

WORDS

A solo play in one act
By Craig Houk

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Synopsis

An aging writer with severe arthritis is compelled to hire a young man to type his autobiography for him. It appears, however, that time may have stopped for one of them.

Cast of Characters

J.D. 63 years old. He is a writer, fast approaching retirement. He is wise and self-aware.

Place

Ogunquit, ME

Setting

An Unkempt Study

Time

Late 20th Century

J.D.

(He sits in an armchair drinking a cup of tea and is dictating his autobiography to a young man.)

Words. The right words. I'm obsessed with them. I truly am. And, in my wise opinion, I think any person with any sense at all would be as well. Because I am convinced that there's nothing more frustrating or more disappointing in life than to be misunderstood. Especially when you're certain that you have something important to say. And I feel that I do. We all have stories worth telling. We all have lives worth living. So, I'll be damned if, before my time expires, I leave nothing behind as a reminder of how wonderfully colorful and layered my life has really been.

And as I quickly approach retirement. As I begin the last third of my life, I recognize that my future will only bring more and more memories of my past.

Isn't it ironic that all we really have to look forward to is remembering what has come before?

I met a young man once. Much like you. When I was very young. But only briefly. I remember so clearly, as if it had happened yesterday.

Who would believe, after years of being a writer, that I once dreamed of being an actor? And I must admit that my only regret in life was that I never really pursued that dream.

I remember, I was playing the role of Stanley in my college production of *Streetcar*. A role that admittedly I was not born to play. However, I am not too modest to say that I was good. Really good. So good in fact that if Brando himself had been there to witness my performance he would have, out of shame for his own mediocrity, run screaming into retirement.

Anyway, there I was, on stage in the final scene. And as the lights began to fade, I attempted to make my exit. But was unable to, because this handsome young man appeared out of nowhere immediately off stage left. I had no idea who he was. He certainly wasn't a member of the cast nor was he part of the crew. I could have easily pushed by him but found myself incapable of further movement. And, at that moment, it seemed as if all time had stopped.

He had medium length almond colored hair, much like yours, with steel blue eyes and stood only maybe five feet six or five feet seven at his tallest. His body was trim and, judging from the way his clothing adhered to his small frame, he was slightly muscular and very tone. He was stunning. And as engaging as my very recent performance. The kind of man that you simply could not take your eyes off no matter what.

I opened my mouth to speak, but only discovered that I could not find the words. The words. And that's when he spoke. One would expect that an image like this one would have something earth shatteringly profound to say, but no. His statement was simple and direct. "Remember me," he said. "Because you'll need me." And then he disappeared as quickly as he appeared. And I

don't mean that he vanished into thin air. He just turned and walked away. Leaving me with only one possible conclusion. Whoever this was, for whatever reason he had come to me, he was real.

Years would pass and I would eventually have to accept that I may never see him again. And I may never know what role I might have played in his life.

(The young man has nodded off.)

Are you getting all of this down? Am I moving too fast for you? Because, if I am, you needn't be shy about speaking up. I don't bite. Unless of course you ask me to. In which case, I'd be happy to oblige.

You must know that I am truly grateful for your time and your company. A writer with severe arthritis is a writer no more. Unless, of course, he has someone who is willing to write for him. So, it means a great deal to me that you've agreed to sit with a tired old fag and listen to him relay stories of his undeniably fascinating life.

But if I catch you nodding off one more time, I'll be forced to spank you. And believe me, I'll be the only one who gets any pleasure out of it.

And do you realize that you sleep with your eyes wide open? It scares the shit out of me. I mean, you just sit there, staring at me like the undead. It wasn't until you commenced snoring that I realized you were still alive.

So, I simply ask that, while you're on the clock, you try and remain conscious.

Anyway, so, where was I? Oh, yes. The young man with the steel blue eyes.

So many years had passed, and I worried that, if I was fortunate enough to again be in close proximity to him, I might not be able to recognize him. And would he recognize me? I certainly had changed. A great deal. What I had lost in height, I had gained in width. And where I had once applied Bryl Cream, I was now applying powder to eliminate the shine.

So, instead of fixating on how the young man might have aged, I decided to remember him as he was. Timeless and ageless.

But I never, in my wildest imagination, anticipated what was to come. Yes, after nearly fifty years of reliving that moment off stage left in my mind over and over again, I would unwittingly stumble upon the young man again.

Imagine my joy. Imagine my fear and wonder when it dawned on me that he hadn't aged a bit. Imagine my disappointment when I realized that he had no idea who I was at all. I mean, here we were, standing face to face and the only face that had changed was mine.

I know this all sounds utterly ridiculous. I mean it's impossible. You look at me and you see an aging queen on the verge of spilling her marbles. Or perhaps you think my marbles have already been spent.

But it's true. I would never make that mistake. I would never forget that hair. Or those eyes. Those steel blue eyes.

I envy youth. I do. What I wouldn't give to be young again and to be living it up in this modern world.

(He attempts to stifle his laughter.)

I'm sorry. It's difficult for me to say those words without actually falling into hysterics. Of course, I don't envy youth! It's the youth who should envy me. My age. My wisdom. I've lived the history of the gay man. I, and thousands like me, had no choice but to suffer, struggle, and fight. And, although the battle is not yet over, today's gay adolescent has one thing that I never had. The freedom to live his life exactly as he likes. And not because society approves, but because thousands of men before him sacrificed their own happiness so that he could have his. Without compromise.

(He leans back in the chair.)

Now that I'm in my late adult years, I don't spend many moments gazing into a mirror. Scrutinizing my face. Or worrying about my body parts. There was a time, however, when I was irritably self-critical about my appearance. I took my looks so seriously and felt painfully inferior to those men Madison Avenue so successfully manufactured. Men who had chiseled cheek bones and tapered torsos and that pouty look.

(He moves forward in his chair.)

My physical preoccupations began at puberty, when I was woefully overweight, and school mates with sneering jeers and loathsome jokes called me blimp and lard ass to my face. In those days, nothing it seemed could diminish the ample fleshiness of my form, verging as it were, on the voluptuous.

A few years ago, I caught myself admiring my calves. "Not bad," I thought. Perhaps that dance training and those endless aerobic classes paid off after all.

And some other body parts I once disliked – Like my chin which emerges from my face, hanging like an indecisive nub, not knowing if it wants to be a chin or not – Well, they don't disturb me anymore.

Now, hedging towards seventy, I like them all. And so, I've come through in pretty fair shape. So far. And though there were times when I didn't like the curve of this or the size of that, life is less strenuous now, somehow.

I've even learned to lean into a mirror on occasion. And wonder why I ever thought I was insufficient.

Except for the love handles, which have to go, I'm quite content.

Now, I look at you. And I see our culture's definition of the perfect man. I mean, you truly are handsome, by anyone's standards. And I sense that you will have very few obstacles in your life.

Admittedly, though, I feel sorry for you. I worry that, every time you look at yourself in the mirror, you might not be able to see what's really there. Because true gratification in life comes from within. And when the exterior begins to fade away, oftentimes men, like you, are left with nothing and no one at all.

But I can see that you're above all that. I can see that you'll rise to the challenge. I could see that when we met nearly fifty years ago. And I can see that today.

"Remember me," you said. "Because you'll need me." I do remember you, blue eyes. But what could I possibly need from you?

(The young man has nodded off again.)

There you go with your snoring. I've should've known you were asleep. But, with your eyes wide open like that, it's difficult to be certain. I swear, without fail, any time I feel like I have something important to say, my words fall on deaf ears.

(End of play.)