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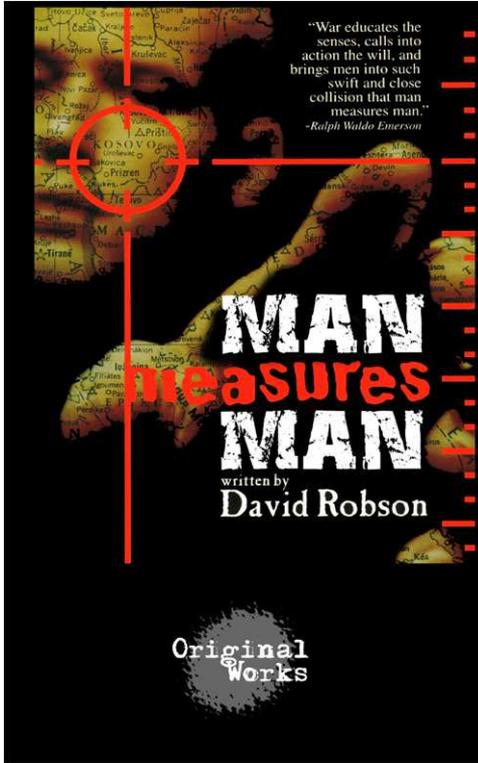
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Playing the Assassin
© David Robson
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Also Available by David Robson



MAN MEASURES MAN

Synopsis: In the waning days of the Kosovo conflict, two American doctors travel to Macedonia to offer their services to Albanian refugees. Into the chaos of the medical camp, a mysterious boy arrives, forcing the doctors to re-examine their actions and the personal ethics that guide them.

Cast Size: 4 Males, 2 Females

**Playing the
Assassin**
by
David Robson

*For Seth Reichgott and Joe Brancato,
two of the finest coaches I know.*

Assassin was first produced in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in a co-production by InterAct Theatre Company (Seth Rozin, Founder and Producing Artistic Director; Anneliese Van Arsdale, Managing Director) and Act II Playhouse (Tony Braithwaite, Artistic Director; Howie Brown, Managing Director). Performances began on January 18, 2013. The director was Seth Reichgott; the set was designed by Dirk Durossette, the costumes were designed by Maggie Baker, the lighting was designed by James Leitner, the sound was designed by Ashley Turner, the fight choreography was by Mike Consenza; the stage manager was Tom Helmer. The cast was as follows:

FRANK Brian Anthony Wilson

LEWIS Dwayne A. Thomas

“A man goes far to find out what he is.”
—Theodore Roethke

CHARACTERS

FRANK, *African American ex-professional football player, fifties*

LEWIS, *African American television producer, thirties*

SETTING

Hotel room, Chicago, Illinois

TIME

Present

NOTE

Playing the Assassin works best when actors and director view it as a “fight for yardage,” as in the game of professional football. The characters study each other, prowl the field of battle, look for openings in their opponent’s defenses, and fight to stand their ground. Still, if the play is viewed simply as a “football play,” the proverbial woods and trees may be missed completely. Ultimately, these men are fighting for their lives and a chance at redemption. Beyond that, the play should be performed for maximum intensity.

PLAYING THE ASSASSIN

(Lights rise on a mid-price hotel suite. Door, up right, leads to a hallway. This is the living room part of the suite, with a sofa, chair, coffee table, small refrigerator, and television. A jacket is flung over the chair; a glass and a pill bottle [a mini bottle of booze] sit on the coffee table, [along with a row of pill bottles]. A cane stands in a corner. Upstage center is an open doorway that leads to the bedroom and bathroom. The television, which does not face the audience, is loud—a football game. LEWIS, in a suit, stands center holding his briefcase.)

FRANK (*Off*): Sorry I'm running a little late: Lost track of time.

LEWIS: It's not a problem.

(LEWIS looks around the room, examining the booze, the pill bottles.)

FRANK (*Off*): I'll be there in a minute.

LEWIS: Take your time.

FRANK (*Off*): Have a seat. Help yourself to a drink.

LEWIS: I'm fine, thanks.

FRANK (*Off*): Whatever you say!

LEWIS: When did you get in?

FRANK (*Off*): About an hour ago.

LEWIS: From San Francisco?

(*FRANK enters from the bedroom.*)

FRANK: From Oakland.

LEWIS: I didn't realize Oakland had an airport.

