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And They Danced

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And They Danced
A play for actors and singers by John Steven Paul
Based on an homily by David H. Kehret on the Gospel of John 11:1-44
Developed in workshop by Soul Purpose
The liturgical drama troupe of the Valparaiso University Theatre

PERFORMANCE NOTES: *And They Danced* is designed to be played in a chancel: a very compact space. Most chancels feature several steps leading from the floor of the nave and landing on the high altar level. The staging suggested in this script depends on such steps. For example, at the opening, the players are arranged in a symmetrical grouping on at least three levels. On the top level, three men are arranged as follows: SIX in the middle, FOUR to his right, and FIVE to his left. Two of the women are on the step below: TWO stage right (in front of FOUR) and THREE stage left (in front of FIVE). ESTHER (ONE) is down center, a step or two in front of the group. Six simple folding chairs are arranged on three sides of the chancel area.

The players move out from this very compact grouping into a closer relationship with the audience, and, ultimately, should occupy as much space as the nave and chancel have to offer and sight lines will permit. At other times, the players move back into their initial compact and symmetrical arrangement. The centerpiece of the action is the celebration of Lazarus' resurrection. The celebration features music, singing, and dancing. The more space afforded the celebration the better, yet the great celebration can be suggested in a small nave and chancel space as well.

The play is performed by six players: three men and three women. At certain points in the play the players take on the roles of characters in the story of "The Raising of Lazarus" (John's Gospel, chapter 11). ONE becomes ESTHER, a dear friend of Lazarus' family. TWO becomes MARY, one of Lazarus' sisters and THREE becomes MARTHA, Lazarus' other sister. FOUR becomes LAZARUS himself and FIVE becomes MARK, a townsman from Bethany. (FIVE should also be able to play guitar.) SIX becomes JESUS.

The players are costumed neutrally. It is suggested that MARY and MARTHA be dressed in all black turtleneck shirts with black skirts or trousers. The other players might be dressed in white turtlenecks and black skirts or trousers.

At the opening of the play, the grieving ESTHER (ONE) is methodically preparing a casserole meal. Her actions are mimed.

ONE

(Reading the recipe instructions aloud to herself)

“Four double handfuls of bulgar wheat,
Steamed until it cracks open.
A measure of flour.
A pinch of salt.
A pinch of dried herbs, rubbed together
And sprinkled into the mixture.
One egg, beaten.

Enough broth to give it moisture.
Mix together.

Prepare another bowl...”

SIX

Glazed for use by the fire.

ONE

“Rub around with olive oil.
Press a clove of garlic into the surface.
Place first mixture into the new bowl, firm down.
Sprinkle bread crumbs over the top, pat in.
Place a damp towel over the bowl.”

FIVE

*(indicates with a gesture that it is Esther who has been
preparing the casserole.)*

Esther wipes off her hands and brushes off her apron.

TWO

She picks up the casserole and goes out her front door to the village street.

*TWO and THREE now come down stage and take positions
extreme down right and extreme down left.*

THREE

There she walks down four or five houses and across.

FIVE

She stops at a door.

ONE

Mary? Martha?

MARY (TWO) comes to the door.

ONE

Oh, Mary, I... I knew you'd be having all sorts of company these days – some folks even from a distance out of town and I knew how things get short. I just wanted to bring over a little something here to help out. You can set it by the fire to warm and just use it whenever you happen to need it.

ESTHER “hands” MARY her covered hot dish and turns away from the door¹. Then, she turns back.

ONE

And, um, Mary, I just wanted to say how sorry we all are about Lazarus. We had hoped and prayed like you and Martha did that Jesus could get here in time. But with Lazarus taking sick so fast and then going so quickly... well, we just want you to know we're so sorry – we're so sorry.²

SIX

Lazarus was dead.

FIVE

Against everybody's hopes...

CHORUS (i.e. ONE through SIX)

Lazarus was dead.

TWO

Oh Lord, if only you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.

¹ MARY then mimes handing the dish to MARTHA.

² ESTHER (#1) moves toward MARY (#2) wanting to embrace her but hesitating; then, MARY embraces ESTHER.

THREE

(with anger in her voice)

Oh Lord, if only you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.

TWO & THREE

Oh Lord, if only you had been here...

CHORUS

My brother wouldn't have died.

SIX

But Jesus had not been there.

FOUR

Blame the Palestinian postal system?

FIVE

The donkeys were slow?

THREE

The cart broke down?

ONE

Hardly.

FIVE

Word had gotten through to Jesus, and he – well, Jesus –

SIX

(crossing down stage)

Okay, let's be honest – Jesus just dilly-dallied around for a couple of days before gathering his disciples and heading to Bethany.

CHORUS

When he got there it would be too late.

TWO & THREE

There would be no healing miracle in Bethany when Jesus got there.

FIVE

There would be no just-in-the-nick-of-time-and-everything-back-to-normal that day.

TWO

Jesus would not be led to a sickbed...

THREE

But to a graveyard.

CHORUS

There he would stand in front of a tomb.

(FOUR separates himself from the Players and takes a position off stage.)

