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Terminus

By

GABRIEL JASON DEAN

Original music by

PAUL BRILL

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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Music by PAUL BRILL

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(TERMINUS)

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“Original music by Paul Brill.”

“World premiere of *Terminus* produced by
The VORTEX in Austin, Texas.”

“*Terminus* was developed at PlayPenn in Philadelphia,
Paul Meshejian, Artistic Director.”

Terminus was developed at Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Black Swan Lab in Ashland, Ore., in 2012; at PlayPenn in Philadelphia in 2013; and as part of the Ruth Easton New Play Series at the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis in 2014. The play received its world premiere on Jan. 15, 2016, at The VORTEX in Austin, Texas, under the direction of Rudy Ramirez. It ran until Feb. 6, 2016.

CAST:

ELLERJennifer Underwood
JAYBO Jacques Colimon
FINCH..... Hayley Armstrong
BONESSamuel Grimes
ANNIE Cara Canary
JIM Errich Petersen
LEAFY Jennifer Coy Jennings
BLONDIEMatrex Kilgore

PRODUCTION TEAM:

Producing Artistic Director Bonnie Cullum
Director Rudy Ramirez
Scenic Design..... Ann Marie Gordon
Lighting Design Patrick Anthony
Props DesignHelen Parish
Sound DesignDavid DeMaris
Assistant Director/Dramaturg Gabrielle Randle
Stage Manager Tamara L. Farley

Terminus debuted in New York City on Feb. 20, 2018, as part of Next Door at New York Theatre Workshop, produced by Monk Parrots, under the direction of Lucie Tiberghien.

CAST

ELLER Deirdre O’Connell
JAYBO Reynaldo Piniella
FINCH..... Vanessa Butler
BONES Mat Hostetler
ANNIE Clementine Belber
JIM Luke Leonard
LEAFY Jessie Dean
THAT MAN Shaun Patrick Tubbs

PRODUCTION TEAM

Artistic Directors..... Jessie Dean, Luke Leonard
Director Lucie Tiberghien
Original Music Paul Brill
Scenic Design..... D’Vaughn Agu
Lighting Design S. “Stoli” Stolnack
Sound Design Megan Culley
Dramaturg Gabrielle Randle
Fight Director..... Dave Anzuelo
Dialect Coach..... Jessie Dean
Production Manager/Technical Director..... Garth Belcon
Stage Manager Madison Lane
Asst. Stage Manager Deidre Works

FOREWORD

“Damn. I’m an old woman. How did I do that?”

This is where we meet Eller Freeman, disoriented in front of a mirror talking to herself. She is a woman who doesn’t quite know who she is, or how she arrived at the self that she has become. If as her mother, Leafy, says, “Young women are like cotton ... a thing to be made,” then the old woman Eller sees reflected in the mirror is a thing to be unmade. She is unraveling mentally, no longer able to remember what she was supposed to remember or what she was supposed to forget. As Eller navigates the frayed edges of the life she has made for herself, she encounters a pattern of lies, half truths, precious falsehoods and nostalgias—the sturdy threads woven into a life of someone who figured out how to survive. This is a story about what happens when we are reminded of what we are made of, this is a story of how a woman was made.

Unmistakably, *Terminus* is Gabriel Jason Dean’s story. This is a semi-autobiographical exploration of one man’s particular family’s past. However, in his dogged dedication to telling this story truthfully it is possible to see where I (and where you) might find our own stories reflected back to us. In many ways, to encounter Eller is to suddenly find ourselves face to face with a parent or grandparent we might rather dismiss summarily. She is a figure that at best evokes a deep ambivalence, a woman who is capable of completely selfless love and indescribable cruelty. She is an unbalanced person, a troublesome remnant of a past that we are often unwilling or unable to recognize. Eller is where we come from and who we hope we’ve left behind. Like Jacob wrestling with angels, Gabriel is reckoning with his past—and our past—in the work.

