

Dash cLIMBS a R..O..P..E...

By James S tills

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

I love this play. To start with, there's the versatility of a play that can be performed with several actors or as a one-person show. But that's just an entrée into a world of possibilities in a coming of age play that takes place in the past and the present, adolescence and adulthood all at once. James Still's DASH CLIMBS A ROPE is introduced by Dash (named to be a runner but isn't one), in a first person monologue to the audience that gets us right into his voice and his head. Then other characters come forward giving their spin on the seminal event of the play, when Dash climbs up the rope in gym class, but doesn't climb down. These characters include gym teacher Mr. Smith and Fireman Joe (yes, a FIREMAN!). There's also John Ransom, everyone's junior high school crush and future Homecoming King. While most of the story is told in monologues through the fourth wall, there's a scene of dialogue that's as loaded as a first kiss. This play is such a good read it could easily be in the fiction category. I can't say enough about DASH CLIMBS A ROPE, so I won't. You'll just have to experience it yourself.

Here's Dash:

Wait, again, being completely honest --
when I say "crazy sex" I don't really know what I mean
because it's 1973 and I haven't had crazy sex.

Yet.

DASH (CONT'D)

Or any sex.

Yet.

I've just had dreams.

Five Stars

DASH CLIMBS A ROPE

by James Still

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note: the story can be told by one actor playing all the roles, or by multiple actors.

A KID who
claims to be
almost 13 years
old. (And also
simultaneously is
a grown-up) It's
the early 1970s
(And also right
now).

This kid talks to
us like someone
on the verge of
making a new
friend:

DASH

...let's start with my name.
It's Dash. Yeah, Dash. D-A-S-H. I think my dad
believed I would be a fast runner,
or he hoped I would. But I also think my mom named me
that way before I was born
because she hoped it wouldn't take very long to have me.
They both got it wrong. I'm not a fast runner. And my
mom set a record
for hours in labor at the hospital where I was born almost
13 years ago. So I never set any records for running the
100-yard dash,
but I did have a hand in setting that record
for the most hours it took for a mom to have her kid. And
that record still stands. I don't know if I just didn't want
to come out --
(spoiler alert: PUN INTENDED). I don't know if I didn't
want to come out,
or if I just really liked it where I was. It's a weird thing,
that idea that for 9 months we live inside of a mom

and get really cozy and comfy
and just really makes ourselves at home -- while on the
outside the mom is miserable, her body blowing up like
the tires on a semi-truck. Thinking about it now,
I guess it's a complicated relationship from the very
beginning.

And then you're born and you need a lot of attention and a
lot of sleep -- and basically you just drink milk and poop,
and drive your mom crazy. Your parents are sleep
deprived and you're -- I don't know -- love deprived? Is
that what a little baby wants? Love, more love, can't get
enough love? Or maybe he just wants to go back where
he came from

where it was kind of perfect.

Back to the womb. I didn't mean to get stuck on being a
baby. I don't even remember BEING a baby. What I
meant to get on about was not wanting to come out. I
don't know what year you're living in -- I can't really see
you because the lights up here are super bright, blinding --
but here where I am it's 1973. And it's the summer, it's
August. I'm 12 going on 13. I'm super horny all the time
but don't really have a name for that when I'm talking to
grownups, it's just this feeling that's really good and kinda
scary and makes me feel sorta naughty and scary and...

so I'm just going to get right to it and say it: I'm in gym
class, I'm in the 7th grade,
and it's the first time I ejaculated. There's this big rope that
hangs from the ceiling of the gymnasium
which all of us have to climb (or try to climb in the case of
some of the guys
who are either too out of shape or just not very
coordinated) -- I've always been on the smaller side, But
I'm not "skinny" -- I'm just -- "scrappy". Anyway I don't
have any trouble climbing that rope, I just shimmy my
way up and up and up. Not only do you have to climb
to the top, but you also have to slap the ceiling with your
hand,

(it doesn't count unless you slap the ceiling with your
hand) and then climb back down the rope. All the while
our teacher who is also our coach -- let's call him Mr. Smith
-- *"The names have been changed to protect the innocent"*

