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Dramatic Publishing

BACKSLIDING IN THE PROMISED LAND

A Play
by
MICHELE LOWE



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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For my father, Marshall Lowe

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THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY of Woodstock, Illinois

Backsliding in the Promised Land

A Full-length Play
For 2-4m., 1 boy, 5-6 w.

CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

HERMAN GROSCHE late 60s, a prominent New York attorney

SAUL BAUM late 20s, an Orthodox Jewish man

NAOMI BAUM late 20s, his wife

ENID GROSCHE late 60s, Herman's wife

LUDMILLA WANTZ late 50s, a blonde woman with a Polish accent

MIMI GROSCHE late 30s, Herman's mother

JENNY DITMER early 20s, Herman's secretary

LEO the Baums' 8-year-old son

NURSE early 20s. Can be doubled with Jenny Ditmer

JANITOR a man with a heavy German accent.
Can be doubled with Saul Baum.

INS OFFICER can be doubled with Saul Baum/Janitor

The play takes place in and around New York City during September 1995.

Author's Note: Light changes and music should be used to bridge scenes without the use of blackouts please.

Backsliding in the Promised Land was produced by Syracuse Stage (Robert Moss, artistic director; James A. Clark, producing director) in Syracuse, N.Y, in January 2003. It was directed by Robert Moss; the set design was by Adam Stockhausen; the costume design was by Nanzi Adzima; the lighting design was by Matthew Frey; the sound design was by Jonathan Herter and the stage manager was Michelle Ferguson.

Herman Grosch MUNSON HICKS
Saul Baum TOMMY SHRIDER
Naomi Baum ANNE PENNER
Leo Baum RYAN FERGUSON or ALEX FRIEDMAN
Enid Grosch JACQUELINE BROOKS
Ludmilla Wantz JUDITH ROBERTS
Mimi SUZANNE GRODNER
Jenn/Nurse KELLY TRUMBULL
Janitor/INS Officer JOHN EDDEY

Backsliding in the Promised Land

SCENE ONE

(A hospital room. HERMAN GROSCH and NAOMI and SAUL BAUM are gathered around LEO's hospital bed.)

HERMAN. They've had six teams examine your son and they all say the same thing. Leo's brain will never function again. You understand that in the eyes of the medical establishment, that's enough to declare him dead.

SAUL. Not in the eyes of God.

HERMAN. Yes, I understand, but the hospital has certain legal claims...

SAUL. Not to my son.

HERMAN. No, but to procedure. Legally, they can disconnect the ventilator.

SAUL. But his heart is still beating.

HERMAN. It doesn't matter.

SAUL. If it's disconnected, his heart will stop. We can't do that.

HERMAN. You can't, but Dr. Fishman can.

SAUL. Fishman? What happens to our son isn't up to him it's up to God.

HERMAN. Fine, but God is moving more slowly than Dr. Fishman would like.

SAUL. You're going to tell God what speed to move?

HERMAN. Stop bringing up God.

8 BACKSLIDING IN THE PROMISED LAND

SAUL. Stop bringing up the ventilator.

HERMAN. Saul, while I admire your calm—and you are incredibly calm for a man in your position—it doesn't look good.

SAUL. Who are you working for, Fishman or me?

HERMAN. For you.

SAUL. Then why don't you tell them what I want?

HERMAN. Look—if you told Fishman *as parents* that you couldn't bring yourselves to disconnect it, he might let you have a few more days. By then Leo's heart may stop functioning on its own and the debate between you and the hospital would be settled.

NAOMI. He should never have been put on those machines in the first place.

HERMAN. Yes, I know—

SAUL. We were never consulted beforehand.

HERMAN. I understand. But he *was* placed on them and right now they need your permission to disconnect them. And I strongly suggest you to give it to them.

SAUL. No.

HERMAN. Saul, you're making this so hard for yourself—

SAUL. No. (*Beat.*)

HERMAN. Saul, your son is gone.

