

DON'T EMPTY THE FROG
(We Are Not Alone)

a one-act play
by Tom Baum

© Tom Baum 2017

CHARACTERS

BURKE, 30s, a cosmologist

ALYSSA, 30s, Burke's wife, a cosmologist

NIGEL, 40s-60s, their visitor

One-room set, minimal furniture. The time is the present.

(Sound of Cosmic Static. We're in a station that monitors signals from outer space. The only pieces of furniture are two desks: one with a computer, the other with a giant plastic frog with invoices in its mouth. Lights up on BURKE and ALYSSA, the married couple who maintain the station.)

BURKE: It's useless to fight it, Alyssa. We're done.

ALYSSA: Please don't say that.

BURKE: Look at it from their point of view. What have we discovered here? Nothing. Zero. No messages. Not a word, not a blip, not a single indication of life on other worlds.

ALYSSA: Because we haven't been at it long enough!

BURKE: Not that I ever thought we would make contact.

ALYSSA: Come on...sweetheart...you used to dream about it. It's like going to the ocean, trying to see if there's any fish....scooping up a glassful of water....no fish? Then there aren't any fish in the ocean....Seriously, how much of the Cosmos have we sampled? About a glass of water's worth.

BURKE: I wish I had your faith. I wish they had your faith.

(BURKE sits down at the desk, takes the invoices out of the giant plastic frog, starts writing checks.)

ALYSSA: What are you doing?

BURKE: What does it look like I'm doing? I'm emptying the frog, before that guy from the Central Office gets here. As many bills as we can pay, so we don't look like deadbeats.

ALYSSA: Stop. I know I can convince them to give us another year.

BURKE: Another year? Are you high?

ALYSSA: Oh Burke...could you stop being Mr. Glass Half Empty?

BURKE: Look, I can't help who I am, OK? Mrs. Glass Half Full? You know, between us we really should have a full glass. Hasn't worked out that way, has it?

ALYSSA: *(pause)* Do you still love me, Burke?

BURKE: What? That's not the issue.

ALYSSA: You can't even say it, can you? Will you please stop writing checks!

BURKE: Alyssa, it's too late to reform me. You, you gaze up at the galaxies, you see proof of God's existence. I see nothing but a doomed Universe.

ALYSSA: Come on. That's your depression talking.

BURKE: Remember we took that train trip? To the Monte Mira Observatory? You were looking out the window at the countryside. Do you remember what you said?

ALYSSA: "What lovely white sheep."

BURKE: And what did I say?

ALYSSA: "OK, they're white. On this side at least."

BURKE: That's who you married. A diehard skeptic. A hopeless pessimist.

ALYSSA: Well, I don't consider you hopeless.

BURKE: Of course you don't think I'm hopeless! You have hope! And that makes me feel more hopeless!

(The Cosmic Static drops out, then immediately resumes. But now it sounds vaguely organized. Cosmic Morse Code.)

ALYSSA: Burke. Listen to that.

BURKE: Listen to what?

(ALYSSA *seats herself at the keyboard.*)

ALYSSA: Something's happening.

BURKE: Look at this electric bill. Three thousand four hundred dollars.

ALYSSA: Burke, pay attention!

(*The Cosmic Morse Code grows even more regular.*)

ALYSSA: I'm putting it through the voice simulator.

(*ALYSSA makes some keystrokes. A robotic Cosmic Voice blasts forth.*)

COSMIC VOICE: *DON'T EMPTY THE FROG. YOU ARE NOT ALONE.*

ALYSSA: Ohmigod.

BURKE: What?

ALYSSA: You didn't hear that? It said, "Don't empty the frog."

(*ALYSSA says what she's typing:*)

ALYSSA: Who are you?

(*Pause.*)

COSMIC VOICE: *I'M THE ANSWER TO YOUR PRAYERS.*

(*ALYSSA takes out her cell.*)

BURKE: What are you doing? Who are you texting?

ALYSSA: The Central Office. They need to send a scientist, not a terminator.

BURKE: No use. The guy's already on his way.

ALYSSA: Well, let's hope he knows his cosmology. Sit down here, we don't want to miss anything.

(BURKE *sits down at the computer.*)

BURKE: There's no way this is coming from outer space.

COSMIC VOICE: *YE OF LITTLE FAITH.*

ALYSSA: You hear that? He's talking to you.

BURKE: Yeah, what a coincidence. You want me to prove this is a trick? Here we go.

(BURKE *says what he's typing into the keyboard:*)

BURKE: How far away are you?

(*Pause.*)

COSMIC VOICE: *297, 600 KILOMETERS.*

BURKE: So you're closer than the Moon.

(*Pause.*)

COSMIC VOICE: *I'M CLOSER THAN THAT NOW.*

BURKE: OK, very clever. First a 2.4-second delay, then a 2-second delay. At least they're smart enough to simulate approach.

