

A GRAVEYARD WHERE DEAD AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS GO

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

By Alexis Kozak

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**A GRAVEYARD WHERE DEAD
AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS GO**

By Alexis Kozak

SYNOPSIS: An Unknown Playwright wakes up in a graveyard with American playwriting giants Arthur Miller, Wendy Wasserstein, and August Wilson. In order to get this "insult playwright" to leave them alone, the residents agree to help him get his ten-minute play published. They slip in a few lessons about making it as a playwright in America.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ARTHUR MILLER Male, late seventies. Cranky. (109 lines)

WENDY WASSERSTEIN Female, late fifties, early sixties. Gentle, caring, mother-like. (125 lines)

AUGUST WILSON..... Male, late fifties, early sixties. Not the brightest. (104 lines)

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT Male, early thirties. Unknown amateur playwright. (135 lines)

STAGE MANAGER..... Responds to character and actor requests during the play. The Stage Manager may also play some or all of the roles from the playwrights' scripts at the beginning of each scene, as well as giving offstage voices. (31 lines)

SETTING

A graveyard, where dead American playwrights go.

TIME: The present.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Though there are some inside jokes and references to the theatre company for which this play was written, they should be altered to fit your specific company.

A Graveyard Where Dead American Playwrights Go was originally produced by Polaris North, Inc., in New York City in December 2006 with the following cast:

STAGE MANAGER.....	Matt Daly
ARTHUR MILLER	Phillip Filiato
WENDY WASSERSTEIN	Nancy Finn
AUGUST WILSON.....	Herb Foster Quebec
UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT	Alexis Kozak
Director	Barbara Panas
Stage Manager	Cara DeCicco

DO NOT COPY

This play is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Carol Anne Kozak, who showed me where the dead playwrights were buried.

And to Barbara, who thought they had more to say.

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

SETTING:

A graveyard, where dead American playwrights go. There are four blocks onstage which represent four gravestones. They are marked, in chalk, with the names of America's recently deceased playwrights: ARTHUR MILLER, WENDY WASSERSTEIN, and AUGUST WILSON. The fourth gravestone is unmarked. There is also a bench. MILLER sits on his gravestone. WASSERSTEIN sits on the bench. WILSON sits on WASSERSTEIN's grave, but with his back to the audience. They are frozen. There is a STAGE MANAGER's desk. The STAGE MANAGER's desk has a stool, a script for the play, a stopwatch, a bell. There is also a box of props, with "Props" written on it in chalk. At the desk sits, you guessed it, the STAGE MANAGER. He wears suspenders, down.

STAGE MANAGER: *(To the audience.)* This play is called "A Graveyard Where Dead American Playwrights Go." It's supposed to be a comedy, but I don't know. I haven't seen it yet. It was written by Alexis Kozak, directed by *(Insert director's name.)*. In it, you will see *(Insert actors' names.)*. We are in the cemetery where dead American playwrights go. Are there any playwrights in the audience? Well, pay attention, because you might come here, too, someday. I'm the Stage Manager. If you need anything, just holler. People usually do. I respond to requests from the actors and from the characters. That's my purpose: to help people. I also get to play a lot of roles, too. I like that.

STAGE MANAGER pulls his SUSPENDERS up to become THE OLD MAN. THE OLD MAN speaks with an old man voice and has an old man body.

You've joined us just in time. We are about to watch a play called *Death of a Salesman*. You may have heard of it. It's by Arthur Miller. It won the Pulitzer Prize. Arthur Miller seems to think that's quite a big deal. Excuse me a moment. I have to get ready to play Linda Loman.

STAGE MANAGER puts on a black veil and stands over MILLER's grave, a mock Linda Loman from the soliloquy from the end of "Death of a Salesman."

When STAGE MANAGER begins to speak, the playwrights unfreeze.

A flute begins, not far away, playing behind her speech. The STAGE MANAGER has a stopwatch and times himself, starting when he starts to talk.

STAGE MANAGER: *(With grand histrionics! As Linda Loman.)* "I'll be with you in a minute. Go on, Charley . . . I want to, just for a minute. I never had a chance to say goodbye."

MILLER: *(To STAGE MANAGER, hurrying him along.)* Go! Go! Go!

WASSERSTEIN: *(From the bench.)* She's never going to finish this soliloquy in a minute. It's impossible.

STAGE MANAGER stops acting.

STAGE MANAGER: That was twenty seconds.

MILLER: Well, maybe if you weren't so grand about your acting.

STAGE MANAGER: Shall I do it again?

