



Playwright Ronald Tavel. Photo by Richard Russell.

**Ronald Tavel in New Orleans, 1991.
Photo: Richard Russell**



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**Ronald Tavel in his bedroom, St. Nicholas St. The French Quarter, New Orleans, 1992.
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**LINE/BIRTH, PLAY/BIRTH
(NEW ORLEANS STYLE)**

a one-act play by Ronald Tavel

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CHARACTERS:

A (male)
B (female)

SET:

A foot-thick, stage-high partition, running from the dark backdrop to the apron, divides the playing expanse into two equal, and largely empty, spaces. Stage right is Area A, whose only piece is a small platform or table. Stage left is Area B, whose centerpiece is a comfortable chair. There are a number of lumpy, cheap-looking cushions in both Areas; and Area B also contains, although concealed until they actually are used, two liquor bottles, a battered suitcase, and an odd assortment of torn, eccentric, thrift shop clothes: a winter overcoat, a palm frond hat, several pairs of knee socks, shirts, skirts, trousers, etc. Two empty crabshells are concealed in Area B.

PRODUCTION NOTE:

This play is conceived as a competition for two actors, with A confined to Area A, and B to Area B. This will handicap the actors -- who are encouraged to "work" the audience -- in their attempts to "win over" the audience, because, not being able to see each other, neither can ever be certain of exactly what the other is doing. At best, each must surmise what he or she might from the audience's responses. A is further handicapped by never being able to leave his initial sitting, or semi-reclining, position atop the table or platform. B, however, though confined for the majority of the play to the chair in Area B, is free to leave and return to it particularly during the last "scene".

When they are required to have what in "realistically-staged" drama would be physical contact, as when B hands A a cushion, B will extend the cushion right, into the darkness surrounding her (and the cushion will seem to disappear in that darkness), and A will pluck a, really second and identical, cushion from out of the darkness to his left.

Again, it is essential that the actors never be able to see each other, and that the audience be very aware of this. This superior knowledge on the latter's part, i.e., they are self-consciously cognizant of both A and B's activities, will allow them to "encourage" either or both; and their "interplay" with their dependent players is a necessary element in the functioning of this piece. The roles are reasonably equal in strength, length, and opportunity. And that both often share sensibility and behavior ideates how problematic is their divisibility while opportuning each with the crucial option of imitating the other -- or, to odd effect, only imagining that he or she is.

(Dark stage. Then the lights begin to blink uncertainly. They finally come on, and illuminate, quite poorly, Area A and Area B, in which A and B, respectively, are discovered. A, squinting, teeth slightly on edge, looks up and about.)

- A: Playwriting belongs to that awesomely irksome area of endeavor, in which, quite necessarily, persons who do their best can not have too tangible a success.
- B: I extrapolate therefrom, you want this one to be bad.
- A: (Wise-ass) In so far as I'm capable of as much.
- B: Or as little.
(reflecting; gazing about with modest disapproval)
Well, we could use some success right now.
- A: If these weren't times of runaway taxation, inflation, talent-under, and property-over, evaluation, probably not; but things being what they cost, and in America "being" being equated with its cost, we do need a smidgen.
- B: Yet to be perfectly honest, a play of true distinction, though denied absolutely, and by definition, unqualified success, could bring a great deal of prestige.
- A: If I had any more prestige, we'd be starving to death.
- B: Are you comfortable?
- A: Give me another cushion.
- B: (As if doing so: i.e., extending a cushion into the darkness right while A plucks an identical one from the darkness to A's left) That one O.K.?
- A: Ummm, dunno. Have to squat on it a while. If it parcels itself out into lumps as quickly as these others -- McCrory's south Canal Street cushions, you know, aren't exactly anyone's idea of a life-long accessory ---
- B: Now, do your deep breathing exercise. ...If that doesn't work, switch to shallow breathing.
- A: Can't go wrong with the Lamaze Method, can you?
- B: Not so long as you can breathe. Start.

