

THEM/US
(a friendly ghost story)

by James Still

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(2022)

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Representation:

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NOTE ON CASTING: Everything tells a story. In the same spirit in which I wrote the play, characters may/can/should be played by actors of any age, race, ethnicity, origin and other-abledness. In whatever ways the play is cast, it will tell the story of three ghosts in search of an audience.

For all hundreds and hundreds of beautiful actors I've worked with through the years.
And all the (friendly) ghosts who have kept me company, who still keep me company.

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We're in a dark, empty theater.

This play is written for THREE GHOSTS and TWO HUMANS. If you don't have any playful ghosts hanging around, humans can also play the ghosts. However you do it, there are FIVE CHARACTERS.

Be inventive about your set.

It would be great if you turned off all the lights. Except for the ghost light. A ghost light is like a campfire for theaters. There should definitely be a ghost light -- every theater has a ghost light... maybe for your production you simply light a candle. Or you use a flashlight. Or a lamp. The important thing is that you create atmosphere. This is a (friendly) ghost story after all.

GHOST 1

(official and playful)

Good evening, theatergoers, and thank you for coming to see our play. Due to unforeseen circumstances, none of the actors scheduled to appear in the play will be appearing in the play. Not a one of 'em.

GHOST 2

How many times are you going to say all that? Night after night after night -- it's getting old.

GHOST 1

Fine! I'm just trying to lighten things up. I want to play! Who can we make mischief with?

GHOST 2

Each other?

GHOST 1

It's not the same. It's no fun being a ghost who hangs out in a theater when there's no one coming to the theater.

GHOST 2

This is an existential crisis.

GHOST 1

What does that even mean?

GHOST 2

It's like a midlife crisis without the red sports car.

GHOST 3

Are people ever going to come back?

GHOST 1

What do you mean?

GHOST 3

Will it ever be like it used to be -- all those humans sitting close to one another in the dark, breathing the same air in and out as one tender creature while a story unfolds in front of them on a stage?

(...)

GHOST 3 (CONT'D)

I miss them.

GHOST 1

Who?

GHOST 3

Them. The audience. I miss the audience.

GHOST 2

What about the actors?

GHOST 3

I miss them too. But the actors can do a play whether there's an audience or not. But how can the audience be the audience if there's not a place where they can gather, if there's not a play for them to see...

GHOST 2

We could do a play!

GHOST 3

But there isn't an audience!

GHOST 2
 (broad and joyful)
Prithee see there! / Behold! look!

GHOST 3
 I'm in no mood for Shakespeare.

GHOST 2
Behold! look!

GHOST 3
 I told you --

GHOST 2
Look!

GHOST 3
 Where?

GHOST 2
 There! See?

GHOST 1
 No. *You do bend your eye on vacancy.*

GHOST 2
Is it some god, some angel, or some devil?

GHOST 3
 It is nothing!

GHOST 2
Oh but the spirit that I have seen / May be a dev'l , and the dev'l hath power / To assume a pleasing shape.

GHOST 3
 Stop it, both of you. There's no shape, there's no devil, there's nothing there! There are no actors, there is no audience, and there is no theater. We're closed, remember?

GHOST 1
 So? What? Shall we throw a pity party with you as the guest of honor?

GHOST 3
 This is why I don't like hanging around the two of you, you drive me freakin' crazy! You always want to make drama. Here's an idea: try being regular ol'
 (MORE)

GHOST 3 (CONT'D)

ghosts -- the kind who haunt the theater! Let's just do what we usually do and float around like we don't have anything better to do.

(...)

GHOST 1

We could pretend there's an audience.

GHOST 2

I love to pretend!

GHOST 3 is unconvinced.

GHOST 2 (CONT'D)

Come on, it'll be fun.

GHOST 1 AND GHOST 2 throw themselves into the game, maybe eating popcorn too: the imaginary audience is now the show.

GHOST 1

Look at that woman on the far side in the cheap seats who keeps dabbing her eyes.

GHOST 2

Maybe she just broke up with someone she no longer loves.

GHOST 1

Or maybe they broke up with HER.

GHOST 2

Do you see the those two men in the third row kissing?

GHOST 1

Get a room! Jeez.

