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Matthews, Manifold Grace

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Matthews, Manifold Grace
A liturgical drama suggested by 1 Peter 4:10 and Matthew 25:14-30
A play for actors and singers by John Steven Paul
Developed in workshop by Soul Purpose,
The Liturgical Drama Troupe of the Valparaiso University Theatre

Characters:

Four talent agents named: Five, Two, One, and Four

Del Marva, *a stand-up comedian*

Stan, *a delivery man*

I.

*The office of the Matthews Manifold Grace Talent Agency.
Three desks with telephones, files, and name plates on
them: "One," "Two," and "Five." ONE, TWO, and FIVE
sit at the desks. They are extremely busy.*

Telephone rings. FIVE answers.

FIVE:

Matthews, Manifold Grace Talent Agents: "Talents big, medium and small, we handle 'em all."
Five speaking... Dogs? Nobody wants dog acts any more. Vaudeville's dead. Haven't you heard?

TWO:

Matthews, Manifold Grace Talent Agents. Two speaking. No, no Siamese twin duets, but how about a glass blower from the Galapagos? Well... fine... go somewhere else. (*caller hangs up*)
Rude!

ONE:

Matthews, Manifold Grace Talent Agents. This is One. Comedian? You bet. I gotta hundred of 'em. What do you mean are they funny? They did, did they? They told you that? Well, you've never seen Del Marva, have you? You can catch him at the Bridge Club in Wilmington. Okay, but get back to me before you miss your chance.

FIVE:

Matthews, Manifold, and Grace Talent Agents. Mr. Matthews...? It's been so long since we've... you're coming back... when... er, soo I hope... Business? Well, up and down, you know, market being what it is and all... Two and One, oh yes, sir... they're hard at work, you

know Two and One. Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Goodbye, sir. Sir? Mr. Matthews? (*Matthews has hung up.*) When are you coming... back...? (*FIVE hangs up the telephone.*)

(*To himself.*) He's coming back! The end of all things is near.

Two! One! (*TWO and ONE hang up their phones.*) Matthews is coming back.

TWO:

You're not serious.

FIVE:

Oh, but I am. I just hung up the phone with the Man.

ONE:

When? I mean, when will he be back?

FIVE:

Can't say for absolutely sure, but soon.

TWO:

How do you know?

FIVE:

Well, I heard all those tell-tale signs in the background: the conductor's last call for boarding, the roar of buses pulling away from the station, three whistles from the ship's horn, the flight announcement.

TWO:

Well, I guess –

FIVE:

That's right, Mr. Matthews is definitely coming back. Time to get organized. Time to get those talent files in order.

The three go quite assiduously and ostentatiously to work, always keeping a competitive eye on each other.

TWO:

I suppose Matthews will want to see how we've managed the talents.

FIVE:

Well, this *is* a talent agency.

TWO:

Yes, but I mean the ones he gave us, you know, just before he left.

FIVE:

I expect he'll want to see those first thing.

II.

(Pause.)

TWO:

So, uh, Five, what have you got to show him?

FIVE:

You mean, what have I done with those talents?

TWO:

Five talents, I believe, to be exact.

FIVE:

Did you ever get a look at those talents, Two?

TWO:

No, not close up.

FIVE:

I have a picture of them. *(gives picture.)*

TWO:

Five, these are –

FIVE:

Pretty uninspiring, aren't they?

TWO:

Five, these boys are –

FIVE:

Not very promising, are they –

TWO:

Five, these are the Backstreet Boys!

FIVE:

That's where I found 'em, out in the back street. But I've worked with them, given them some confidence, brought in a few of their friends, an orchestra and... *(he goes off stage to an adjacent room)*.

TWO:

I can't believe it. Matthews gave him the Backstreet Boys.

FIVE:

(from off) Listen to them now.

From the other room we hear the unmistakable sound of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. FIVE returns, beaming with pride.

FIVE:

What do you think?

TWO:

I think Matthews gave you a lot to work with.

FIVE:

You think I'll get the old "well-done-thou-good-'n'-faithful"?

TWO:

Matthews always trusted you more than he did me.

III.

FIVE:

(patronizingly) Two, now that's not true. I'll bet he'll just love what you did with your talents. Where are they?

TWO:

You remember that on the day Matthews left, he gave me these *(shows two Christmas tree ornaments)* two Christmas ornaments?

FIVE:

Yes, that Matthews! Always the kidder! So what'd he really give you? Later, I mean.