(I've always wanted to say even though no one in my story
is particularly innocent). So "Mr. Smith" is standing there

in his short-shorts
with a clipboard and a stop-watch and he's timing all of us
from the second he yells "GO!" to the second we get back
down to the floor. Holy shit.
I just realized that if you add an "O" to "GO" it becomes
"GOO" which is funny since I'm telling you about
The First Time I Ejaculated. Anyway.
"Mr. Smith" is timing us all with his stopwatch.
You're probably thinking I remember what my time was --
and I could make up something for the sake of the story
but I'm really trying not to make up stuff
and I honestly don't remember my time. What I DO
remember is Mr Smith's short-short-shorts and his muscular
hairy legs -- blonde hair that shimmered like an
inappropriate invitation. And now it's my turn to climb
the rope. Those hairy legs have me hypnotized
until I hear him yelling, "Dash! Dash! You're up!"
Reluctantly I come out of my dream where I was married
to Mr. Smith and we live together in a loft painted all-
white in New York and spend our summers together on
Martha's Vineyard.
With our dog. And a fast car. But now I'm back in the
gymnasium that smells like old socks and Mr. Smith yells
"GOO!" I mean "GO!" And I'm going up that rope so fast
that even a couple of the bullies in my class can't think of
anything to yell up at me. It's an incredible feeling: that
combination of adolescent sweat, Mr. Smith's blonde
hairy legs, my own obvious skill at climbing the rope --
and me just being 12 years old. Well I have an instant
boner and in seconds I ejaculate all over my gym shorts.
So then it's the smell of sweat and my cum and
whatever else drips from your body
after you've shot a load like that
in front of a bunch of other horny middle school boys --
the whole thing was head-spinning. I mean, OK, it was
embarrassing. But also kind of..
-- amazing? But here's where things get weird. Finally
living up to my name
-- Dash --
I get to the very top really fast, I slap that ceiling with my
hand, and I'm feeling like I'm the King of the World!
And I look down at everybody waiting and cheering
and I just really like where I am... kinda like before I was

born when I was hanging out inside my mom. I just like it -- I like being up here, I like how it feels, how things look from the ceiling of the gymnasium looking down at the world. I didn't plan this, I'm not trying to be an ass or anything -- but here I am -- Up here on the top of the world and I suddenly realize that I don't want to come down. I figure surely there've been others like me, others in my school, or even others in history -- guys who found themselves on the top of the world and knew this might be as good as it gets. That's part of it -- I'm 12 years old and I'm thinking: "What if this is the best moment of my life? What if I never do anything else as cool as this? What if this is as good as it gets?" And also, I mean, since I can't see you sitting out there and since I'm being crazy honest: I have cum all over my gym shorts and I have no clue how I'm going to hide that or explain it. As long as I stay up here on the top of the world, I'm untouchable. I've already had some crazy dreams about boys I liked and boys I liked that I didn't even know I liked. I have posters hanging in my room of football and basketball and baseball players, pop singers and tv stars, and even one of Jesus wearing bell-bottoms and a necklace of pukka shells -- it's around the time that "Jesus Christ Superstar" scandalized the Methodists when some of us kids in the youth choir wanted to sing some of those songs in church. Sorry, I'm getting off-track again... I was talking about some of the crazy dreams I've been having about boys. That's the thing about dreams -- anything goes, no one's there to change the channel or yell at you for saying something (or doing something) and so it just happens, you know, in your dreams? You just do what you really want to do. And what I REALLY want to do most of all is have crazy sex with John Ransom who is a year older than me and the star of everything. Wait, again, being completely honest -- when I say "crazy sex" I don't really know what I mean because it's 1973 and I haven't had crazy sex. Yet. Or any sex. Yet. I've just had dreams. And I don't know if ejaculating when you're climbing a rope in gym class counts as sex -- because, what would that mean? That I had sex with a rope? Maybe

THAT qualifies as "crazy sex" but I don't know. You hear people say stuff -- grownups, older kids even -- you hear them talk about sex and they make it seem so... like it's a - - sport, something you're supposed to "win". But we don't have "sex teams" that play each other, there are no "Super Bowls for Sex". At least I've never heard of any.

