

Dead (!) Mommy Jokes (ha, ha)

By James Burnside

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

When you read this play (and you must read this play) it crawls, crackles, and primally screams right off the page. Little surprise that it's been performed at a fringe festival in the city that knows how to keep it weird. And Dead Mommy Jokes demands to be seen. I love that the play comes with its own warning in the title. Hey, if you're looking for some light reading that's going to politely and tastefully tiptoe around the subject of maternal death, then you'll surely want to slither back into your patriarchal hole and get to work eviscerating voting rights and censoring this play along with the instructions that come in boxes of tampons. But if you want to howl with the absurdity of any notion that violence to women is a "controversial" topic, then get set for a hysterical killer set of James E. Burnside's Dead Mommy Jokes brought to you "live" from the walking and talking dead: Dead Mommies #1, #2, and #3, all dressed in bloody rags and all carrying "a naked plastic baby doll." Then there are the other characters in this outrageous outrage of post-modern-pantomime, a (woman) nurse in scrubs, and two men, a doctor and...a legislator. See the Mommies looking for their mommies! Watch as they writhe in the pain of childbirth and oppressive legislation! Take note as they sing to us from heaven reminding us that we might not have insurance, but we've all got mommies!

Mother cries out with a contraction.

Oh my God!

DOCTOR
(reading a chart)

What is it, Doctor?!

NURSE

DOCTOR
She doesn't have any health insurance! Let her die.

Five Stars. (Spacing is playwright's own.) JEC

Dead mommy Jokes
By James E. Burnside
(This play was part of FronteraFest 2018 in Austin, TX)

Cast:

Nurse - adult woman any age, dressed in scrubs
Dead Mommy #1 - a young woman, dressed in white rags stained with blood.
Her hair is ash white and her skin is pale as in death. She carries at
her belly a naked plastic baby doll.
Dead Mommy #2- same as Dead Mommy #1
Dead Mommy #3- same as Dead Mommy #1
State Legislator - tall white man of great dignity and power, dressed in
a suit
Doctor - a man dressed in scrubs

Dark Stage.

NURSE (O.S.)

Clear!

Mother, off stage, cries out with a contraction.

Dead Mommy #1, All the Dead Mommies speak for their plastic baby dolls.

DEAD MOMMY #1

(to an audience member)

Have you seen my mommy?

(Wanders the edge of the audience asking various other audience members
the same question.)

Have you seen my mommy?

Dead Mommy #2 enters and goes to Dead Mommy #1.

DEAD MOMMY #2

Have you seen my mommy?

DEAD MOMMY #1

She's... she's right behind you.

Dead Mommy #2 spins around.

DEAD MOMMY #2

Where?

Dead Mommy #2 looks around, but can't find Mommy.

Dead Mommy #3 enters and goes to Dead Mommy #2.

DEAD MOMMY #3

Have you seen my mommy?

DEAD MOMMY #2

She's right behind you.

Dead Mommy #3 spins quickly.

DEAD MOMMY #3

Where?

Dead Mommy #3 starts looking for Mommy. Dead Mommy #2 continues looking.
Dead Mommy #1 starts asking the audience again...

DEAD MOMMY #1

Have you seen my mommy?

Finally all Dead Mommies arrive at the middle of the stage. They line up with a bit of confusion into a line. Dead Mommy #2 is facing the wrong direction. Dead Mommy #1 and #3 help face Dead Mommy #2 the right direction.

DEAD MOMMIES ALL

When your a Dead Mommy, everyday is a bad hair day.

Dead Mommies strike a pose.

DEAD MOMMIES ALL

(Dead Mommy #1, Dead Mommy #2, and Dead Mommy #3 singing together)

We got a robe,

You got a robe,

All God's children got a robe.

When we get to heaven

Gonna put on our robes

And shout all over God's Heaven, Heaven

We're gonna shout all over God's Heaven!

Dead Mommies bow.

DEAD MOMMY #1

What you are about to see...

DEAD MOMMY #2

... is the stupidest thing...

DEAD MOMMY #3

... you will see tonight.

Beat.

DEAD MOMMY #1

Or this week...

Beat.

DEAD MOMMY #2

Or this month...

Beat.

DEAD MOMMY #3

Or this year.

Nurse enters.

NURSE

Or ever.

Silence.

State Legislator enters. A fanfare plays! A spotlight highlights him. He strikes a pose, hands on hips, head turned slightly, chin up and out, super hero style.

NURSE

Okay. Maybe not the stupidest thing...

Silence.

