



Almost an Evening

By *Ethan Coen*

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Three satiric plays by Oscar-winning screenwriter Ethan Coen

Raising Arizona, *Fargo*, *No Country for Old Men*, *Burn After Reading*—the Coen brothers' films are some of the most critically acclaimed and iconic of our time. Now, one half of the duo, Ethan Coen, adds playwriting to his eclectic bio. In these three short plays that ran to sold-out audiences Off-Broadway in 2008, the theme is hell—both on earth and in the hereafter.

In “Waiting,” a man faces an uncertain future in an uncertain location that seems to be some kind of waiting room. The anxiety and despair hark back to dramas of the '50s—Sartre, Beckett, Pinter.

“Four Benches” depicts an unlikely meeting in a steam room between a straight-talking Texan and an uptight Brit. Both men learn from the encounter, though only one survives it.

In “Debate,” the cantankerous god of the Old Testament roundly abuses the mealy-mouthed god of the New. His profanity and ill humor receive a startling comeuppance, and further reversals and changes of point of view lead to a denouement that is no more preposterous than anything else in the play.

Clever, provocative, and as engaging as the best fiction, these plays showcase yet another talent of one of our most celebrated contemporary writers.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the production of *Almost an Evening*

“Theatergoers nostalgic for the urbane, mind-teasing divertissements that once flourished Off-Broadway . . . should leave happily hungry.”

—*New York Times*

“Boisterous and fun.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Let’s hope Coen finds time to write more plays.”

—*Star-Ledger*

About the Author

When not writing plays, poetry, or short stories, ETHAN COEN makes movies with his brother, Joel Coen. After 13 films, the Coen brothers have one of the most beloved and critically acclaimed bodies of work in the history of cinema.

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WAITING

A drab waiting room.

Mr. Nelson, in a suit, sits waiting.

A high counter separates him from a receptionist who sits with her back to us. She types.

And types.

Mr. Nelson clears his throat.

He glances at his watch.

He looks around, reaches into his jacket.

Without looking up from her typing (nor will she ever):

Receptionist: No smoking.

Nelson’s hand freezes, then slowly emerges from his jacket, empty.

He looks around.

He looks at his watch.

He glances down at the side table next to him, picks up the two magazines displayed there, looks from one to the other.

Nelson: Are there any other magazines?

Receptionist: No.

He looks at the first magazine.

Nelson: Highlights for Children.

The receptionist continues typing.

He looks at the second magazine.

Nelson: U.S. News & World Report.

The receptionist continues typing.

He squints at the second magazine.

Nelson: Last April.

The receptionist yanks the sheet out of her typewriter. She briefly proofs it against a laminated reference sheet before inserting a new piece of paper and resuming typing.

Mr. Nelson puts down the magazines.

He looks around.

He rises and heads for a small pebbled glass window downstage.

Receptionist: It's sealed.

He freezes.

He slowly turns and goes back to his chair.

He drums his fingers.

He looks around. This time, however, as he faces the fourth wall, something dawns on him.

He stares.

Alarmed, he looks all around.

He looks suspiciously at the receptionist.

Nelson: There's something funny about this room, isn't there?

Receptionist: Yes.

He waits for her to continue.

She only types.

He elaborates:

Nelson: There's no door.

Receptionist: No.

He nods.

Nelson: So--how did...

He thinks.

Again, something dawns. He smiles and, nodding comprehension, bounces a pointing finger at the receptionist.

Nelson: I'm dead, aren't I?

Receptionist: Yes.

He nods, pleased to have figured it out.

He looks at the room again with new appreciation.

Nelson: So this is hell.

Receptionist: No.

Taken aback, he picks up the two magazines and looks from one to the other.

Nelson: Heaven?

Receptionist: No.

He puts down the magazines, puzzled.

Nelson: So...it's a sort of...purgatory.

Receptionist: Sort of.

Nelson: So...it's not eternal.

Receptionist: No. Damn!

She stops typing, rolls the paper up a couple of lines, shakes some Wite-Out, paints it onto the paper, blows on it.

Nelson: So...how long do I spend in here?

Receptionist: Eight hundred and twenty-two years.

She rolls the paper down and resumes typing.

