

The Conservation of Mass

By Donna Seage

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DEDICATION

*For my mom, who lived the best stories,
even though she had trouble reading them.*

SYNOPSIS

It's the summer of 1974 and local teen Larissa has discovered that rock musician Paul McCartney has secretly rented a farm just outside Nashville for a few weeks. Larissa camps out on the farm, watching through her binoculars for Paul, certain that his presence in her small town means all sorts of miraculous things are sure to happen. But Larissa has a secret of her own and her need for a miracle becomes the focal point of the summer of '74.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

The Conservation of Mass premiered at La Vergne High School in La Vergne, TN on Dec. 2, 2023, with the following cast and crew:

LARRY:Ki'Ara Lynch
PAUL:Quinten Nash
JENNY:Abigail Garcia Camacho
MICHAEL:Lonald Evans
BARB:Talley Barber
JJ:Joel Sandoval Vallejos
ENSEMBLE:Yasmin Alvares Torres,
Makayla Beaver, Yasmin
Jones, Lloyd Lewis, Cassie
Rutledge, Leif Williams,

Director:Donna Seage
Stage Manager:Robin Phelps
Sound Design:Robin Phelps
Assistant Stage Manager:.....Robin Gore
Makeup Designer:.....Cupid Sanchez
Lightboard Operator:.....CJ Gordon

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 m, 3 w, ensemble)

LARRY: Short for Larissa, 18-year-old female who has just graduated high school.

JENNY: Larry's best friend, female, also just graduated high school.

PAUL: Male classmate, also just graduated high school.

MICHAEL: Paul's male cousin, just finished freshman year of college.

JJ: Larry's recent ex-boyfriend, just graduated high school.

BARB: Larry's younger sister, who just finished 9th grade.

DENIZENS: Ensemble as large as you wish.

TIME AND PLACE

Summer of 1974, a farm just outside Nashville, TN.

SET

One unit set, outdoors in a wooded area.

Scene 1

(AT RISE: It is June 10th, 1974, just at mid-day. From out of the nothing of a blank stage comes a remarkable mystery. MUSIC that isn't The Beatles but is also not not The Beatles begins to play. It is full of the mystical, slow and lilting. The colored LIGHTS glow and dim in improbable ways for rural Middle Tennessee. People, maybe hippies, maybe just DENIZENS of the natural world, emerge onstage and create, improbably but wonderfully, a dance/movement piece of creation, of life and of love. Throughout this dance/movement they create the setting; the small juniper tree woodland surrounding a farmyard/farmhouse just outside of Nashville, TN; an area known as the Cedars of Lebanon. They leave stumps and large rocks, bushes and small trees scattered about. We do not see the farmhouse itself, which is toward the audience. After their passage, there is the litter of a few days' worth of food and drinks. A crumpled sleeping bag, a few pieces of grime-covered clothes worn and discarded as the temp changes, a full backpack, a scattered deck of cards and some rumpled fan magazines which tell the story of an impromptu campout.

LARRY, a teen girl who is not a hippie, not part of the group, is caught up in this dance/movement, urgently seeking to be part of it. She moves through them and with them. She may not be the best dancer and that's OK, because it is heartfelt with solemn joy. We begin to hear the whisper of her name, "Larry," and "Larissa." At the end, they join together to hold her and lift her up. Noises in the distance, possibly created by the ensemble. SFX: The motor of a dirt bike, and someone approaching, signal the end of the dance/movement. The whispers of her name blend into the real world of someone calling her off in the distance but getting closer. Larry is gently returned to the ground where she takes her position behind a scraggly bush, binoculars in hand. And the denizens melt away.)

(Larry is humming tunelessly, something that might be a Beatles song. Although a rabid fan of popular music, Larry is a horrible singer, so it's hard to tell. The sound of the dirt bike engine is heard more clearly, and she follows the progress of the unseen person riding it into the farmyard with her binoculars. The sound of the engine comes to a halt, pattering out. She is obviously excited and then we see the release of her tension as the person riding goes out of her field of vision. She is then startled by her name being called and someone coming through the brush behind her and turns to see her best friend burst out into the campsite, take in the disarray and then...)

JENNY: What in the world, Larry! What are you doing?

LARRY: I...

JENNY: I could snatch you bald-headed, you're lucky it's me and not my Gram; you'd be wig shopping!

LARRY: But...

JENNY: Girl, everyone is worried sick. Why are you hiding out here?

LARRY: I'm not hiding...I, wait, get down!

(SHE pulls JENNY into a crouch behind a small bush.)

JENNY: If you're not hiding, why are we crouched behind a bush?

LARRY: I'm not hiding from you. I am hiding from them! Shh!

JENNY: Who's them? And whose farm is this?

