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The Methuselah Tree—First Printing, 2007

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The Methuselah Tree

A Play in Two Acts

By Jayme McGhan

CHARACTERS

Harris- Hackneyed inventor and scientist.

Murielle- Architect.

Jeremy- Awkward teenager.

Man in the Attic- An apparition.

TIME: Seven years from now.

PLACE: Harris and Murielle's house.

A makeshift basement laboratory.

"The Methuselah Tree" was originally produced by Cockroach Theatre. It premiered at the Minnesota Fringe Festival on August 4th, 2007, and subsequently received a full-production in Las Vegas, opening on September 6, 2007. The production was directed by Sarah Norris. The Original Cast and Crew was as follows:

Harris - William Adamson

Murielle - Dana Martin

Jeremy - Thomas Sawicki

The Man in the Attic - Matthew Hegdahl

Stage Manager - Jennifer West

Set Design - Scott Fadale

Sound Design - Brad Ward

Costume Design - Michelle Fraser

ACT ONE

“It happened that a fire broke out backstage in a theatre. The clown came out to inform the public. They thought it was just a jest and applauded. He repeated his warning, they shouted even louder. So I think the world will come to an end amid general applause from all the wits, who believe that it is a joke.”

-Soren Kierkegaard-

(A basement laboratory. The basement is unfinished. The walls are simply frames with insulation and wiring stuffed between the two by fours. There is a set of stairs leading to the ground level of the house. A metal lab table with a sink on one side sits in the middle of the room. Beakers, glass tubes, syringes, and other lab materials cover the table. Most of these materials are makeshift, homemade, giving the lab a sort of amateur quality. There is a chalkboard behind the table with numerical sequences and scientific writings hastily drawn in yellow chalk. There is a desk in the room covered with papers, calculators, a skull with phrenological markings, an ancient record player, a dusty family picture, and a clutter of coffee cups, one of them reading “#1 Dad.” A white screen hangs in space, a manifestation of the home’s attic. The room is comfortable if not a bit sad. The one thing the room is not is sterile and cold. Lights up on Harris. A light jazzy tune vibrates from the record player. Harris taps along with the beat, singing a line here and there. He finishes a mathematical sequence on the chalkboard, double checks his work, smiles. He takes out a soldering torch and works on a small gold sphere, roughly the size of a golf ball. Murielle enters from the stairs.)

MURIELLE: Dinner is ready. *(Harris, startled, drops the gold ball. The ball shatters.)*

What was that?

(Harris falls to the floor, picking up the pieces.)

HARRIS: Oh no. Oh no, no, no. Look at this! Look what you did!

MURIELLE: Did I do that? I’m awfully sorry. What is it?

HARRIS: The bell, the bell!

MURIELLE: Are you coming to dinner?

HARRIS: That's what the bell is for. No intruders I say. Absolutely no visitors while I'm working, including you. Including you Murielle!

MURIELLE: That's right, the bell. I forget.

HARRIS: Ring the bell before you enter I say. Don't startle me while I am in the process of creation. Always announce your presence in my laboratory. Bad things happen when you don't ring the bell.

MURIELLE: Dinner is ready. Shall I bring it to the basement?

HARRIS: Six minutes wasted! Six minutes of hard work! Not much time left. It's not a basement.

MURIELLE: Sorry, the laboratory.

HARRIS: Do you realize the difficulty of creation? The spark that must come to fruition? There is that...that need, and that need must be breathed upon, must come alive and dance or else it will fester and die. I will die. And when I die...what happens then?

MURIELLE: The body will be burned and the ash will be spread.

HARRIS: You're missing the meat of it! There's not much time!

MURIELLE: Dinner is ready. Would you like it or not?

HARRIS: I'll eat down here please.

MURIELLE: May I ask what you are working on?

HARRIS: You may not.

MURIELLE: Jeremy would like to eat with you.

HARRIS: Yes, yes, yes. Tomorrow. We'll eat tomorrow.

MURIELLE: Would you like one pill or two with your dinner?

HARRIS: What constitutes two again?

MURIELLE: (*singing a jingle*) “If you’re happy or you’re sad,
you’re excited or depressed, just pop two pills at dinnertime, feeling
nothing is the best!”

HARRIS: Better make it four. And more coffee please.

MURIELLE: Would you prefer noodles or rice?

HARRIS: Noodles please. Brain food, noodles.

MURIELLE: Fork or chip sticks?

HARRIS: No time for chop sticks. Fork please.

MURIELLE: I’ll send Jeremy to come down and eat with you.

HARRIS: No visitors. Far too much work.

MURIELLE: It would be okay if Jeremy-

HARRIS: Fork please.

MURIELLE: It is of the utmost importance that Jeremy—

HARRIS: No chop sticks.

MURIELLE: Harris!

HARRIS: Fork please Murielle.