GHOST 2

It's kind of sweet.

GHOST 1

Look look! That man over by you -- him -- the one who's sleeping. Blow in his ear! Do it!

GHOST 2 blows in an imaginary man's ear.

GHOST 1 (CONT'D)

His wife just elbowed him -- ah! he's awake again.

GHOST 2

For now.

GHOST 1

Warning in Row J -- left-middle. I see a phone! And he's -- he's checking football scores? Horror! Oh my god! Do something!

GHOST 2

What shall I do? I don't know what to do!

GHOST 1

Turn off his phone! Smash it to smithereens!

GHOST 3

Are the two of you quite finished?

GHOST 2

With what?

GHOST 3

With harassing the audience!

GHOST 1

It's hardly harassment if they aren't really here. Gee. It's all pretend, you know. There is no audience.

GHOST 2

It's just a game.

GHOST 3

Wait. Hello? *Prithee see there! / Behold! look!*

GHOST 2

We tried that already and you were the one who shot it down.

GHOST 3

(whispering loudly)

No! Look!

The THREE GHOSTS see TWO HUMANS sitting in the very back row in the shadows.

GHOST 1
(whispering)

What are they?

GHOST 3
(whispering)

Humans.

GHOST 2
(whispering)

No, I know. But what are they doing here?

GHOST 3

Maybe they're lost.

GHOST 1

But why are they sitting all the way in the back row?

GHOST 2

Latecomers? Parking around here can be a real hassle.

GHOST 3

Maybe they're the audience.

GHOST 2

An audience of two?

GHOST 3

It's two more than we've had for months.

GHOST 2

True.

GHOST 1

But how do we know they're not ghosts?

GHOST 2

Because in this play WE'RE the ghosts.

GHOST 3

Which means they must be the audience.

GHOST 1

Maybe they're the GHOST of the audience.

The THREE GHOSTS think it over.

GHOST 3

Naaah. They aren't ghosts. We're the ghosts and they're the audience.

GHOST 2

Which means they've come to see a play. Let's put on a play!

GHOST 3

But we're not actors, we're ghosts.

GHOST 2

(insulted)

Who are you not calling an actor? I was an actor long before I was ever a ghost!

GHOST 1

(topping)

Well I once played a ghost on TV.

GHOST 2

(not to be outdone)

And I once played the ghost of an actor on TV.

GHOST 3

What? Focus! Please. We need to focus.

GHOST 2

They're looking at us!

GHOST 3

Act natural.

GHOST 1

We're ghosts, we only know how to be SUPER-natural.

GHOST 3

No! I know. Just -- just dial it back.

GHOST 2

Dial it back??? Is that a note??? And what's the point of being a ghost if I don't get to be supernatural?

GHOST 1

(brilliant idea)

Let's have a sword fight!

GHOST 2

I love sword fights!

GHOST 3

What? No!

GHOST 2

If they're the audience then they're here to see a show.

GHOST 3

There is no show! There are no actors. The theater is closed.

Buzzkill.

Then:

AUDIENCE 1

I'm so confused. Are they ghosts? Is this a play about ghosts?

AUDIENCE 2

No, honey, I mean yes, they ARE ghosts -- but I think they live here, they must just haunt the place.

AUDIENCE 1

Does that make them good ghosts or bad ghosts?

The GHOSTS wave to them playfully.

AUDIENCE 2

They seem friendly enough. Maybe it IS a play about ghosts.

AUDIENCE 1

I don't think I like this play.

AUDIENCE 2

It's unusual, give it a chance. Besides, it's better than watching another play on Zoom. Let's just sit here a while longer and see what happens.

AUDIENCE 1

But what if they really are ghosts -- the bad kind -- the kind that turns you into ashes or something.

AUDIENCE 2

I don't think ghosts do that.

AUDIENCE 1

I don't even think I believe in ghosts. I think this has to be the play.

AUDIENCE 2

Maybe WE'RE the play and they're the audience.

(...)

Maybe we're all ghosts. For now.

GHOST 3

Hello?

AUDIENCE 2

What? Are you talking to us?

AUDIENCE 1

Oh God -- audience participation -- you know how much I hate audience participation.