SIX

(Pause. Then, with great emotion.)

Father, I know that you listen to me. *(pause)* Lazarus, come forth!

CHORUS

(hesitantly, hoping, doubting)

Lazarus, come forth!³

After a moment's silence, FOUR slowly rejoins the players, as if he has returned from the dead. The other players respond with initial doubt and hesitation, then with ecstasy. All the actions are mimed.

³ After waiting for a time, ESTHER, resigned to LAZARUS' death and annoyed at herself for believing JESUS could raise him, rushes off the stage and out of sight. The NARRATOR (#5) begins to follow ESTHER to comfort her, but the sight of the approaching LAZARUS stops him in his tracks.

FIVE

(rapidly, with great excitement)

Suddenly there would erupt in that graveyard the greatest gift unwrapping the world has ever seen.

TWO

Funeral shroud and grave clothes torn and ripped,

THREE

Pulled this way and that.

FOUR

Poor Lazarus blinking his eyes in the bright light,

TWO

His face smothered with tears,

TWO & THREE

And kisses,

FIVE & SIX

And hugs from his sisters and everybody around,

ONE, TWO, THREE, FIVE & SIX

Yelping and screaming and crying

CHORUS

And shouting all at the same time.

FOUR

And suddenly Lazarus would find himself lifted up on strong shoulders...

FIVE and SIX boost FOUR up high on their shoulders and process upstage as far as possible.

TWO & THREE

With Mary and Martha tagging along behind as they start on the way out of the cemetery

FOUR

And the funeral procession in reverse would make its way from cemetery back to town.⁴

THREE⁵

(As if seeing the action from afar)

Along the way a couple of young men would go off to the side down over the hill, down to a flock of sheep, and they would get the biggest ewe they could find, and they would butcher the ewe and clean her out there in the field and bring her into the village...

FIVE

Just as the fire that someone else started in the village square was dying down to very hot coals.

THREE

Now...

TWO

They're putting the lamb on a spit on a rack

THREE

And starting to burn it over the fire.

FIVE

In short order this village will be transformed.

THREE

Esther would be coming out of her house wondering:

⁴ TWO follows closely behind FIVE and SIX, who are holding LAZARUS aloft, "spotting" #4 in case he falls back.

⁵ This line might also be taken by ONE. Other lines may be taken by actors other than those indicated if the staging requirements make such modifications necessary.

ONE

What in the world is going on?

And now it dawns on ESTHER just who is standing in front of her. She looks at MARY and MARTHA who assure her that this is indeed her friend LAZARUS. ESTHER runs to hug him.⁶

TWO

And she would soon know...

CHORUS

And every passerby would know...

Now the preparations for a great celebration begin – the kind of celebration that a community might have when one of their number comes back from the dead. The celebration of new life is the centerpiece of the play and must be wonderful!

ONE

Tables, chairs, and benches from every house and down from the side streets filling the village square... and food... trays and trays of food

THREE

Now Esther's funeral casserole

TWO

Will be the centerpiece for the head table!

ONE

Then

FIVE

The lamb would be done

⁶ In this moment, we see ESTHER hesitate before touching her friend who she knew had been dead and buried. It is a moment in which joy and horror compete.

TWO

And the wine skins would come out

CHORUS

And everybody

ONE

Eat

ONE & TWO

And drink

ONE through THREE

And laugh

ONE through FOUR

And cry

ONE through FIVE

And talk

CHORUS

Until they had their fill.

FIVE

And when the sun dipped further below the horizon, another transformation would begin to take place in the village. Torches would be brought out and placed on the fronts of houses

ONE

Forty, fifty torches there, flickering around the village square.

FOUR, FIVE & SIX

And the tables and benches would all be pulled back off to the side

By now the players have dressed for the party to celebrate LAZARUS' return from the dead. Each of them, including LAZARUS, has, with exaggerated enthusiasm, taken and put on three items of party clothing which have been situated on the chairs from the beginning: a crazy hat, a colorful vest, and, perhaps, a long scarf. LAZARUS puts a new robe on JESUS.⁷

TWO

(Off Stage)

And down at one end...

CHORUS

(Off Stage)

Six stout chairs placed in a row

And six stout chairs are brought down center stage. They are the chairs that have been sitting in the chancel. From these chairs the music is played and the dancing enjoyed.

FIVE

(re-entering with a drum)

And in from the shadows would come musicians:

Ideally, the players would be able to play the instruments called for, but really any combination of simple melody and rhythm instruments will do.

ONE

(re-entering)

Dulcimer,

SIX

(re-entering)

Harp,

⁷ Or reverse the robe JESUS is wearing. This is a moment of transformation.

TWO & THREE

(re-entering)

Two flutes,

FOUR

(re-entering)

A tambourine,

FIVE

A drum.

The particular piece of music should be chosen by the players. The music should be up-tempo and singable. The music is played slowly at first and then more and more rapidly. The dancing of the three men will increase in enthusiasm as the musical tempo increases.

THREE

The women would grab the children and bring them over to the side where they would find a place to sit, and the men would step forward onto the street.