The DOCTOR rolls a gurney on stage. On the gurney is a body completely covered in a sheet. (NOTE: A dummy or a set of pillows or anything else can be used for this.) The Nurse goes over to the gurney. The Doctor and Nurse lean over the Mother checking for signs of life.

Mother "screams" with a contraction.

NURSE

Something's wrong, Doctor.

DOCTOR

I can see that, Nurse.

NURSE

Her blood pressure is very high.

DOCTOR

Do we have a report from the lab?

NURSE

Her red blood cells are breaking down. Low platelet count.

DOCTOR

Pre-clampsia. She's a goner.

NURSE

Not every pregnant woman dies from pre-clampsia! We have to try!

Doctor rolls his eyes and leans over the woman.

The Dead Mommies stop center stage and bow. They point out members of the audience. They mug for the audience.

DEAD MOMMIES ALL

We got wings

You got wings

All God's children got wings

When we get to heaven

Gonna to put on our wings

And fly all over God's Heaven, Heaven

We're gonna to fly all over God's Heaven

Legislator, a sign on his back reads "State Legislator," nudges and pushes and herds the Dead Mommies off stage making sure that his sign is seen by everyone in the audience.

LEGISLATOR

All right, all right, let's don't turn this into a fucking melodrama.

The Dead Mommies come right back on stage.

DEAD MOMMY #1

But...

DEAD MOMMY #2

But...

DEAD MOMMY #3

But...

The Legislator holds up his hands for quiet. Slowly everyone stops cheering.

LEGISLATOR

Please everyone! Let's show a little decorum.

Mother cries out with a contraction. Dead Mommies, caught by surprise, retreat.

NURSE

(examining Mother)

Mother's vitals are stabilizing. The baby is still in some distress.

Heartbeat's still irregular.

DOCTOR

The fetus...

NURSE

(interrupting, insistent)

Baby.

DOCTOR

Fetus will stabilize now that the mother has. However, Miss Piggy, here...

(indicating Mother)

... needs to lose forty pounds.

NURSE

Doctor!

DOCTOR

She can't hear me. She's out cold.

DEAD MOMMY #1

I can hear you!

NURSE

And I can hear you!

DEAD MOMMY #2

I know I've put on a little weight...

DEAD MOMMY #3

... since I got pregnant.

DOCTOR

A little weight!? That kind of weight leads to all kinds of pregnancy problems including death.

NURSE

She'll lose some of it nursing.

DOCTOR

She'll lose a lot more after she dies!

Mother swoons into unconsciousness.

Everyone looks at the Legislator.

LEGISLATOR

There's an obesity epidemic in this country. But it's not the governments job to slap the fork out of the mouth every fat bi...

(looks up guiltily)

Ahh ... every... over-weight woman eating for two. They should just join a gym or... something. And if they can't... well...

The Dead Mommies step forward taking cell phones out. They wander the stage looking at their cell phones. Dead Mommy #1 stops when she is standing between Mother's legs looking at her crotch. Dead Mommy #1 starts flicking her phone.

DEAD MOMMY #1

I got it!

DEAD MOMMY #2

Which one?

DEAD MOMMY #1

(sadly)

It's just... Pincachu.

DEAD MOMMY #3

Gesundheit.

DEAD MOMMY #1

You are such a moron.

DEAD MOMMY #3

I've got a dozen Pincachu.

DEAD MOMMY #2

Where was it?

DEAD MOMMY #1

Between her... I mean...

DEAD MOMMY #3

You mean her...?

DEAD MOMMY #1

No.... Yes... no... yea...

DEAD MOMMY #2

No.

DEAD MOMMY #1

Yea.

DEAD MOMMY #3

No.

DEAD MOMMY #1

Yea.

Mother screams in pain. Dead Mommies step to one side of the stage.

Mother screams in contraction.

NURSE

Contractions are coming every three minutes.

NURSE

This is serious, Doctor.

DOCTOR

(looking out at the audience)

Not so far.

NURSE

Doctor, we're losing the patient!

The Doctor picks up a clipboard.

DOCTOR

(resigned to the inevitable)

I don't think there's anything we can do, nurse.

NURSE

What?!

DOCTOR

She one of... the blacks.

NURSE

So she's African-American! So what?!

DOCTOR

She is four times more likely to die in child birth than a white woman.

NURSE

You took an oath!

DOCTOR

Do no harm.

NURSE

That's right!

DOCTOR

Do you know how much harm these women do to my insurance rates? Boom!

Through the roof!

Dead Mommy #1, Dead Mommy #2, and Dead Mommy #3 step forward as the crowd quiets.