GHOST 3

Ah, so you CAN hear me.

AUDIENCE 2

Yes, we've heard everything you've said.

AUDIENCE 1

I'm not sure I understand your play but, you know -- it's something.

GHOST 1

What are you doing here?

AUDIENCE 1

What are YOU doing here?

GHOST 1

I live here.

AUDIENCE 1

We used to -- in a way.

AUDIENCE 2

We were season ticket holders.

AUDIENCE 1

We miss the theater.

GHOST 2

So do we!

AUDIENCE 2

We miss coming to the theater, the whole thing from beginning to end, we didn't know how much we missed coming to the theater until we couldn't come to the theater. Everything closed down.

GHOST 3

What do you miss most?

AUDIENCE 1

I miss crying.

AUDIENCE 2

I miss laughing.

AUDIENCE 1

We've been watching plays at home on our computers and phones -- but it doesn't feel the same. Don't get me wrong -- it's convenient and sometimes it's nice to watch a play in your PJs... but... sometimes you just want to get up off of your couch, you know?

The GHOSTS are a very empathetic audience to the AUDIENCE.

AUDIENCE 2

I miss feeling like I'm in on it, that I'm part of something, part of something that will never be the same twice, part of something where my attention and reactions MATTER, something that brings people together, you know?

AUDIENCE 1

I miss the actors, I miss seeing them in person. I miss seeing them sweat because they're working so hard, I miss feeling like they're doing the play just for me.

AUDIENCE 2

The plays! I miss the plays, I miss the words, I miss that it's LIVE which means I miss the little mistakes that happen --

AUDIENCE 1

-- the forgotten line, the late entrance, the missed light cue --

AUDIENCE 2

-- the scenery that misbehaves at the worst possible time... All of those mistakes that are so hopelessly -- human, you know?

(...)

Going to the theater made me feel human, achingly human. I miss that.

GHOST 3

So you broke into the theater just so you could sit in the audience again?

AUDIENCE 1

I told him we were asking for trouble.

AUDIENCE 2

We didn't break in. There was a door --

AUDIENCE 1

It almost seemed like some kind of portal --

AUDIENCE 2

Right -- It was an open door. We couldn't resist.

AUDIENCE 1

We won't stay long.

AUDIENCE 2

We just wanted to -- be here for a little while.

AUDIENCE 1

We promise not to stay long.

GHOST 2

Maybe you want to go on stage? You could be the actors and put on a play! We could all put on a play together!

AUDIENCE 2

Thanks -- but, I don't know. We're not actors.

AUDIENCE 1

We're the audience.

AUDIENCE 2

We just love being the audience.

GHOST 3

Right.

AUDIENCE 1

You can sit with us if you want.

The THREE GHOSTS sit in scattered theater seats. Now all five of them are the audience.

GHOST 1

(official and playful)

Good evening, theatergoers, and thank you for coming to see our play. Due to unforeseen circumstances, none of the actors scheduled to appear in the play will be appearing in the play. Not a one of 'em. There is no play. The theater is closed.

AUDIENCE 2 tries to cover their emotion.

GHOST 3

Are you alright? Are you crying?

AUDIENCE 2

We should probably go.

GHOST 2

But you just got here.

GHOST 1

Stay a little while longer. Please?

GHOST 3

It's nice having an audience here again.

AUDIENCE 2

It's nice being an audience again.

The five of them sit in silence, full of feelings for everything they miss.

AUDIENCE 1

What's that light called -- the one on stage there.

GHOST 2

Oh that's a ghost light. It's a tradition, every theater has one.

AUDIENCE 1

So you really are ghosts?

GHOST 3

(gently)

Shhhh. Let's just sit together for awhile.

(...)

AUDIENCE 1

Are theaters ever going to open up again?

GHOST 3

Yes.

AUDIENCE 2

When?

No one answers, no one knows.

In silence, this last part of the play is about longing. Sometimes longing takes a long time. Sit together as long as you need to, as long as you want.

When the play is over, make a meal and celebrate being together.

And maybe you can talk about the plays and productions and theater experiences that you've loved (or hated) the most. Which ones made you feel achingly human?

Leave the ghost light on.