ONE

Then the music would start and the men would begin to dance and they would dance – every dance they knew, faster and faster and faster and faster and faster on into the night, and there would be Jesus in the middle of them dancing, his hands in the air, his feet and legs moving to every step he could remember, his robe swaying with his body, while the torch lights flickered over the whole affair.

FIVE

Then the music would slow, just for a moment, and one by one the men of the village would pull back off to the side and find a place to sit on a bench or on the ground until there just two figures left in the center of the city square. And Jesus and Lazarus would grasp hands together and they would dance.

JESUS and LAZARUS dance with increasing joy and abandon and then suddenly the music and the dancing stop and the two men embrace each other for a long moment.

Now the tone of the play changes radically. The players drop their roles and speak directly to the audience. The staging should now be quite formal: the players are arranged in straight lines, boxes, or equilateral triangles. With each successive line, the players, very reluctantly, take off one of their three items of party clothing, returning them to the chairs or dropping them to the floor. Finally, they all return to their original, neutral costumes.

FOUR

But none of that could have happened.

TWO

Remember this so you'll never forget it.

TWO through FIVE

None of that would have been at all possible.

THREE

Mark this indelibly in your memory.

CHORUS

None of that would have happened...

SIX

...except first Lazarus had died.

The players return their chairs to their original positions in the chancel.

ONE

Death and resurrection,

TWO

Death and new life:

THREE

That's what the weeks of Lent are about.

FOUR

And that's the message of Easter.

FIVE

Not just resurrection,

SIX

Not just new life,

CHORUS

But *death* and resurrection, *death* and new life.

TWO

For there is no resurrection

SIX

Where there has not been a death.

THREE

There is no new life

FIVE

Unless something old has been put away.

ONE

There is no born again

FOUR

Until there has been a burial.

CHORUS

We've heard that before

FIVE

But we tend to spiritualize such thoughts out of reality. Yet the death and resurrection we are talking about here is as real and down to earth

FOUR

As the death of Lazarus

TWO

Which made it necessary for his companions to put him away in a tomb.

ONE and THREE

Because he was going to smell.

FOUR

That's how real this death is that we're talking about and the resurrection that follows.

CHORUS

All of us have experienced at some time in our life the dying, the letting go of one life for a new one.

SIX

We left high school, we had to let go, had to let part of ourselves die to go into the university.

TWO

We have moved from one place to another. We have experienced having to let go of the past in order to embrace the new life of the future.

FOUR

We have lost loved ones and have known the letting go that has to be done before our own life can go on.

THREE

We have had to change jobs or vocations and have known death, the letting go, the giving up of one thing for something new to take place.

ONE

Some of you know how terribly hard such dying is, how so unbelievably hard it is that sometimes we find it just impossible to let go and cling for dear life to dying things unable to take our hands off of them.

CHORUS

Those of us...

TWO

... who are struggling and can't get free from the misuse of alcohol and drugs.

CHORUS

Those of us...

FOUR

... who are caught in a relationship that we know has no future, but we lie to ourselves about how fantastic this is going to be for us and for the other person

ONE

... because we just can't let it die and let go.

TWO

It's too scary?

ONE nods and then gives TWO her party accessory⁸. All the players' party clothing has now been removed.

CHORUS

Those of us...

⁸ A scarf (red).

SIX

... who are trapped in a job, a position, a status that has become a death for us and who can't let go of it for the uncertainty and the insecurity and the unfamiliarity of anything else.

FOUR

There are also those among us who have had the courage to let go and who know what wonderful new life is possible when we allow something to die in order for a resurrection to take place.

CHORUS

Those of us...

THREE

... who have been willing to let go of attitudes and ideas in order that new attitudes and ideas can be born.

CHORUS

Those of us...

SIX

... who together have let one relationship die in order that between us a new relationship can sprout and grow know the courage it takes and the joy.

ONE

We know, finally, what it means to be born again. We have come to face that being born again,

ONE & TWO

What it means to be born again

ONE through FOUR

And again

ONE through FIVE

And again

CHORUS

And again and again.

TWO

And we have come to acknowledge that if we are to be born again and again and again...

ONE

We must also die again and again and again... we have learned that in dying new life comes.

SIX

That in dying an invitation to rise comes to us.

FOUR

That it is from *inside* the tomb that we hear the voice of Jesus:

SIX

Lazarus!

ONE

Kevin!⁹

FIVE

Calls out the first name of the actor playing number SIX

SIX

... the name of the actor playing number FOUR

FOUR

... the name of the actor playing number THREE

THREE

... the name of the actor playing number TWO

⁹ *The first name called should always be "Kevin" in memory of Valparaiso University student and Soul Purpose member Kevin Fann who died in a drowning accident in 1996. Kevin played the role of Lazarus many times. The other names should be the actual first names of the players, who then come down stage as their names are called.*

TWO

... *the name of the actor playing number ONE*

ONE

... *the name of the actor playing number FIVE.*

CHORUS

Come forth!

The final players' position is a straight line parallel to the front line of the playing space with arms outstretched.

END