DEAD MOMMY #1

A priest, a rabbi, and a dead mommy walk into a bar...

DEAD MOMMY #2

The priest orders red wine in a teeny tiny little glass.

Dead Mommy #2 makes the sign of the cross.

DEAD MOMMY #3

The rabbi orders Manschewitz on the rocks. L'Chaim!

DEAD MOMMY #1

The dead mommy orders...

DEAD MOMMY #2

A bloody mary?

DEAD MOMMY #3

A zombie?

DEAD MOMMY #2

Corpse reviver?

DEAD MOMMY #3

Death in the Afternoon?

DEAD MOMMY #2

What the hell is a Death in Afternoon?

DEAD MOMMY #3

A book by Hemingway.

DEAD MOMMY #2

A book by Hemingway? Why would she go into a bar and order a book by Hemingway?

DEAD MOMMY #1

She was still breast feeding.

Dead Mommy #3 looks at Dead Mommy #2 in consternation. Finally, they shrug and all three start singing and dancing and moving off to the side of the stage.

DEAD MOMMIES ALL

We got a harp,

You got a harp

All God's children got a harp

When we get to heaven

Gonna' to take up our harps

And play all over God's Heaven, Heaven

We're gonna' to play all over God's Heaven

LEGISLATOR

That's what I'm talkin' about! Heaven! Maternal mortality just means more citizens for the Kingdom of God. It's a joyous thing! Mother waiting for the arrival of her baby after her son's shot in a drug deal gone bad or her daughter's stabbed by a crazed john. Waiting with open arms to greet them and comfort them. Hallelujah!

Mother cries out with a contraction.

DOCTOR

(reading a chart)

Oh my God!

NURSE

What is it, Doctor?!

DOCTOR

She doesn't have any health insurance! Let her die.

NURSE

What?!

The Nurse snatches the clipboard from the Doctor.

DOCTOR

Who's going to pay me!?

NURSE

The... the government?

Legislator steps forward.

LEGISLATOR

(frowning and shaking his head)

I don't think so! She's not poor enough for Medicaid. Not in this state! Taking that money today would only create an unfunded mandate. New uninsured people will come out of the woodwork with their hand out demanding payment. We cannot accept this unfunded expansion of...

(dramatically)

... ObamaCare!

NURSE

It's funded.

LEGISLATOR

I'm not getting into a discussion of Medicaid with a healthcare professional, who thinks that all we have to do is take the money and run. We're not taking that tainted money...

(indicating Mother)

... Not over her dead body!

Legislator retreats.

The Dead Mommies step forward.

DEAD MOMMY #1

You know you're a dead mommy if...

DEAD MOMMY #2

... If when you change the baby's poopie diaper...

DEAD MOMMY #3

... the diaper smells better than you do.

DEAD MOMMY #1

You know you're a dead mommy if...

DEAD MOMMY #2

... if when your baby breast feeds...

DEAD MOMMY #3

... the only white liquid that comes out of your breast is puss.

DEAD MOMMY #1

You know you're a dead mommy if...

DEAD MOMMY #2

... if when your baby cries...

DEAD MOMMY #3

... all you do is lie there...

DEAD MOMMY #1

...dead as a door nail...

DEAD MOMMY #2

... the maggots crawling in and out...

DEAD MOMMY #3

... in and out...

Dead Mommies retreat.

DOCTOR

Where did she get prenatal care?

NURSE

(looking over chart)

She... she didn't. She didn't get prenatal care. She made too much money for Medicaid...

DOCTOR

But not enough to go to the doctor when she found she was pregnant.

Dead Mommies step forward to center stage.

DEAD MOMMY #1

How many dead mommies does it take to change a diaper?

DEAD MOMMY #2

I don't know. How many dead mommies does it take to change a diaper?

DEAD MOMMY #3

Depends on how you stack 'em.

DEAD MOMMY #1

The diapers?

DEAD MOMMY #2

The dead mommies.

DEAD MOMMY #3

That... doesn't even make any sense. Why would the legislature...?
Legislator steps forward.

LEGISLATOR

I strongly supported de-funding those... those demonic cesspools...

DEAD MOMMIES ALL

Like Planned Parenthood! Yea!

LEGISLATOR

... those abortion factories.

DEAD MOMMIES ALL

And if the price is a few dead mothers... Yea!

DEAD MOMMIES ALL

(breaking into song)

We got a shoes,

You got a shoes,

All God's children got shoes.

When we get to heaven

Gonna put on our shoes

And march all over God's Heaven, Heaven

We're gonna march all over God's Heaven!

Mother cries out with a contraction. Dead Mommies retreat.

