

R O P E

Dash climbs a _____

By James Still

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

(Spacing is playwright's own.)

DASH CLIMBS A ROPE

By James Still

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Representation:

Bret Adams, Ltd.

Bruce Ostler / Kate Bussert

212-765-5630

NOTE ON CASTING: Everything tells a story. In the same spirit in which I wrote the play, characters may/can/should be played by actors of any race, ethnicity, origin and other-abledness. In whatever ways the play is cast, it will tell the story of a kid who climbed a rope and saw his future.

NOTE FROM THE WRITER: The play can be played by one actor who plays all the roles, or multiple actors. I'm a fan of both approaches.

DASH CLIMBS A ROPE

by James Still (ThreeC 6/17/21)

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.

My dad believed I would be a fast runner

(or 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 the 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 didn't want to come out --

or if I just really liked where I was.

It's a weird thing, that idea that for 9 months we live inside of a mom
and get all cozy

and comfy
and just really make ourselves at home --
while on the outside your mom is miserable,
her body is 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 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 everything was kind of perfect.
Back to the womb.

I didn't mean to get stuck on 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 1974.
And it's summer, it's August.
And I'm 12 going on 13.
And I'm super horny all the time.
But don't really have a name for that when I'm talking to grownups
because it's just this feeling that's really kinda
good
which makes me feel kinda
bad
but in this really good way
which is
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 ever ejaculated.
There's this big rope -- see?
that hangs from the ceiling of our gymnasium which all of us have to
climb
(or try to climb in the case of the guys who are 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 all the way to the top,

but then you have to slap the ceiling with your hand

(it doesn't count unless you slap the ceiling with your hand)

and then you climb back down the rope.

All the while our teacher who is also our coach --

let's call him "Coach" --

"The names have been changed to protect the innocent"

(I've always wanted to say that even though no one in my story is particularly innocent).

So "Coach" is standing there in his short-shorts 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, right? since I'm telling you about

The First Time I Ejaculated.

Anyway.

"Coach" is there with his stopwatch

but I honestly don't remember my time.

What I DO remember

is Coach's short-short-shorts and his muscular hairy legs --

blonde hair that shimmers 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'm married to Coach

and we live together in New York in a loft painted all-white

and spend our summers on Martha's Vineyard with the Kennedys

and our dog named Diana Ross.

But now I'm back in the gymnasium that smells like old socks

and Coach yells "GOO!" I mean "GO!"
And I'm climbing that rope so fast
that even a couple of the bullies are in awe of me.
It's an incredible feeling:
that combination of being 12 years old,
being really good at climbing that rope,
and being hypnotized by Coach's blonde hairy legs.
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 kind of embarrassing.
But also kind of...
-- amazing?

Now here's where things get weird.
Finally living up to my name
I climb that rope really really fast,
I slap that ceiling with my hand again and again
and I'm feeling like I'm the King of the World!
I look down at everybody cheering
and I 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.
And suddenly I realize that I don't want to come down.
I mean, I'm 12-years old and I'm thinking:
"What if this is it, what if this is as good as it gets?
What if this is the best moment of my life..."
And also, I mean, since I can't see you sitting out there
and since I'm being so crazy honest:
I have cum all over my gym shorts
and I have no clue how I'm going to hide it or explain it.
As long as I stay up here on 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
is have crazy sex with John Ransom
who is a year older than me and the star of everything.
Wait -- when I say "crazy sex" I don't really know what I mean
because it's 1974 and I haven't had crazy sex.

Yet.

Or any sex.

Yet.

I've just had these 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 just 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 none I've ever heard of anyway.

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.
This is probably a good time for you to 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 1974.
In a few years I'm going to be the star of the high school football team
and of course 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'll set school records for running the mile.
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.

DASH

I'm still up here on Top of the World thinking about sex.

I mean, 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?

Uh-oh.

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.

If I'm being 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 looking because there are naked guys EVERYWHERE YOU LOOK.

(my dog ran away / my dog ran away / my dog ran away)

But 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. 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?

(...)

Yeah. I'm gonna stay up here for as long as I can.

JOHN RANSOM

When I graduate from high school

I know I'll 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 come out, to be out --
and then everybody starts dying.

Everybody.

Everybody you love.

Everybody you might have 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 gym class --

I do remember Dash climbing that rope
and then 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 Coach's version of what happened:

COACH

I haven't been a coach very long --

I'm 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 teach P.E.

And Driver's Ed. And geography.

I don't know jack-shit about geography but I like maps
and that's the class they needed me to teach, so...

Teaching P.E. is more like coaching so it comes easy.

But 7th and 8th Grade boys?

It's a pretty squirrely age

and when I don't find them amusing they drive me fucking nuts.

"HEY! Get your gym shorts off your frickin' head and stay away from that fire alarm!"

DASH

Here's something else I gotta throw in the mix,
it's the backdrop,
the context, you know?

This is August, 1974.

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 like:

"No politics at the dinner table!"

And my dad will look at me and shrug.

It's also around 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 am 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.

(secret)

I almost tell him about this dream I had last night --

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 --
when 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.

COACH

"Way to go, Dash!"
The day when that Dash kid 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 and balloons out of trees, stuff like that.
But Dash had climbed that rope and wouldn't come down.
When his gym teacher calls and explains what's going on,
I 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 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 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 know the place pretty well.
But the scene inside is almost comical.

All these pimply boys looking up at the ceiling
where Dash is hanging out at the top of that 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

Hey, Dash.

DASH

Hey, Joe.

FIREMAN JOE

Guess you're in a pickle, huh.

DASH

Guess so.

FIREMAN JOE

What are you doing up here?

DASH

I like it up here. I just like it.

FIREMAN JOE

Are you afraid to come down?

DASH

No.

FIREMAN JOE

OK.

No problem.

But you can't stay up here.

You know that, right?

Gym Class is almost over

and you're probably in trouble anyway

so better to be a man and cut your losses.

DASH

...

FIREMAN JOE

...

DASH

Joe?

FIREMAN JOE

Yeah?

DASH

Do you speak Swedish?

FIREMAN JOE

No.

DASH

Oh.

FIREMAN JOE

Why are you asking me that?

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

Yeah.

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 and years.
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.

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.

They have touched down.

DASH watches FIREMAN JOE disappear.

DASH

(to US)

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 still give me detention for three days.
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 whole world going on inside my head
that they will never understand.

DASH begins aging before our eyes.

DASH (cont'd)

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 understand 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.

And 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 a proud to call Los Angeles home where he/him/his continues to shelter in place.