity news and occasionally printing significant literary work.

Emily Penrose (late 40s to 60s), the Editor-in-Chief, sits at her desk reading a slim (fifteen pages or so) stapled sheaf of pages. The single important set design detail is that she has a small framed photograph on her desk, facing her directly— not facing visitors.

“On that day in Las Vegas when Levi Presley died, five others died from two types of cancer, four from heart attacks, three because of strokes. It was a day of two suicides by gunshot as well as a suicide from hanging.”

Emily flips to the last page. She places the essay on her desk

and starts rapidly, sharply typing on her computer.

On screen:

WEDNESDAY

“Wednesday” fades, replaced by the words of her email as she types it.

EMILY.

[**To:** Editorial

From: Emily Penrose]

Hey, everyone: In light of recent events, we’re bumping “Congressional Spouses” and going with the John D’Agata piece originally slated for February. It is suddenly and tragically timely. The photography has been in and ready but the copy needs a final fact check. The right volunteer will QUICKLY comb through it for press next Monday. Find me your best person. I’ll buy them a pack of red pens.

[—Emily]

Quick blackout, then full lights back up. Jim Fingal (mid-20s) now sits opposite Emily, as she reads his résumé.

EMILY. Okay, Jim Fingal, so you’re interning with Bob down in Editorial?

JIM. Yes.

EMILY. How long you been with us?

JIM. Ah, just under six months.

EMILY. And what’s Bob got you doing?

JIM. Apart from making coffee, which I think he makes me do as a joke, research, copy-editing, that sort of thing.

EMILY. Tell me about yourself—

JIM. I was a joint concentrator in Computer Science and Journalism.

I wrote a few stories and some editorials for the *Crimson*.

Beat.

Harvard.

No reaction.

And whatever jobs I got after college were just marking time until I got here.

Beat.

Where I'm really happy.

His eyes survey the walls/shelves, noting knick-knacks, awards, framed magazine covers.

Wow! Is that the Wall of Fame? (*Looks closer; a bit starstruck.*) What is that, fifty years of autographed covers...?

EMILY. Fifty-two.

He looks at another spot on the wall.

JIM. What's...KanKAKee?

EMILY. KANKakee. Illinois. Our beloved production facility. The largest in the country. They do everyone—us, Hearst, Condé Nast, Time Inc., Simon & Schuster. The ones that are left.

Beat.

Now then, why are you here?

JIM. Why am I—?

EMILY. What do you want to do?

JIM. Well, whatever it is you want me to do.

EMILY. That's a cute answer. But what plans—?

JIM. Where do I see myself in five years?

EMILY. Something like that.

JIM. Well, my next step is *this*. Trying to get a chance to fact check this article.

EMILY. Bob tells me you're talented and trustworthy.

JIM. That's very kind.

EMILY. So you're looking to stay at the magazine?

JIM. Absolutely. Particularly given the kind of work I've seen this

magazine is capable of.

A beat.

EMILY. You don't like the direction?

JIM. That's not—

EMILY. No, I think it's wonderful that you have standards. Just as long as you understand the compromises we often have to make between material that pushes the envelope—

JIM. —and the stuff that sells magazines. Absolutely. And ads.

EMILY. You get it.

JIM. I try to.

EMILY. The assignment is a final fact check for me personally. The John D'Agata piece. I need it quickly and the special volunteer will give up their weekend.

JIM. Yes, that sounds like fun. Well, not fun—

EMILY. So you'd be up for it.

JIM. John D'Agata? Absolutely.

EMILY. You've heard of him.

JIM. David Foster Wallace called him one of America's most significant living writers. He thinks essays are an irreducible literary art form, like fiction and poetry—

EMILY. You knew about him, or you googled him on your way up here?

JIM. I've read some of his work. But yeah, I searched and found out what I could. So...kind of...both?

EMILY. Okay. Now tell me what you bring to the project.

JIM. Well, there's my experience at the *Crimson*—I did some fact checking there—and I really think I can help you because of other skills of mine: C++, Python, Lisp—

EMILY. And what are those?

JIM. Computer languages. Well, scripting languages most of them—

EMILY. Okay.

JIM. I can write custom searches and automated batch apps that grab a lot more information than most people usually get. Most

people just kind of use Google. My way is both faster and—
EMILY. Bob said you were fast but we need you to be careful.

JIM. I'm careful.

EMILY. Tell me how you'd go about it. Fifteen pages. Nine sections.

JIM. Checking the facts?

EMILY. Yes. How would you check the facts?

JIM. I'll...check the facts. Research. The internet. The phone. The library. I'd batch-automate all I could but—

EMILY. You'd check all the details, make sure they're correct. John's been known to take his little liberties, so if there's a place mentioned, make sure it's spelled correctly. If there's a person mentioned, confirm they exist. We need to make a good-faith effort—confirm every detail.

JIM. Be rigorous.

EMILY. Don't be roughshod.

JIM. Never. You get the full Jim.

EMILY. This essay is an opportunity for us to do meaningful work. To create the conversation, to drive it, and I hope, in this case, to help.

JIM. Hold on... (*Writing.*) ...create...drive...help.

EMILY. The story itself is shattering. Kid killed himself jumping from the tower of a hotel-casino in Vegas.

JIM. (*Writing.*) Suicide... Vegas...

EMILY. But the essay is so much more. Sense from immeasurable tragedy. The history and meaning of Vegas. Despair. Yearning. What it is to be human in a city.

JIM. (*Writing.*) Human in a city. Yes. Got it.

EMILY. Why does a boy kill himself? Is there any comprehending the grief it causes? How ruinous it is? Is there such a thing as consolation, or is even the idea an insult?

JIM. (*Writing.*) Consolation. Comfort? Question mark. Got it.

EMILY. Now forget all that.

JIM. Uh.

EMILY. Don't get sucked in.

JIM. No. Right.

THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT

by Jeremy Kareken & David Murrell
and Gordon Farrell

based on the book by John D'Agata and Jim Fingal

2 men, 1 woman

Jim Fingal is a fresh-out-of-Harvard fact checker for a prominent but sinking New York magazine. John D'Agata is a talented writer with a transcendent essay about the suicide of a teenage boy—an essay that could save the magazine from collapse. When Jim is assigned to fact check D'Agata's essay, the two come head to head in a comedic yet gripping battle over facts versus truth.

"...terrifically funny dialogue... once the writer and the fact-checker get into a lively debate on the ethics of factual truth vs. the beauty of literary dishonesty, it's time to really sit up and listen. ...Their deadly serious but oh-so-funny ethical dispute is brilliantly argued... the debate at the heart of this play transcends comedy and demands serious attention." —**Variety**

"...buoyantly literate... wholly resonant questions [are] wrestled with in this briskly entertaining play... you'll find yourself happy to have your preconceptions disturbed and assumptions unsettled."

—**The Washington Post**

"[THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT] moves with the ticking-clock urgency the situation demands, yet finds appropriate moments to breathe and let us ruminate on the personal, professional and moral issues at stake. ...[an] ingenious adaptation of the sui generis book of the same name..."

—**The Hollywood Reporter**

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