ALYSSA: Who's they?

BURKE: Whoever's jerking us around. Some joker has hacked into the system. Rubbing it in, now that we're going down the tubes.

(NIGEL *enters. He's wearing a blazer and a bowler hat and is folding a wet umbrella.*)

NIGEL: Hello?

ALYSSA: Ohmigod, you startled me.

NIGEL: Didn't mean to, sorry.

ALYSSA: You must be from the Central Office. Welcome. I'm Alyssa. And this is Burke.

NIGEL: Your husband, yes, I know. You may call me Nigel.

ALYSSA: Why the umbrella, is it raining? I didn't notice.

NIGEL: No, your heads are beyond the clouds, aren't they. You're more likely to know if it's raining on Mars, eh?

BURKE: There's no weather on Mars.

NIGEL: You never can tell. It might make up its mind to rain there. So how are we faring here?

ALYSSA: I just tried to reach your office. Exciting news. We've finally made contact.

NIGEL: Isn't that remarkable.

BURKE: Yeah, just in the last few minutes.

NIGEL: How very convenient. Just as I was arriving. I see you're preparing to shut down. Clearing the books. Emptying the frog, I think you call it.

BURKE: Yeah, that's what we call it. How did you know?

NIGEL: There's very little I don't know. *(to ALYSSA)* So you think you've made contact.

ALYSSA: Absolutely. I'll play you back the last two messages.

(ALYSSA makes a few keystrokes.)

COSMIC VOICE: *TWO HUNDRED NINETY-SEVEN THOUSAND, SIX HUNDRED KILOMETERS. (pause) I'M CLOSER THAN THAT NOW.*

ALYSSA: Isn't that remarkable?

NIGEL: Quite impressive, yes. I must say, Alyssa, you're even more charming in person.

BURKE: Wait. You two have talked?

NIGEL: No, we've never talked. But I have managed to keep tabs—on both of you. *(to BURKE)* You've come to believe your whole career as a cosmologist has been a failure. *(to ALYSSA)* You've done your best to cheer him up, but your best hasn't been good enough. Of course, there was a clash of temperaments from the start—the daughter of hard-shell Baptists and a secular half-Jew. Risky pairing, that, and I take full responsibility. *(to ALYSSA)* Tell me, do you mind if I call you Leda?

BURKE: Of course she minds, what are you talking about?

ALYSSA: I don't understand...what did you mean by "I take full responsibility"?

BURKE: Alyssa, I'll handle this. How did you manage to bug this place?

NIGEL: Without the slightest effort, I assure you. Burke, where are you going?

BURKE: I'll be right back. I have a phone call to make.

(BURKE exits, taking out his cell.)

NIGEL: I'm sorry things have been so difficult lately. Between the two of you, I mean. You used to hang on each other's words. If one of you said something, and the other didn't hear, it was an absolute sin to let the moment pass. Bravo to that, I say. Most couples can't wait to tune each other out.

ALYSSA: Is there anything you don't know about us?

NIGEL: Not a thing. And you mustn't blame yourselves for your marital predicament. You can't help taking sunny view of things, any more than he can help being a pessimist.

ALYSSA: It hasn't driven us apart.

NIGEL: You've been faithful to each other, that's true. But absolute fidelity puts a terrible strain on a marriage, don't you feel?

(NIGEL *puts a hand on ALYSSA's arm*. BURKE *enters*.)

BURKE: OK, pal, back your ass out of here. You're done.

ALYSSA: Who did you call?

BURKE: Don't worry about it. I'll be calling the police in a minute.

NIGEL: (*to ALYSSA*) He rang up the Central Office. They said they have no record of a Nigel, and no one was scheduled to visit until later this week.

ALYSSA: Burke, is that true?

BURKE: That's what they told me. (*to NIGEL*) So who are you and why are you messing with us? And why did you want to call my wife "Leda"?

NIGEL: Alyssa, you minored in Comp Lit—care to enlighten your husband?

ALYSSA: In Greek mythology, Zeus disguised himself as a swan and had sex with Leda, the Queen of Sparta.

NIGEL: Exactly. I wrote a poem about it. "A sudden blow: the great wings beating still above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed by the dark webs..."

ALYSSA: No.

NIGEL: I beg your pardon, that's word for word.

ALYSSA: William Butler Yeats. That's who wrote that poem.

NIGEL: But whose idea was Yeats?

BURKE: Whose “idea” was Yeats?

NIGEL: Someone had to dream him up.

BURKE: You’re claiming Yeats didn’t exist. He wasn’t real.

NIGEL: “Real?” What’s “real”? Just a four-letter word. (*to* ALYSSA) For example, that dream you had three nights ago—that you and Burke were back at Cal Tech, absolutely smitten with each other. Was that “real”?