FRANK: Oh, yeah, got all kinds of things in Oakland now: gas stations, hospitals, Targets... I'm messing with you.

LEWIS: That's funny.

FRANK: I like to joke around sometimes: puts people at ease, you know?

LEWIS: Pleasure to meet you, sir.

FRANK: Thank you.

LEWIS: I hope your room is satisfactory?

FRANK: It's fine—kind of nice, actually. Still, you won't see the younger guys today staying in a place like this. They only go five stars. Something to drink before we go?

LEWIS: What are you having?

FRANK: Oh, me? Just a soda—not a drinker. You?

LEWIS: Juice is fine.

(FRANK goes to mini bar, returns, eyes on the TV, and hands LEWIS a bottle of juice. FRANK un-mutes the TV.)

FRANK: Would you look at that? Patriots again. They're making this look easy. Who you rooting for?

LEWIS: No preference really.

(FRANK turns down the volume on the TV.)

FRANK: But these are the playoffs, baby. Only come once a year. You got like somebody.

LEWIS: The Ravens have had a good season.

FRANK: Hell yes, they have.

LEWIS: Tough year for your old team the Raiders, though.

FRANK: Worst record in the NFL.

LEWIS: That's too bad.

FRANK: An embarrassment! But, once a Raider, always a Raider.

LEWIS: A different story from when you played.

FRANK: Tell me about it. (*FRANK checks his watch.*)
Hey, I guess we better get downstairs—don't want to keep them all waiting.

LEWIS: What's that?

FRANK: This is a meet-and-greet, right?

LEWIS: I don't know what you mean.

FRANK: You bring in the network brass, we all shoot the shit, you guys blow a little smoke up my ass, and then we get this thing done.

LEWIS: Oh, no, it's nothing like that.

FRANK: So what is it?

LEWIS: I'm here to finalize plans and conduct a pre-interview with you.

FRANK: Just the two of us...

LEWIS: Yes, if that's alright.

FRANK: It's just that on the phone you gave me the impression that this was a big deal...

LEWIS: As far as CBS is concerned it is a very big deal. We're doing an interview piece on the two of you that will be shown in the hour prior to the Super Bowl itself. We're still in the planning stages, but we'll most likely have a host asking you questions in front of massive photos from your playing days.

FRANK: I like the sound of that.

LEWIS: I'm thinking it'll begin with some kind of montage from your games and intersperse interviews with each of you separately. Then, at some point, we'll show the two of you together.

FRANK: Together?

LEWIS: It's a reunion, after all.

FRANK: But what if he doesn't, you know...

LEWIS: What?

FRANK: What if he won't...? I don't want to upset the man.

LEWIS: What's most important is that the two of you meet face-to-face. What happens next is up to you.

FRANK: I guess you're right. And hey, whatever heightens the drama and shit. Drum roll, please, right?

LEWIS: That's right.

FRANK: Damn, Super Bowl pre-game!

LEWIS: It's a big showcase.

FRANK: The biggest! We'll light up the night sky, baby—ratings through the roof.

LEWIS: That's the plan.

FRANK: What are you going to call it?

LEWIS: Call it—?

FRANK: You've got to give it a name—some kind of tagline to sell this thing.

LEWIS: Usually the marketing department takes care of—

FRANK: Call it something like, uh...uh...I got it:
“Reunion of the Legends.” What do you think?

LEWIS: I don’t know if it’s quite accurate.

FRANK: Sure, it’s accurate—

LEWIS: Lyle Turner was injured during his second season.

FRANK: So what? It sounds good; that’s all that matters.

LEWIS: I guess a little hyperbole couldn’t hurt.

FRANK: A one-time, never-before-seen reunion between two of the NFL’s greatest players!

LEWIS: Two decades in the making.

FRANK: Yeah, but who’s counting, right?

LEWIS: Aren’t you?

FRANK: What’s that supposed to mean? Why should I be counting?

LEWIS: No reason. I’m just making conversation.

FRANK: Once something’s done, it’s done—no looking back.

LEWIS: I'm sure you're right.

FRANK: What is it you do for CBS exactly?

LEWIS: I'm a segment producer. I do the leg work—make the contacts, set up interviews, all the behind-the-scenes stuff.

FRANK: Yeah, and the on-air guys take all the credit.

LEWIS: That's okay; I prefer being the research guy.

FRANK: Shy type, huh?