(*Murielle smacks the record player. The music ceases.*)

MURIELLE: Look at me! I am telling you, watch my mouth, Jeremy
would like to have dinner with his father. (*she pulls a small, blood
soaked paper bag from her pocket.*) Do you know what this is? This,
Harris, is the head of Mr. Fuzzy Britches, Jeremy’s pet hamster. He
decapitated Mr. Fuzzy Britches this morning while I was working on
my blue prints. Sliced his fuzzy little head right off. And do you
know what he did with the body of Mr. Fuzzy Britches? He placed it
on a pyre of popsicle sticks and set him adrift in the bathtub. He set
the hamster on fire Harris. Do you hear me? Jeremy torched Mr.
Fuzzy Britches in a cacophony of conflagration.

HARRIS: Boys will be boys.

MURIELLE: How many boys do you know of that decapitate rodents for pleasure?

HARRIS: You assume he took pleasure from the experience?

MURIELLE: Why else would he do such a thing?

HARRIS: It's a rodent Murielle. The boy had an urge to decapitate it, who are we to say no? Certain boundaries, so long as they are not harmful to the collective whole, are bound to be broken. Furthermore, they should be broken. It's a healthy process of illusory individualism. If a man believes that he is rebelling, that he is part of some great revolution, let him. It's a process. Some boys enjoy athletics, some boys enjoy board games, and some boys enjoy the bloodshed of defenseless animals. Let nature take its course.

MURIELLE: It still seems vile to me.

HARRIS: There once was an obstinate boy who broke all the boundaries. He spoke against the hypocrites, he gave sight to the blind, and he rose from the grave. Not only did his father allow him to do what he would, but he also helped his son along the way. The boy grew up, performed great wonders, and saved the world through his liquid sacrifice.

MURIELLE: Who was this obstinate boy?

HARRIS: His name was Scooter. I met him at a micro- technology convention. He wore a somewhat painful looking hat.

MURIELLE: Regardless of our son's natural process, I still think it fit to punish him.

HARRIS: Very well. What shall we do?

MURIELLE: I don't know? We've never punished him before.

HARRIS: Aha! Let's send him to mass!

MURIELLE: Oh, no no no! I'm not sending my little boy to mass. Do you realize how dark it's getting outside?

HARRIS: You're absolutely correct. Attending mass is a bit harsh.

MURIELLE: Shall we take away his privileges?

HARRIS: Heavens no you cruel woman! What's a man to do with himself without his privileges? Wake up saluting the morning sky, covered in his own mess, that's what.

MURIELLE: Very well. Shall we not give him dinner?

HARRIS: A fair punishment. No dinner it is. Now please, leave me be.

MURIELLE: Don't you want to hear how my day went?

HARRIS: If I did, I would have asked.

MURIELLE: Ask me.

HARRIS: No.

MURIELLE: Ask me. (*pause*)

HARRIS: How was your day?

MURIELLE: Fine, thank you.

HARRIS: That's it?

MURIELLE: Well, what else do you want me to say? My day was fine. If I had said great, I would have been lying. If I had said poor, again I would be lying. My day was fine, thus, I responded with fine.

HARRIS: Fine.

MURIELLE: Well...

HARRIS: Well what?

MURIELLE: Aren't you going to ask me if anything interesting happened?

HARRIS: No.

MURIELLE: Ask me.

HARRIS: Did anything interesting happen?

MURIELLE: No.

(Murielle picks up a vial and pours the contents in to another vial, creating a bright blue chemical reaction. Either an explosion of foam, or a bright flash of light.)

HARRIS: What did you do?!!

MURIELLE: Nothing.

HARRIS: Nothing!?

MURIELLE: I poured this one in to this one.

HARRIS: Why did you do that?

MURIELLE: To see if something interesting would happen.

HARRIS: Get out of here! Go upstairs!

MURIELLE: But your dinner.

HARRIS: Forget the dinner! Give it to the man in the attic.

MURIELLE: But the man in the attic never eats.

HARRIS: Make him eat! Shove it down his lofty throat if you must!

MURIELLE: But he almost always has the attic locked, and he rarely answers me.

HARRIS: Pick the lock and talk louder. Problem solved. More coffee please. And don't forget the pills.

MURIELLE: I can't leave yet.

HARRIS: And why is that?

MURIELLE: I haven't told you about my day.

HARRIS: By all means, tell me you cursed creature!

MURIELLE: The towers fell.

HARRIS: The towers fell?

MURIELLE: Came tumbling right down. Jeremy was flying his model airplane in my office and it crashed smack in to my towers. There were heaps of Styrofoam and rubber cement everywhere. And the flies, oh dear, the flies were thick and black. Terrible, terrible black flies. They always seem to find comfort in annihilation don't they? I asked Jeremy why he would do such a thing, and do you know what he said? He said, "The I am commands that we destroy in order to create."

HARRIS: Interesting idea. I should write that down. *(he writes it down on the chalkboard as such: C-D+J=ME.)*

MURIELLE: I've been picking my brain all day on how to make the towers more stable. Any suggestions?

HARRIS: Maybe you built them too tall?

MURIELLE: There's no such thing as too tall.

HARRIS: That's my Murielle, always thinking big. Where do you get it from I wonder? Certainly not your mother...a tiny woman in all respects.