- A: (Breathing deeply in and out; then:)
 "Dignitaries gather an occasion too rapid
 Out on the jetty wading in brine
 Up to its knees in crustacean."
- B: (Pause) What?
- A: Knee-high in crustacean. That's how I see it.
 The jetty is knee-high in crustaceans.
- B: Gumbo crabs were one forty-nine a pound over at
 St. Roch's Market ---
- A: (The word apparently meaning something special)
 Rocks?
- B: -- on St. Claude Avenue this week.
- A: (Startled) You hiked by foot to St. Claude in the
 Tremé this week, just to buy Gumbo crabs?
- B: Last week, too. Were a quarter less last week.
 And even less the week before. Take my life in my
 hands for you.
- A: Oh, I know. That Salvation Army crock smells like
 Gumbo crabs. The whole, peeling kitchen smells
 like Gumbo crabs. But I don't mind. I rather like
 the taste of Gumbo crabs, actually -- plain Gumbo
 crabs. And hard-shells, well, you know, hard-shells
 are scavengers, step sidewise they do to eat
 sewerage same as oysters, you take a chance on
 hepatitis with them.
- B: And they cost seven twenty-five a pound.
- A: And they cost seven twenty-five a pound. Their
 meat extrapolated, anyhow.
- B: So you see this jetty knee-high in Gumbo crabs?
- A: Jutty: I like the sound of jutty better. Cause it
 juts out into the water, no? So "jutty" is more
 appropriate, even at The-Devil-take-the-hindmost
 risk of a neologism... Still, the audience can
 understand "jetty" easier -- quicker. So I defer
 to their quicker misunderstanding. You have to in
 theatre. Oh! the compromising, humiliating lengths
 I go to for the audience. But I do see that jetty
 in crustacean. I see everything in crustacean.
 Like seeing the whole, wide world in Gras green,
 yellow and purple, so tasteful. Tasteful, taste,
 tasty... well, you are what you eat. Specially ---
- B: -- when you eat so much of it.
- A: Yeah.

- B: -Definitely take my life in my hands for you -- and had to wait an hour and thirty-four minutes at St. Roch's 'fore I even got waited on. Had a shot while I was waiting at Caranek's -- you know, the lounge back of the Market, on Marais. -Marais, is it? for Jean Marais?
- A: Bet you took your life in your hands at Caranek's, as well.
- B: Did indeed.
- A: Not for me, though, Muse, not for me! Sure it was just one shot you had at Caranek's?
- B: (Stares blankly; sighs) Ya givin' me a headache.
- A: (Suddenly, screaming) OOOHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!
- B: Oh, my God! what is it? You going into labor?
- A: No, dammit! something's stuck up under my ass.
- B: Lift up! lift up! that's it, I got it.
(as if extricating an object from under A's behind)
- A: What is it? My God.
- B: A Gumbo crab shell. You more comfortable now?
- A: Yes, a great deal. Thank you. ...It felt so big for a crabshell.
- B: Well, there's a coupla seaweed strands stuck in its claw.
- A: No kidding? -Can't cook up that seaweed, can you? Like them Nam immigrants do?
- B: Nope. I mean, you can, but what value is in so few sea fingers isn't really worth it. Probably tastes like shit, anyhow. ...Sea fingers: nice turn of phrase, that.
- A: (Dark; suspicious) All the crabs you buy have seaweed stuck in them?
- B: (Casual) Not all. Some. Some, a few. Wouldn't be worth one forty-nine a pound if they all had seaweed, inedible seaweed, bringing up the weight. (pause; affecting detachment)
You know, I don't mean to criticize, but when you start your play, the place where it says, "Up to its knees in crustacean," you know? Well, that's not very exact, you mean, "muscles," don't you? or the miniature barnacles that suction themselves on to

muscles even though muscles are barnacles, too?
 But there are muscles and muscles. And there are
 just barnacles, not barnacles and barnacles. The
 audience might get the wrong inference if you
 choose to use "muscles". Like human muscles, like
 biceps. Big biceps.