SAUL. And who will replace him?

HERMAN. You have two daughters.

SAUL. No, no, who's going to replace my son and his son and his son's son?

HERMAN. He's one little boy...

SAUL. Leo dies and another Jew disappears. Poof. Gone. Who's going to take my son's place? Give me the name of the person and I'll let you disconnect the machine.

HERMAN. I can't tell Fishman that.

SAUL. My son Leo stands at the gates of heaven and he wants to know—who will take his place on earth?

HERMAN. You want a name?

SAUL. He wants it. Why do you think he's still here?

(The NURSE enters.)

NURSE. Mr. Grosch? Dr. Fishman apologizes. He'll be here in two minutes. *(The NURSE exits.)*

NAOMI. What's he coming for?

SAUL. Maybe he's changed his mind.

HERMAN. No, I asked him to meet us. I was hoping we could settle this today. Let Fishman see you as feeling people. Right now he sees you as religious fanatics. Men like him are frightened by you. You seem so sure of yourself, they don't think they can argue with you.

SAUL. We're not here to argue.

HERMAN. But you won't listen to reason...

SAUL. Whose reason, his or mine? He's a doctor, so what? Does he know what's better for my son than the Almighty?

HERMAN. You're going about this all wrong.

NAOMI. What do you want us to do?

HERMAN. I want you to emote!

SAUL. Do you mean cry?

HERMAN. Cry! Scream! Look uncomfortable. Anything but that tone of voice.

SAUL. This is who I am. I'm not putting on a show for you or Fishman or anybody else.

HERMAN. I'm not the right attorney for you, Saul.

SAUL. That's obvious.

HERMAN. I'd be happy to recommend someone else—

10 BACKSLIDING IN THE PROMISED LAND

SAUL. No, thank you. People have been begging to represent Leo. I don't think we'll have any problem replacing you. (*HERMAN turns to leave.*)

NAOMI. Herman—aren't you going to say goodbye to Leo?

HERMAN (*looks at LEO once more*). Naomi, how old is Leo?

NAOMI. He's eight.

HERMAN. When he was born, was he a big baby? A little baby?

NAOMI. He was three pounds, two ounces.

HERMAN. You couldn't take him home right away, could you?

NAOMI. He was too small.

HERMAN. How long was he in the hospital?

NAOMI. Two months.

HERMAN. Did you visit him?

NAOMI. Every day.

HERMAN. And your husband?

NAOMI. Twice, sometimes three times a day.

HERMAN. How many times has Leo returned to this hospital?

NAOMI. Many times—

HERMAN. The doctors told you that he would make a full recovery, didn't they?

NAOMI. Yes.

HERMAN. The doctors told you that Leo would eventually live a normal, healthy life and you believed them, didn't you?

SAUL. It's not up to them—

HERMAN. And now, that's not going to happen, is it? Even if you could keep him alive on the machines, even

if Fishman left you alone, and the hospital allowed you to keep your son on the ventilator indefinitely, your son will never be a normal little boy.

SAUL. That's enough.

HERMAN. He'll never read or write or learn to ride a bike, or throw you a kiss or hold your hand.

SAUL. Stop it.

HERMAN. He'll never go to school or marry or make children of his own.

NAOMI. Why are you saying this?

HERMAN. He'll never be able to open his eyes. He'll never look at you and your husband ever again.

SAUL. Shut up!

HERMAN. Your little boy is no more.

SAUL. Leo!

NAOMI. Saul...

SAUL. LEO!

HERMAN (*opens the door*). Nurse...

SAUL (*screaming*). MY SON!

(*NURSE enters.*)

NURSE. Is he all right?

HERMAN. Unfortunately not. Is Dr. Fishman here?

NURSE. Yes.

HERMAN. Could you please tell him to come in. I'm afraid Mr. Baum is quite overwrought.

