

Two Men & a Wheelbarrow

by Michael Olsen

Characters: Jim, a nurseryman, 20s/30s (M)
Darren, the boss of a gardening company, 20s/30s (M)

NB: The characters of Jim and Darren are to be played by female actors. However, for the purposes of the text, the characters are referred to by their character's sex, not their performer's.

Lights come up on—nothing. Nowhere. An endless desert. The only thing we can see is the figure of DARREN, curled up asleep. He wears a suit and gumboots.

Silence.

JIM enters pushing a wheelbarrow with a spade in it. He wears dirty overalls and gloves and seems to be very hot, and very uncomfortable in his overalls. He stops when he sees Darren. He takes the spade and is about to plunge it into the soil only he can see in the wheelbarrow, when he stops and uses the spade to play air guitar. Unfortunately we don't hear the Led Zeppelin that Jim wants to hear in his head. We hear a classical piece, maybe Beethoven's 5th Symphony, in snippets as Jim starts and stops at his furious thrashing air guitar. Finally frustrated beyond belief, he hurls the spade to the ground. Then, thinking better of it, he picks it up and digs it into the invisible soil in the wheelbarrow. He walks over to Darren and tips the dirt onto Darren's head. Darren doesn't stir. Finally, he pokes Darren with the shovel. Darren wakes up angrily.

DARREN: What the hell!

JIM: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean—Who are you?

DARREN: Darren. Who the hell are you? You're wearing the same clothes as this bozo—

JIM: It's me—Jim.

DARREN: Shit!

**JIM +
DARREN:** You're a woman!

Darren feels his face, his hair. Jim tears his gloves off, feels his face, his hair, shocked. Darren feels his face, runs his hands over his body.

DARREN: This is weird, isn't it?

JIM: How long is this one going to last?

DARREN: Who knows? Could be worse though. Better than being a rock. *(Darren finally touches his breasts.)* Could be a lot worse. Say, this is OK. This place can't be all bad, can it?

JIM: Oh yes it can. We just haven't figured it out yet.

DARREN: Go ahead. You know you want to.

JIM: What?

Darren indicates Jim's chest. Finally, Jim touches his breasts, then stops almost straightaway.

JIM: They're just—well, they're just a part of you, aren't they? It's like scratching your elbow, isn't it? *(Pause)* Isn't it?

Darren stops his fondling.

DARREN: Alright alright. *(Pause)* But it's better than scratching your elbow.

JIM: I just wish I knew what I looked like.

DARREN: Take it from me, you're ugly.

JIM: Well you're fat!

DARREN: Bullshit! This is muscle. Everyone knows chicks' muscles are softer.

JIM: So tell me. What am I like?

Jim again runs his hands over his face.

DARREN: You're a shocker. A twelve pot beauty at least.

JIM: What?

DARREN: It'd take twelve pots before a guy'd sleep with you.

JIM: Well you're as ugly as a bag of snails. You'd be able to stop traffic with that face.

DARREN: Could be a lot worse.

JIM: I don't think so.

DARREN: I could look like you.

JIM: Bitch.

DARREN: Cow.

JIM: Slag.

DARREN: Tart.

- JIM:** Ha ha. We sound like women already. *(Pause)* You still haven't figured out the worst bit yet, have you?
- DARREN:** What's that?
- JIM:** If we're women, then we're not men.
- DARREN:** That's deep, genius. That's real deep. So?
- JIM:** So we don't have—
- DARREN:** What?
- JIM:** We don't have...
- Jim plunges a hand into his overalls and feels his crotch. Darren plunges a hand down his trousers.*
- JIM:** It's gone!
- DARREN:** Mine too!
- JIM:** It's gone!
- DARREN:** Stop saying that!
- JIM:** It's gone!
- DARREN:** Shut up!
- JIM:** It's gone!
- Darren goes over and slaps Jim.*
- DARREN:** Get a grip! Well, maybe not, but—remember yesterday we were fish? We didn't have one then either.
- JIM:** That's true, but when you're worried about breathing, you're not worried about your dick.
- Darren imitates a fish breathing.*
- DARREN:** This is—this is just temporary.
- JIM:** Temporary? We were fish for five fucking hours, flopping around under the blazing sun!
- DARREN:** Your point?
- JIM:** Why did we stop being fish?
- DARREN:** I have no idea.
- JIM:** Because it was boring. There's only so much flopping around you can do as a fish. He *(pointing up)* got bored.