- A: You're very right. Crustaceans is a miscarriage.
 So "jetty" is wrong and "crustacean" is wrong.
- B: While you're at it, what does "Dignitaries gather
 an occasion too rapid" mean?
- A: (Superior) You mean, what does "an occasion too
 rapid" mean?
- B: No, I mean what does "Dignitaries gather an
 occasion" mean?
- A: (Suddenly losing self-confidence; somewhat timid)
 Maybe, "Dignitaries gather on occasion"? Or maybe
 it's not clear... Like the grooved and corrugated
 Gulf. Should I start again?
- B: I was afraid to say something, but so long as you
 did...
- A: (Pause; "regrouping brain cells"; then breathing
 deeply in and out; and then:)
 "Dignitaries gather on occasion too rapid
 Out on the jutty wading in brine ---"
- B: The dignitaries or the "jut-ty" is wading?
- A: (Alarmed) I don't know! Maybe both.
- B: If you don't know, how shall the unlit ones, your
 projected audience, know?
- A: The answer is neither:- if I don't know, and they
 don't know, neither one is wading in the brine.
 I'm sure that's absolutely, devastatingly it because
 I don't really see the dignitaries or the jetty.
 I do see the brine. I see wading in brine! Or at
 least, in rock salt. I swear as much! I wouldn't
 lie. Not to you, Muse. ...Oh, I am so totally
 tired. And my bottom's killing me. Do you think,
 perhaps, you shellfish-shopping slave-driver, that
 I should start again?
- B: Switch to shallow breathing, first. And conserve
 now, conserve. I can feel your fight wanning.

(The lights flicker and go out. Darkness. Then the lights
 flicker again and finally come on, with a more dramatic and
 somewhat lurid cast. A, by three or four McCrory cushions,
 is more elevated now; and the expressions on A and B's faces

are more intense, more effortful, and retail, with Barrymore-exaggeration, the consequential strain thereof.)

- A: Conserve. Now, then. When you give birth to a play, you are foraging the forest of the oral for that one perfect line. Cause if you can get that one perfect line out, you shall necessarily have out the whole play. For a play is one perfect line, specially here in New Orleans where less is more by tradition count of nobody is going to do more no-how, anyhow... And this line of a truth is a lungline a-growing straight out from you, its breather, quite perfectly out like a respiratory tube, except determinédly straight....
- B: To?
- A: (As if carried off somewhere) To, what?
- B: (Quite grounded) To where?
- A: (Confident) It juts, and then zooms, purposefully out and determinédly straight, like The Holy Breath!
- B: To where?
- A: Where? Posterity, no?
- B: No, but I mean, where to in space? Where, jutting from the lung, does the line zoom determinédly straight out to? If memory serves, a respiratory tube would waver, say, circle about a bit -- have something of the apparently disorderly, the swiftly swimming-snake, about it, its destiny unclear, to its object above all, till the capital strike, the dart sharp, the end.
- A: (Pause, while B stares ahead in creative contentment; then, shocked) Man! you are a regular asshole! I just realized that. And I've been talking to you like you understood something. But you don't. And I've been talking to you straight-forward ever since inspirational conception. I've wasted nine laborous nightmares! This play is going to be a freak! A freak from taking regulatory pills or swilling whole milk and Mississippi River Chemical-Corridor water or falling victim to radio-active fallout or acid rain or talking nine ninny-driven nightmares through to numbskull you! Our Mississippi-mired marriage is on the shipwrecked, tempest-tossed, fetus-fatale rocks!
- B: (Pause) Did you do your pressing-down exercise?
- A: Rocks! I see rocks! I see rocks and I see wading. Maybe wading rocks. --Yes! I did my pressing-down exercise. I'll do it again. Wanna see? -There.

There. THERE!!

