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*Dramatic Publishing*

# RELIABLE JUNK

Based on the real life of inventor Harvey Scheetz

By  
RIC AVERILL



**Dramatic Publishing**

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(RELIABLE JUNK)

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## DEDICATION:

This play is dedicated to Harvey Scheetz, who, in exchange for the right to use his name and tell his story, asked for only one thing—to be driven to the opening production in a limousine. Harvey passed away before the premiere, but with his firm belief in ghosts and spirits, I hired a limo on opening night and instructed the driver to drive to the theatre, open the door, and say “You’re here at the premiere, Mr. Scheetz!” The play is also dedicated to Turk (Cecilia Fay Grimes), a very real girl whose life was changed by Harvey’s imaginative science.

## IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

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*Reliable Junk* was a winner of the Seventh National Waldo M. and Grace C. Bonderman Playwriting Workshop sponsored by Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis and was featured in a rehearsed reading at the 1997 Youth Theatre Playwriting Symposium held at the Indiana Repertory Theatre, Indianapolis.

The Bonderman process was essential to the development of the piece and I am grateful for the opportunity to have worked there on several occasions with Dorothy Webb.

The premier production of *Reliable Junk* was performed at the Lied Center on the University of Kansas campus by the Seem-To-Be Players of Lawrence, Kansas, on March 1, 1998, under the direction of Roger Bedard, with the following cast and artistic team:

THE CAST:

HARVEY SCHEETZ . . . . . Ric Averill  
TURK . . . . . Erin Kessler  
MICHAEL . . . . . Mat Hostetler  
DWINK . . . . . Matt Chapman  
STEFANIE . . . . . Lynette Valencia  
MR. CURTIS . . . . . Dr. Don Schawang  
TURK'S MOTHER . . . Jennifer Glenn (role not present in  
published script)

THE ARTISTIC AND PRODUCTION COMPANY:

Director . . . . . Roger Bedard  
Set and Light Design . . . . . Mark Reaney  
Costume Design . . . . . Jennifer Glenn  
Sound Design . . . . . Ric Averill  
Set Construction . . . . . Jim Peterson  
Stage Manager . . . . . Jason Ware  
Assistant Stage Manager . . . . . Mike Sentfen  
Artistic Director . . . . . Ric Averill  
Managing Director . . . . . Shane Scheel  
Development Director . . . . . Nancy Longhurst  
Education Director . . . . . Jennifer Glenn  
Booking Manager . . . . . David Thiel  
Administrative Assistant . . . . . Erin Kessler

The playwright also wishes to give credit to the following Seem-To-Be Players who toured with the production at various times: Sara Nutt, Chris Waugh and Chris Johnson.

Special thanks to Max Bush who led an early development workshop of the script prior to the Bonderman. Special thanks also to the Off the Deep End Flea Market, the Cosmic Connections Museum, Harvey's doctor: Doc Pickert, his sons Aaron and Eric, and Fay Grimes, Turk's mother.

# RELIABLE JUNK

A Play in One Act  
For 3m., 2w., 1 either gender

## CHARACTERS

HARVEY SCHEETZ . . . an inventor, cosmic cowboy and  
ghosthunter

MICHAEL AHRENS . . a precocious, intelligent but rather  
inflexible 13-year-old

DARRYL “DWINK” MCKINNEY . . his nerdy best friend,  
also 13

STEFANIE LESSENDEN . . . . 12 years old, a year ahead  
of her class, friend of Dwink and Michael’s

MR. (or MRS.) GARY (or GWENDOLYN) CURTIS . . . .  
a science teacher, mid-30s,

tough and enthusiastic  
“TURK” . . an 8-year-old cancer patient, friend of Harvey’s

NOTE: See end of play for expanded character descriptions.



SETTING - Three different locations:\*

1. Cosmic Connections Museum, housed in the flea market, UC.
2. Science Lab, at school, consists of two lab stations with high stools and sinks, beakers, etc., and a desk for Mr. Curtis, DR.
3. Pool of Light, center, representing “Science Fair Awards Assembly” for final scene.

