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No Looking Back: A South African Allegory

A Drama In One Act
For Three men, Two male extras

Man 1: A young black man, handsome, with a great deal of character and intelligence visible in his face. Late twenties, although age is not crucial to the part and could be portrayed by anyone not particularly scarred by time.

Man 2: A white male of approximately the same age. He is quite dapper, with the look of one more interested in his appearance than the world directly surrounding him. He tires to sound intelligent by demonstrating his knowledge of life and politics, but he is actually quite sheltered.

Man 3: Older than the other two characters, he has a British accent and a very distinguished looking, with silver hair set off by the black he continually wears. He is quite autocratic.

Two extras: Dressed identically to Man 3, they follow his every order and react in unison. They never speak, but they have a strong presence—very cool, very frightening. They use no unnecessary movements, for that is wasting useful energy in pointless pursuit. Should be young and strong, quite threatening in stature.

Time: Undeterminable.
Place: Presumably a park, and later a holding room.

The stage is empty, except for a park bench with paint peeling off, preferably an army green color, and a wire wastepaper basket of the type commonly found in a park.

Lights come up slowly. A soft tapping noise (soles on wood) can be heard moving closer, and then, suddenly, Man 1 bursts past the curtain stage left. He is gagged, and dressed in ragged grey clothing that is neither stylish or antiquated. He looks around,
frightened—absolutely terrified by whatever is outside, the audience, and what is following him. Voices can be heard, as well as walkie-talkie static and other "chase" noises. The man collapses on the stage face first after staggering across half of the stage.

Enter stage right. Man 2, young, well-groomed. All in white, with a Jay Gatsby look of classical elegance—pleated trousers, polished shoes, etc. A fedora with a blue band matches his blue belt (the only color on him). Whistling a popular waltz and casually strolling, he thrusts his hands in his pockets.

He steps over the black man to sit on the park bench.

There is no backdrop. He casually pulls out a paper and begins to read.

Man 2: (Directing comment over paper) Nice day, isn't it? (Pause) I said, nice day, isn't it? (Groan from Man 1) I think there could be a little less sun, though. It's bad for my complexion. (Pause) Says there's turmoil in the Middle East. There's always turmoil in the Middle East. I think that's why it's there—to give us something for target practice when they finally get out of hand. (Another groan) I wish you'd answer me in a complete sentence. What is the matter with you? (Slowly gets up from bench, methodically folds paper and sets it on the bench, talking continuously) Didn't your parents ever tell you that it's bad manners not to answer when someone is speaking to you? (etc.) (Rolls him over) Why, you're gagged. (Undoes it, drops it quickly as if it is polluted) There. Now do you find it easier to talk?

Man 1: (Slowly) Yes, of course.

Man 2: So, don't you agree with me?

Man 1: (Quizzically) About what?

Man 2: The Middle East, of course.
Man 1: (Stuck with the inanity) Yes, I suppose so. It all depends on the leaders—if they can manage to stay within fairly respectable limits, then there won’t be any problem.

Man 2: (Walking back to the bench) Yes, you’re right. (Opens paper; clearly ending conversation)

Man 1: Aren’t you even curious?

Man 2: About what?

Man 1: Why I’m gagged. Why my clothes are torn. Why there is a rope tied to one of my wrists.

Man 2: Not really.

Man 1: What?

Man 2: Well, it doesn’t directly concern me, does it? I think that if it did, I’d already know, and since I don’t know it doesn’t matter to me. It’s your own business.

Man 1: (Moving toward him and sitting next to him on the bench. Almost imperceptibly, Man 2 moves away) You really don’t want to know?

Man 2: I really don’t care at all.

Man 1: Oh. (Long pause) Well, I suppose I should go. (Pause) You don’t want to know why, right?

Man 2: (Sarcastically) Very good.

Man 1: That’s a very callous attitude, you know. Here I am, another human being in trouble, and you don’t even care why. Where is your compassion, your neighborly concern?

Man 2: Neighborly concern went out with two-cent stamps.
Man 1: (Long pause) Goodbye. Thanks for untying me.

Man 2: Uh huh. (Looks back at paper)

Man 1 starts to run off-stage right. Suddenly, his body jerks backward, pushed by a white, older man dressed all in black. Man 2 resumes whistling and does not look up from the article he's reading. The older man (Man 3) does not react to his presence but proceeds to shove a new gag in Man 1's mouth, smothering a cry of distress. Two people enter from stage left, dressed in the same manner as Man 3, moving symmetrically and in constant unison.