MURIELLE: The only way to see the totality of creation is to have a juggernaut's point of view. *(Murielle picks up a piece of the sphere.)* What is this?

HARRIS: A broken piece.

MURIELLE: A broken piece of what?

HARRIS: A broken piece of something that shall remain a secret.

MURIELLE: You are aware that a marriage necessarily implies complete honesty and truthfulness between the two participants?

HARRIS: If I revealed every detail, every minuscule moment of my dull existence so as there were no longer any so-called secrets between us, you would no doubt hang yourself with a piece of rusty razor wire. (*Harris looks closely at a piece of the sphere*) A man must keep some things to himself.

MURIELLE: One day you'll tell me.

HARRIS: I hope to be dead and floating in nothingness by then.

MURIELLE: That just might happen.

HARRIS: One can dream. (*pause*)

MURIELLE: I have secrets too.

HARRIS: You have secrets?

MURIELLE: Many secrets.

HARRIS: For example?

MURIELLE: If I told you, they wouldn't be secrets anymore. (*A crash from upstairs.*)
What was that?!

HARRIS: By the tin of it, I would say it was a cooking pot crashing through a window.

MURIELLE: Jeremy! Jeremy, what are you doing up there!? (*Murielle runs up the stairs. A few moments of silence as Harris goes back to work. Murielle reenters.*)

He threw a cooking pot through our kitchen window! Can you believe such a thing?! Harris, did you hear me? I said he—

HARRIS: Threw a cooking pot through our kitchen window. Yes, I heard you.

MURIELLE: Why would he do such a thing?

HARRIS: Maybe it slipped?

MURIELLE: Slipped?

HARRIS: It's important to remain objective in situations such as this. We should consider all of the possibilities. Perhaps there was a fly buzzing around his head, annoying him to the point whereby he picked up a cooking pot and swung it at the fly. The pot slipped from his hand and crashed through the kitchen window.

MURIELLE: Or maybe he threw it intentionally? Do you think he would throw it intentionally?

HARRIS: Or maybe it was a fly?

MURIELLE: Jeremy, come down here!

HARRIS: Did I give you permission to invite our son in to my laboratory?

MURIELLE: Jeremy, get down here this instant!

HARRIS: No Jeremy! Stay upstairs!

MURIELLE: Don't listen to your father Jeremy, get down here!

HARRIS: If you come down here Jeremy, I'm going to remove your kidneys and make you eat them!

MURIELLE: Jeremy! Now! *(Jeremy enters. He stands at the top of the stairs, only his feet are visible. Jeremy rings a bell at the top of the stairs.)* Forget the bell, I said come down here.

HARRIS: Don't you dare take another step.

MURIELLE: If you don't come down here, I'll take away your privileges.

(Jeremy walks down two steps. His calves, knees, and lower thighs are now visible.)

HARRIS: If you don't leave, I'll rip your eyeballs from your skull!

(Jeremy backs up a step, only his calves are visible now.)

MURIELLE: I'll take away your multi-media and make you read books.

(Jeremy takes a couple of steps forward. His waist is now visible.)

HARRIS: I'll shave your toes with a dull knife!

(Jeremy steps back. Only his thighs are visible now.)

MURIELLE: I'll send you to mass!

(Jeremy bounds down the steps. He is a lanky, pimple faced teenager in the process of transitioning in to a man.)

HARRIS: How unfair! I was going to use that one!

MURIELLE: Jeremy! What possessed you to throw a cooking pot through the window?

(a blue light from behind the screen. The shadow of an androgynous figure is seen holding a gavel. This is the man in the attic. A small rhythm, reminiscent of a heartbeat, is tapped out. It grows in intensity.)

HARRIS: Was it a fly?

MURIELLE: Tell me, I won't be angry with you.

HARRIS: It was a fly, yes?

MURIELLE: I promise I won't punish you if you're honest with me.

HARRIS: Was it a big fly?

MURIELLE: Objection! You're leading the witness!

HARRIS: It was a fly, wasn't it?

JEREMY: Yes. A fly. It mocked me with its wicked tongue.

HARRIS: You see? A fly. Nothing more, nothing less.

MURIELLE: What did the fly look like?

HARRIS: Murielle please. The boy can't be expected to produce such minute details under a moment of emotional duress.

MURIELLE: What did it look like Jeremy?

JEREMY: It was...black.

HARRIS: You see, it was black! The boy has the recall of a salmon. Well done boy.

MURIELLE: How many eyes did it have?

JEREMY: Eyes?

MURIELLE: Yes, eyes.

HARRIS: Objection! I move to have that question stricken from the record.

MURIELLE: Overruled. Answer the question Jeremy.

JEREMY: Three?

MURIELLE: Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! You are wrong!

HARRIS: This means nothing!

MURIELLE: There was no fly, was there?

HARRIS: Don't answer that Jeremy.

MURIELLE: Do you want to keep your privileges?

JEREMY: No, don't take away my privileges!

HARRIS: I say again, what's a man to do without his privileges?

MURIELLE: There was no fly, was there Jeremy?!