LARRY: OK, false alarm. *(THEY leave their hiding place and move to sit on rocks or stumps.)* This is Putman's farm. How did you find me? Did Barb tattle?

JENNY: No, Barb didn't say anything. Although she's gonna be in trouble if she's known where you are and didn't say.

LARRY: Trouble? I told her she'd be in trouble if she did say... she doesn't know exactly where I am, she's not real happy I'm out here...

JENNY: You think? I'm not happy you're out here! You've been missing two days, everyone is searching for you: your parents, your brothers, JJ, the police...

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LARRY: The police? Oh, Jenny, I didn't think...

JENNY: I guess you didn't. Larry, did you really think you could take off and be gone almost three days and no one would notice?

LARRY: It's my life. I guess I thought they wouldn't care.

JENNY: You thought I wouldn't care? Larissa Jane Holman, that's messed up, I mean, we've been best friends since 7th grade, since... what year were we in 7th grade?

LARRY: '68-'69 school year.

JENNY: Since 1968, that means we've been friends for...

LARRY: Six years. (*JENNY squints at this math feat, so LARRY counts it off on her fingers.*) Start in 1968, then, '69, '70, '71, '72, '73 '74. Six years.

JENNY: Six years! And you thought I wouldn't care that you were missing?

LARRY: (*Uncomfortable.*) Well, you don't care much for music.

JENNY: (*Dumbfounded.*) Girl, you need to back up, you are not making any sense. Did you hit your head on a rock? Did you get bit by something... you're not afraid of drinking water, are you?

LARRY: Stop it. I know you care about me, but you don't care much one way or the other for music, so don't care means I thought you maybe wouldn't be interested in why I'm here. And you got your own life to live.

JENNY: My own life that you're not a part of? Please.

LARRY: And I got my own life too.

JENNY: Your own life that I'm not a part of? Girl, your biscuit ain't done in the middle...

LARRY: I got a right to make my own decisions, same as you!

JENNY: OK, OK, OK! Why this decision then? Why are you here? Some big concert going on down here on the farm? And whose farm is this? Putnam?

LARRY: Put-MAN. He's a songwriter, he wrote that Tammy Wynette hit and he also wrote that Green, Green Grass of Home song. He's big.

JENNY: Mm, OK. You hiding from him? From Put-man?

LARRY: (*Hesitates.*) I'm here because Paul is here.

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JENNY: Paul from biology class, Paul? He's cute, but I think he's seeing someone.

LARRY: *(Hesitates again.)* Paul from The Beatles, Paul.

JENNY: Paul McCartney, Paul? He's cute, but I think he's seeing someone too. I mean, he's married, isn't he? Plus, why in the world would Paul McCartney be on a farm in Lebanon, Tennessee? I doubt he's ever even heard of it. Paul McCartney? You've lost it, you have gone round the bend, you have been bitten by something rabid, you can't really think that's... *(LARRY puts the binoculars in front of HER eyes.)* That's Paul McCartney.

(SHE gets excited and loud and starts to wave. LARRY yanks her to crouch down again behind the bush and they trade the binoculars back and forth.)

JENNY: *(Cont'd.)* That's Paul McCartney, Paul McCartney!

LARRY: Shh, for Peter, Paul, and Mary's sake, shh!

(THEY look at each other, amazed at the notion that Paul McCartney is before them. It's like seeing the Virgin Mary in a tortilla. Jenny grabs the binoculars again.)

JENNY: Wow, he's gorgeous! But, still, he's seeing someone, right? It's not like he's going to D-I-V-O-R-C-E his wife and leave his kids for a teenager. So, why are you here?

LARRY: Ha, that's the Putman song, D-I-V-O-R-C-E! Have you started paying attention to music?

JENNY: Well, it's on the radio, isn't it? Have to be deaf not to hear that one. Stop stalling, why are you here?

LARRY: First, back up and tell me how you found me.

JENNY: Greg.

LARRY: Oh, Greg.

JENNY: He called the house when you came into the Food Mart this morning 'cause the whole town knows you're missing, and I told him to follow you. He found your empty car up on the side of the road. I started there and walked 'til I found you. My turn. Why are you here? And why haven't you told anyone what you're doing if you're not hiding?

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LARRY: OK, they're gone. I told Barb.

JENNY: That doesn't count! You told her not to tell anyone!

LARRY: You just think it only counts if I told you.

JENNY: Correct-a-mundo. So, tell me now. Why are you here?

(THEY come out from behind the bush.)

LARRY: Well, I'm waiting.

JENNY: Like you're making me wait now?

LARRY: Sorry, I just realized it sounds a bit silly when I go to say it out loud... I'm waiting for... I'm waiting for Paul.