\*In the original production design, the museum was onstage the entire time and for the school scenes a large chalkboard was flown (or rolled) in to cover the majority of the museum. Desks and chairs were rolled onstage by the actors. The final scene remained in a pool of light.

## **FULL CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS**

### **HARVEY SCHEETZ:**

Harvey runs the Cosmic Connections Museum at the “Off the Deep End” Flea Market, which is adjacent to “Reliable Junk,” the town’s biggest junkyard. Harvey is a simple, straightforward man who takes pleasure in inventing things—such as a transmitter chair which sends messages deep into space; a helmet which turns the wearer into a human lightbulb; a ghost-hunting glove that allows one to make contact with the other world; and last, but not least, a machine which will enable his friend Turk to fly. All of the inventions are made out of the odds and ends which he picks up on daily scavenges through the constantly changing inventory of “Reliable Junk.”

Though Harvey is a basically happy person, he suffers from occasional bouts of depression. The creations he makes are his way of staving off the scary clouds that sometimes threaten to overwhelm him. Most of the time he appears “normal” though one doesn’t have to spend much time in his company to realize that he is just a bit mad. His mission in life is to entertain young people with his inventions and to generate a certain amount of attention himself.

### **MICHAEL AHRENS:**

Michael is an extremely bright student. His brain sometimes gets in the way of his social abilities and he is unable to fully enjoy life. He is practical rather than imaginative. He is very dedicated and ambitious and seeks to “save the world” through science. From birth he has been a very con-

trolled child, but this is self-imposed rather than coming from without. Michael lives with his mom and his grandparents. His grandfather has recently been diagnosed with cancer. Michael's life is suddenly out of his control.

Michael has many small inventions he's made himself to help out in his daily life. When he finds out his grandfather has cancer, his attention diverts to trying to save him. Michael is a winner.

DARRYL "DWINK" MCKINNEY:

Michael's best friend, "Dwink" looks up to his "smarter" peer and wants to be like him. Dwink is a computer jock. His high-achieving parents are divorced. He lives with his college professor mom but he has an X Boy in both places.

Dwink is gangly, still growing, and very sensitive to how others perceive him. He has glasses but doesn't like to wear them. He compensates for a cowlick by greasing down the back of his reddish hair.

STEFANIE LESSENDEN:

Stefanie is a reasonably nice person caught in the throes of adolescence. Success in school is very important to her. She dreams of being a medical doctor or psychiatrist, like her parents. She has everything going for her but doesn't know it yet. She constantly counsels her friends with advice that reflects her own and her parents' world views. She likes science and she likes life.

GARY CURTIS:

Mr. Curtis grew up with Mr. Wizard and likes to think of himself as an innovative teacher. He is genuinely concerned with the welfare of his students and tries to encourage creative thinking along with analytical thinking. [Though it is preferable to play this character as a man, it is possible to use a woman in this role whose name is Mrs. Curtis and pronouns where necessary.]

“TURK”:

Turk is the nickname of Cecilia, an eight-year-old cancer patient. She is very fragile. She was given only six weeks to live nearly a year before the play begins. Harvey’s doctor brought Turk to visit the museum and she took a special liking to Harvey and his inventions. Harvey asked Turk what she would like him to build, and she drew a crayon picture of the flying machine he is working on throughout the play.

# RELIABLE JUNK

## SCENE ONE — Harvey's Museum: One Tuesday.

*(Lights come up dimly on a strange room which stretches from UC to DL. The room is “wall-papered” with colorful computer chips. Every inch of space in the room is jammed with contraptions which, though each contains oddly familiar parts, are impossible to identify in their present configuration, as to either form or function. Overhead is a maze of red, blue and white connecting rods and black, orange, green and gray wires. Far upstage is a huge metal chair. The arms of the chair are equipped with buttons and dials. Over the chair is a rounded bowl, upside down, rather like a futuristic hair-dryer. Loose wires and connections dangle like spaghetti. DL is a strange contraption consisting of a trash can and a steering wheel connected with wires. There is a humming sound, like an idling machine. Suddenly a door opens and a sharp crack of light illuminates the silhouette of a middle-aged, compact, balding man. HARVEY SCHEETZ enters, wearing a lab coat. He is the builder and curator of the Cosmic Connections Museum. He turns on a light and the museum is illuminated. He walks to the chair and sits, reaches up and pulls a lever. A machine sound creaks as a crayon-col-*