In *Terminus*, the past is inescapable, it sings in the walls and crawls out of the dirt. Through traces, lost to memory yet ever present, the past haunts generations of the Freeman family.

Though we begin the play with Eller, the story ends with Jaybo. Or more accurately the story becomes his to tell, his to own, and his to reckon with. We are left at the end of *Terminus* with big questions. What does Jaybo make of his life? Does he survive? Can he? If Jaybo can make it, then maybe, just maybe, we as a country might find a way through as well. *Terminus* paints a picture of the American South and the horrific quotidian realities of being poor and black, white or both in 20th-century Georgia. Blackness and whiteness intermingle, alternating between the co-constitutive realities of love and contempt, in a world where the only functional currencies are cotton, secrets and black bodies. *Terminus* is about how the materiality of racism can and must be reckoned with, not toward reconciliation or even forgiveness, but to better understand how violence takes control of our lives. Is it selfishness? Is it fear? Greed, pride? Or worst of all, is it because when others suffer, our suffering doesn't hurt so badly? And so we arrive at this place again, the beginning. We look in the mirror and there are more wrinkles than we remember, but we are ready to reckon with all the moments, people, and choices that made us and the ones that are our undoing.

—Gabrielle Randle
Dramaturg

This play is dedicated to my nameless kin.

Terminus

CHARACTERS

ELLER FREEMAN: 65, an elderly matriarch.

JAYBO FREEMAN: 17, Eller's multiracial grandson.

BONES BOYD / JIM: 30s-40s, Eller's son-in-law, Jaybo's father. / 30s, Eller's daddy.

ANNIE: young, Eller's baby sister.

FINCH / VOICE OF PINOT: 19, A gutter punk / Eller's multiracial daughter.

LEAFY: 20s, Eller's mama.

THAT MAN / HENRY: 20s, a woodcutter / Eller's husband.

SETTING

The dilapidated Freeman house very near the train tracks in Attapulcus, Georgia. The year is 1994.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The set should be an expression of the world as seen through Eller's eyes and therefore not literal. Though action takes place inside and outside of Eller's house, one singular space minimally furnished with a table and two chairs can serve as both interior and exterior.

The occasional quick costume change for actors who double adds to the surprise and confusion for Eller, so do your best to achieve them.

The music in the play can be done without piano, but casting an actor in the role of Leafy who can play the basic piano score is preferred. In fact, it's best if the whole cast can carry a tune. Sheet music can be found in the back of the book.

PUNCTUATION GUIDE

- / indicates interruption
- < > indicates a beat
- ... indicates stammer or trailing off of thought
- in the middle of a line, indicates a shift in thought
- at the end of a line, indicates that the next line should flow without pause
- (Silence.) an opportunity for the unspoken

Terminus

ONE

(Dusk, the liminal when night and day exist all at once, borderland of end. If we were being true true, then here's the picture: the Freeman house sits in a ravine, just a stone's throw away from an active railroad track. The place is a dilapidated, clapboard-covered, shotgun shack with a front porch held up by cinder blocks and a screen door that sounds like a punishment every time it shuts. But, as we'll get to, true true is tricky to determine when thinking in the color of memory. Our main lady, ELLER FREEMAN, is desperately trying to pull open the front door but can't because it's nailed shut from the outside. Breathless, she wanders to the table, recovers and falls into the spell of her breath.)

ELLER. <> I wish ... I wish ... I wish ...

(A train in the distance.)

ELLER *(cont'd)*. I could borrow some train tracks. Maybe them tracks would take me home. Home gets away from you when you ain't looking.

(ELLER paces, her attention caught by a mirror on a wall. Underneath the mirror, in big block letters, is written ...)