- B: Feel better? ...What do you feel?
- A: Like I gotta go to the bathroom.
- B: (As in "I'm not going to help you over to it")
Know where the pee-can is?
- A: Know what a headache is?
- B: Or, hows about the trashcan, case it's another
cleaned-out crabshell you've come out with?
- A: (Calm; good-natured; ignoring the slight) You know,
you know how I think I want to start? I want to
start with the dedication. For I believe that the
dedication should do service as the first line.
Such inauguration would be innovation's very
inexpectation. And, an arresting gasser. And it
could be the perfect line! Because if you have the
dedication Caribbean-clear in your mind, for whom
the play is and why, and what for and wheretofore,
why then, you've got the whole play right there.
And don't need any more. How New Orleans can you
get?
- B: I'd say that's reasonable. And, by any stretch of
welfare's pocketbook, inarguably parsimonious.
Need another McCorey cushion?
- A: No, I shall simply press down forcefully and breathe
in and out shallowly and commence. -Hope shallow
breathing doesn't make for a shallow play. Though
it is a play about the shallows. I certainly see
shallows. That's the setting. That is the setting
all right, boy, if that's not the setting there jist
ain't no setting. But I don't like the word,
"shallows". It's too art-farty. It's like poetry
by someone who has three names. Like Daniel Day-
Lewis or Olga San Juan or Julia Sans Child.
- B: Let's not talk about anything sans child! Simply
commence.
- A: O.K. -00000000000000, here it comes:-
"I dedicate this play
To my child, the play, in celebration....."
No, that's not right.
- B: (Sneaking a drink) Really? What's wrong?
- A: It's too wordy. Um, let me recommence:-
"To the play itself in celebration!
Something to warn it about
Or encourage it to accomplish
That has told me that if
I want to have and love it

That is my business."
 (pause)
 Well?

- B: (Inattentive, in the process of factoring in a second long swig; startled pause) Oh! -- is it already time for criticism?
- A: No, gross geek! you could just go pass out cigars at The Maple Leaf and keep your gap-tooth trap shut tight. Talk about deflation! Giving birth is a bummer. So you can see your feet again, big deal! Man, you bring me down!
- B: First of all, that quote-unquote "unwordy" dedication is a systemic a priori objective-reflexive redundancy. You can't warn or encourage a playchild with the prima facie fact that you wanted to have and love it because plays prima facie radically appropriate as much as your fuck-up, not requiring as they do either love or attention, existing altogether alone and without the need even to exist, a separate and insensately-solo self-sufficiency, their quiddity being, unconsciously and optimally, great labor's inadvertant accolade in unbroken casing impervious to, and unalterable by, time and tide.
- A: The tide. I don't think I see the tide. I see rocks and wading, but not the tide. So "tide" has nothing to do with it, you're so right, Muse, you always are. Nor does time:- since for plays, time, as well, doesn't exist.
- B: Specially when they're only one line.
- A: That I have, but can't have.
- B: Now you've got it.
- A: Always did.
- B: Oh, yeah? Then why did you bolt ass-backwards out of the stall yet once more and expend, with said aforeknown, extensive above, my best-shot hour of the evening? Indeed, doubtless, of the whole week?
- A: Cause the only time I have the line is when I have it.
- B: I call that holding it, not having it. Holding it off and holding it back, holding onto it.
- A: (Pause; sighs deeply) O.K. Should I start again?
- B: (Slightly disgusted) Dunno now. Probably be better if I just fed a semi-sensible one up there for you to come out with, and we could don those straw hats

the mules in Jackson Square wouldn't be caught dead wearing on a dog day the third week in August, 'n we could trot the hell outa here straight for Harry's.

A: Ever actually seen what sadistically happens to those drooling Decatur Street donkeys if they're driven on a dog day's a notch above ninety-eight degrees over there? Huh? have you? -EMULATE!!

B: (Fed-up, shouting) MANON, LET'S GO!

A: (Pause; then, very carefully) O.K. I go down the switchback road through a white cliff cut in the Melville mind, reach the non-committal water, remove my reversable and use it to coat the bare skull of a beached bell-buoy. The buoy's skull is utterly bare, not a seaweed on it, and I conceal that, to-me, blankfaced and either accusing or approving witness: requiring, as I eventuate at this juncture, very truly neither. Then I sit down on an overhang and pull off my pencils. I see the swing of my arms in an overlaid multiple motion like a dancing Shiva, for the pencils are all laid over me, I see myself from my back continuously pulling off the overlay of my pencils and directing them to craft in the salted swimming-snake ripples twixt the wash pulled on and let back through the everswelling birth, and sweet submission, of the breakers...