DOCTOR

(examining Mother)

How old is this woman?!

Nurse examines chart.

NURSE

Thirty-nine.

DOCTOR

O.M.G.! She's an ancient! What's an old woman doing having a baby?!

NURSE

She's only thirty-nine!

Doctor goes and looks between her legs.

DOCTOR

Thirty-nine! Probably spiders and bats livin' in that thing.

NURSE

Doctor!

DOCTOR

She's gonna need a lotta meds and as much lube as we can lay our hands on. Things probably drier than the sands of the Sahara. Or maybe we should just cut it out of her belly now.

NURSE

She wants a natural child birth.

DOCTOR

Natural?! When she was twenty-two it might have been natural, but now...

It will kill her.

LEGISLATOR

Baster babies! Test tube babies! Women think they can wait forever to have a child! These are the creations of Satan himself! They are abominations and death to the Mother is God's will for denying God's plan!

Dead Mommies step forward.

DEAD MOMMY #1

Knock knock.

DEAD MOMMY #2

That's an old joke.

DEAD MOMMY #1
For an old mother. Knock knock.
DEAD MOMMY #3
(big sigh)
Who's there?
DEAD MOMMY #1
Dead Mommy.
DEAD MOMMY #2
Dead Mommy who?
DEAD MOMMY #3
Dead mommy who carried you in her belly for nine months and then died during child birth so you could have a life, you little bastard!
DEAD MOMMY #2
I'm a... I'm a bastard?
DEAD MOMMY #3
Yes, you're a bastard! Your mother had no idea who your father is. The post man, the delivery man, or just some random drunk your mother picked up in a bar one night...
DEAD MOMMY #2
This isn't funny...
DEAD MOMMY #1
I thought this was supposed to be a joke...
DEAD MOMMY #3
A joke?! A joke! Your mother is dead and you have no idea who your father is!
DEAD MOMMY #2
How's that a joke?!
DEAD MOMMY #3
At least she doesn't have to change your disgusting diapers...
Dead Mommy #2 looks at Dead Mommy #1's backside.
DEAD MOMMY #2
What is that smell?!
Dead Mommies retreat.
Mother cries out with a contraction.
NURSE
We got the blood analysis back.
DOCTOR
And?
NURSE
Alcohol point oh four...
DOCTOR
At least she's not drunk.
NURSE
Not at the moment anyway. Also T.H.C. and cocaine.
DOCTOR
What!? No opioids? She's just not trying.
NURSE
(examining Mother's arm)
Old needle marks.
DOCTOR
Excellent. Whelp, pull the sheet over her head.
NURSE
She's not dead yet!
DOCTOR

Only a matter of time. She's not likely to survive the birth, and if she does, when the postpartum hits...

Doctor gives a throat slash sign to the Nurse.

NURSE

(sigh)

You're probably right.

Legislator steps forward.

LEGISLATOR

We need to build a huge border wall!

NURSE

Hey..., Wait... I thought this was about women's health during pregnancy.

LEGISLATOR

And if those immigrants aren't kept out, the flow of drugs into this country will never be stopped. Mexicans, calves the size of cantaloupes, cross the desert with seventy-five pounds of marijuana or cocaine or heroin. Only one way to stop those illegal immigrant drug mules from bringing their poison into this country...

Dead Mommies step forward.

DEAD MOMMY #1

What are you reading?

DEAD MOMMY #2

Cookbook.

DEAD MOMMY #3

What are you planning to cook?

DEAD MOMMY #2

Mommy au gratin.

DEAD MOMMY #1

Mmmm. Cheesy.

DEAD MOMMY #3

That sounds so good.

DEAD MOMMY #1

How do you make it?

DEAD MOMMY #2

First, divide your dead mommy into six equal parts.

DEAD MOMMY #3

I've got the perfect knife for that.

DEAD MOMMY #1

Next?

DEAD MOMMY #2

Pre-heat the oven to 350. Then add salt, pepper and your favorite spices.

DEAD MOMMY #3

I like paprika.

DEAD MOMMY #1

The good smoked Spanish kind.

DEAD MOMMY #3

Don't forget the cheese.

DEAD MOMMY #2

Then bake for 90 minutes. Serve mommy hot and bubbly.

DEAD MOMMY #3

Mmmmm.

DEAD MOMMY #1

That's good eats.

DEAD MOMMY #2

Wonder what milk goes best with mommy.

DEAD MOMMY #1

Maybe a nice Guernsey or Holstein?

DEAD MOMMY #3

This is Texas. I prefer a local Santa Gertrudis.