ELLER *(cont'd)*. "Eller Freeman. You. Alive and kickin'."
<> Damn. I'm an old woman. How *did* I do that? *(Talking to the nice lady in the mirror.)* There was a time when I

had my time. *(Singing.) Meet me in the water, meet me in the ... if I, if I, if I ... I am if. < > I've got this list on my arm, see? (Reading her hospital bracelet.)* "Name: Eller Freeman. Sex: Female." Yes that's right. "Birth: August 24, 1929. Meds: Twice daily with food. Diabetic." These are the things they know about me. But people aren't the things you know. People are the things you don't know.

(She touches her face in the mirror.)

ELLER *(cont'd)*. You got a pretty face, sweet lady. You look like my mama.

(LEAFY, ELLER's mama, appears through a wall, humming the melody of our haunting lullaby, "Terminus." No text should be sung here. See back of book for music.)

ELLER *(cont'd)*. You hear that? I swear I know that song ...

(JIM, ELLER's daddy, unfolds himself from the floorboards and hums along with LEAFY.)

ELLER *(cont'd)*. Oh, I declare now! Like to scared me to death! This old house is gonna fall down it's so heavy with haunts.

(The train becomes a baby crying, echoing in the distance.)

ELLER *(cont'd)*. There's another one. Somebody ought to feed that poor thing! Shut it up. Preacherman Bishop used to say when you die, your soul stays in the grave till that trumpet sounds. And on that day, all souls washed in the blood of Jesus will rise up victorious.

(THAT MAN emerges, humming the harmony.)

ELLER (*cont'd*). They Lord God! Why y'all gotta be so damned sneaky? (*Harried.*) Annie! Annie! Where'd you go? When that trumpet sounds, pretty girl, me and you'll borrow some train tracks and ride into the morning together. Get away from these devils. Won't that be nice? It sure will, Eller Freeman female August 24 1929 twice a day diabetic.

(The chorus of HAUNTS crescendos like an oncoming train. The lights flicker, the ground shakes until the fridge opens, revealing a little girl, ANNIE. All is quiet.)

ELLER (*cont'd*). There you are.

ANNIE. Here I am.

ELLER. My North Star.

(ANNIE hums the song.)

ELLER (*cont'd*). What is that song?

ANNIE. We'll figure it out. Let's take a walk to the clearing, sis.

ELLER. I'm too tired. I wanna sleep.

ANNIE. I don't need to sleep.

ELLER. Well, I do.

(ELLER takes ANNIE's hand and leads her to a door with "J's Room" painted on it.)

ELLER (*cont'd*). What's that "J" stand for?

ANNIE. Jesus, I reckon. This must be the Jesus door.

ELLER. Well, let's go in there then.

(ELLER and ANNIE go inside the Jesus door and close it behind them. The HAUNTS steal themselves to unseeable)

places. Lights shift as FINCH skulks in, dragging a water hose. She takes off her top and quickly bathes with the hose. JAYBO FREEMAN, carrying a bag of burgers and toking the last bit of a roach, approaches. He's wearing his Golden Corral cook's uniform. He notices FINCH, but she doesn't notice him. JAYBO gazes at her. FINCH enjoys the chill of the water and the oncoming night. He takes a drag—a little too much, coughs loudly.)

FINCH. Shit!

(She's off. He tosses the joint.)

JAYBO. Wait ... Uh ... Hold on a minute.

FINCH. You already got an eyeful—

JAYBO. No, um. I wasn't looking.

FINCH. You weren't? Why not?

JAYBO. Because I, I ... I'm a gentleman.

FINCH. Yeah. OK.

JAYBO. Here. A little something for your journey.

(JAYBO offers her a burger from the bag.)

FINCH. Is it meat?

JAYBO. It's a hamburger. So yeah. Made it myself.

FINCH. No thanks.

JAYBO. What's wrong with a hamburger?

FINCH. It's meat.

JAYBO. You don't eat meat?

FINCH. Try not to.

JAYBO. Ain't that hard?

FINCH. Sometimes. Sometimes not. < > This is a sometimes not kinda time.

(FINCH puts on her shirt. JAYBO pretends to look away.)

JAYBO. Um, where you going? I mean ... like, we get a lot of hoppers here. So ... where are you going-going? Like, for good.