LEWIS: I've just learned, over time, where the power really lies. They report the stories, but I write the stories. Those talking heads don't say a word unless they get it from me.

FRANK: Then I guess calling me was your idea.

LEWIS: Yes. It's a great human interest story.

FRANK: You got that right.

LEWIS: The NFL tried to bury what happened between you and Lyle Turner. It was a black eye on the sport, a tragedy that they wanted to forget about as quickly as possible.

FRANK: So why not keep it buried?

LEWIS: The drama needs an ending, doesn't it?

FRANK: What'd you have in mind?

LEWIS: How it ends really isn't up to me, Mr. Baker.

FRANK: I guess not.

LEWIS: The ball's in your court, as it were.

FRANK: Yeah, but see, I don't play tennis.

LEWIS: No, you prefer contact sports.

FRANK: I like fucking people up.

LEWIS: I'll have to remember that. Listen, I'm sorry this is all so last minute.

FRANK: No problem at all.

LEWIS: But the Super Bowl is two weeks away. We have to get this done tonight, or it just isn't going to happen.

FRANK: I'm easy to work with, believe me. It's the other guy you need to worry about.

LEWIS: That's already taken care of. We reached out to Mr. Turner last week.

FRANK: Oh, yeah? What'd he say?

LEWIS: He's interested.

FRANK: You talked to him directly?

LEWIS: We did.

FRANK: Everybody has a price, don't they? And when the network calls you, you answer.

LEWIS: It's now or never, isn't it? Neither of you is getting any younger.

FRANK: We're not that old, son.

LEWIS: No, but you likely don't have another twenty years to sort this out.

FRANK: I feel you; I feel you right there. You, uh, ready to get going?

LEWIS: Sure, just let me finish this. Are you in a hurry?

FRANK: No, no, not at all. Take your time.

LEWIS: Thanks.

FRANK: Do you mind if we, uh, we talk [about] money while we got a few minutes?

LEWIS: We can talk about anything you want.

FRANK: ‘Cause we *are* talking a payday, aren’t we?

LEWIS: CBS does not make a habit of paying for its interviews, but considering the extraordinary nature of this story, the network is willing to offer each of you \$100,000.

FRANK: One hundred thousand...

LEWIS: You don’t sound happy.

FRANK: This shit is exclusive.

LEWIS: The cost of broadcasting the Super Bowl is very expensive.

FRANK: Don’t give me no song and dance, “we have no money”, bullshit, now. It’s the biggest event on TV every year. Advertisers pay millions. You can squeeze a little more money out of your bosses if you really want to. I’m negotiating for Lyle, too, you know? Whatever I get, he gets.

LEWIS: He's lucky to have you looking out for him.

FRANK: That's what I'm saying.

LEWIS: Then again, some might say it's the least you can do.

FRANK: Huh?

LEWIS: The man's in a wheelchair.

FRANK: Hold on, now. I didn't come here for no hatchet job.

LEWIS: There's no reason to get defensive. I was simply stating a fact.

FRANK: Yeah, but see, whenever guys like you call me, they start by asking things like, "Mr. Baker, do you miss playing football?"; "Mr. Baker, what made you such a hard hitter?"; "Mr. Baker, tell us what you think of all the head injuries." But all that's a build-up to the big one: "Mr. Baker, do you have any regrets about what you did to Lyle Turner?" What I did—like I'm a Nazi or something, like I committed a crime.

LEWIS: I thought I made it very clear that this is to be about the play that injured Mr. Turner—

FRANK: That's all you want to talk about? I had a whole career—

LEWIS: No, but it has to be a key part of the interview—

FRANK: Says who?

LEWIS: Says me, says CBS. It's all right here in the contract.

(LEWIS takes a contract from his briefcase.)

FRANK: Contract...?

LEWIS: That's right.

FRANK: You didn't mention any contract on the phone.

LEWIS: I think I did.

FRANK: You didn't.

LEWIS: Well, I have it here now. Take a few minutes to read it.

FRANK: I don't read contracts; my lawyers do.

LEWIS: We need an answer tonight.

FRANK: Tell you what: you show me some cash, I sign it right now. No cash, no sign.

LEWIS: It doesn't work that way.

FRANK: Then educate me, Mr. Segment Producer.

LEWIS: You sign; I sign; I take it back to the network; and on the day of your appearance you receive payment.

FRANK: What, no signing bonus?

LEWIS: I'm afraid not. It's not like football.