- DARREN:** You and your bloody theories. One day, two days, we'll get turned back into blokes. There's no way we're going to Heaven as women.
- JIM:** For godsake we're in Hell! Why is it so hard for you to accept that?
- DARREN:** We are not in Hell. We're in Limbo, which is completely, totally and utterly different.
- JIM:** How would you know?
- DARREN:** I've told you before: Limbo is like a railway station. There's a timetable and you get on the right train. We're all just hanging around waiting to get the right ticket: our "Orders of Ascension."
- JIM:** Can you see a railway station anywhere? Can you? We are in the middle of Nowhere! We have seen nobody! I feel hot, you feel cold, and the only other thing here is this bloody wheelbarrow!
- DARREN:** You've just got to have patience, Jimbo. Once we get those tickets— whoosh, up we go to the Main Event, the Big "H."
- JIM:** There are no bloody "Orders of Ascension!" Today is yesterday is tomorrow is forever the same now, forever and forever for eternity. Tomorrow we could be pigs, and the day after that we could be worms.
- DARREN:** You can really piss me off, you know that?
- JIM:** We've been turned into women! Does that sound like the action of a benevolent god?
- DARREN:** Maybe He wants us to explore our feminine side, expand our consciousness. Heaven is a very with-it kind of place, you know.
- JIM:** The Devil is sitting watching us and having a bloody good laugh.
- DARREN:** You have such a warped imagination. It's just a test, that's all.
- JIM:** A test for what? To see if we like being women with no bits and all these bumps around the place?
- DARREN:** Don't you like being a woman?
- JIM:** No. Do you?
- DARREN:** It's different, I'll give you that.
- Jim doubles over in pain, moaning.*
- JIM:** Oh boy! Where did that come from?
- DARREN:** Well it couldn't have been something you ate.
- JIM:** It's just—everywhere!
- DARREN:** Have you eaten something? What did you eat? What—

Darren doubles over in pain as well.

DARREN: What is this? Feels like someone's driving a truck over my back and down my thighs.

JIM: I know what it is.

DARREN: What? What? Tell me!

JIM: You're gonna laugh when I tell you.

DARREN: It's funny already. What is it?

JIM: Period pain. I remember years ago this girlfriend Tracey had it bad. She wound up in bed for a couple of days. I thought it was bullshit.

DARREN: Are we gonna have this for two days?

JIM: No, probably just eternity.

DARREN: Doesn't it pass when you have a period or something?

JIM: Should do. Do you want a period as well?

DARREN: We haven't got any tampons have we?

JIM: Gross.

DARREN: I don't want to get this suit dirty.

JIM: You're a crack up. Where would we get tampons anyway? The local 7 Eleven?

DARREN: We'll think of something.

JIM: I doubt it.

DARREN: Let's just go with the flow.

Jim gives Darren a withering look. The period pain stops suddenly. Both of them are wary as they stand up slowly.

JIM: It's gone.

DARREN: It'll be back.

JIM: How do you know?

DARREN: It's what I'd do if I had the switch. Make them think it's gone, then bam! Turn it back on again.

JIM: I don't think it quite works like that down here. There's some other reason we're women.

DARREN: So what is it?

JIM: I don't know. But that just seemed like a taste, that's all. Nothing big.

DARREN: Nothing big? I never knew how bad it could get for girls.

JIM: Don't get all sappy on me.

DARREN: I'm not. Just an observation. All I know is, thank God it's over.

JIM: I don't think God had any part in it.

