

# Ghost Light

A One Act Play (approximately 20 minutes)

By Gary Davis

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## SETTING

A bare, dark stage with only a ghost light and a leftover prop umbrella [*see Prop Note 1*].

## SYNOPSIS

A crew returns to a theater that's been empty for two years because of the pandemic to prep the stage for reopening.

## CHARACTERS

KAY woman in her 50s or 60s, a stage manager

AL man in his 60s or 70s, an actor

RAUL younger man in his 20s or 30s, give or take, on the tech crew

**SCENE OPENS**

*(Kay and Raul enter and cross to the ghost light.)*

KAY

Wow, this ghost light has been standing here for almost two years and the bulb still hasn't burned out! It's kept vigil all this time.

RAUL

Incredible! Two years and the bulb's still good.

KAY

That's literally what I just said. Why don't you go turn on some stage lights?

RAUL

*(Raul looks around and sees an umbrella on the stage)*

What's this?

KAY & RAUL

*(together)*

Looks like a prop from the last show.

KAY

*(she laughs)*

Jinx!

RAUL

*(Raul picks it up by the handle and a sword slides out)*

WOAH!!!! Oh, man! I gotta show this to Jack!

*(Raul exits laughing taking the sword and umbrella with him)*

KAY

Put it away. And be careful with that!

*(talks to the ghost light)*

We've been gone for two years. Have you seen anything in all that time? Got any stories to tell?

*(louder to the control booth)*

You know, these things used to be called 'equity' lamps - probably because the Actors Equity Union required them for safety. There's a story that one time a burglar broke into a New York theater late at night. He was wandering around on a pitch black stage and fell into the orchestra pit breaking his leg ... after which, of course, he successfully sued the theater! Then, of course, there's always the superstition that ghost lights are here for the theater ghosts. But there's some debate as to whether they're meant to scare off ghosts or to appease them. Apparently some ghosts like to strut the boards themselves when theaters are closed.

*(said as she 'struts the boards' in imitation)*

Well, two years is plenty of time for strutting, so I hope they don't mind us coming back.

*(looking around, then to herself)*

What's taking him so long with those stage lights?

*(Kay steps away from the ghost light and starts to exit when the stage lights come up and reveal Al wondering upstage. His clothing looks a little dated. Kay turns and sees him for the first time and lets out a quick shriek, then takes a breath and laughs at herself.)*

Oh ... Jesus! You scared the shit out of me! I didn't know you were there.

*(Al doesn't acknowledge or look at her.)*

I'm Kay. I'm a stage manager. I don't believe I've met you before. You look like you're running lines in your head or something. What's your name?

*(He still doesn't look at her or respond.)*

I'm sorry, what exactly are you doing here? We're just now prepping the theater to open back up. You shouldn't be here.

*(He continues to look around and he can clearly see she's there, but still does not respond.)*

I'm sorry, but who are you?

*(still no response; finally getting irritated she walks right up to him and gets in his face)*

Hey, buddy! I'm talking to you. Who are you and what the hell are you doing here?

AL

*(He is shocked and looks right at her with his mouth agape. He is definitely gobsmacked and looks around frantically to see if there's someone else on the stage she might be talking to.)*

Uh...uh. Are you ... talking to me?!

KAY

There's nobody else on the stage. So yeah, I must be talking to you. If you don't explain yourself, I'm going to call the cops. You can't be here for a show. We haven't started rehearsing anything yet. So tell me who you are!

AL

*(still somewhat flustered)*

I'm ... I'm ... I'm Al.

KAY

Why are you here, Al? I've never seen you before. Are you new on the crew?

AL

Crew? Uh, no.

KAY

*(after some reflection and with a little sympathy)*

You're some homeless fellow aren't you? You wandered in off the streets. How did you get in? Was there a door unlocked?

AL

No ... no, the doors are all locked as far as I can tell.

KAY

Have you been living here during the pandemic? The basement is pretty comfortable with all that stage furniture. And you look like you raided the costume shop with that get up. Jasen's gonna be pissed at you!

AL

I'm sorry, the what?

KAY

The costume shop. You look like you're wearing something from the costume shop.

AL

No, no. You said something about ... a pandemic?

KAY

OK, now you're just messing with me!

