

GRAVE

a play for a cemetery

by
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

OLIVER-- A spry man in his sixties. A professional grave digger.

TERRY-- A rough man-boy around twenty. Oliver's assistant.

TIME AND PLACE

The graveyard behind a small country church in the Midwest. The day before a funeral, sometime in the afternoon.

NOTE ON DIALECT

These characters speak with a Midwestern Scandinavian accent. This accent is common in northern and central Minnesota, particularly in the region between Brainerd and Fargo.

PERFORMANCES

GRAVE was first performed as a lab production at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in May 1993. Ernest James Hall, II, directed it. The cast was as follows:

Oliver-- John Jackson

Terry-- Thom Jackson

GRAVE was subsequently produced at City Lights Theatre in San Jose, California in August 1994. Jim Marbury directed the play. The characters were played by:

Oliver-- Michael Collins

Terry-- Geoffrey Nixon

The Prairie Wind Players in Barrett, Minnesota produced GRAVE in March 1999. The production also toured to the MACT Festival in Hibbing, MN. The characters were played by:

Oliver-- Dayle Ray

Terry-- John Paul Jones

[The graveyard behind a small country church. The back of the country church can be seen, complete with its white sides and white steeple. Gravestones of various ages and sizes, some tall and some short, are all around. Some gravestones are broken off, and their tops now lean beside the base. The more modern flat stones are slowly taking over the graveyard. Plastic flowers sit in permanent pots.]

[OLIVER and TERRY are standing waist deep in a grave they are digging. A mound of dirt has been heaped up along side of them. Both have long narrow shovels they use for accurate cutting into the soil.]

Dig your own damn grave!

TERRY

Terry—

OLIVER

[TERRY throws his shovel on the grass. He crawls out.]

Attitude, attitude, attitude. That's all you people give me!

TERRY

Terry!

OLIVER

So it's not perfect. I can't fault that.

TERRY

IT'S NOT SQUARE ENOUGH! Look at my side. It's like a rectangle of ground was pulled out. Ripe for the coffin to slide in. That's called craftsmanship. Compare my end to your end.

OLIVER

[TERRY compares the ends.]

Didn't want to be here anyway.

TERRY

Typical. How you ever gonna become anything?

OLIVER

TERRY

Y'know, if people would give me a real chance, maybe I wouldn't be such a waste.

OLIVER

Terry, the whole family's rallying behind you.

TERRY

Get off it. The whole family. That'll be the day. I know what everybody says about me. Terry's the slow one. And I know they do, Uncle Ollie.

OLIVER

Get back in the hole.

TERRY

Only my first grave and I'm booted on my ass.

OLIVER

Walk away and that's it! You'll shoot your chance with me. I happen to be the last authentic gravedigger in a tri-county area, so that should say something about your future in this particular profession.

TERRY

There ain't any future. Most graves are dug with diesel backhoes.

OLIVER

You better not bring up those mechanical monsters. Folks around here, folks that count anyway, hire me.

TERRY

Ease up on it! You know this is a dying business.

OLIVER

A grave only matters when it's dug by hand... Dying business? Was that intended as a joke? I've heard 'em all, y'know.

TERRY

All of what?

OLIVER

THE JOKES! So you can't impress me with any smart wit you might've heard.

TERRY

I'm not taking this. See you at Christmas.

[TERRY starts to walk away.]

OLIVER

If someone were digging your grave, wouldn't you want the corners square?

TERRY

No one's digging my grave. Not for a long while.

OLIVER

The way you drive that Trans Am? Alright, I'll leave you alone. But just think about something. Let's say we dig the whole thing like your end. Would you show it to a congregation?

[Pause.]

TERRY

There's a straightness to your work I admire.

OLIVER

Nothing better than the quiet beauty of a grave. The home we're digging is gonna be around till end times.

TERRY

It is sorta grand, I'll give you that.

OLIVER

Wanna give it another go?

TERRY

I don't know. I would. Y'know I really would.

OLIVER

Your choice. But hurry up. A storm's comin'.

TERRY

Where? I don't see any storm.

OLIVER

It's gonna rain. Arthritis is acting up in my knee.

TERRY

Right. Just teasin' again ain't you?

OLIVER

Fine. Go home then.

[TERRY walks back and jumps into the grave.]

TERRY

I do gotta lotta bills coming up.

OLIVER

Car payments, huh? Then tell you what. If you want work, and I got my doubts, but... let's say you do. If your side matches mine exactly, you'll help on the next job.

TERRY

I will?

OLIVER

Mm-hm.

TERRY

But... exactly the same?

OLIVER

If you're a good gravedigger, you start today. This is serious work.

TERRY

I can match that side.

[TERRY starts digging.]

OLIVER

Here's the condition then. By the time I finish my side, and I'm three feet shy of grave level, you better be just about done.

TERRY

How can I... you're way down there!

OLIVER

That's the condition. Prove you're hungry, Terry, real hungry for the work.

TERRY

Being tough now, huh? See, that's what I'm talking about with this attitude problem.

OLIVER

I thought you'd enjoy a race.

TERRY

I can do without your teasing! Just give up on that. Believe me, I'm plenty hungry.

[Pause.]

I'll take you up on it. I can dig it faster and I'll even make your precious corners square.

Shake then.

OLIVER

You going that far?

TERRY

Shake or it's no deal.

OLIVER

How about we add a side bet?

TERRY

I don't gamble my money.

OLIVER

No, not money. Whoever finishes their side last has to buy the beer.

TERRY

Hm. Wouldn't pass up a free bottle.

OLIVER

We'll see whose is free. So whatta say?

TERRY

You sure do have a talent for livening up things.

OLIVER

[TERRY spits on his hand and holds it out.]

Bet.

TERRY

[OLIVER does the same.]

Bet.

OLIVER

[They shake hands. They assume their positions on each side of the grave.]