Though I will admit that sometimes when I watch football on TV I get that funny feeling inside and wonder what some of those guys look like without all those pads on.

DASH stops for a moment and clearly he's thinking about a football player without all those pads on...

DASH (CONT'D)

Sorry. I'm 12 years old. I'm easily distracted. But if sex turns out to be as good as it is in my dreams then it's a wonderful life. Then again, what if it isn't?

What if sex doesn't live up to how I imagine it? What if I have a better imagination than whoever invented sex in the first place? I don't want to think about that.

Think about something else, think about something else, think about something else.

OK. I'm thinking about something else and if I'm crazy honest then I admit that taking a shower with a bunch of other naked boys after gym class is hell and torture

and also the best part of the day. I mean, this is a real question: do you have any idea how many different body types there are? And how different guys look without any clothes? I'm super careful not to stare -- that wouldn't be cool -- but even if you're not looking you're still seeing because there are naked guys

EVERYWHERE YOU LOOK. I do this thing so that I'm not thinking about what I'm thinking about -- I think about

my dog running away Or my grandpa dying. But let's not deny that in the shower JJ Simpson has the biggest -- one.

My dog ran away, my dog ran away, my dog ran away --

I mean, JJ Simpson -- it's -- big. And he's not even hard.

My grandpa is dying, my grandpa is dying, my grandpa is dying -- It's just -- big. I'm not even sure what I'd do with it but every time I see it, I figure if I have the chance I'll know what to do. But what if I don't? How do you learn these things? Who's going to teach me? Will anyone ever want to kiss me?

(...)

There's something else I gotta throw into the mix, it's the backdrop, the context, you know? This is August, 1973.

School has just started

which is why all this happened in 7th grade gym class.

But also, the President resigned about a week ago.

President Richard Milhous Nixon. He just quit, he resigned, took off in a helicopter. There's been all this stuff going on about this thing called Watergate -- and my parents talk about it with a pained look on their faces like they're having bad gas.

My mom'll say: "Why'd he do it,

why'd he lie about doing it,

why'd he ask others to lie about doing it..." And my dad'll say: "I told you not to vote for him.

Anyone could tell he's not to be trusted." And then my mom'll yell something about like: "No politics at the dinner table!" And my dad would look at me and shrug. I think my parents are worried that the Watergate thing is setting a bad example for kids, that the President of the United States should be better than that. It's also around the same time at one of those dinners that I announce to my parents: "If the Viet Nam War keeps going and I get drafted when I'm 18 then I'm moving to Sweden." My dad nods like he understands; my mom bursts out crying and says something about how wrong it is that a kid has to even think about such things. After that my dad and I secretly meet in my treehouse and try to learn how to speak Swedish. We use a cassette tape he ordered in the mail but learning Swedish is impossible so my dad and I end up talking about other things. One time I almost tell him about a dream I had the night before -- a dream about

a boy -- but I stop myself. I'm too afraid to tell the truth.

I wish I really did know Swedish so that I could tell him about my dream in Swedish. Years from now -- I'm older than my dad was back when we'd hang out in my tree house -- years from now I wonder if things would have been different if I'd had the courage to tell him about that dream, about my feelings for boys.

(...)

So back in the gymnasium there are three things happening that are connected in some weird way that I'm still trying to figure out.

One: I climb the rope faster than anybody in my class but then I won't come down. Two: I'm definitely moving to Sweden when I turn 18. Even if I don't speak Swedish. And Three: President Richard Milhaus Nixon just resigned.

It's like I climbed to the top of the world and I could see Sweden in the distance -- while at almost the same moment the President had FALLEN from the top of the world. When you're on your way up, someone else is always on their way down.

(...)

I'm gonna stay up here for as long as I can so this is a good time for you meet John Ransom.

JOHN RANSOM
enters. He's a
year older than
DASH -- and
(one of) the
object(s) of
DASH's fantasies.