AL

Is THAT why the theater's been closed all this time? I couldn't understand it. It's been so ... BORING!

KAY

*(her attitude softens somewhat as she suspects dementia and need for help)*

You've been hiding here for the last two years?

AL

More like 60 I think.

KAY

Sixt - that's a little ...

*('crazy' is the next word, but she can't bring herself to say it)*

Hold on a second.

*(Goes offstage and brings back a couple chairs. They sit down close to the ghost light and talk. Al seems to hesitate before sitting.)*

Look, Al, I feel for you. I really do. Life is hard for someone in your situation. To tell the truth, it's not been much easier for the rest of us these past couple years. I wish I could let you stay here, but I can't. I'm afraid you'll have to leave.

AL

Oh, believe me I've tried ... a few times. It never works. I always end up back here.

KAY

And why is that?

AL

Because I'm a ghost.

KAY

*(pause, then inadvertently bursts out laughing, but quickly stifles it)*

I'm sorry. It sounded like you said you were a ghost.

AL

I did. And I am. You don't believe me?

KAY

*(pause, not sure how to respond)*

Of ... course I ... do?

*(Of course she doesn't, but speaks with great sympathy for this poor crazy fellow.)*

AL

I don't think you do. I'll prove it.

*(stands and crosses to the ghost light; passes his hand through the light and as he does so the ghost light and the stage lights simultaneously blink on and off [See technical note 1]; Kay looks around)*

KAY

Oh, crap, the gremlins!

AL

*(angry and very loud with echo [see technical note 2])*

I AM NOT –

*(pauses a moment while he regains his composure, voice back to normal)*

I am not ... 'a gremlin.'

*(says the word with a touch of loathing)*

I am a ghost. Ghosts come from people, and like people we come in a wide variety. But, by and large, gremlins ... are ASSHOLES!

*(there are unnatural sounds from above; Al turns and calls out to the rafters shaking his fist)*

YEAH, I SAID IT! YOU WANNA MAKE SOMETHING OF IT?

*(sounds disappear)*

Yeah, I didn't think so!

*(back to Kay and composed)*

So you'll understand if we ghosts are ... offended ... by the comparison.

KAY

*(a bit stunned)*

Your hand ... your voice ... Your hand went right through that light(!) ... Could you do that again?

*(Al passes his hand through the ghost light again as it and the stage lights blink on and off; Kay and paces, starting to freak out)*

Oh my god! I'm talking to a ghost!

AL

I like to think that 'talking' is the operative word here. I'm enjoying this conversation ... and your company.

KAY

*(very nervously)*

So you don't want to scare me or hurt me?

AL

Oh heavens no! For a moment there you actually seemed to care about me. I really felt it. You're a sweet and caring person.

KAY

But I'm a stage manager.

AL

True, but you're not a gremlin.

KAY

So why are you here?

AL

Well, it could be any number of reasons that I don't understand. But I suppose that the most likely explanation is that this is where I died. In fact it was ... well, it was ...

*(looks around the stage and points)*

Oh, right there, right where you're standing.

*(Kay jumps aside with a slight screech, Al looks at the spot)*

Oh, don't worry ... stain's gone.

KAY

What happened? When did it happen?

AL

Oh, it was decades ago. We were rehearsing for ... oh, I don't even remember which show it was. Oh, it was "Carousel." Anyway, I was always a bit of a practical joker. And knowing more than a few of my fellow cast were a bit superstitious I loudly proclaimed MAC-

KAY

*(Kay quickly interrupts)*

A – A – A – A! THE SCOT! We just say THE SCOT or THE SCOTTISH PLAY! Unless you're actually doing ... the Scottish play, then you're actually allowed to say ... the actual Scottish play title.

AL

Superstitious, are we?

KAY

I'm literally standing here talking to a ghost! If I wasn't superstitious before, I sure as shit am now!

AL

*(considers this)*

Fair point.

KAY

So after ... invoking the Scot, what happened?

AL

A Klieg light fell on me.

KAY

Oh my God! Did it hurt?

AL

Nope. Snapped my neck.

*(snaps his fingers and imitates a snapped neck with tongue sticking out)*

It was pretty instantaneous. Next thing I knew I was standing here looking down on myself and everyone gathered around me. But oddly they weren't looking at me. They were all looking up ... fearing a rain of Klieg lights, no doubt. Maybe they felt it was safer to be near me where the Klieg light had already fallen.