*ored picture moves toward him along a wire. He pushes the lever again and the picture stops. He presses another button and an old reel-to-reel tape recorder begins to run, illuminated by a spotlight upon which is mounted a revolving set of gels, changing the color of the tape recorder as it spins. He removes the picture from the “clothesline” contraption and looks closely at it, leans over and picks up an antique microphone and speaks into it.)*

HARVEY. Harvey’s log. Tuesday, November 16th. Progress report on Turk’s Machine. *(As he talks, he stands and walks to the trash can and examines it, pulling open the hatch.)* Phase seven: Capsule hatch perforation complete. Phase eight: send out press releases on new invention—television coverage expected. Phase nine: acquire more parts on Wednesday. Project acquisition list includes radar, radio, auto-releasing restraints, gyroscopes, and high-power beam headlights. Completion timetable depends on available materials at Flea Market, Yesterday’s and Junkyard. Visit by project designer expected on Wednesday. Over. *(He walks back to chair, turns off tape recorder and sets microphone down. He walks to junk pile and sorts through it looking for more parts. Lights fade. End of scene.)*

## **SCENE TWO — Science Club: The Next Day.**

*(A bell rings. Lights come up on an after-school honors science club located in a classroom DR. The room is equipped with tall stools at lab desks. The front of the*

*room is decorated with an anatomy chart, a periodic table of the elements and a poster depicting the scientific method. There is a sudden rush of activity as “DWINK” MCKINNEY enters the room, thinking he is late.)*

DWINK. Mr. Curtis, I’m sorry I’m late but I had to run laps ’cause—

*(Looks around notices that he’s alone, visibly relaxes. He takes a seat, then reaches up to his head and tries to brush his hair down. There is a stubborn tuft of his bright red hair that sticks way up. He rubs and rubs and then licks his hand and tries to smooth it back. He walks to a reflective window, looks and realizes he still doesn’t have hair right, scrambles around in the drawer and finds something unidentifiable in a small square bottle. He pulls a dropper out and drops it onto table, gingerly touches it and then smells it. It seems safe, so he shrugs, drops some more on his hand and greases his hair. It almost stays down. STEFANIE LESSENDEN enters. She is eager and bright, a year ahead of her class. DWINK straightens up and smiles.)*

DWINK. Stef, you’re late.

STEFANIE. Late for what, Dwink? Nobody’s here.

DWINK. Nice, nice, real nice.

STEFANIE. What’d you do to your hair?

DWINK. Nothing.

*(MICHAEL enters holding a newspaper. He is good-looking and nicely dressed, almost preppy with but-*

*ton-down collar and loafers. He tucks his shirt and fluffs his wet hair.)*

DWINK. Hey, Mikey, what'd you do to your hair?

MICHAEL. Just got out of the shower. I had to do extra laps in gym.

DWINK. Busted! What happened?

MICHAEL. Coach Beeson figured out our digital lap-counter, Dwink. Didn't believe me when I showed him I'd run four laps.

STEFANIE. Why not?

MICHAEL. He watched me run. He counted. To three. Amazing.

DWINK. There goes your athletic scholarship, science boy.

STEFANIE. You guys spend more time trying to get out of things than it would take to just do what's expected.

DWINK. Are you my mother? You *are* my mother.

STEFANIE. Biological impossibility, Dwink. You're an evolutionary throwback.

DWINK (*acts goofy*). The missing link.

STEFANIE (*to DWINK*). Stop! (*Picking up on an earlier conversation.*) Any news, Michael?

MICHAEL. No. (*He shakes his head, then flips out newspaper he has had under his arm.*) Did either of you go to the high school football game Friday?

STEFANIE. No, Mom wouldn't let me.

DWINK. I had a date. (*They look at him.*) OK, I had to babysit my little brother.

STEFANIE (*to MICHAEL*). Why?

MICHAEL. I just wish I had. (*Shows them paper.*) Look at this. "Local Hero becomes Human Flashbulb."



