

Utah State University

From the Selected Works of Gene Washington

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EXISTENTIAL VERTIGO

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EXISTENTIAL VERTIGO

(Or, The Map is not the Territory)

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Relax and give the play a chance to strut its stuff—relax, stop wondering what it is all 'about'—like many strange and familiar things, Life included, this play isn't 'about,' it simply is. . . . Don't try to enjoy it, let it try to enjoy you. DON'T TRY TO UNDERSTAND IT, LET IT TRY TO UNDERSTAND YOU. e.e. cummings

CAST: A, B and C. teens to 30s something. May be all male or all female, or male/female. May carry a climbing tool, or more than one, to identify them. Or just a backpack. Two mountaineers, A & B are out to summit a mountain. . If they summit it in record time, they will win some needed prize money. C appears late in the play to help them with the map.

ASIDE: Occasionally an actor will break the fourth wall.

SCENE: Bare-stage perhaps with a chair or two or something to sit on.

AT RISE. Actors enter and put their packs down.

ACTION: Actors either perform the play standing or sit down occasionally. One of them is holding a map.

The first performance of the play was by the Wasatch Acting Company, SLC Utah, 23-25 January 2014. The actors were Eric Leckman and Ana Lemke. Elise Hanson directed.

A

I think we're lost.

B

(Looking around)

Yeah, We're definitively lost. I remember coming through here a couple of times today

A

I don't think we're justified in called it a detour.

B

I believe you're right.

(Looking half-wildly around)

I wouldn't want to call it a short cut either.

A

No...I believe you're right.

(Walks to side of the stage and looks around)

We've been walking in circles.

B

A milestone. We keep coming back to the same place. I learned in the Boy Scouts that two places that have the same relationship with every other place in the universe are the same place.

A

I'd like to compare thoughts on that.

(Pause)

I got lost at exactly 11:30.

B

What a coincidence. I also got lost at 11:30.

A

(Interrupting)

Whatever.

(Pause)

I counted 33 different species of birds so far today.

B

That's amazing! I too counted 33 different species.

(With great seriousness)

We must be ready for anything.

(Pause, thinking)

Reminds me of the time when my buddies and I were blown up in the war...we rose up from the ground into the air like birds. Though we didn't stay there as long as birds.

A

. (Checking watch; looking at the position of the sun)

Whatever. We're running out of time. We need to summit the mountain before 5 o'clock in order to claim the prize.

B

(Checks watch)

You're right. We're absolutely running out of time.

(Pause; gazing off in the distance, thinking)

Being blown up in a war, twisting around in the air...like a young bird, trying to learn how to fly...well, it's changes peoples attitude toward you. They become a little standoffish.

(Comes to center stage and asks the audience)

Do you see anything wrong with my face?

A

(Shaking h/h/ head)

If someone else had told me that I would get lost someday I wouldn't have believed it.

B

(Becoming philosophical)

You certainly get in less trouble not getting lost.

(Looking around, nervous; pausing)

We don't have much time left. So, which way should we go?

A

Well, it well known that birds land together by aligning themselves with the direction of the earth's magnetic field. Scientists call it birds of a feather always land together.

B

I've always liked to watch birds....especially when they're landing.

A

I was about to say that.

(Long pause may be kept)

So, what next?

B

(Gesturing in different directions, rotating h/h body)

Well, since we're starting from where we are we still know we have six choices. We can go forward, backwards, to the right or to the left.

(Looks out at nothing in particular; puzzled)

I've forgotten the other two choices.

A

(Gesturing up and down)

Up or down, of course.

B

Thank you.

(Pause, looking off at nowhere)

When I hear the word "choice" I always think of when I was young and personable...the blood coursing through my veins...everything was ahead...there was no yesterday or tomorrow ...and now that we're lost there's no time at all...there's not even is no "now."

(Pause; pensive; to the audience)

Time...where is...?

(Pause, thinking)

Where is....?

(Longer pause)

Where is....

(Aside; to us)

Can you help me with that thought?

A

Whatever. Well...now, thanks to science, we know both the right and wrong way to climb a mountain in record time and win a prize. In the early years of mountaineering there was no such knowledge. Not knowing right from wrong, people went up and down mountains both ways...not knowing there was a difference.

B

(Shrugs h/h shoulders)

So? Science doesn't know everything.

(Pause)

Now from where we are which way would you recommend we go? I assume it would be the shortest way to our mountain?

(Pause; looking up and down)

And frankly, I can't see us going up or down...of course if we went right, left, forward or back we might see a way down or up.

A

If we had more time we could spend it looking around for the best way to go. So let's stop talking and look for some landmarks, something to guide us...that sort of thing.

B

I agree. We don't have much time to look around for the perfect way to go...even though I find it enjoyable to talk about which way to go.

A

So, let's save time and start from where we are and then determine which way to go.

B

Good idea. But starting from here will be chancy if we don't know where we are.

A

We are here.

B

(Pointing to the audience)

I just heard someone out there say the opposite.