MILLER: Yes. Start talking right away. As soon as the flute goes, you go. *(To the sound operator, offstage.)* Start the flute again. *(Flute starts.)* Aaaaaaannnnnd go!

STAGE MANAGER: *(Missing the start of the flute.)* "Forgive me, dear. I can't cry."

MILLER: No! Cut! Stop! *(Flute and STAGE MANAGER stop.)* You start talking at the same time that the flute starts. Do you think you can do this for me?

STAGE MANAGER: Yes.

MILLER: *(To offstage sound operator.)* Take the flute from the beginning . . . Flute! *(Flute starts. To STAGE MANAGER.)* And, go! Go, go, go!

STAGE MANAGER: *(In a rush.)* Okay. Where was I? *(Rattling off a list.)* “Just for a minute. No chance to say goodbye. Can’t cry.” Yadda, yadda, yadda.

Flute continues over scene.

WASSERSTEIN: I’ll bet she could do this in a theatrical minute.

STAGE MANAGER stops acting.

MILLER: I hate theatrical minutes. They’re like football minutes. They can last a half hour.

Flute music continues. AUGUST WILSON spins around on WASSERSTEIN’s grave. He holds a bucket of chicken.

WILSON: Art, if you were so worried about being realistic, maybe you should have written, “Give me a little time, Charlie,” or “Can I have five minutes, Charlie?” Something like that.

WASSERSTEIN: What are you doing in my grave?

WILSON: *(Suggestively.)* I was getting me some of that forty calorie a teaspoonful bleached white sugar.

WASSERSTEIN: August, I told you already. I haven’t any milk. I haven’t any eggs. And, most of all, I haven’t any bleached white sugar. My cupboard is bare. Get it?

WILSON: *(Suggestively.)* I like your cupboard bare.

WASSERSTEIN: Arthur, tell him to stop.

MILLER: August, stop.

WILSON: Ok, dead white male.

WASSERSTEIN: August.

WILSON: What? I ain’t telling him something he don’t know. He’s dead, he’s white, and he’s a male.

MILLER: Where’d you get that chicken?

WILSON: From that guy.

A head appears in the grave that is unmarked.

MILLER: *(To the UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT.)* Hey, fella. *(This goes unnoticed.)* Hey, pal.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT speaks in gibberish.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: *(With hands pressed over his ears.)*
Ohalsaejlckhhjfsalkfdg. *(Stop the flute!)*

MILLER: What did he say?

WASSERSTEIN: I couldn't understand him.

WILSON: I think he said, stop the flute.

MILLER: *(To STAGE MANAGER.)* Would you stop the damn flute?
(Flute stops.) Hey, kid. What did you say your name was?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: *(Signaling towards the blank tombstone.)* Alkkjdsikjlc,mnwelkrjyereitythjggk. *(If you don't have a name, you don't have a voice.)*

WILSON: I think he said, if you don't have a name, you don't have a voice.

MILLER: You speak gibberish?

WILSON: I spent a lot of time in Pittsburg.

WASSERSTEIN: Let's give him a name, so he can talk.
(UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT motions the symbols for "pen and paper.") Write it down? You want us to write it down.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: *(Signaling to the blank gravestone.)*
Alkkerlkhjsdfkflkj. *(Do you have a pen?)*

WASSERSTEIN: *(As if talking to someone who does not speak English.)* No pen here.

WILSON: I have chalk.

MILLER: Where the hell did you get chalk?

WILSON: *(Laughs.)* I smuggled it in the only place they didn't check.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT becomes excited by the appearance of the chalk. UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT begins to make wild gesticulations towards the blank stone.

WASSERSTEIN: I think he wants us to write his name on the stone.

WILSON: What are we gonna call him?

MILLER: Let me get real creative here and call him the Unknown Playwright.

WILSON: I like it. It's got a nice ring.

WASSERSTEIN: Well, write it.

WILSON signals the STAGE MANAGER. The STAGE MANAGER takes chalk from WILSON and scrawls "UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT" on the UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT's gravestone.

MILLER: Now, what have you been trying to say, boy?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: *(Gasping, as if out of breath from the gibberish ordeal. To MILLER.)* What does the flute mean?

MILLER: How the hell should I know? I'm not a director.

WASSERSTEIN: We use sound effects in our plays sometimes.

WILSON: As symbols.

MILLER: The vaguer the better.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: That sound effect thing is a great idea. I'm going to try that in one of my plays.

MILLER, WASSERSTEIN, WILSON, and the STAGE MANAGER all laugh.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: What?