DWINK. Let me see. (*He grabs the paper from MICHAEL.*) Weird. 4,000 volts of electricity, 30 flash-bulbs...

STEFANIE. He must be crazy.

MICHAEL. We ought to check him out. Write him up, take his picture.

DWINK. Yeah.

STEFANIE. Seems pretty strange. Where's Mr. Curtis?

DWINK. We ought to have treats. That'd be more motivation to stay after school.

STEFANIE. He doesn't have any rules about food. Bring your own.

*(MR. CURTIS enters. He is an attractive and energetic teacher in his mid-30s. MR. CURTIS sets down his books and a note he was holding in one hand.)*

STEFANIE. Hi, Mr. C.

MR. CURTIS. Sorry I'm late. Had to make excuses to get out of curriculum committee meeting. (*Looks at DWINK's hair and then picks up bottle and dropper.*) Dwink, you didn't pour sulfuric acid on your hair, did you?

DWINK (*looks down, shocked, then back up*). It isn't sulfuric—is it? Is it? (*Grabs a lab towel and rubs his head.*)

MICHAEL. It's silicone, Dwink, to grease the test tubes?

DWINK. Silicone? You mean, like... (*Proudly.*) ...my hair's got implants?

STEFANIE (*groans*). Please, what are we doing in science club today, Mr. C?

MR. CURTIS. I just got the District Science Fair entry forms. I thought we'd talk projects and fill these out.

MICHAEL. Were you at the high school game Friday, Mr. C?

MR. CURTIS. No, why?

MICHAEL. You gotta see this...

MR. CURTIS (*takes the paper from MICHAEL and looks at the front page*). Harvey Scheetz, again. Were you there, Michael?

MICHAEL. Naw, I had kind of a crazy weekend.

MR. CURTIS. What's up?

MICHAEL. Nothing. (*STEFANIE shoots a glance to MICHAEL. MR. CURTIS notices.*) Do we have to do a project?

MR. CURTIS. Not if you did one last year, Michael.

DWINK. Only seventh-graders, right, Stefanie?

STEFANIE (*defensive*). I'm in eighth.

DWINK. Still have to do a project.

MR. CURTIS. Yes, Dwink, Stefanie has to do a project, like all seventh-graders, but she'll enter in the eighth-grade division. With you two, it's by choice and no credit. Still, you might think about it, Michael. That's what we're going to be working on in science club every Wednesday for a while.

MICHAEL. Sure, maybe I'll come up with something.

DWINK. Fart powder. You could analyze the ingredients in fart powder.

MR. CURTIS. Dwink, be appropriate, please. All right, every project has to illustrate the scientific method.

DWINK. Right. Pink Iguanas Hopping Everywhere Doing Cartwheels.

MR. CURTIS. Excuse me, Dwink?

DWINK. Remember, how we memorized it? Pink—P—problem. Iguana—I, uh, uh...

STEFANIE. Information, hypothesis, experimentation, data and...

DWINK (*interrupting her*). Cartwheel.

STEFANIE. Conclusion? You could just memorize it.

DWINK. I prefer pneumonia devices.

STEFANIE. Mnemonic, Dwink. Whatever.

MR. CURTIS. Enough, you two. All experiments must begin with a problem— (*He walks toward the chalkboard, then remembers the note on the desk and stops, turns to MICHAEL.*) Oh, shoot, Michael, before I forget... (*Hands note to MICHAEL. DWINK tries to read over his shoulder, pretends to read.*)

DWINK. It says, “Meet me after school in the cemetery, Mikey. Love, Stefanie.”

(*MICHAEL looks at the note and scowls.*)

STEFANIE. You’re hyperactive, Dwink. Did anyone ever tell you that? Hyper-hyperactive and you ought to be on medication.

(*DWINK makes a face. There is silence. They all notice at once that MICHAEL has become very quiet.*)

MR. CURTIS. Michael, is something wrong?

MICHAEL. I have to go to my aunt’s house after school.

DWINK. So, what’s wrong with your aunt’s house? She’s got a trampoline.

MICHAEL. Yeah, it’s OK. It just means... (*Thinks of an excuse.*) ...means I can’t do anything in the lab at home.