Man 3: Well, we've got him now. (Other two nod together, Man 2 remains focused on paper. Man 3 pushes Man 1 to the ground) It was really stupid to run like that. You know that, don't you? (Grabs him by collar, yanks him to a sitting position) DON'T YOU? (Forces him to nod) That's beneficial to your health. I hope this will never happen again.

Man 2: (Finally looking over paper). Hello there. I didn't see you come over in this area. I was just discussing the Middle East with our friend here (Points at Man 1) and we decided everything's getting worse. Don't you agree?

Man 3: What?

Man 2: (Clearly exasperated) I'm getting tired of repeating everything twice! I said, the turmoil is increasing, don't you agree?

Man 3: (Still confused) I guess you're right.

Man 2: (Toward paper again) As long as we have this settled. (The two men begin to tie up Man 1, kicking and thrashing his arms about) Excuse me, but don't you think you could be a little gentler with him? After all, he seems intelligent.
Man 3: (Sarcasm dripping from every word) Don't judge a book by its cover.

Man 2: Oh, yes, I forgot about that. Well, that changes everything. Sorry I interrupted. (Man 1 loses his battle) Please, don't let me stop you.

Man 3: Do you know who un gagged him?

Man 2: Why, yes, I did. It was only for a moment.

Man 3: (Suddenly suspicious) What did he tell you?

Man 2: Nothing. I didn't care to listen, and he was in a hurry to leave.

Man 3: (Glancing at his co-conspirators, who take one step forward) As you know, we can't tell if you are lying or not. Tie him up as well.

Man 2: (Acquiring the same look as Man 1 in the beginning) No! Really. (Hurriedly standing up from bench) He didn't tell me a thing. You're wasting your time.

Man 3: I'll be the judge. (The two men grab him from behind, gag him, and tie him up, with one acting as the right hand and one as the left, as if they are a unified being) Let's go home, boys!

SCENE TWO

The lights go up. There are no props. The walls are white and the floor is covered with a white material that billows occasionally with a gust of wind.

Man 1 and Man 2 are tied and gagged on the floor. Man 3 enters. He grabs Man 2 by the shirtfront, which is now grey with dirt and quite wrinkled, and drags him into a sitting position. He rips the gag off brutally.
Man 3: Are you ready to tell me what you know about this situation?

Man 2: But I already told you, I don't know anything! (Gets slapped in the face)

Man 3: Liar! Filthy liar! (Walks to Man 1, ungages him no less gently)

Man 1: (Coolly) What now?

Man 3: What did you tell that man? How much did you reveal to him?

Man 1: (Shrugging his shoulders) I couldn't tell him anything. He didn't want to know what was going on.

Man 3: You expect me to believe a story as...(Searching for word) contrived as that? Forgive me if I find that a little unlikely. After all, simple curiosity on his part would elicit something, right? Well, (Gags them one at a time) I'll give you a little while to think about your situation, but remember--each minute you waste will give us another minute to think of ways to find out the real truth. (Sarcastically) Have a nice day. (Leaves stage right)

The two men are silent for a second, and then Man 1 jerks up with an idea. Slowly, he inches toward Man 2, until his tied hands are level with the knot on Man 2's gag. Classical music can be heard in the background. He unties Man 2's gag, and then his hands.

Man 2: Well, thank you! (Man 2 shoots him a look, Man 2 lowers his voice to a whisper) I suppose you want me to untie your hands now. (Creeps toward him, and then stops and unties his own feet) Silly me. Why didn't I do this right away? (Starts to stand slowly) You know, your muscles really get cramped when you lie in the same position for so long. And I got an itch under my kneecap.
The last time I had an itch under my kneecap was when I had a cast on my left leg in the seventh grade. I couldn't scratch it then, either. (Starts to pace a little) It was worse this time, though—I couldn't try to stop it by shoving a nail file or pencil in the crevice between my leg and the cast. (Impatient sound from Man 1) Oh, I forgot to untie you. (Starts to walk toward him again, and stops) How do I know you're not dangerous? (Man 1 Shakes his head) I mean, it's a natural concern. I don't know anything about you except you were being chased by some people. What if you killed someone? (Man 1 shakes his head again, this time more adamantly) What if you'll kill me? (Man 1 shakes his head, the strongest motion yet) I know about you. Nothing! (Starts to move toward the door)

Man 1: (Muffled by gag) Please—help me.

Man 2: (Coming to a decision) All right. But this will be the last time. I got into a lot of trouble doing this for you the last time, and God knows what will happen to me this time. (Undoes his gag) Now I want you to promise not to hurt me before I untie you.

Man 1: I promise. (Pauses while Man 2 unties his hands) Why did it take you so long to release me? I immediately helped you, even though I was tied. After you had been freed, you had to debate whether you would return the favor. Why?