Again Mr. Nelson looks around, trying to imagine it.

Nelson: And only you to talk to.

Receptionist: I don't talk.

He chuckles.

Nelson: But that's a...what do you call it? When it contradicts itself?

Receptionist: I can answer questions for six more minutes. After the first ten minutes, I only type.

He laughs.

Nelson: Oh come on! I've been here more than four minutes!

She types.

His smile evaporates.

He looks at his watch.

He looks around.

He looks at the receptionist.

Nelson: Eight hundred and how many y--

Receptionist: Twenty-two.

He nods. He shakes his head. He sucks a tooth, thinking.

Nelson: What if I have to make pee-pee?

Receptionist: You won't.

He nods thoughtfully.

He looks down at the side table.

Nelson: Do they ever change the magazines?

The receptionist gives a short humorless hoot.

Mr. Nelson nods. He looks around.

Nelson: Well eventually--I mean, once I've served my time--how...

He nods at the fourth wall.

Nelson: How do I get out?

Receptionist: After seven hundred and fifty years, they put a door in.

He stares at the fourth wall, trying to picture it.

He stares for quite a while.

The receptionist types on.

* * *

A plain office. A man sits behind a desk, writing.

He writes for a while.

There is a knock.

Man: Yes?

The door opens hesitantly.

Man: Yes, come in.

Mr. Nelson enters, still wearing the same suit, clutching a piece of paper.

The writing man rises and extends his hand.

Man: Mr. Nelson? I'm Mr. Sebatacheck.

Nelson beams.

Nelson: Hello.

Sebatacheck: Have a seat.

Nelson: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Sebatacheck.

Sebatacheck: The typist, where you were waiting, when you left did she give you a...

Nelson: Yes!

Nelson holds up the piece of paper.

Sebatacheck: May I?

Nelson: Yes, yes!

He hands it across.

Sebatacheck: Great.

Sebatacheck keeps up a line of banter as he carefully checks Nelson's paper against a plastic-laminated reference sheet. His speech is directed down at his desk as he busily refers between Nelson's paper and his master sheet.

Sebatacheck: Well, I'll bet you've had enough of that place.

Still beaming, Nelson shakes his head.

Nelson: Boy! Phooph!

Sebatacheck: Ready for heaven then?

Nelson: Boy! I've been ready for...

He shakes his head.

Sebatacheck: Ready for quite a number of years, I would think.

Nelson: Boy!

Sebatacheck: Some folks say the first few years are the toughest. Although I don't suppose it ever really...

Nelson: Mm-mm. No sir.

Sebatacheck: But then, you'll like heaven. Everybody does--well, listen to me!

He chuckles at himself, still checking the paperwork.

Sebatacheck: Talk about stating the obvious!

Nelson laughs along with him.

Sebatacheck: Okay, let me just...what?--no!

He squints at Nelson's paper, his smile gone.

Sebatacheck: No!

He shakes his head, then laughs with disbelief.

Alarmed, Nelson looks from the paper to Sebatacheck.

Sebatacheck sits back in his chair, laughing and shaking his head.

Sebatacheck: No no no no no! Achh.

Still smiling and shaking his head, he makes a helpless gesture at the paper. He enunciates carefully at

Nelson:

Sebatacheck: Eight thousand and twenty-two years.

* * *

The waiting room again.

The receptionist types.

Nelson sits in his chair, bitterly jabbing a finger toward her.

Nelson: Eight hundred and twenty-two years. You sat RIGHT there. That's right, lady. I'm talking to you.

You sat RIGHT there and you said Eight hundred and twenty-two years. I asked you to REPEAT it. You said it TWICE. Eight hundred and twenty-two years. I'm talking to you, lady. YOU. Miss busy-screwing-up-somebody-else's-inforMation. You think I don't remember? You think just because it was a few thousand years ago I don't remember? What did I, confuse it with something else you said in the last six thousand five hundred years? You think maybe I got CONFUSED with all the amusing chitter-chatter SPEWING out of your mouth? And let me tell you something else, lady. You think I'm not gonna tell them about you? About how YOU screwed up? About how you gave me WRONG information?...That's right, lady. You type. You type while they LET you type. A position of TRUST. A position of AUTHORITY. Important DOCUMENTS. And you. YOU. Mental MIDGET. Sure. You type. Enjoy it while you can, lady...Heeyeah!