I really don't know if I'll have time to do a project, Mr. C.

MR. CURTIS (*looks at him, very curious*). It's OK, Michael, really. You don't get a grade for science club and we're just glad to have you here.

STEFANIE. Really, Michael. (*Then quietly to him.*) Is it about...? (*MICHAEL looks at her, hushing her, and she gets quiet.*)

MR. CURTIS. OK. So let's apply the Pink Iguanas to your science fair projects. Who's cooked up an idea?

(*MICHAEL gets up and walks over to bookshelves, begins thumbing through catalogs.*)

DWINK. I know what I'm going to do, Mr. Curtis. I'm going to make a simulated elevator, right? Because, here's the hypothesis: if the cable snaps when you're in an elevator and it goes crashing to the ground, everybody says that if you jump up in the air at the last minute, you won't get crushed.

STEFANIE. I am so sure.

DWINK. If I can prove it, hundreds will be saved from a horrible death.

STEFANIE. That is so dumb.

DWINK. Shut up.

MR. CURTIS. Dwink!

DWINK. So I'm going to fix up a simulated elevator and then use an egg for the person and a spring.

MR. CURTIS. Sounds fascinating and quite imaginative. Stefanie? Any ideas?

STEFANIE. My mom and I went to Colorado and New Mexico last summer and there was this place, Mesa

Verde, where this tribe, the Anasazi, lived for years and then they just...disappeared.

DWINK. Oooooooo.

STEFANIE. So I want to explore the culture, the climate, lifestyle and come up with a theory as to why they left.

DWINK. Probably knew you were coming, brain-child.

STEFANIE. Doofus!

DWINK. Weeny!

STEFANIE. Wimp. (*STEFANIE thwaps him.*)

DWINK. Girly girl.

STEFANIE. Boyly boy! (*Slaps him twice.*)

MR. CURTIS. Stefanie, do *not* touch Dwink again!

DWINK. Yeah, I might get the wrong idea.

STEFANIE. Make him shut up then!

MR. CURTIS. And don't say shut up.

STEFANIE. Be quiet, Dwink.

MR. CURTIS. Dwink, do *not* irritate Stefanie again.

STEFANIE. Too late. (*MR. CURTIS shoots her a look. She gets quiet.*)

MICHAEL. They don't have it anywhere.

MR. CURTIS. What, Michael?

MICHAEL. Radium. They don't have it in these catalogs.

MR. CURTIS. Radium?

MICHAEL. Yeah, I have an idea. I was thinking about cell research. Can you get radium and laboratory mice for me?

MR. CURTIS. Radium and mice?

DWINK. Microwave Mickey Mouse!

STEFANIE. Shut—be quiet, Dwink. (*She starts to hit him, but remembers the warning, holds back.*)

MR. CURTIS. Where is this taking us?

MICHAEL. Radiation therapy. Why do some people get sicker? I was thinking about safety of doses or—

MR. CURTIS. Michael, we can't do experiments with radiation, you know that. There are health hazards, issues of containment. We don't have the equipment—

MICHAEL. I thought this was a club for advanced science students.

MR. CURTIS. It is, but... Radiation is tricky and... Where is this coming from?

MICHAEL. ...I'll think of something. Maybe I should go to the library...or maybe just go to my aunt's.

DWINK. You want me to go with you? I got money for burgers.

MICHAEL. Nah, that's all right. It's out of your way, Dwink. Thanks, anyway. *(He gets up and walks out. DWINK looks after him.)*

DWINK. It's not out of my way. It'll keep me from getting home in time for my chores. Wait up! *(He pursues MICHAEL and teasingly grabs his books from behind, pulling them out of MICHAEL's hands. MICHAEL spins on him and snaps.)*

MICHAEL. No, Dwink. I don't want any company. OK? *(He picks up his books.)* Just leave me alone. *(He stands up, pivots on his foot and exits.)*

DWINK. OK. Don't have to tell me twice. Stef, you want a burger?

STEFANIE. No thanks, Dwink.

DWINK. You do want a burger.

STEFANIE. No, Dwink.

DWINK. But you want me to walk you home?

STEFANIE. Not today. OK?