TWO:

That was it, Five. Two Christmas ornaments. So, I thought about what I could do with these and I got an idea. At Christmas, people like to feel good about themselves, right?

FIVE:

(not sure where this is going) Right.

TWO:

And they like to be reminded of what they've accomplished, right?

FIVE:

Mm-hmm.

TWO:

So, I put their accomplishments on these Christmas ornaments – in pictures.

FIVE:

Two, you're a genius.

TWO:

So, now I need to find a market. You remember last summer when I went to visit my mother in Wisconsin? (*FIVE nods.*) She belongs to a little club out there that sells Christmas ornaments every year to raise money for a university in Indiana.

FIVE:

No.

TWO:

Yes! So, I had a guy I know in Frankenmuth, Michigan –

FIVE:

Where?

TWO:

Frankenmuth. Say it with me Frank-en-

FIVE:

Furter?

TWO:

Muth. Franken-*MUTH.* Whatever. So, I had a guy I know in Frankenmuth, Michigan put a picture of one of the University buildings on every one of these Christmas ornaments.

FIVE:

And?

TWO:

Let me show you. Hey Stan.

From off stage, STAN, the delivery man, struggles to bring in several huge boxes with the word "Frankenmuth" stenciled on the side.

STAN:

Hey, I got an order here for someone called Valpo Guild. 4,000 Christmas balls.

TWO:

I'll take that. You can put them right over here.

STAN:

Thanks, lady. It's not that they're so heavy. They're just awkward. You know what I mean.
(Exits.)

FIVE:

Brilliant, Two! You've turned two talents into four... thousand! Absolutely brilliant!

TWO:

You think I'll get the old "well-done-thou-good-'n'-faithful"?

FIVE:

No doubt about it!

IV.

TWO:

You know, all this talk of Christmas makes me think of Four.

FIVE:

Yes, indeed. Four used to love Christmas. She organized the Christmas party every year.

ONE:

(The first we've heard from ONE for a while.) Whatever happened to Four?

Silence.

FIVE:

Uh, ahem, Four, uh...

TWO:

Yes, well, Four, um... Things didn't work out for Four.

ONE:

Was she given any talent to work with?

FIVE:

Oh, yes. Four reeeeeeeaaaaally big talents.

TWO:

The biggest.

ONE:

So what happened?

FIVE:

Let's be honest. Four blew it. Four was a loser. Two of her four talents left the business and the other two went with another agency.

TWO:

Mr. Matthews was not happy.

ONE:

He fired her?

FIVE:

You could say that.

ONE:

Where's Four now?

TWO:

I don't know. The last I heard she was way off somewhere in the outer darkness.

FIVE:

Weepign and moaning.

TWO:

And gnashing her –

FIVE:

Enough about Four. Let's turn the page.

FIVE and TWO now look over at ONE.

V.

FIVE:

So, One!

TWO:

One, old boy.

FIVE:

One, old sport.

TWO:

What have you got to show Matthews?

FIVE:

He'll be back any time now.

ONE:

I've got what he gave me.

TWO:

What's that?

ONE:

I'll show you. (*He turns on the personality of an emcee at a nightclub.*) Ladies and Gentlemen, the Apocalypse proudly presents, directly from the Bridge Club in Wilmington, Delaware... (*drum roll*) Mr. Del Marva!

The comic comes out and does his act. Three jokes and a song fall flat.

TWO:

Thank you, Mr... uh?

DEL:

Del Marva.

FIVE:

Right. Thank you, Mr. Marva. Leave your name with the girl at the front desk.

TWO:

Don't call us.

FIVE:

No. We'll call – One, could you show Mr. Marva out, please?

ONE awkwardly ushers him out.

TWO:

(to FIVE) That's it?

FIVE:

That guy's about as funny as a bowl of clam dip.

TWO:

And not half as tasty.

ONE returns.

FIVE:

One One One One oowhon-nuh! This will never do!

TWO:

Matthews “entrusted his property to you.”

ONE:

And I’m giving it back to him.

TWO:

Where have you been keeping him?

ONE:

In the hall closet. (*FIVE and TWO shake their heads slowly.*) Can you blame me? That’s all I had to work with. Matthews is a harsh man. I was afraid. I figured if I locked the guy up, I could at least give him back to Matthews in one piece.

FIVE:

One, let me tell you something. Matthews is not only harsh, but he reaps where he didn’t sow and gathers where he didn’t scatter seed.

ONE:

I’ve heard that about him, but I’ve never known what that meant.