WILSON: You're dead.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Dead?

MILLER: These gravestones, not a theatrical convention. They are real.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: How did I die?

WASSERSTEIN: The worst thing about this place is that we don't get the Writers' Guild Newsletter, so we don't have a real connection to what goes on in the world of the living. If I knew you were coming, I would have baked you a cake. Except baking a cake is a typical female errand and therefore repressive.

WILSON: We knew somebody died. We just didn't know who.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: How did you know?

WILSON: There's a bell that rings when an American playwright dies.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Wow! So, I am actually considered an American playwright?

WASSERSTEIN: Well, the bell rang.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Holy shit! That's awesome.

MILLER: Language, language.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I forgot, you old guys don't like language in the theatre. Wow, I'm a playwright.

MILLER: You don't have a name?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: I don't have a name for myself yet. I'm no one you would have ever heard of.

WASSERSTEIN: Are you Adam Rapp?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Who?

WASSERSTEIN: Exactly.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: (*Climbing out of his grave.*) Well, who are you guys? (*To MILLER.*) You, I recognize from the flute and the soliloquy. You are Arthur Miller. (*To WASSERSTEIN and WILSON.*) Now, you two I'm not so sure about.

WILSON: (*To WASSERSTEIN.*) Give me my five bucks.

WASSERSTEIN: For what?

WILSON: They always recognize Arthur.

MILLER: With a face like this?

WILSON: Why's Arthur the recognizable one?

WASSERSTEIN: He married up.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: I'm sorry. Who are you? (*WASSERSTEIN and WILSON signal to their gravestones.*) Oh, of course. Wendy Wasserstein and August Wilson. Holy cow! You two are famous. I guess what they say is true. It doesn't matter if you have nothing to say, as long as you say it real loud.

WILSON laughs aloud, enjoying the little joke.

WASSERSTEIN: August, stop laughing. I don't think he meant that as a joke.

MILLER: You know what? I don't like this lad very much.

WASSERSTEIN: He's a little rude and irreverent.

MILLER: August?

WILSON: The boy gave me a bucket of fried chicken. I ain't complaining.

MILLER: Young man, I think the three of us would appreciate it if you just stuck to your own grave and left us alone.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Absolutely not.

WILSON: Excuse me?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: I'm an insult playwright.

MILLER: I've never heard of that.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: It's easy. You start with just the smallest bit of information on someone and then you just keep hitting them on it. Like you, Wendy. I know you write boring feminist plays. August, you write plays about black people. Arthur, you write plays about Jewish capitalists who can't live with themselves any longer. So then I just make jokes about it.

WASSERSTEIN: Hmm.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Yeah. It's a little reductive, but it makes people laugh.

WILSON: Hmm.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Yeah, I like it.

WASSERSTEIN: So, you're sort of like my friend Christopher Durang.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Oh, no. He's a serious sitcom writer; I just string a bunch of jokes together.

WILSON: So what do we need to do for you to leave us alone?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Well . . .

WASSERSTEIN: He probably wants us to write him a play.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Not exactly.

WASSERSTEIN: What? You want us all to combine and write you one play together?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: That's very Lincoln Center of you, but no.

WILSON: What, then?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Well, I have this ten-minute play.

WASSERSTEIN: And?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: I want you to help me get it published.

MILLER: We're dead.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Yeah, but you still get stuff published after you're dead.

WILSON: That's because we were good to begin with, so people dug up stuff we weren't done with, finished it in a slapdash style, and published it.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: I don't see the problem.

MILLER: We are good. You're a hack.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: (*Grinning.*) An insult hack. Who is stuck with you three for the next millennia or so. And believe me, with you as inspiration, I'm just getting warmed up.

MILLER: This ought to be good.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: I can do it. I just need a shot. I never got my shot.

WILSON: How about a writing sample, so we can get a sense of your style.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Oh, don't give me that writing workshop b.s. I know you people never really read that stuff.

MILLER: He's right.

WASSERSTEIN: I always read it.

WILSON: You would.

STAGE MANAGER sneakily places the Writers' Guild Newsletter on his desk and draws UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT's attention to it. STAGE MANAGER and UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT trade a look. UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT looks at the newsletter, puts it behind his back, and turns to the playwrights.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: I'll tell you what. Not only will I leave you alone for the next millennium, I also have something else to trade that might be of interest to you.

WASSERSTEIN: What?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: (*UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT holds up the NEWSLETTER.*) The Writers' Guild Newsletter. Most recent edition.

MILLER: How did you . . . ?