ALYSSA: Ohmigod.

NIGEL: (*to* BURKE) Or that dream you had this morning, about the end of the world, just before that 13-second urination. How “real” was that?

ALYSSA: Burke? Did you dream the world was ending?

BURKE: Maybe I was talking in my sleep.

NIGEL: I assure you, neither of you spoke a word. I’m truly sorry to have to tell you—your entire existences, your dream lives, your waking lives, are nothing but a sham. Nothing in this room is actually here, or anything outside this room, for that matter. The Earth, the Solar System, the far galaxies you’ve been probing, your histories, your mysteries...it’s all an illusion. Utterly without substance. Completely virtual.

BURKE: (*skeptically*) A computer simulation?

NIGEL: That’s putting it crudely. After all, the human brain is a computer. Of the lowest possible order, totally incapable of generating artificial worlds, except during REM sleep. (*to* ALYSSA) I’d rather you think of me as flesh and blood.

ALYSSA: Are you saying you created us?

NIGEL: Well, yes. Haven’t I made that clear?

ALYSSA: So you're God.

NIGEL: Your terminology, not mine. At any rate, not the God of your girlhood, the one with the dark flowing hair and the luminous blue eyes. The God you prayed to every night for a year, in utter loneliness, begging him to send you a boy who shared your interest in astronomy. The God of the Holy Bible, the God of wrath and revenge—I'm not that troublesome fellow. But I suppose, to your way of thinking, I am a god.

ALYSSA: A god?

NIGEL: One of many. (*uneasily*) An infinite number, I suspect.

BURKE: You're out of your mind.

NIGEL: Well, I'm certainly out of my element. (*uneasily*) Ordinarily, I sit back, let matters take their course...the way you people are obliged to let your dreams unfold. (*to ALYSSA*) But I couldn't resist. You're too adorable. Burke, do you mind? I'd like to be alone with your wife.

BURKE: Over my dead body.

NIGEL: Oh, I hope it won't come to that.

ALYSSA: Why me? Out of all the women in your universe?

NIGEL: Why did Zeus choose Leda?

ALYSSA: Zeus didn't choose Leda. You chose Leda for him.

NIGEL: Exactly. And now it's my turn.

(NIGEL *takes a step toward* ALYSSA. BURKE *interposes himself*.)

BURKE: Unh-unh, pal. Keep back! Tell me, how did you get here? Where's your spacecraft?

ALYSSA: Burke, stop badgering him.

BURKE: Shh, I'm entering into his delusion. It's standard therapeutic practice.

NIGEL: Oh my, he really is a “diehard skeptic,” isn’t he?

BURKE: What do you really look like?

NIGEL: Let’s not go there just now.

BURKE: (*skeptically*) Right. And the minute you start to have sex, you’ll turn into a monstrous insect with oily, dripping mouth parts.

(NIGEL *picks up the giant plastic frog.*)

NIGEL: Or maybe I’ll turn into a prince.

(*Sound of Cosmic Static, quickly resolving into Cosmic Morse Code.*)

ALYSSA: What’s that? What’s happening?

BURKE: Hold on. Something’s coming through.

(*The Cosmic Voice blasts in—a robotic female voice this time.*)

COSMIC VOICE: *BE WARNED: YOU’RE TALKING TO AN ESCAPEE.*

NIGEL: (*aside*) Oh dear.

BURKE: You see? I knew it. This guy’s a mental patient. Barking mad.

ALYSSA: Burke, come on. What about all those things he knew? Our pasts, our problems, our personalities, our nightmares—

BURKE: Psychotics have special powers. They pick up signals normal people don’t.

ALYSSA: Ohmigod. You’re the one who’s crazy! I’m so tired of your skepticism I could scream!

NIGEL: (*to BURKE*) You see where your scientific doubts have landed you. Time for a god to take over.

(NIGEL *moves toward* ALYSSA.)

BURKE: Get away from her. Hey! Did you hear me? Stop!

(NIGEL *starts to take* ALYSSA *in his arms.*)

ALYSSA: Please don't, Nigel.

NIGEL: Oh just call me Zeus.

(ALYSSA *squirms in his grasp.* BURKE *grabs* NIGEL, *pulls him loose from* ALYSSA. NIGEL *writhes with sudden pain.*)

NIGEL: OW!

ALYSSA: Nigel, what's wrong? Burke, you hurt him! You dislocated his shoulder!

NIGEL: No. It's *angina*. Here it comes again. (*another stab of pain*)
Aaah!

ALYSSA: Ohmigod, what's happening?

NIGEL: This is exactly what I was afraid of. She's angry with me.

ALYSSA: Who's "she"?

NIGEL: Or "he." Always felt like a "she." Giving me "heart trouble."
Putting the "pun" back in "punishment."