TWO:

It means you’re in big trouble.

ONE:

I know. And I’m all packed to leave.

TWO:

Where will you go?

ONE:

The outer darkness, I guess. Maybe I can open a little agency of my own out there. I used to know a guy who had an act that featured fruit bats. (*TWO ducks and covers her head.*) Maybe I can represent him. (*Exits.*)

SCENE TWO

On the road to the Outer Darkness. ONE with a suitcase in hand and head down. ONE bumps into FOUR. They do not recognize each other. ONE's suitcase flies out of his hand.

FOUR:

Excuse me. My fault.

ONE:

Oh, that's okay. It's been that kind of day.

FOUR:

Here. Let me help you. There you go. (*Helping FOUR pull things together.*) Do you live around here?

ONE:

No, but I used to work around here.

FOUR:

I'm lost. Do you know where the Matthews Talent Agency is located?

ONE:

It's right there.

FOUR:

Wow, that's quite an impressive building. They must have moved.

ONE:

About three years ago. Are you looking for an agent? (*hopefully*) Do you work in the dark?

FOUR:

As a matter of fact, I've been working in the dark for quite a while now, but I'm coming in off the road. I'm going to face the music.

ONE:

Going to audition?

FOUR:

No, I'm going to see if I can get my old job back with Matthews.

ONE:

Hey, your name wouldn't be... Four, would it?

FOUR:

Yes. How did you know?

ONE:

Merry Christmas!

FOUR:

What?

ONE:

Oh, never mind. I used to be with Matthews. In the comedy department. Name's One.

FOUR:

I think I've heard about you. You were in the mailroom when I left. What went wrong?

ONE:

I let one too many bad comics out of the closet. Long story, lousy punchline. So now I'm on my way to the Outer Darkness. How is it out there?

FOUR:

Dark. Really dark. And noisy.

ONE:

Noisy?

FOUR:

All that gnashing of teeth.

ONE:

Oh, yeah, that. *(Pulls out a mouth guard.)* What took you out there? Prospecting?

FOUR:

I'm surprised you don't know. I thought the other guys around the office loved to tell the story of "that loser, Four."

ONE:

Uh, no. What happened?

FOUR:

Matthews gave me four talents and I loved every one of them. Maybe it was because I loved them that I couldn't see that two of them just weren't right for show business. They were good enough, but they weren't truly gifted performers. I helped them to see that. One's a nurse now and the other's got four kids and he tunes pianos. They love what they do. The other two have done very well; maybe you've heard of them: Siegfried and Roy?

ONE:

Oh, yeah, sure. *(Makes his fingers into claws and flashes them.)*

FOUR:

I went back to Matthews to tell him about the nurse and the piano tuner and he threw me out. Actually, he didn't throw me out, but my old buddies Five and Two said that Matthews reaped where he didn't sow and gathered where he didn't scatter seed. If I knew what was good for me, I'd get out while the getting was good. I got scared and ran all the way to the Outer Darkness.

ONE:

I know the feeling. How did you do out there?

FOUR:

I've been in the unemployment line for three years.

ONE:

Out of work?

FOUR:

Out of agency work, but I did some good out there, I think. I got into employment counseling right out there on the line. I helped people discern their gifts and how best to use them. I came to love those people, One, but I miss the light. So here I am. I think I can be of service to the agency. At least I'm going to see Mr. Matthews *himself* this time. Want to come with me?

ONE:

Maybe I'll just look in through the window. *(They exit.)*

SCENE THREE

The Matthews Talent Agency. FIVE and TWO at their desks. FOUR enters.

FOUR:

Talents big, medium and small. We handle 'em all.

FIVE:

What? *(Looks up.)* Is that... Four? It is. Four!

TWO:

Well, bless my soul. Four! How are you?

FOUR:

Yes, it's me. I'm fine. Or, I will be once my eyes adjust.

FIVE:

Four Four Four Four Four. As I live and breathe!

TWO:

Four, you've... lost weight, or... something.

FIVE:

Four, what brings you here, after all these years?

FOUR:

I want to see Mr. Matthews. I thought I might try to get my job back. I've learned some strategies that might be put to good use here at Matthews Manifold Grace.

An awkward moment.

TWO:

Now, Four, I'm just not sure that coming back to work here is such a good idea. Times have changed since you left. We barely have enough talent to keep *us* busy.

FOUR:

(assertively) Could I see Mr. Matthews? Is he in?