DARREN: He's around here somewhere. Watching. Taking notes. I mean, there's some reason behind this whole thing, right? A plan. A purpose. I mean, why else are we here?

JIM: Why were we alive? *(Pause)* Well? You told me yesterday you didn't believe in God.

DARREN: Well not when I was alive, no. *Now* I believe in Him.

JIM: Why? Because we're down here?

DARREN: It makes sense, don't you think?

JIM: But you don't *love* God, do you?

DARREN: What are you nuts? I believe in Him. That's enough.

JIM: You don't get it, do you? We're down here because neither of us believed in Him.

DARREN: You too?

JIM: Yes.

Pause

DARREN: Still want to be a woman?

JIM: I've never wanted to be a woman.

DARREN: Bullshit. Never? Never ever? Not even once?

JIM: You did, didn't you? I can tell.

DARREN: Of course. Ever since Grade 5 and I couldn't follow Megan Nebnic into the girls change rooms.

JIM: I remember watching Belinda Bettini in Grade 4 being beaten up by David Roddick and thinking: "I'm glad I'm never gonna be a girl."

DARREN: I had a nightmare once about being a fish, and now that's been and gone.

JIM: So all our nightmares are coming true?

DARREN: Not at all. You don't understand what's going on here.

JIM: And you do?

- DARREN:** I was in management.
- JIM:** You owned a nursery. You told me where to stack plants and fertiliser.
- DARREN:** The principles are the same. I know how they think about things around here.
- JIM:** For some reason that actually sounds believable. I guess it takes a psycho to understand a psycho. So what's your theory?
- DARREN:** As I said before, they're just testing us. That's all. To see if we're worthy of getting the ticket to upstairs.
- JIM:** We're not worthy.
- DARREN:** I am. What have I ever done to deserve going down there?
- JIM:** "Down there?" You mean right here? You're a bastard of the first order, ever since high school. You're a bully, a coward, and a thief.
- DARREN:** That's not true. None of that is true! You are the biggest liar! At least I know why *you're* here.
- JIM:** Here we go again.
- DARREN:** If you hadn't driven onto those bloody train tracks we wouldn't have met the 6:40 from Melbourne, would we?
- JIM:** I keep telling you the engine stalled!
- DARREN:** That would have to be my definition of hell. To be told again and again I died simply because of engine failure. And to be told by someone like you, who can't admit that ever since high school, they've been jealous of me.
- JIM:** I am not now nor have I ever been jealous of you. I may have hated you, I might have loathed you. In fact, I did. I might have wanted to cut you up into a million pieces and flush you down the toilet but I have never been jealous of you. I'm not even jealous of you now. Look at your hair. It's all straggly. And your lips. There's no colour there. And your eyes—don't let me get started on your eyes.
- DARREN:** I don't have to stand around and hear crap like this!
- JIM:** Oh yes you do. Remember Clare? You went out with her for three years, and then dumped her. She only found out about it when you and your new girlfriend walked into Papa Gino's where she worked. As if that wasn't bad enough, you then proceeded to humiliate her in front of everyone in the shop by saying you'd only consider going back with her if she lost between 10 and 15 kilos.
- DARREN:** She was never in danger of being called waif-like.
- JIM:** She killed herself the next day!

