

Challenger: To Touch the Face of God

By Julian Felice

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DEDICATION

To Sylvana

STORY OF THE PLAY

Challenger: To Touch the Face of God tells the powerful story of the *Challenger* disaster of 1986. It dramatizes the stories of the seven individuals who tragically lost their lives in this event, while also drawing attention to the controversial circumstances which led to one of NASA's blackest days. Although some of the scenes depicted are fictional dramatizations, many of the sentences are the actual words used by the astronauts themselves. Scenes and settings flow seamlessly together with only lighting to distinguish them. The result is a hard-hitting and emotive story that is strengthened by the knowledge that it is based on a real event, an event that left an indelible mark on the fabric of America.

AWARDS

Entered in the 2015 Gibraltar Drama Festival and the Duncan Rand Youth One-Act Play Festival held in Medway Little Theatre in the United Kingdom, where it won a number of awards, including Best Actress for the performer who played the role of Judith Resnik, one of the astronauts.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(10 m, 4 w, 1 flexible, and 1 boy)

Members of the Crew aboard *Challenger*

FRANCIS R. SCOBEE

MICHAEL J. SMITH

ELLISON S. ONIZUKA: Can double as Patrick Scott

JUDITH A. RESNIK

RONALD E. MCNAIR

GREGORY B. JARVIS

S. CHRISTA MCAULIFFE: Teacher in Space Project

Other Characters

JAMES BEGGS: NASA administrator

ROGER BOISJOLY: An aerospace engineer

JAY GREENE: Flight Director

CHERYL MCNAIR: Ronald McNair's wife

REGINALD MCNAIR: Ronald McNair's young son

RICHARD COVEY: Capsule communicator

PATRICK SCOTT: CEO of Morton Thiokol, Inc.

BARBARA MORGAN: A teacher, part of the Teacher in Space Project

A SCIENTIST: Explains the details of the shuttle

A Note About the Title

The phrase "to touch the face of God" is a line from "High Flight," a sonnet written by John Gillespie Magee, a 19-year-old American pilot killed in the Second World War during a training flight. Portions of his poem appear on the headstones of many interred in Arlington National Cemetery, particularly aviators and astronauts. The line is also part of the address given by President Reagan on Jan. 28, 1986.

LOCATION AND TIME SETTINGS

Opening Sequence: Reginald's bedroom one week before the launch, then the Flight Command Center during the launch.

Ronald and Reginald: Reginald's bedroom a week before the launch.

James, Jay and the Teacher in Space Project: James Begg's office at NASA sometime in 1984.

Scientist's Presentation: A science laboratory out of timeline.

Greg and Judith's conversation: A workstation at NASA sometime before the launch.

Christa's lesson and the presentation of the crew: Christa's classroom out of timeline, then a press conference center at NASA sometime before the launch.

Dinner at the McNairs': The kitchen in the McNair household a few days before the launch.

Roger expresses his concerns: Patrick's office July 1985.

Barbara's Monologue: Neutral location after August 2007.

Greg and Judith: NASA canteen sometime before the launch.

Roger's final warning: Jay's office the morning of the launch.

Cheryl's Monologue: Neutral location after the publication of the Rogers Commission Report in June 1986, then launch site for Reggie's mime during the launch.

Greg opens up to Michael: A locker room at NASA sometime before the launch.

Roger's Monologue: Neutral location after the *Columbia* disaster of February 2003.

Francis tries to calm Christa's nerves: A canteen at NASA the night before the launch.

Roger resigns / The Final Tableau: Roger Boisjoly's office after the publication of the Rogers Commission Report in June 1986, then the Flight Command Center, mixed timelines.

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(AT RISE: SPOTLIGHT CS on REGINALD McNAIR. He is in his bedroom reading from a large storybook, using the typical sing-song tone of a child. As the story progresses, the LIGHTS slowly come up to reveal the Flight Command Center of the Challenger mission.)

REGGIE: *(Reading.)* Once upon a time, there was a young boy called Icarus. Icarus was the son of Daedalus, a skilled craftsman who built a large maze called the Labyrinth for King Minos, the King of Crete. In the Labyrinth lived the Minotaur, a terrifying creature who was half-man and half-bull and was kept by King Minos to kill his enemies. One day, a young Athenian called Theseus, son of Aegeus, volunteered to kill the monster and travelled to Crete. King Minos' daughter fell in love with Theseus and wanted to help him, so Daedalus gave her a ball of string to help Theseus find his way out of the Labyrinth. Theseus killed the Minotaur and, with the help of the ball of string, escaped from the Labyrinth and took Ariadne with him back to Athens.

When King Minos heard about what had happened, he imprisoned Daedalus and his son in the Labyrinth. To escape from Crete, Daedalus made two pairs of wings out of wax and birds' feathers. He warned Icarus that he was not to fly too close to the sun nor to the sea, but to stick to their flight path.

(By this time the stage is in FULL LIGHT, enabling the audience to see the Flight Command Center. JAY GREENE and ROGER BOISJOLY observe RICHARD COVEY trying to contact the Challenger.)

RICHARD: Challenger...this is Houston...do you read me? Over.

REGGIE: But Icarus was an ambitious boy and, in his excitement, and without realizing, he flew too high.

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REGGIE: *(Cont'd.)* The heat from the sun melted the wax, and the feathers started to fall from the wings.

RICHARD: *(Increasingly insistent.)* Challenger...this is Houston...do you read me? Over.

REGGIE: Icarus flapped his arms in desperation, but it was too late, and he plunged into the sea, where he drowned.

RICHARD: Challenger...this is Houston...do you read me? Over. *(There is a long, tense pause.)* We have a report from the Flight Dynamics Officer that the vehicle has exploded. Obviously a major malfunction.

(A long pause.)

JAY: *(Finally taking action.)* Okay... Lock all doors. No phones. All discussions are to be within this loop. Don't reconfigure your consoles. Take photographs and print hard copies of all your displays. Remotely detonate the rocket boosters. Find any signs of the Orbiter Vehicle. Richard, get back on the radio and see if they're still out there.

RICHARD: Challenger...this is Houston...do you read me? Over. *(Another pause.)* Jay...what happened?

(Pause.)

ROGER: *(Almost to himself.)* The temperature. It was too cold. *(Pause.)* We said, didn't we? It's too cold—

JAY: Roger, do you really think this is the time for I-told-you-so's? We have seven crew members up there, and the world is watching! They...they might still be alive and it is our job to bring them back. We have never lost a man in space, and it's not going to happen today, not on our watch! So I don't want to hear your theories. I want everyone to keep tracking, to keep your eyes glued on your screens for any signs...and, you, keep trying!

RICHARD: Challenger, this is Houston...do you read me? Over.

(The LIGHTING switches to Reginald's room. RONALD McNAIR enters.)

End of Freeview

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