FINCH. I don't go nowhere for *good*.

JAYBO. Oh.

FINCH. Atlanta's the next stop though.

JAYBO. What's in Atlanta?

FINCH. What's not in Atlanta, graham cracker?

JAYBO. What's that supposed—

FINCH. And I'm not a *hopper*.

JAYBO. / Oh.

FINCH. Hobo. Not hopper.

JAYBO. People still use that word?

FINCH. You ask every naked girl you meet this many questions?

JAYBO. Guess I don't meet many naked girls.

FINCH. Too bad, graham cracker.

JAYBO. There you go with that again.

FINCH. It's cause you're mixed. The color of your skin. / Graham cracker.

JAYBO. Yeah. Right. I get it.

FINCH. Anyway.

(She's off again.)

JAYBO. Wait. What's your name?

FINCH. Does it matter?

JAYBO. Yeah it matters. I mean ... ain't many people like you around here.

FINCH. What, you never met no hobo before?

JAYBO. Not one that looked like you.

FINCH. Now you have.

JAYBO. What's your name?

FINCH. < > Finch.

JAYBO. Finch what?

FINCH. Finch ... J. Finch.

JAYBO. What's the "J" stand for?

FINCH. Just.

(FINCH is gone.)

JAYBO. Oh. Riiiiight. Just Finch. Clever.

(As JAYBO goes toward the house, ELLER storms out of the Jesus door.)

ELLER. Jesus, I said hush! I ain't talking to you no more! You ought not talk that way to a lady! You just stay in this room till you can behave yourself, mister!

JAYBO *(announcing)*. Nanny! I'm home!

(JAYBO uses a hammer to pry a few nails out of the front door. ELLER hides under the dining table.)

ELLER *(whispering)*. Shh! Be quiet. I don't want him to find me.

JAYBO. Who?

ELLER. The Lord God. Jesus himself.

JAYBO. OK, that's a new one. Come on out from there now.

(As JAYBO helps ELLER out of hiding and gets her settled in a chair; ELLER yaps nonstop.)

ELLER. Jesus is in that room because you know why? I was praying for him to come and take me home. And Jesus came right through the window and what did I do? *(Animated.)* I just reached up there and slapped him right across the jaws. *(Laughs.)* Just slapped Jesus blind. And he said, "Well, what'd you do that for?" And I said, "I don't know." And he just slapped me right back. Slapped me so hard, it like to killed me. Sure enough. And then he said something. Words ... fire and such. Ah, damn! I forget. < > Me and Annie was watching that stupid Pat Robertson ... I don't know why she likes him so much—

JAYBO. You still seeing Annie?

ELLER. As clear as white lightning.

JAYBO. We shoulda told the doctor about your hallucinations.

ELLER. Hallucinations? I see what I see, young man. Besides, you doctors ain't gonna do a damned thing, 'cept keep me spending money. < > After he slapped me, Jesus touched my face and told me my skin was like time. Then he said some other things which I won't repeat. He sure is good-looking.

JAYBO. You comfortable?

ELLER. Sure, honey, sure. You're a good doctor. My name's Rosella. But you can call me Eller.

JAYBO. Nanny. It's me. Jaybo?

ELLER. Where'd you get a name like that?

JAYBO. You give it to me.

ELLER. *I did?*

JAYBO. Yes. I live here with you.

ELLER. You?

JAYBO. That's right.

ELLER. But you're a—

JAYBO. A little different than you? I know. Listen ...

(JAYBO takes ELLER's hands.)

ELLER. You got warm—

JAYBO. Warm hands? Right. Just like you. “Warm hands mean a warm heart.” That's what you always say. Over here. Look.

(JAYBO takes ELLER to a wall of photographs. All of the photos are labeled underneath in big letters painted directly on the wall. She pauses at a photo of a handsome black man. He wears an American military uniform from the Korean War. Under this photo, the following is written ...)