FRANK: How the hell would you know?

LEWIS: I'm talking about the TV end of things.

FRANK: I don't like this. I don't like this one bit.

LEWIS: Is that a requirement, Mr. Baker?

FRANK: No, but I see how it is.

LEWIS: How what is?

FRANK: You fly me out here to Chicago, get me a nice room, but it sounds like you're just looking to take me down.

LEWIS: That's not it at all.

FRANK: What is it, then?

LEWIS: We just want the truth.

FRANK: That's what they all say. See, I meet people like you all the time.

LEWIS: People like me?

FRANK: You come in here with your tailored suit and flashy cuff links and try to shove some kind of shady deal down my throat—

LEWIS: Take a look. I assure you that this is standard policy.

FRANK: I don't like surprises.

(FRANK thumbs through the contract, not looking closely.)

LEWIS: That was an unfortunate miscommunication—

FRANK: You can say that again.

LEWIS: We're presenting you with an opportunity, Mr. Baker.

FRANK: So I have no say in any of this.

LEWIS: It's our show; it's our money. Now, we can end this right here if you'd like, if you're uncomfortable.

FRANK: I didn't say I was uncomfortable, but I want to know, you know, what kind of stuff you're going to ask me before I think about putting anything in writing.

LEWIS: Then perhaps we should get on with the pre-interview. We'll deal with the contract later. Is that alright with you?

FRANK: Yeah, fine, fine.

LEWIS: Where would you like to do it? How about over here?

FRANK (*Looking at TV*): How about a little "D" Ravens...? Aw, look at that. They got holes like Swiss fucking cheese in that defense. Tighten up, tighten up!

(*LEWIS takes out his cell phone, fiddles with it.*)

LEWIS: I'm going to record this. Would you mind muting that?

(*FRANK uses the remote to lower the TV sound further.*)

FRANK: Do what you have to do.

LEWIS: Would you have a seat, please?

(FRANK explores the mini-bar, finds some snacks: pretzels, chips, candy bars.)

FRANK: I thought you were buying me dinner. Wasn't that the plan?

LEWIS: Yes, but this might be better.

FRANK: Not for me. I see they got a nice restaurant in the hotel.

LEWIS: We need a quiet place.

FRANK: Yeah, but see, I can't eat this shit—I got the sugar. I need something a little more, you know, substantial. I mean, ain't you hungry?

LEWIS: I can wait.

FRANK: Maybe we can do room service then. *(FRANK finds a menu.)* Let's see, what have we got here? *(FRANK scans the menu.)* I'm thinking a cheeseburger, maybe, or the Cobb salad...

LEWIS: I'd go with salad, if I were you.

FRANK: Why's that?

LEWIS: I don't eat ground beef anymore.

FRANK: Why not?

LEWIS: You never know what the hell is in it.

FRANK: Sure you do: Beef.

LEWIS: I'm saying the cattle industry is not in the best shape right now. I probably shouldn't be telling you this.

FRANK: Tell me.

LEWIS: It's just that with all these factory farms they have so many millions of heads of cattle—most of them getting sick from eating the corn they're fed.

FRANK: What's wrong with corn?

LEWIS: Well, physiologically, the bovine body isn't built to eat corn; it's built to eat grass. So, the animals get sick and farmers shoot them full of steroids and antibiotics, and before you know it they're rendering these broken down cows and grinding them into the patties we're—well, *you're*—eating.

FRANK: That's fucked up. Still, a man has got to eat, Lewis. Maybe we could order out—Chinese or something. What do you say?

LEWIS: That's not what I came for.

FRANK: All business, huh?

LEWIS: It shouldn't take long. We'll do this and I'll take you out for a nice steak.

FRANK: I guess we're staying then.

(FRANK eats another cookie and sits.)

FRANK: How'd you know all that?

LEWIS: All what?

FRANK: You know, about the cattle.

LEWIS: I read.

FRANK: You know what I read? I read the sports pages, and all these years later you guys in the media still paint Lyle Turner and me as enemies, but I have no doubt that if circumstances had been different, Lyle and I might have been friends.

LEWIS: You think so?

FRANK: Stranger things have happened.

LEWIS: Okay now, I want to start with a couple of establishing questions—just to make sure I have some of the basic facts straight. (*LEWIS begins recording their conversation.*) This is a pre-interview with Frank Baker, recorded on January 19 (*Checks his watch*) at 7:21 pm. Just for background, you were an All-American at Nebraska.