A

Well, we may not know the location of where we are but we do know what it is. It's our start position.

B

I was about to point that out.

A

I could tell you were. Our start position determines the initial conditions under which we go somewhere else...in a certain direction from here...which, in turn, determines which way we ought to go. So we have to be very precise about where we are. If we get it wrong, we will end up going the wrong way and lose more time. I learned that in high-school geometry.

B

(Pointing back and forth)

You mean, say, start by going right instead of left, or back instead of forward?

A

Or down instead of up. It's a process of elimination. And keep in mind, the initial conditions of a start position, sum to six different directions. With that large a number it's easy to get confused about the best way to go.

B

I am beginning to believe that routine knowledge of the start position of a place is impossible without new discoveries regarding space, time and direction.

A

New discoveries don't tell anything we don't already know.

(Pause)

So its obvious we need some help here.

(Gesturing toward the audience)

Let's ask them where we are.

B

(Gesturing toward us)

Them? Look at their faces. What makes you think that they know where we...or they...are?

A

Well, aren't we all in the same place?

B

Yeah, in a manner of speaking. But what of it? It could be anyplace in the universe.

A

I'll tell you what of it. It means that we are all lost. Just being here together in one place creates a new lost place in the universe. It's simple quantum physics.

(Long pause; thinking)

I just remembered an old professor saying to our class in Euclid that two parallel lines starting from somewhere are infinite...except the one on the left which has a shorter line to infinity.

B

I always found infinity overrated.

(Gesturing at audience)

Well if you're not on a tight schedule like us you might enjoy being lost...even if you miss a few things. Isn't that a possibility?

(Pause; scanning the audience)

See how they look.

A

(Scanning the audience)

I take your point. Look at their faces. It's obvious that we're all are living in an age of less moral comfort and more factual mystery.

B

And don't forget the uncertainty principle. The more precisely the position of some particle is determined, the less precisely its momentum can be known, and vice versa. We are nothing more than swerving particles in a chaotic, uncertain universe.

A

Still, we could use more information.

(Pause; gesturing toward audience)

Well, let's not wake them up and starting establishing some facts. We know we're lost. We're running out of time.

A

Yeah...and we're broke...we need the prize money.

B

We're up against stiff competition.

A

We don't know which direction the earth's magnetic field is pointing.

B

We're swerving particles in a chaotic, uncertain, universe.

A

Still, we absolutely need to get moving...from where we are.

They high five.

SOUND: HELP1 This
may be either performed by an
actor sitting in the audience.
Or, of course, from backstage.

A (cont)
(Pointing at the audience; A addressing B)
Hear that. Go out there and help him.

B
Why should I go?

A
That's no reason.

B
When someone yells HELP it means they need help.

SOUND: HELP!

A
Not always. In most cases when I've called for help it's meant something else.

B
That may be true in theory, but in reality things are different.

SOUND: HELP!

A
(Clapping hands suddenly together)
So! Which way should we go? We're running out of time.

B
Just give me a minute. I wasn't born knowing which way to go from here.
(Flourishes the map)
Let's consult the map.

They consult the map. This may be done either standing up or one their hands and knees with the map spread out before them.

B (cont)
(Suddenly looking up from the map; pointing to a distant peak)
We're on the peak of that mountain, over there.
(Long pause; looking out at the peak; turning to A)
I don't know about you. But I think. I'd prefer a different location.

A

(Shrugging)
Whatever.
(Long pause; looking hard at the map)
Did you mark our position on the map?

B
No, I lost all my markers in the last avalanche. But remember where we are on it.
(Pointing; A leans in closer)
Right here.

A
(Aside; to us)
Do any of you guys have something to mark a map with? It's important.

SOUND: HELP!

C, another mountaineer,
Enters.

C
(Looks at map; to A)
I heard you asking for a marker. Be my guest
(Hands marker to B)
Now show me where you are on the map.

B
(Pointing at map)
Right here.
(Pointing at peak of the mountain)
On that peak over there.

C
Okay. I believe I am right in thinking that you're out to summit the contest mountain first and win the prize. Is that right?

A
That's right. We need the money.

C
(Looking A and B over carefully)
Well, I have to say you look fit enough...but would you like a suggestion?

A
Gladly.

B

Shoot!

C

Now look at this.

(Pointing at the map; moving h/h finger around)

Now here is the location of the contest mountain. Is that right?

A

Yeah, that's it.

B

No doubt about it.

C

And here...

(Placing a finger on the map; Then pointing at the distant peak)

...is where you are? Right?

A

Absolutely.

C

My suggestion then is not to mark your map location as being on that peak.

(Pointing)

I would mark it in different places on the map.

(Jabbing finger at map)

Here...maybe there...or over here...more than one place. In the situation you're in you could use a few backup positions.

B

(To C)

Good idea. Hand me your marker.

(Begins marking the map)

SOUND: HELP!

We leave them scrutinizing, rotating
marking etc. the map.

FADE TO NIHILISTIC
DARKNESS