B: Nearly conceivable. But push on down to the essence. See through your eyes, don't see your back, don't see the back of yourself, don't see yourself as you were more than yourself, see through your eyes straight out and see just what you see. Not the land, you are the land, but the water, the unsymbolled and irreversible drop in the overhang, the overhang as it protrudes before you to its irrevocable, sharp unMelvillian drop and then the sea, the rocks.... (stopping just short of taking over)
Well, it's not my line to get. You're the one who's lying-in.

A: (Tenderly) I like the way you let me do this myself. I love you, you know that?

B: (Tenderly) You are almost a good person. Give birth in peace.

A: (Pause) I have to wait, Musy. Overcome with love as I am, I'm not in labor now.

(The lights fade out. Then, they blast up. A is screaming. B is running frantically about Area B, garments a-rent in wringing hands. Shadows play violently in both Areas.)

B: Oh, my good God! what terrible labor, what a difficult birth! I never midwifed-in on such a

difficult birth! Boy, am I worried, I just can't calm down!

- A: Boy, am I worried! Boy, am I worried!
- B: Bear down, bear down! breathe in, breathe out!
- A: Doll, oh doll! do you think I could lose the playchild?!
- B: You could lose your mind, you could lose your money, you could lose your Arcady Abbyville lovers, you could lose your damn downpayment on a blue-song 'n dance double-shotgun in the Bywater should you forestall the installments! Sure! you could lose the playchild! -Oughtn't we ring up Charity?
- A: Fuck Charity! We're having the ingrate here, at home, what do you think I have been rehearsing the Lamaze Method nine months of nightmare for? To end up giving birth, or end up, in that so-called hospice, I mean, hospital? They'd install me in a Third Floor funnyfarm stall there anyway, and morgue-stash the key in deep-freeze! Fuckoff!
- B: (The lights steady; the shadows condense and then evaporate; and suddenly, completely self-possessed) There, I've calmed down.
- A: (Pause; then, affectionately) Say, Babe, do you think I could lose....
- B: The playchild? I'm not reversing my position. I said you could lose the playchild.
- A: No, I mean, my life.....
- B: (Totally out of control again) Your life!! God forfend! bite your tongue which feedeth upon the astrologic Crab! Mishaps like that just do not mishap any more... This ain't the Dark Ages -- though it might be in a coupla days, you haven't paid NOPSI since verily I say unto you, Abraham came to be.
- A: (Sadly) Something threatens my life... One line can extrapolate, nay, eviscerate so much out of one.
- B: But NOPSI threatened us three times and, see, we still got lights. Or light, one light, a 25 watt pink, or as finicky as you are, I'd say, off-fuchsia bulb.....

(Said fuchsia bulb blinks a few times and expires. Then the lights relume with an unmistakable funeral-parlor pall. B, musing alone, and with an unmistakable growing detachment, is examining the light fixtures in Area B.)