FRANK: That's right.

LEWIS: The Oakland Raiders drafted you in 1979...

FRANK: Uh huh.

LEWIS: You played with them for ten years before being traded to the Bengals, where you played your final two years in the NFL.

FRANK: Anybody with half a brain can tell you that shit. I thought you said you were a research guy.

LEWIS: I am.

FRANK: Then prove it. I want to see how good you are. How many career interceptions I got? [do I have?]

LEWIS: Is this a test?

FRANK: Isn't everything?

LEWIS: What do I get if I pass?

FRANK: You get to play with the Assassin, baby.

LEWIS: What if I don't want to play?

FRANK: All you TV guys want to play. You want to peer behind the face mask, find out what made me the hardest-hitting, baddest motherfucker in the history of the NFL.

LEWIS: I just want to ask you some questions.

FRANK: Show me what you got, hotshot. You think you know all about what happened between me and Turner, so let's see what else you know. How many career interceptions do I have? Come on, humor me.

LEWIS: You had 66 career interceptions.

FRANK: Tackles?

LEWIS: 1231.

FRANK: How many games I play in?

LEWIS: 192.

FRANK: You got all that in your head?

LEWIS: I have a mind for numbers. Ask me who blocked the most passes in any year and I can tell you.

FRANK: 1962.

LEWIS: Ernie Reynolds with 12.

FRANK: How many passes I block in my career?

LEWIS: Safeties don't have the chance to block many passes, but you have a surprisingly high number: 7.

FRANK: Shit, brother, you know more about me than I know about myself.

LEWIS: Mr. Baker, there's a lot I don't know—a lot of things numbers can't tell you.

FRANK: Like what?

LEWIS: You played for 12 years, longer than most players—especially at your position. How'd you manage that and not get hurt?

FRANK: Yeah, and we took a bigger pounding back then when the pads were thinner, less able absorb a hit. As far as I'm concerned, they coddle players today. They're supposed to be better physical specimens, but what, they pull a hamstring and they're out for three weeks. They sprain their ankle—the whole season is lost. No, these guys couldn't play the kind of football I did. They'd all be carried off the field on stretchers. Not me; I knew how to play the game.

LEWIS: You got the chance.

FRANK: What are you talking about?

LEWIS: You tell me.

FRANK: I read offenses not minds.

LEWIS: You read them well. You were a take-no-prisoners kind of type—got off on laying men out.

FRANK: Got off how? You mean it turned me on or something? Where'd you read that?

LEWIS: Maybe I read it somewhere. Maybe I just made it up.

FRANK: That's okay: people used to make shit up about me all the time, but I thought you prided yourself on accuracy.

LEWIS: We all have our blind spots.

FRANK: You ever see me play?

LEWIS: Only on YouTube.

FRANK: What'd you see?

LEWIS: I saw the '83 Super Bowl when you hit Tommy Floyd so hard his helmet flew off.

FRANK: Let me tell you: my only regret is I did not hit Floyd hard enough. The son of a bitch still caught the ball.

LEWIS: But you won the Super Bowl.

FRANK: We won the Super Bowl, but football is a game of individual plays. If I could have that play back I'd truly knock the shit out of him.

LEWIS: You can't hit people like that anymore.

FRANK: What would they do—suspend me for a couple of games, dock me some pay?

LEWIS: The league can take serious action in extreme cases—

FRANK: What extreme cases?

LEWIS: Bounties—where a team pays its players extra to hurt people.

FRANK: All is fair in love, war, and football, my man, and bounties are nothing new. We did that shit all the time in the '70s and '80s. The only difference is now it's institutionalized. Back then, it was more like a bar bet. Anyway, what difference does it make? The game's about fucking people up—always has been, always will be. That's where people like me come in.

LEWIS: Tough guys, you mean.

FRANK: Damn straight. The NFL needs guys like me. Difference is today these young guys get all inked-up with these bad-ass tattoos, show up in magazines with their shirts off, guns out and oiled. These motherfuckers are the biggest celebrities on the planet. Talk about getting off on the game. I mean, there is such a thing as humility.

LEWIS: You're jealous.

FRANK: Not me, man. I did shit; I played.

LEWIS: Ancient history!

FRANK: I'm a legend, motherfucker! What did you ever do?

END OF FREE SAMPLE.