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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.

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Customer Reviews

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Ben Brantley, New York Times

Caryl Churchill (1938-) is probably the most respected woman dramatist in the English-speaking world. She is the author of some twenty plays including Light Shining in Buckinghamshire, Cloud Nine, Top Girls, Serious Money, The Skriker, Blue Heart, Far Away and A Number, seen and admired all over the world. CARYL CHURCHILL's plays include "Cloud Nine" (revived in 2007 to huge acclaim at the Almeida, London), "Top Girls", "Serious Money", "The Skriker", "Blue Heart", "Far Away" and "A Number". Most are published by NHB.

Intriguing topic of a person discovering he is a clone and then he tries to locate his brother(s). Once he finds one, he shocks you with his behavior. As the story unfolds, you get drawn deeper into a web of lies and deceit. I recommend this play/book highly as well as watching the HBO TV adaptation.

Good play

Needed it for class, it has worked out fine! Good short play!

What if you discovered you had been cloned? Caryl Churchill offers thought provoking answers in an intense drama.

A haunting play that delves deep into a father-son relationship, except that it isn't quite what you think it is, because there is the father, Salter, in his sixties, and Bernard (B1), his son, forty, and Bernard (B2), his son, thirty-five, and yet another son Michael Black, also thirty-five. It's difficult not to give the plot of this very bare but harrowing play away, as Salter talks to each of them in alternating scenes, with inconsistent revisions about the past, as each son tries to uncover the reason that there's more than one of them. Under the guise of an SF premise, the play

deals with issues of identity, the spurious desire to make a fresh start when things go wrong, and the tragic failure to connect. The dialogue is short and sharp, and the syntax impactful in their truncated incompleteness, showing the characters' urgency to get their points across to each other, but ultimately being unable to get to the heart of it, and save their rapidly deteriorating relationships.

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? What is it that makes me, me? What accounts for that look in the eyes, the set of the shoulders, the scowl or the smile that allows a father to distinguish between his genetically identical sons? We can create life in a petri dish, but do we actually know what it is? It's a chilling question, and one that may well be unanswerable. But as Caryl Churchill shows in this spare, harrowing and above all humane play, those kind of questions are precisely the ones worth asking.

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." This provoking play is about what constitutes identity, where does it come from, and how do we as parents identify and relate to our children. There's almost no action in the whole play, only dialogue, but the dialogue is so brilliant it really doesn't need action. The play was first produced in London, at the Royal Court Theatre, in 2002, with Michael Gambon and Daniel Craig as actors, which tells you something about the quality of the play by itself.

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