Man 2: (Quietly) I don't know. (Pause) Maybe it's the way I was raised. (Change of voice—deeper, fatherly; spoken bitterly) Look out for number one, buddy boy. Go out and grab all you can. It doesn't matter if you push other people's faces in the dirt as long as you can grab what's in their hands! (Pause, Quietly again) It doesn't matter. (Pause) Why were they chasing you?

Man 1: (Sarcastically) Because I escaped.

Man 2: Why did you try to escape?
Man 1: You really want to know? Really? It doesn't affect you directly. You could leave, and never have it bother you again. It could just vanish from your mind—you could just go back to your life and forget today. The mind is full of trapdoors, and for each idea you don't want to keep, you can just step on that latch and fall down through the floor. Today doesn't have to affect you at all.

Man 2: Yes!!

Man 1: Yes, you want to forget, or yes, you want to remember?

Man 2: I want to remember. I have to remember. This is just too big to fall through a trapdoor.

Man 1: Not if you make the door big enough, or whittle the day small enough.

Man 2: Why did you try to escape?

Man 1: I had to. I have ideas—ideas I can't express here.

Man 2: What ideas?

Man 1: (Getting slightly angry—more irritated than anything else) Why does it matter? Are you going to judge my ideas and then tell me if I was right or wrong? An idea is an idea—whether it's important or not, I should have the right to think them and tell others about them. Even if it is the most minuscule, over-thought thought on record, it is my idea, and goddamnit, I should be allowed to think it!!

Man 2: (Furtively) Shhh!

Man 1: (Whispering) Sorry.

Man 2: I understand. I was just curious. Didn't mean to upset you like that.
Man 1: I didn't mean to fly off the handle like that.

Man 2: Why would I know something? I haven't heard anything so far that would hurt them tremendously.

Man 1: Yes, you have.

Man 2: I have?

Man 1: Of course you have. They're looking up people's ideas here, and changing them with their whims. Controlling thoughts.

Man 2: Where are we?

Man 1: Everywhere--and nowhere.

SCENE THREE

A little time has elapsed. They are sitting cross-legged center stage, apparently sharing a strange sort of camaraderie in the middle of this turmoil. They are wiping their eyes and laughing from the last joke.

Man 2: A rabbi, a priest, and Christ were playing golf, and...

Man 1: (Instantly serious) When do you think they'll be coming back?

Man 2: (Matching his mood) I don't know. Soon, I'd guess. They've been gone for almost two hours. Our grace period is up, I'm sure. (Pause) How powerful are they, really? They've left us alone in here for a long time. Maybe something happened to them--maybe they left! Why, we could be free! Free!

Suddenly from stage right, the two extras enter simultaneously, folding their arms and standing with legs apart once they enter completely. For a minute they just stand there, and then they
part, allowing Man 3 to enter. Man 1 and Man 2 scramble for their bonds, and when the two men look at them, they decide it isn't worth the effort. The two extras leave.

Man 3: So, do you have anything to tell me now? I'm very tired of wasting my time and yours.

Man 2: (Very afraid) I told you before, I don't know anything at all! Really, I don't know anything.

Man 1: Sits on the floor, watching the situation, not saying anything.

Man 3: I'm bloody sick of this! (Slaps Man 2 across the face) I told you before, I want answers now!

Man 2: (Covers face) I don't know anything.

Man 1: (Resignedly, Quietly, but with Pride) What do you need to know? You can ask your questions. I may not answer them, but that's a risk you'll have to take, isn't it?

Man 3: (Glowering) What is the name of your movement? (No answer) What is the name of your movement? (Grasps Man 1's shirt, pulls out a lighter, lights it, and moves closer)

Man 1: (Moving backwards, and then answering) Freemen. The Freemen movement.

Man 3: How many?

Man 1: I don't know.

Man 3: What?

Man 1: (Ferocious gleam in eye) I don't know. New people join every day. And not just in this complex—there are people outside of this little world you've created for yourself. They are planning; and someday soon, we'll be the
strongest, and we'll crush you into the ground. You didn't show us any mercy. We won't show you any, either. (Man 2 gradually showing more strength. Man 1 causes Man 3 to drop the lighter, grabs him around the throat and begins to strangle him) No mercy at all. Do you understand?

Man 3: (Choked) Yes.

Man 2: What do we do now? (Man 1 drops Man 3, now unconscious or dead)

Man 1: I don't know. There are more like him. They'll find us, hunt us down, destroy us for killing him. (Gesture toward Man 3) Maybe we could break free, but they'll always be chasing us. Who knows? Maybe we'll live, maybe we'll die, but one thing's certain: there's no looking back.

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