* * *

The office again.

A different man, McMartin, sits behind the desk.

On the desk are two sheets of paper, Nelson's report and the laminated reference page.

Nelson sits in front of the desk but is sprawled forward, elbows resting on the desktop, one hand holding a business card up toward McMartin.

Nelson is sobbing.

He sobs for some time, motionless, displaying the card.

McMartin helplessly shakes his head. Finally he turns two palms up.

McMartin: I don't even know why they brought you here.

Nelson brings the words out between hacking sobs:

Nelson: Because...I've waited...eight thousand...and twenty-two...years!

McMartin: I understand.

Nelson: Eight thousand...and twenty-two...years!

McMartin: Yes. I understand. But, Mr. Nelson--your term is twenty-eight thousand and twenty-two years.

Nelson: That's not...what Mr....Sebatacheck said!

McMartin: I don't understand how he could possibly--

Nelson: He checked it! He triple checked it! I begged him to, because I didn't think it could be that long! He guaranteed me it was right!

McMartin: I don't understand how he could--

Nelson: He said he'd be here when I came back! Or if he wasn't, he said he could be reached! Mr.

Sebatacheck! He swore to me! He gave me his card!

McMartin: There's no way he could've--

Nelson: Please take it! Please take it! Mr. Sebatacheck!

McMartin sighs. He leans forward and takes the card.

Nelson: Mr. Sebatacheck!

McMartin looks at the card. Dubiously shaking his head, he drags the phone across his desk.

It is a rotary phone. Referring to the card, McMartin slowly...dials...seven...digits.

After a beat he dials...four...more...digits.

He leans back for a long listening wait.

Suddenly:

McMartin: Mr. Sebatacheck, please...Mr. McMartin, in admissions...I see...I see...I see.

He hangs up.

He looks thoughtfully at Nelson.

He draws a deep breath.

McMartin: Since Mr. Sebatacheck cannot be reached, I'm afraid I have no choice but to--

Nelson: Why?! Why can't he be reached?

McMartin: --I'm afraid you'll have to serve out the balance of your term.

Nelson: Mr. Sebatacheck!

McMartin: Your term is twenty-eight thousand and twenty-two years. I--

Nelson: He said eight thousand! Why can't he be reached?

McMartin draws another deep breath.

McMartin: Mr. Sebatacheck has passed away.

Nelson stares, stunned.

Nelson: Puh--

He laughs, incredulously.

Nelson: Passed away?! That's not...how could...Passed away?!

He rises, laughing hysterically.

He slams the back of one hand into the palm of the other to further stress the two stressed syllables:

Nelson: That's absurd!

* * *

The waiting room.

Nelson sits waiting in the same chair. He stares straight ahead.

The receptionist types.

The tableau holds for some time.

* * *

The office again.

Nelson hovers anxiously over the shoulder of a new man, Polhemus, who refers back and forth between Nelson's report and the laminated plastic reference sheet.

Nelson agitatedly waves another paper.

Nelson: And this is a notarized affidavit I had McMartin sign, guaranteeing that I could leave after twenty-eight thousand and twenty-two years. And I had him specify there, you'll notice I had him specify--

Polhemus: Yeah.

Nelson: --I had him specify it was not just on his own authority but by authority of, and binding upon, management, its agents, its nominees and assigns--

Polhemus: Yeah yeah.

Nelson: --in perpetuity, so that--

Polhemus: Acchhh.

He disgustedly flips down his pencil and leans back.

Nelson: --so that...what?

Polhemus shakes his head.

Nelson: What?

Polhemus grimaces.

Polhemus: McMartin really screwed this up.

For a moment Nelson is afraid to speak.

In an absent sing-song, his eyes still on the magazine:

Sebatacheck: Ye-es.

The door slowly opens.

Nelson, clutching a sheet of paper, takes a shuffling step in, turns, closes the door behind him, turns again, and shuffles into the office. He is an abject, beaten man, his voice hollow, his manner pathetic:

Nelson: Okay. Can I go now?