WILSON: (*Winks.*) Did you smuggle that in the only way you know how?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: No. I got a fully furnished grave. They must have thought I was just here for pilot season.

MILLER: Let me see it.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: *(Pulling newsletter back.)* Do we have a deal?

MILLER, WASSERSTEIN, and WILSON trade significant looks.

MILLER: I don't know . . .

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: I just want to be remembered the way you guys were remembered. *(Holding up newsletter.)* So what do you say?

MILLER: Give it here.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT hands the newsletter to MILLER. MILLER, WASSERSTEIN, and WILSON crowd around the newsletter.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: You guys changed the face of American theatre. I want to change something, have some positive influence on others.

MILLER: Having one ten-minute play published won't change anything.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: It'll help. Then I can e-mail all my friends from college and tell them I'm a published playwright.

WASSERSTEIN: You get e-mail down here?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: I have a wireless connection. Look, I want theatrical fame so badly. I want it so badly.

WASSERSTEIN: Theatrical fame is not like other fame. Even when you're famous, nobody knows who you are.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: That's awesome!

MILLER: Where do you want it published?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: American Theatre.

MILLER: Pseudo-intellectual tripe.

WASSERSTEIN: It's onanistic. That means "masturbatory," to any of you people who didn't know what that word meant.

WILSON: That's what I'm talking about.

MILLER: Oh, Wendy, please.

WASSERSTEIN: What? A woman can't talk about her own body in public?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: (To WASSERSTEIN.) Onanism aside, that's where your last play was published. (To WILSON.) Yours, too. (To MILLER.) You haven't written a good play in years.

MILLER: Aaack. They can't tell the difference anyway. The only reason to publish a play is so people can start to fuck it up. *Death of a Salesman* set in Tokyo, with some Asian guy who can't pronounce L's - - "Wirry Roman."

WILSON: P. Diddy in *The Piano Lesson*.

WASSERSTEIN: The Pussycat Dolls in *Uncommon Women and Others*. They were the "others."

MILLER: You lose control of the thing the second you give it away. As a young playwright, you want to keep control of your work as long as possible. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. You know what I'm saying, son?

STAGE MANAGER rings bell: ding.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: What was that?

MILLER: That's the American playwright death knell.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: That? It's so . . . tinny.

MILLER: What did you want? The bells of Saint Peters? We ain't Shakespeare.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: There's going to be nobody left to write plays in our country.

WILSON: Screw the plays. Who's going to teach in the M.F.A. writing programs?

MILLER: Unpublished hacks.

WASSERSTEIN: Those who can't do, teach.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: (Slightly hurt.) How about those who can't teach, do.

WASSERSTEIN: (A realization.) Is that what you were? A teacher?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: (Cough.) Maybe.

MILLER: What college?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: (Cough.) High school.

WILSON: High school? He taught high school.

WASSERSTEIN: Oh, that's so cute. You were the drama teacher.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Hey, come on.

WASSERSTEIN: Aww. He's feeling insecure.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: *(Cough.)* No, I'm not.

WASSERSTEIN: Aww. Were you part of some rinky-dink membership company in New York so you could feel like you were part of the theatre scene?

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Polaris North is not a rinky-dink membership company. I'll have you know there has been some fine work done there . . . in the seventies. There's a whole packet about it.

STAGE MANAGER hands MILLER a new edition of the newsletter. MILLER and WILSON crowd around the newsletter. MILLER leafs through to the obituaries.

WASSERSTEIN: Aww. He's so cute.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: You guys think you're better than me.

MILLER: *(Referring to newsletter.)* Nope, but Albee will.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Edward Albee?

WILSON: Yep, that was him. He just died.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Albee's coming here?

WASSERSTEIN: He should be here any minute.

MILLER: He's gonna rip you a new one.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: What do I do?

MILLER: Don't tell him you teach high school.

Looking offstage.

WASSERSTEIN: Here he comes. Hide. Hide.

MILLER, WASSERSTEIN, and WILSON run frantically around the graves. The UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT hides behind his grave. WILSON tries to hide behind his own grave, finds that it is too small to cover him, grabs the UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT's grave, places it on top of his own, and hides behind it. A moment later, the UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT realizes what has happened.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT: Hey, you took my grave. Hey, what about my play?

MILLER: *(Popping out from behind his grave.)* Forget your play surviving you! You've got to survive Albee.

UNKNOWN PLAYWRIGHT looks around for a place to hide and then dives behind the bench.

LIGHTS DOWN. END SCENE ONE.

*Thank you for reading this free excerpt from A GRAVEYARD
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