JOHN RANSOM

...yeah, I was there that day, in the gymnasium. They had combined 7th and 8th Grade gym class -- all the boys in one class. Some things to know about me before I tell you about that day in 1973. In a few years I'm going to be the star of the high school football team and I'll be Homecoming King. I also start on the varsity basketball team when I'm a freshman (which is almost unheard of and pisses off some of the seniors who then quit the team). And then I also set school records for running long distance. I was good at pretty much anything I did. And

all that time I'm dating lots of girls, no trouble in that department. But secretly I might of liked boys a little bit.

No I guess I KNEW I liked boys. I also knew that boys who were like me couldn't like boys. So it was my secret.

And I didn't really know about Dash -- that he had the same secret. I mean, thinking about it now, I probably should have known, but I just didn't think about it then. I couldn't risk it. When I graduate from high school I know I will have to move as far away as possible if I'm ever going to be myself -- so I end up going to college in California and after college I can't wait to move to San Francisco. That was 1981. Some timing, huh? Some of you probably know where this story is going. In San Francisco I'm finally able to be myself, to be out -- and then everybody starts dying. Everybody. Everybody you ever loved.

Everybody you ever loved. Everybody just

died. I died too. AIDS -- or "The Gay Cancer" which is what they call it in the early days when being HIV-positive is basically a death sentence.

So. You have the advantage of knowing the end of my story before I did. But that day in 1973 -- I do remember being in the gym and seeing Dash at the top of that rope and him not coming down. And to be honest: I think it's kinda cool. I understand what he's doing. I kinda wish that it was me up there. Here's Mr. Smith's version of what happened:

MR. SMITH

I hadn't been a coach very long -- I was just a few years out of college, a young guy who just always wanted to be a coach. But a coach also has to teach -- so I taught P.E.

And geography. I didn't know jack-shit about geography but I liked maps and that's the class they needed me to fill... Teaching P.E. was more like coaching so it came easy. But 7th and 8th Grade boys? It's a pretty squirrely age and when I didn't find them amusing they drove me fucking nuts. That day when that kid Dash climbed the rope --

I don't know what got into him. At first it was impressive

--

he has the fastest time, and I yell up to him, "Way to go, Dash!" But then he won't come down. And after trying everything I can think of -- that's when I have to call the Fire Department.

FIREMAN JOE

...yeah... that's gotta be one of the more unusual calls I ever got in my 35 years with the Department. We had our share of getting cats out of trees, stuff like that. But Dash had climbed a rope and wouldn't come down. When his teacher calls and explains what's going on, I laugh and think it's a joke -- I mean I know a prank call when I hear one so I hang up on the guy. But he calls back and somehow convinces me he's for real and would it be possible for the Fire Department to come to the gymnasium and get this kid down from the goddamn ceiling...? I decide not to use the siren on the truck when we head to the school -- I don't want people in town to panic when they see us heading to the school. But me and a couple of the guys drive over there and take one of our big ladders into the gym. I grew up in that town, had gone to that school, I'd even climbed that same rope when I was a kid -- so I knew the place pretty well. But the scene inside is almost comical. All these skinny boys looking up at the ceiling where Dash is hanging out at the top of the rope. I know Dash's mom and dad from church -- so Dash waves at me. Not like a smart-ass wave, just friendly-like. And then we figure out a way to get the ladder up there, so I climb up and now I'm face to face with Dash.

FIREMAN JOE
and DASH are
face to face.

FIREMAN JOE
(CONT'D)

Hey, Dash.

DASH

Hey, Joe.

FIREMAN JOE

Guess you're in a pickle, huh.

Guess so. DASH

Are you afraid to come down? FIREMAN JOE

No. DASH

Then what are you doing up here? FIREMAN JOE

I like it up here. I just like it. DASH

OK. No problem. But you can't stay up here. You know that, right? Class is almost over and you're probably in trouble anyway so better to be a man and cut your losses. FIREMAN JOE

... DASH

... FIREMAN JOE

Joe? DASH

Yeah? FIREMAN JOE

Do you speak Swedish? DASH

No. FIREMAN JOE

Oh. DASH

Why are you asking me that? FIREMAN JOE

DASH

I'm looking for someone to teach me Swedish.