- B: So that's why the bulbs keep browning out and dying off. Wish you'd Hancock a check now and then, this ain't the manner to which I've grown accustomed. I used to live on Prytania, a regular Oak Alley Taj Mahal. Fact, we called it, "Temple Tara". And in poorer days, on St. Peter twixt Shart and Royale, I helped a whole buncha shortly to be successful playwrights to hone their craft... --Awww, dawling, I didn't mean it, no serious dig intended, not while you're in difficult labor and in danger of losing your life and the playchild whose rave reviews might service me as references and hence be a FAX or two away from some income after you're safely stashed in St. Louie VII or VIII or how-some-ever many. Want another cushion? Want a Sazerac, or a canapé, or a Bromo Seltza?
- A: (With a pained expression) No. I do have wild cravings for a Gumbo crab, though.
- B: (Angry) Oh, I don't wanna cook now, it's late!
- A: With seaweed sauce, please. Can't be too bad, the seaweed.
- B: Course not: tastes like chicken.
- A: I knew, from the depths of your great seminality, you'd say that.
- B: (Putting on an oversized, shot-to-hell coat and a battered straw hat) Know something, I believe I've outgrown this sawed-off shotgun! Come on, get dressed and let's go to The Who-Pulled-Napoleon's-Bonaparte House for a Pimm's Cup. We'll leave the unborn line at home, it's incubated here so long it's used to the lighting. Besides, the unborn have not seen better days, it's us grown-ups need a bottle. (hiccups)
- A: (Astounded) You've been swilling while I'm in labor? I can't believe it! You're high while I die.
- B: Liquor helps me to break the ice, and it's time to look for my next inspiree. (quickly realizing the inadvisability of that pronouncement) --No, no, dawling, it's cause I can't bear to see you suffer so. I can not bear it. Bear down.
- A: To what purpose now, bearing down? I'm slipping away, sure as shit; and you're planning a stealthy getaway to slip away same as me. --But go on, have one on me, let everyone at The Alpine have a last one on me! Let everyone at Harry's have a last one on me! No, not Harry's Place, it's Happy Hour, too

many people there.

- B: (Pulling on several pairs of long holey socks, one on top of the other; hard) So you want one now to see yaself out? That is to say, one for the road paved with good intentions, as 'twere?
- A: (Intimidated) Listen, Muse, before you split... could I impart that last line to you, I mean, the first line, well, um, that first line is the last line, the definitive one....
- B: (Drinking again, quite high now, and furious) You're a one-liner, not a playwright, a trashbag of one-liners, no class at all, don't know why I didn't realize that before... Some don't do windows, I don't do one-liners!
- A: Please listen... Oh, I'm still worried I won't get it out... the proper way.....
- B: Shoot!
- A: (Suddenly perky, didactic) See, that is what was wrong with me:- I never got it out the proper, acceptable way -- I got it out, but never in the acceptable way.... Coulda been a millionaire.
- B: (Dreamily) And made your significant other proud.
- A: Yeah, well, you know the scene...
- B: I can almost taste it. Salt.
- A: (Visionary) There is the gray and choppy water, the rocks wading in it, and the overhang ---
- B: (Alert) Yes?
- A: "Overhang" is a touch melodramatic, staged. "Over-Hang" has a dreary pun and implications. I totally don't want that word.
- B: (Fed up; cramming a heap of worn-out clothes into a battered suitcase) I thought you had the line!
- A: Even in death the playwright is rushed. Such is the fate of the writer of dramatic material. First person on the assembly line.
- B: The LINE! The LINE!
- A: (The previous thought unbroken) There is a sandy, simpler word to suggest my position, that Anchoring Ultimate, or footing from which I, and all the potential of people, see... Beach of ever-never? How does "beach" sound? How does "sound" sound?

...It's not really a sound though, there's no land on t'other side.

B: (Exhausted; giving up) Want me to send ya over some Gumbo crabs? From wherever I end up?

A: No. I'm bringing this in on the deadline. -Oh! what a rock-bottom pun. I really killed your buzz, huh?

B: Well, Muse-talking a playwright out in linebirth is not exactly my idea of how to have a high. Specially if the line croaks with the playwright.

A: It won't. Lines pulley so much out of you cause they come endlessly out of you to go on, just you don't.

B: But you do.

A: (Pause; bearing down; breathing deeply in and out; then:) Ah, there, and now no longer ahead, is the Gulf, the vast, wide immersion blinking gold in the crystal, intangible kaleidoscope of that redeemed immemorial chill; and it's as though... it's as though....

B: (Close to the partition of the Areas, hanging in desperately) Yes?

A: It was as though.... it was as though.....

(A bears down hard and dies. The lights fade in Area A. B gestures as if lifting A's nightshirt and as if extracting from between A's legs a crabshell with a notepaper neatly folded up into it. B removes the page, unfolds it, and reads very slowly as the lights in Area B carefully fade out:)

B: "As though the land, not quite completed, reached out a few more rocks into the sea."

END.