- DARREN:** I'm not responsible for that.
- JIM:** Just as you're not responsible for Nancy going off the rails with that handgun of her father's.
- DARREN:** It was lucky no-one was hurt there.
- JIM:** You'd just broken up with her, hadn't you? What did you say to her? How did you make her feel?
- DARREN:** I didn't! I didn't say anything! The police couldn't prove anything.
- JIM:** But you did say something, didn't you? You whispered something in her ear, something that helped flip her over the edge.
- DARREN:** Enough! Enough! I'm going.
Darren heads off SL.
- JIM:** Good riddance.
Jim watches Darren head off into the distance. Jim waves. Finally, Jim smiles.
- JIM:** Yes! I'm free! *(looking up)* Oh thank you thank you thank you.
Jim goes to the wheelbarrow and grabs the shovel, digs up a spadeful of dirt and deposits it SL. He breaks a nail and swears. Unseen by Jim, Darren enters SR, puffing.
- DARREN:** Damn it! What the hell are you doing here? Did you run around in front of me?
- JIM:** I haven't moved! See the dirt I'm spreading around the place?
- DARREN:** No.
- JIM:** Well I am.
- DARREN:** You keep saying that but I can't see anything. It's really starting to sound a little crazy.
- JIM:** At least I have something to do.
- DARREN:** Shovelling air? That's very meaningful.
- JIM:** Now *you're* jealous.
- DARREN:** You've got to be kidding.
- JIM:** I have a purpose. From day one, I've had a purpose.
- DARREN:** You have a wheelbarrow. *(Darren walks around the wheelbarrow)* Pretty much the same one you had when you were alive. And you're doing pretty much the same thing here as when you were alive. If this is

Hell, then your Hell is doing exactly what you were doing when you were alive.

JIM: *(spluttering)* And you? What are you doing? What have you got to show for your days?

DARREN: My job is to keep an eye on you.

JIM: To hassle me you mean.

DARREN: To ensure you're performing within acceptable parameters.

JIM: And how do you propose to "ensure I'm performing within acceptable parameters?" You can't even see what I'm doing!

DARREN: Believe me, I'll just know. I know a lot of things. For instance, I know what happened with you and Susan.

JIM: Nothing happened.

DARREN: That's exactly right. Nothing happened. She got bored with you and simply went off and banged the nearest guy she could find when she walked in the pub.

JIM: That is not true!

DARREN: The lucky thing is, that guy just happened to be me.

JIM: You didn't!

DARREN: I most certainly did. She was crying out for a real guy to give her a really good time, and that's precisely what I did.

JIM: You bastard!

Jim and Darren get into a fight, but it's a bit of a hissy fight, with lots of slapping and not many fists, as if they don't know how to fight.

JIM: You do this all the time! All the time!

DARREN: What? Pick up your half-eaten leftovers?

JIM: Susan loved me! She only broke up with me when she had to move to Bendigo!

DARREN: Funny way of moving to Bendigo via the pub, but there you go. She wasn't the only one, though, was she?

JIM: What do you mean?

DARREN: What about the others? Megan? Tracey? And let's not forget, the classic of them all, Stephanie Petersen.

JIM: Don't you dare say anything about Stephanie.

- DARREN:** I wasn't going to. I was going to say something about you, the way you were in touch with how she felt. How you knew instinctively that she needed more space when she first talked about moving to Tocumwal with her family. You were very sensitive.
- JIM:** I cared about her! She was everything to me!
- DARREN:** But you just couldn't be yourself around her, could you? You kind of disappeared, didn't you? You became a woman, didn't you?
- JIM:** No!
- DARREN:** That's the funny thing about men and women, as much as each might hate the other, we need the other to be what it is. When a woman pushes into you, she wants to hit something solid, not keep going down and down into some emotional quicksand.
- JIM:** Stephanie was a beautiful woman and I gave her everything I had. Just because it didn't work out doesn't mean it lacked purpose.
- DARREN:** No, but it has to have balls, and there's one place you find those.
- Pause*
- JIM:** And how do you know all this? All this about Stephanie?
- DARREN:** Come on, Jim. Malimbi is such a small town. Everyone knows everyone else's business. You couldn't fart without half the town knowing what you had for dinner.
- JIM:** Stephanie was the one.
- DARREN:** The one who what?
- JIM:** The one I was going to marry.
- DARREN:** Oh please. You'd been going out for how long? Four years? And you still hadn't popped the question. What were you waiting for? An end to the drought?
- JIM:** At least I know you didn't have her.
- DARREN:** Well...
- JIM:** What?
- DARREN:** It was the night before she left. They had a party up at her folks' place. You were crook, weren't you?
- JIM:** I had the flu.
- DARREN:** Yes. Well, I think you'd be proud of me, actually.
- JIM:** What happened?