Sebatacheck: Excuse me?

Sebatacheck's eyes slide lazily off the magazine and, resting on Nelson, grow puzzled.

Nelson is slowly raising his report.

Nelson: Can I go to heaven now? Here's my re--

Nelson's eyes widen. He gasps.

Nelson: Mr...Sebatacheck!

Sebatacheck is still puzzled.

Sebatacheck: Yes?

Nelson: They said...they told me you were dead!

Sebatacheck: I was dead? That's absurd.

Nelson nods.

Nelson: That's what I said.

Sebatacheck: What do you have there?

Zombielike, Nelson extends the paper.

Nelson: My paperwork.

Still puzzled, and a little irritated, Sebatacheck takes the paper and looks between it and Nelson throughout Nelson's forlorn narrative:

Nelson: I don't think there should be any problem now. Last time, after I missed the shuttle, I lost my--

Sebatacheck: The shuttle?

Nelson: To heaven. I lost my temper because it meant spending an extra ten years in the waiting room, so they--

Sebatacheck: Extra ten years?

Nelson: Ten more years, til the next shuttle. But I'd already waited the first eight hundred and twenty-two years; and then seven thousand two hundred more when it turned out I was supposed to serve eight thousand and twenty-two years--that's when I met you, Mr. Sebatacheck--and then an extra twenty thousand years just because of a stupid mistake that Mr. McMartin made, so the extra ten years made me lose my temper. And then they told me I wasn't allowed to lose my temper and I'd have to serve an extra ninety-nine thousand years for cursing. So, yes, I cursed some more but then I stopped, and I haven't cursed once in ninety-eight thousand four hundred and forty-nine years.

Sebatacheck gazes at him for a beat.

Sebatacheck: I bet that's a record.

Nelson: So now I've been in purgatory for a hundred and twenty-seven thousand and thirty-two years--

Sebatacheck: Purga--

Something hits Sebatacheck and forces out a laugh.

Nelson: . . . and I'm awfully tired of it so if there aren't any other problems, can I go to heaven now?

Sebatacheck: Purgatory...

He is lost in reminiscence. Nelson prods:

Nelson: I don't mind if I have to sit at a tram stop for a year or two.

Sebatacheck: I'm sorry. I just realized--you're from before Disclosure.

Nelson: Huh?

Sebatacheck wears a smile of nostalgia.

Sebatacheck: Jesus. I'd forgotten how we used to...

Nelson: Disclosure?

Sebatacheck: Yeah, they decided to stop kidding people. We tell them up front now.

Nelson: Tell them?

Sebatacheck: That they're in hell.

Nelson can't quite take this in.

Nelson: Who is.

Sebatacheck: You are. You people.

Nelson solemnly shakes his head.

Nelson: No, I've been in purgatory. I've been waiting to go to heaven. In the waiting room.

Sebatacheck shakes his head. His speech is patient, a little too loud, and meticulously enunciated, as if Nelson were a dull child.

Sebatacheck: We were pulling your leg. We were teasing. You stay here.

Nelson: . . . Teasing?

Sebatacheck: Yes. False hope. But we've stopped doing that. We stopped a long time ago.

Nelson: So...When am I going to heaven?

Sebatacheck: You're not going to heaven. We were just pretending. But now we're telling people. They've decided that despair is more effective, so now we tell people. You're in hell. It's eternal.

Nelson: So...I'm staying.

Sebatacheck: That's right. Forever. We tell people now--less fun for us; more effective for you people.

Nelson: I see.

Sebatacheck: It's more effective that way.

Nelson: I see.

Sebatacheck: After Disclosure they cut us back. Couldn't string people along if we wanted to. Don't have the manpower.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Geraldine Davis:

Have you spare time for any day? What do you do when you have far more or little spare time? Sure, you can choose the suitable activity to get spend your time. Any person spent their very own spare time to take a go walking, shopping, or went to often the Mall. How about open as well as read a book called Almost an Evening? Maybe it is being best activity for you. You realize beside you can spend your time along with your favorite's book, you can better than before. Do you agree with the opinion or you have various other opinion?

Norma Eberhart:

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Roxie Gregory:

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