ELLER. “Henry Freeman, Husband, R.I.P.” Is that you?

JAYBO. Does it look like me?

ELLER. A little bit, yeah.

JAYBO. That's grandpa. Your *husband*. And this one?

(Under the photo of a brown-skinned teenage girl, the following is written ...)

ELLER. “Pinot Freeman, Daughter, R.I.P.”

JAYBO. My mama, your daughter.

(ELLER goes to a painting of Jesus.)

ELLER. “Jesus, Lord and Savior, R.I.P.” I know him.

JAYBO. What about this one?

(Under another photo, the following is written ...)

ELLER. “Jaybo Freeman, grandson, alive and kicking.”

JAYBO. That’s me. See?

ELLER. Don’t look like you.

JAYBO. Yeah, well, we need a more recent photo.

(ELLER examines another photo.)

ELLER. “Bones Boyd, S.O.B.”

JAYBO. That’s nobody worth remembering.

ELLER. Oh ... wait, now ... I know him ... where’d you say Pinot was?

JAYBO. Nanny, she—

ELLER. Where is that little hussy? I need to tell her a thing or two.

JAYBO. Nanny, Mama ... Pinot ... is dead. See up there? R.I.P?

ELLER. < > Who’d you say you were?

JAYBO. Jaybo. Your *grandson*. Alive and kicking. *(Takes a burger from the bag.)* If I weren’t your grandson, I wouldn’t know exactly how you like your hamburgers. A little pink, extra pickles, extra mayo, no mustard, shredded lettuce, a few red onions, *not white*, and only one tomato.

(ELLER takes a bite of the burger.)

ELLER. < > Jaybo?

JAYBO. Burgers bring you back every time.

ELLER. Did I go somewhere?

JAYBO. I hope not. Nailed you in tight this morning.

ELLER. What the hell d’you do that for?

JAYBO. We can't have no more strangers picking you up on the side of the road.

ELLER. What now?

JAYBO. Next time you see Jesus, before you slap him, tell him thanks for sending that Etheridge woman. She was kind enough to take you to the hospital when she found you.

ELLER. I don't ... I can't ... you see, I just—I went walking, thinking, this is what I'm supposed to do.

JAYBO. I / know—

ELLER. Just keep walking and you'll get there. That's what Annie said.

JAYBO. Annie told you that?

ELLER. Yeah ... she said ... get to the clearing and ... get to the clearing and you'll find home.

JAYBO. You are home now.

ELLER. I need to find home, son. You understand me? Forever home. I need to find forever.

JAYBO. Nanny, now ... don't go getting morbid on me again. I don't want you saying stuff like that, OK? It bothers me.

ELLER. < > I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I didn't know. I just ... I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know—

JAYBO. It's all right. Don't get all worked up. We'll figure it out.

ELLER. When?

JAYBO. Soon.

ELLER. The world begun and ended in the middle of the word "soon."

JAYBO. Well, for now ... let's eat.

ELLER. Don't think I'm hungry.

JAYBO. I brought you a cherry coke.

ELLER. OK.

JAYBO. Knew that'd convince you.

(ANNIE comes out of the fridge, hums the tune, motions for ELLER to follow her.)

ELLER. Let's eat outside. Food tastes better out of doors.

JAYBO. Sun's down. You'll be cold.

ELLER. You locked me in here all day. *(Follows ANNIE to the front door.)* Take me out of doors. I want to see the moon. And he wants to see me.

JAYBO. If you're going out, I'm gonna get you a sweater.

(JAYBO goes toward the Jesus door.)

ELLER. No! No! Don't you go in that room!

JAYBO. It's my room. "J" is for Jaybo.

ELLER. "J" is for Jesus.

JAYBO. < > Whatever.

(ELLER grabs her burger and cherry coke and follows ANNIE outside. JAYBO goes to the open fridge.)

JAYBO. Gotta fix this fridge.

(JAYBO closes the fridge door and sneaks into the Jesus room.)