FIREMAN JOE

If I hear of anyone I'll let you know.

DASH

That would be great.

(...)

Sorry you had to come up here like this.

FIREMAN JOE

All in a day's work, kid.

DASH

But what a day.

FIREMAN JOE

Sure you're OK?

DASH

I don't know.

FIREMAN JOE

How about I get on that rope with you and we'll go back down together. You up for that?

DASH

Maybe.

FIREMAN JOE

Just put your arms around my neck... hold on... I won't let you fall... we'll go slow... I'm right here, buddy.

DASH

Goo. I mean, Go.

FIREMAN JOE

Hold on.

DASH

(to US)

I mean COME ON: a FIREMAN??? Fireman Joe???

A fantasy is born that will come in handy for years to come. He hasn't shaved and my cheek brushes against his stubble and just about every nerve in my body goes nuts.

I almost ejaculate again. His breath smells like juicy fruit gum. And he has some kind of aftershave on -- no idea what it's called. But for the rest of my life, anytime I smell anything like it -- I am right back in Fireman Joe's arms.

"Just put your arms around my neck... hold on... I won't let you fall... we'll go slow... I'm right here, buddy."

(...)

Of course I do get in trouble and I'm sent to the Principal's office where I argue that I'm less guilty than Richard Nixon and what kind of example is he is for kids like me anyway? But they give me detention for three days anyway. My parents pretend to be mortified. But mostly I know they're more mystified.

For the first time they realize I'm growing up and that I have a world world going on inside my head that they will never understand. Later on in my treehouse when my dad and I are still pretending to learn Swedish, he tells me he thinks it was cool that I climbed that rope and wouldn't come down. He actually cried -- and told me that he felt that way sometimes too. Sometimes you just don't want to come down, you just want to stay above it all. It feels funny watching my dad cry -- but years later I think I understood what he meant.

Sometimes life gets so crazy.

Sometimes you just want to climb a rope and not come down.

Just put your arms around my neck... hold on... I won't let you fall... we'll go slow... I'm right here, buddy...

DASH looks out at us. He's shared more than he ever intended, isn't sure how he feels about that, but what's done is done.

DASH shrugs.

It's suddenly dark.

The play is over.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *What inspired DASH CLIMBS A ROPE... hmmm. All stories are a gift to the writer (even when you don't know it) but some stories come at you with such force that you can't say no, you simply must put your ear to the ground and let it bloom everywhere in and around you. Since my writing career has been inspired more by curiosity than by ambition or strategy, I said "yes" to this play almost as soon as it announced itself. I had had an unremembered dream about a guy named "Dash" and I let him lead the way into the story that needed to be told. Looking at the play now I'm struck by Dash's confidence as a storyteller so maybe I was writing about the ways that strange and scary experiences can sometimes shape us in positive ways. What could have been a story about shame is instead a story about tenderness and triumph. I remember also immediately sensing Dash's sexual energy and how he ravenously wanted his future even if he wasn't sure what that future might be. And influences? If I get stuck and don't know what comes next I just say to myself "What would Caryl Churchill do?" I've always loved her fearless theatricality and the artistic restlessness that seems to connect all of her plays. The short story writer Alice Munro has taught me about the art of telling complex and moving stories in fewer pages. The fiction writer Louise Erdrich has taught me about point of view and structure. And my own 4 year-old self continues to teach me about determination and playfulness.*

AUTHOR BIO: JAMES STILL's plays have been produced throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia, South Africa, China and Japan. He is an elected member of both the National Theatre Conference in New York and the College of Fellows of the American Theatre at the Kennedy Center. Four-time Pulitzer nominee, five-time Emmy nominee, the Playwright in Residence at Indiana Repertory Theatre and an Affiliated Artist with American Blues Theater in Chicago. He is proud to call Los Angeles home where he continues to shelter in place.
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