ALYSSA: Punishment for what?

NIGEL: Obviously, she's no fan of interspecies fornication. To her I'm nothing but a homewrecker.

ALYSSA: But can't you do something? Aren't you all-powerful?

NIGEL: No, don't you see, I'm really no better off than you. I'm just a character in someone else's virtual universe. Just as she's just a character in somebody else's simulation—ad infinitum, most likely. I went off-script, and in her universe that's unforgivable.

ALYSSA: Why did you go off-script?

NIGEL: Haven't I made that clear? Because I'm mad about you!

COSMIC VOICE: *(female) WHAT'S MORE, HE'S ARMED AND DANGEROUS.*

NIGEL: That's preposterous. Don't listen to her.

(BURKE grabs NIGEL again.)

NIGEL: What are you doing? Take your hands off me.

(BURKE digs in NIGEL's blazer, extracts a pistol.)

NIGEL: Oh good grief. She's pulling out all the stops now.

BURKE: Where'd you get this pistol? Who sold you a gun without a background check?

NIGEL: Believe me, I didn't know the gun was there. Please be careful with it.

BURKE: Why? According to you, it isn't real.

NIGEL: It's real enough for her purposes. Please put it away, I'm starting to fibrillate. If I drop dead of a heart attack, I promise you'll die with me. Both of you. Everybody on Earth. This whole universe will go out like a light. Do you really want that on your conscience?

BURKE: Alyssa, call the police.

NIGEL: Please don't. I can't take any more stress. Stop this, I'm begging you.

BURKE: You stop me. If I'm nothing but your pipe dream.

NIGEL: I would if I could. But obviously she's not letting me. *(to heaven)* I was only trying to help! I was trying to save their marriage! *(winces with pain)* Ow, all right, I made that up. Please, I'll go back on-script. I'll never invade my universe again. Oh dear...

(NIGEL *clutches his chest, sinks to the floor.*)

ALYSSA: Nigel! Ohmigod....Nigel?....Burke, he's not breathing....Nigel, wake up. Nigel, don't die. We want to live.

(ALYSSA *bends over NIGEL, administers mouth-to-mouth.*)

ALYSSA: Nothing's happening.

BURKE: Deeper.

ALYSSA: Deeper? Are you sure?

BURKE: Yeah. Go ahead. I can take it.

(ALYSSA *deepens the mouth-to-mouth kiss. Blackout. Absolute darkness.*)

ALYSSA: Ohmigod. Burke?

BURKE: Alyssa?

ALYSSA: What's happening?

BURKE: Alyssa, sweetheart, can you hear me?

ALYSSA: Yes, darling, I can hear you.

(*Spotlights on BURKE and ALYSSA, groping about in the surrounding darkness.*)

BURKE: Where are you? What's happening?

ALYSSA: Are we dying?

BURKE: Oh God. Is it too late? Alyssa, I love you. There. I've said it. I've been so afraid to say it. I was embarrassed. I was terrified. People say "I love you" all the time and it always sounds so hollow. But I didn't sound insincere, did I?

ALYSSA: No, darling.

BURKE: I meant it. With all my heart. I love you! I always have! I always will!

ALYSSA: I've always loved you! Never a doubt in my mind! Oh God, please don't let us die!

(Lights up. NIGEL is gone...except for his bowler hat and umbrella.)

BURKE: He's gone.

ALYSSA: He went back on script.

BURKE: You saved his life. You saved our lives. You saved our universe! *(pause)* Did he kiss back?

ALYSSA: Yes, he kissed back.

BURKE: And?

ALYSSA: His mouth was kinda weird.

BURKE: Weird how?

ALYSSA: Kind of sticky? Sort of oily? More than one tongue?

BURKE: Yep. That does it. I'll never doubt anything again.

(Sound of Cosmic Morse Code.)

BURKE: Oh boy, here we go.

(BURKE sits down at the computer.)

ALYSSA: What's it saying? He's not coming back, is he? I'm getting scared again.

BURKE: Shh, Alyssa. Your fear is only an illusion.

ALYSSA: I know! That's what's scaring me!

BURKE: Hold on. I'm translating.

COSMIC VOICE: *(male)* **SO WHAT IF YOU DON'T EXIST? KISS HER YOURSELF, YOU BLOODY FOOL!**

BURKE: God has spoken.

(BURKE takes ALYSSA in his arms, kisses her. Pause.)

COSMIC VOICE: *(fading) THAT'S THE TICKET. GLAD TO BE OF SERVICE. DON'T EMPTY THE FROG. CARRY ON, MY CHILDREN....*

(The Cosmic Voice fades out, dissolving to a Cosmic Melody, as BURKE and ALYSSA kiss passionately and the lights go down. END OF PLAY.)