Mother cries out with a contraction. Mother starts jabbering incoherently and thrashing about. Nurse tries to restrain her movements, but is tossed aside.

NURSE

Doctor! Help!

DOCTOR

I'm not getting near that crazy woman.

NURSE

Crazy?! That's a medical term you learned during psych residency?!

DOCTOR

Yes... Well, that, and whacked out, bananas, looney-tunes, more cuckoo than a clock factory... You want me to go on?

NURSE

We have to do something?!

DOCTOR

Like what?

NURSE

She's about to have a baby!

DOCTOR

She's homeless. Probably lives under a bridge or an overpass.

NURSE

She's obviously mentally ill.

DOCTOR

So she definitely lives under a bridge.

NURSE

What should we do, Doctor?

DOCTOR

Even if she survives the birth, she'll probably die in the first year of the child's life. Another blip on the upward curve of maternal mortality rates.

Legislator steps forward.

LEGISLATOR

Ronald Reagan knew that psychiatry was a communist plot! People in mental hospitals just needed to pull themselves up by their boot-straps! De-institutionalization is the cure for mental illness! Trickle down. That's all we can do for these women. Tax breaks for the rich and when the money trickles down, these women won't die anymore. Their children won't be dumped on a Child Protective Services that only has beds in state offices. Trickle down.

Dead Mommies Step forward.

DEAD MOMMY #1

I heard your mommy died. How did she go?

DEAD MOMMY #2

Just a little gurgle and...

Dead Mommy #3 closes her eyes, cocks her head at an odd angle and sticks her tongue out one side of her mouth.

NURSE

Why did she die? Did she die because she's too fat? Or too black? Or too poor? Or because she didn't have enough money?
DEAD MOMMIES ALL
We got a mom,
You got a mom,
All God's children got a mom.
When we get to heaven
Gonna hug all our moms
And weep all over God's Heaven, Heaven
We're gonna weep all over God's Heaven!
Silence.
"An instant of recorded vagitus."
End of play.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

I grew up in the 60's. Dead Baby Jokes were popular with young boys. I always liked them in a creepy sort of way.

This country's maternal mortality rate is shocking, disturbing, embarrassing, and a clear indictment of our healthcare system.

Add a heaping helping of Theatre of Cruelty and the result is "Dead Mommy Jokes."

The play was performed as part of FronteraFest 2018 at Austin's Hyde Park Theatre by some friends of mine.

AUTHOR BIO: I'm a gamer. I was a gamer before there were gamers. I was raised a naturalist, a scientist, a chess player, but at seventeen, I knew I wanted to write fiction. In college, I played tournament bridge and studied geology, math, engineering, screenwriting and read books about theatre history and married the love of my life. We had babies. I fixed fighter jets in the Air Force and wrote poetry. Then our son died. There was a long silence. Ten years as a commuter cyclist gave me time to think... and dream. Books on art theory, Dada, Surrealism, Theater of Cruelty, became my companions. I read Aristophanes and I wrote screenplays that got smaller and smaller. The stage seemed the only solution. I joined ScriptWorks and participated in a 10-minute play writing contest, and my play about President Gerald Ford went on stage and the director transformed it into a dance that delighted me.

I am now a ScriptWorks Board member. I love going to staged readings of new work and talking to writers about keepin' on, keepin' on.

Because I am a disabled veteran (tinnitus and hearing loss from six years under F-4's,) in the last couple of years, I joined the Board of TILT Performance Group. TILT provides adults with disabilities the opportunity to create and perform professional theatre that shatters stereotypes about people with disabilities.

I am also a recovering alcoholic, 17 years.

I have had more productions and I am always surprised and thrilled by how smart, friendly, and hard working theatre people are and how difficult the theatre is.

I consider myself a DADA/Surrealist playwright heavily influenced by Aristophanes, Brecht, and Artaud. I believe that the advantage of the theatre over the screen is the live audience. I often try to speak directly to the people in the seats and not pretend they aren't there.

Successes & Productions:

Flipside Redux - "Limbo Cafe" a 15-minute play, TILT Performance Group

Disability: 10 Minute New Play Festival, Arkansas Theatre Collective, November 2016 - "A Shadeless Socket"

Moondance International Film Festival 2007 - Finalist "The War Against California," Full-length screenplay

BlueCat Screenplay Competition 2008 - Semi-Finalist "20th Century Limited," full length screenplay

Out of Ink 2013 - "Proclamation 4311" Full Production, 10-minute Play

Out of Ink 2020 - "Adults are Just Obsolete Children" 10-minute play, production canceled due to COVID-19