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A Number



Synopsis

Caryl Churchill, hailed by Tony Kushner as "the greatest living English language playwright," has turned her extraordinary dramatic gifts to the subject of human cloning; how might a man feel to discover that he is only one in a number of identical copies. And which one of him is the original. . . ? Churchill's harrowing bioethics fable leaves us with a number of things to chew on. • • • Kris Vire, Time Out Chicago; A Number confirms Churchill's status as the first dramatist of the 21st century. On the face of it, it is human cloning; Like all Churchill's best plays, A Number deals with both the essentials and the extremities of human experience; The questions this brilliant, harrowing play asks are almost unanswerable, which is why they must be asked. • • • Sunday Times; Caryl Churchill's magnificent new play only last an hour but contains more drama, and more ideas, than most writers manage in a dozen full-length works. • • • Daily Telegraph Caryl Churchill has written for the stage, television and radio. A renowned and prolific playwright, her plays include Cloud Nine, Top Girls, Far Away, Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?, Bliss, Love and Information, Mad Forest and A Number. In 2002, she received the Obie Lifetime Achievement Award and 2010, she was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame.

Book Information

Paperback: 64 pages

Publisher: Theatre Communications Group (May 1, 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1559362251

ISBN-13: 978-1559362252

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.2 x 7.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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Customer Reviews

On a routine visit to hospital, Bernard receives some shocking news: he's been cloned. When he confronts his father, he finds out it's worse: he is just one in an unknown number of genetically identical sons. But is Bernard the original or a copy? Does it matter? And what's going to happen

when two other versions come knocking at the door? "A Number" takes the ethical labyrinth of genetic engineering, and the timeless debate over nature versus nurture, and reconstitutes them as a bracing family drama. As Bernard and his "brothers" wrestle with a range of very human responses to the news - shock, anger, horror and delight - their anxious father ducks and weaves, grudgingly revealing their histories and the anguished choices he's made. The play's themes might be borrowed from science fiction and philosophy, but its scale is confrontingly domestic. There are no speeches, no grand pronouncements, no finely honed philosophical dialogues here. It consists almost entirely of the halting, taciturn exchanges that usually pass for conversation between men, especially fathers and sons. This makes the issues real for us. It grounds them in the eternal questions and doubts that hover over every child and every parent who wishes they could cancel their mistakes. "A Number" looks fearlessly at what is often left over when the excitement of new science fades: damaged people. In this case, they must confront not only what's been done to them, but the more terrifying issue of just what they actually are. By extension, it's something we're invited to ponder about ourselves. As one "son" reminds us: "We've got ninety-nine percent the same genes as any other person. We've got ninety percent the same genes as a chimpanzee. We've got thirty percent the same as a lettuce." So what makes me different?

A father, in his sixties, talks with his son, who is thirty-five. The son has just discovered that the hospital where he was delivered used his embryo cells to create a clone of him, or was it an indeterminate number of clones? What should he and his father do? Sue? The father, in his sixties, talks to his son, who is forty. They talk about the discovery made by his son, the same son, aged thirty-five. His son, forty, is indignant that his father sent him away and allowed the hospital to create a copy of him "from some bit of my body some" The father interjects "it didn't hurt you" "what bit," the son asks. "I don't know what" "not a limb, they clearly didn't take a limb like a starfish and grow" "a speck" "or half of me chopped through like a worm and grow the other" "a scraping cells a speck a speck" "a speck yes because we're talking about that microscope world of giant blobs and globs" "that's all" "and they take this painless scrape little cells of me and kept that and you threw away the rest of me away" "no" "and had a new one made" "no" "yes" "yes" "yes" yes" We have entered a world of Beckett-like discourse but it's about a resolutely modern topic, and the dialogue is more focused than in Beckett's poem-plays. Toward the end of this scene in Churchill's play, son #1 asks his father, "Do you recognize me now?" That's what the play is about. How much of living is a matter of pure genetics, the genes we have inherited? How much is our nurture? What are we ultimately, our genes or our growing up? The picture is complicated further when son #3, also

thirty-five, enters. (All three sons are played by the same actor.) Horrible things have happened to son #1 and son #2, but as son#3 says, ""There are nineteen more of us.

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