(*Lights change.*)

SCENE TWO

(Early evening in the Grosch's dining room. ENID GROSCH sits at the dining-room table doing an intricate jigsaw puzzle. HERMAN enters.)

ENID. Reverend Mathias called. The roof caved in on the church.

HERMAN. Anybody hurt?

ENID. No, but they need money fast.

HERMAN. What did you tell him?

ENID. That we'd contribute the full amount.

HERMAN. Pay for the whole roof?

ENID. Is that all right with you?

HERMAN. The entire roof?

ENID. It's lunch money for us, Herman.

HERMAN. Did he give you an amount?

ENID. I said we'd give him a check and he'd fill it in. All we ask is that he remember us in his prayers. He said he would, but I don't think he will. I think he only remembers the very ill to God—the terminal cases, the unsavable ones. I'm sure we're on our own.

HERMAN. Then what did we give him the money for?

ENID. On the off chance that he thinks of us while God is in the room. Do you think Mathias is a bright man?

HERMAN. He just got a great big bag of money from us.

ENID. Maybe it would help if one of us became ill.

HERMAN. I don't think that's necessary, Enid.

ENID. I was thinking I might get a migraine tomorrow. Why don't we open a bottle of wine? That usually gives me a headache.

HERMAN. Enid we are such model members of the church—what kind of Jews would we have been?

ENID. What?

HERMAN. Have you ever thought about what we missed? What we forgot?

ENID. There is nothing to forget. And if there was, it's already forgotten.

HERMAN. Then why do I keep humming that song?

ENID. What song? (*HERMAN hums a bit of a tune.*) Stop that.

HERMAN. It's "Adon-O-Lam," isn't it?

ENID. What are you asking *me* for?

HERMAN. Esther—

ENID. My name is Enid. And you are Herman.

HERMAN. Herschel.

ENID. Herschel is dead. You're Herman. Herman, the Episcopalian. If your poor mother could hear you now.

HERMAN. Come on, Enid, we're alone for chrissakes—

ENID. You're not Jewish, you've never been Jewish, and neither have I.

HERMAN. I see. And your father?

ENID. What about him?

HERMAN. Was he Episcopalian?

ENID. Don't bring up my father.

HERMAN. I just wanted to know what church he belonged to—

ENID. Drop it, Herman.

HERMAN. What he did for a living—

ENID. My father was an electrical engineer.

HERMAN. Oh?

ENID. He graduated from the university when he was sixteen.

14 BACKSLIDING IN THE PROMISED LAND

HERMAN. Ah, a gifted student.

ENID. My mother was a chef. When the Germans came they specifically asked for her—

HERMAN. That's a lovely touch.

ENID. *Specifically asked for her.*

HERMAN. They asked for her to get on the train.

ENID. There was no train.

HERMAN. Enid, your father was a tailor.

ENID. He was an electrical engineer.

HERMAN. Your mother worked in a factory.

ENID. She was a chef!

HERMAN. She made garden hoses.

ENID. She made marzipan pastries and charlotte ruses!

HERMAN. The wonderful thing about reinventing your life is that you can make geniuses out of your parents.

ENID. We sat in the first pew of the church...

HERMAN. You sat in a rat-infested cellar huddled around a half-chewed Torah...

ENID. NO.

HERMAN. We invented it all!

ENID. When they come to the house, when they ask who you are, what will you tell them?

HERMAN. No one is coming to the house.

ENID. What will you say?

HERMAN. I would never do anything to hurt you.

ENID. But you're my husband. Everything you do affects us both. Where are you going?

HERMAN. I'm going out.

ENID. We must stand together. We have to be ready for them.

HERMAN. I'll try not to be late.

ENID. They're coming, Herman.

HERMAN. Sorry to have upset you.

ENID. I can feel it.

HERMAN. It wasn't my intention.

ENID. Maybe not tonight, maybe not tomorrow night—

HERMAN. Good luck with the puzzle.

ENID. But soon.

(HERMAN exits. Lights change.)