FIVE:

No, Four, Matthews isn't in. In fact, he's out prospecting. Imagine, a man of his achievement and at his time in life out there drumming up talent. You've been gone a long time. Times are hard. Tastes have changed. It seems that people just aren't interested in the kind of talent we handle any more.

TWO:

Let's be honest, we feel like the end of all things may be near.

FOUR:

When will Matthews be back?

FIVE:

Not sure.

TWO:

Maybe around Christmas. We'll call you.

FIVE:

Leave your number with the girl at the desk.

TWO:

Five, there, uh, isn't a girl at the desk any more. Matthews had to let her go.

FIVE:

(GULP! Recovering) See, Four? That's how hard the times are. Two, could you step over here for a moment?

In a somewhat more private space now.

FIVE:

What do you mean they let the girl go? Why wasn't I consulted? Who fired her?

TWO:

There was just an envelope with her name on it and a pink slip inside.

FIVE:

There was an envelope on my desk this morning.

TWO:

Did you open it?

FIVE:

No. I'm afraid to. *(Turns to FOUR.)* I know it's hard to believe, but I'm afraid.

FOUR:

You should try spending some time in the outer darkness like I did. You learn to deal with fear.

TWO:

How'd you do it?

FOUR:

The day I left here I knew I was washed up in the talent business. And, I never caught on anywhere else. So I signed up for unemployment and spent a lot of time online waiting for a job to open up. I stood there day after day with all the other people out of work.

FIVE:

I couldn't take that. I'd go crazy.

FOUR:

Some did. But others found consolation just in having a place to go, even though it was an unemployment line. I began to love those people and they loved me and we began to build up even those poor sad people who'd lost their nerve.

TWO:

What's this got to do with us?

FOUR:

Love each other.

FIVE:

Here at the office.

FOUR:

We did once. Remember those Christmas parties?

FIVE:

The business has gotten tough, Four. Downright ugly. People hate talent agents. Sometimes I have to hold the phone away from my ear. "Love one another" isn't going to get us anywhere.

FOUR:

Where has competition gotten us? I didn't see anybody in the waiting room.

TWO:

She's got a point, Five. What else?

FOUR:

Out there in the darkness, on that line, when somebody had a sandwich we cut it into parts. Somebody had coffee, he shared it. We were hospitable. Even to people we didn't much like. The obnoxious ones, the smelly ones, the slow ones.

FIVE:

The losers.

FOUR:

We were all losers.

ONE comes in.

FIVE:

You want us to be hospitable to him?

FOUR:

To everyone. Without complaining. Besides, One is... one of us, I mean you. Where would *you* be without him?

FIVE:

We'd be free of a long line of lounge lizards. You should have seen that last one he brought in. He was about as funny as a dead fern.

TWO:

Shut up, Five.

FOUR:

Two...

TWO:

I'm sorry. One has his gifts, Five. You have to admit, Del Marva looked great. One has an eye for costume.

FOUR:

And you have an ear for music, Five. And, two, you have a keen sense of the market. You need to work together. I don't know if you can convince Matthews to keep you on. Maybe not; probably not. But whether he does or doesn't, you should be grateful to Matthews for what he's given you.

TWO:

What's that?

FOUR:

It's right here in the title of the agency: "Matthews Manifold Grace."

FIVE:

Yeah? This is no time to be cryptic, Four.

FOUR:

"Manifold;" you know, "many and various." In many and various ways, you are the embodiment of Grace to one another. Or, you could be.

FIVE:

We need help here, Four. What's the next step?

FOUR:

We just have to figure out what our gifts are and how best to use them to serve each other – and Matthews, of course.

ONE:

You're pretty good at that kind of figuring.

TWO:

Want a job? Who knows how long it will last.

FOUR:

I'd love it. I will work for Matthews with all my heart, soul, mind and strength.

FIVE:

Four, you talk like Matthews is God.

FOUR:

Well, this is a parable after all.

TWO:

(whines) You mean we've gone through all this and it's not true?

FOUR:

On the contrary, it's more than true. I realized something else out there in the darkness. It was hard standing out there day after day. Some days I thought my legs were going to fall off. The only way I could go back there every day was with the strength that God supplied me.

ONE:

That was the only way that God could be glorified in *all* things through Jesus Christ.

FIVE:

(to ONE) Now you're doing it.

ONE:

Talking about God.

FOUR:

We all are and we all must. We must speak as ones speaking the very words of God.

Knocking on the door is heard.

FIVE:

Who's that?

END