JENNY: Waiting for Paul. Waiting for Paul, what? What do you think he's going to do?

LARRY: I don't know, really. I just feel like I have to wait. And, if I do, something wonderful will happen. It's like a pain in my gut, this feeling I have. I have to be here.

JENNY: We live in Small Town, Tennessee. Nothing wonderful ever happens here.

LARRY: Exactly, that's right, but now Paul is here and that's so unlikely, it's like a miracle itself. So, I'm waiting to see what's next. Something's coming, I can feel it. I... I need it.

JENNY: *(Somehow sees some sense in this, nods and, taking the binoculars back, begins to wait with her.)* Paul is here. Paul is here, where he couldn't possibly be. Paul is here and that means...

LARRY: Something wonderful could happen, should happen!

JENNY: Will happen!

(SFX: There is a crash in the brush behind them. A teen BOY emerges from offstage and pulls to a stop on seeing them. He, for whatever reason of casting, is obviously not Paul McCartney. The GIRLS turn to him, and both exclaim...)

BOTH: Paul!

(BLACKOUT)

Scene 2

(LIGHTS UP. The THREE TEENS are seated around the makeshift camping area.)

JENNY: So, what we think is... *(SHE takes a big breath.)* I mean what Larry thinks is, and I believe her, is that if Paul is here, and he is here, is that something wonderful is going to happen, because it doesn't make any sense for him to be here, and if that doesn't make any sense but it happened anyway, then there's a good chance that other things will happen that won't make sense, and some of those things could be wonderful things that don't make sense so it just makes sense to keep watch and see what happens next that doesn't make sense! Does that make sense?

PAUL: Um...

LARRY: How'd you find us? I mean, how did you even know to look?

PAUL: Well, everyone is looking for you, Larissa.

LARRY: Larry.

PAUL: Oh, uh, everyone is looking for you, Larry. I saw Jenny diving into the woods as I was driving by and, well, I thought you were, maybe were, in here hurt or something, and I pulled over and called out to her. But some guy on a dirt bike buzzed by about then and she didn't hear me, so I followed her as best I could.

LARRY: Dirt bike? That's Paul! He found one in the shed and has been riding it all over! He rode in on it just before Jenny showed up.

JENNY: Paul rides a motorbike? That's wonderful! *(Seeing LARRY's glance.)* I mean, not the kind of wonderful that we're waiting for, that will obviously be out of this world kind of wonderful, but still, it's pretty good. Isn't it?

LARRY: Well, Paul, as you can see, everything's wonderful, I mean, everything's fine. So, thanks, I guess and um, I guess let my folks know where I am and that I'm OK. But I can't leave again or I'll miss it, whatever it is, I just know I'll miss it.

PAUL: Miss it? Miss what exactly?

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LARRY: I don't know. I know that sounds cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs, but I made a food run this morning and knew the whole time I had to get back here. I could feel it, this nauseous feeling every moment, hurrying me back here. I almost doubled over in the middle of the store from it. I had to force myself to buy more food, even though I don't feel hungry, that's how worried I am I'll miss it. It'll happen and I have to be here for whatever it is.

PAUL: Jenny, if you knew she was here, why didn't you tell her family? Tell the police, tell someone? JJ is frantic.

JENNY: I didn't know until this morning when Greg called the house and told me he saw her.

PAUL: Oh, Greg.

LARRY: That's what I said, "Oh, Greg!"

PAUL: Paul McCartney, huh? Mind if I have a look? *(THEY hand HIM the binoculars, but he sees no one after a good long look.)* I can't say I get it, but, well, what if I play at mission logistics for you? This place is a bit of a mess. I mean, all this food trash will draw animals, you know?

LARRY: *(Simultaneous.)* Well, I been kind of busy...

JENNY: *(Simultaneous.)* Animals? What kind of animals?

PAUL: Look, let's at least pick up this trash stuff, I'll pack it out and come back in a bit with some supplies to really set you up in style for a few days. I'll swing by both your houses and tell them what's going on and that you'll be a few, what... days? I'll even have my boss call his dad, Charlie Douglas, he's a state trooper, and tell him what's going on, so they call off the search. OK?

LARRY: You tell them first that I'm staying. It's my life and I'm living it here... for now.

JENNY: Thank you, Paul. That's very kind of you, Paul. I appreciate you supporting me camping all cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs in the woods waiting for miracles, Paul...

LARRY: Yes, great, thank you, Paul!

(THEY begin straightening camp. For lack of a bag for the trash, they empty out the backpack of the food stuff Larry bought that morning and a stuffed sea lion toy. PAUL holds up the toy to LARRY, eyebrows raised; she shrugs.)

End of Freeview

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