KAY

I think I heard about that. Great Caesar's Ghost! So there really is a ghost in the theater! I mean theater people are always talking about ghosts in the theater, but I don't know that anyone actually believes it ... except those that say it happened to them. And the rest of us tend to think they're making it up for a good story to tell. Meg and Tom swore up and down they ran into a ghost in the upstairs library.

AL

Well, when nothing's going on, that spot tends to be a favorite hangout ... or 'haunt,' if you will.

*(Kay giggles as Al enjoys his own joke)*

And when nothing else is going on, we like to read all the scripts up there. So yes, that story is likely true.

KAY

There's always talk about hearing bumps and footsteps and other noises. Some people try to explain it by saying that homeless people find their way into the theater and the noises are made by them. So that's not really true?

AL

Well, sometimes it's true. Sometimes a homeless person will find their way in to take refuge.

KAY

And that's OK with you? You don't ever scare them off?

AL

It depends on the situation. I mean if, for example, a homeless woman with her children took shelter, what are you going to do about that? Sometimes what you do is you keep an eye on the kids to make sure they don't get hurt. So, to be honest, at times they can be nice company.

*(changes to a darker tone)*

On the other hand if someone came in and was really disrespectful to the theater ... damaging or stealing things, carrying on like that. Well, let's just say they get ... THE FULL ... TREATMENT!

KAY

*(Kay's eyes open wide with a bit of apprehension)*

The full treatment?

AL

*(quickly)*

Don't ask! You don't want to know. It's pretty horrific. Let's just say it's only used in emergencies. And those that get it don't come back! There's been an occasion or two where the 'full treatment' prevented the theater from burning to the ground! Damn junkies!

KAY

You mentioned keeping an eye on kids. I have to ask – some people have said they've seen small kids, like three or four years old, waving to people who aren't there. Is that - ?

AL

*(Al nods)*

Yeah. I can't really explain that. Some very young kids – not all of them, mind you, only a few – seem to see us. You don't want to scare a little child, but you don't want to be rude, either. So if they wave, you wave back. That's usually about as far as it goes.

KAY

Usually?

AL

Usually.

KAY

Now **some** people have said that they'll be here alone at night drinking coffee ... they hear some noise, put down their coffee and go check it out. When they come back, their coffee has been moved. But nobody else is in the theater.

AL

*(looking around with a bit of guilt on his face)*

I confess. I absolutely llllove coffee. The aroma puts me in heaven. I adore it! So, yes, I have on occasion distracted 'someone' from their coffee. But the sad part is that I love the aroma so much, I forget that ghosts can't drink. So in frustration I don't always put it down in the same spot I picked it up from.

*(shrugs his shoulders with raised hands as if to say, whadya gonna do?)*

KAY

So I wasn't crazy! You haven't ever messed with my keys have you?

AL

No, that's all on you, I'm afraid. That happened to all of us when we were alive. We remember the exasperation. So keys we leave alone. Socks, too.

KAY

What about the Native American? I've heard stories about a Native American ghost.

AL

He's been known to stop by on occasion. He really likes the musicals. But otherwise he's much happier haunting the park trails along the river. Since the theater is between the trail and the river, the theater is open territory for him. Apparently the Metroparks put up a statue of him carrying a canoe. Well, it's doubtful that the statue is actually him. I mean he died a couple hundred or so years ago. But he likes to think it's him and brags about it.

KAY

That's incredible! What about 'ghosting?'

AL

*(confused)*

Well, if I understand the modern definition of that term, when you die, you're pretty much 'ghosting' everyone you've ever known.

KAY

Ooops! Yeah, that is the current popular definition of 'ghosting.' No. What I mean is that on the tech crew we call it 'ghosting' when the power to a light is cut, but the light doesn't go out.

AL

Oh, well then 'ghosting' is the right word for it. 'Cause, yes, I've done that. I told you I was a practical joker! Boy, you are loaded with questions ... any more?

KAY

Oh, a thousand, I'm sure! So you've been alone here all these decades?

AL

Oh, no. There have been plenty of other ghosts here all these years. Believe me, the theater was **party central** for ghosts. We got to see all the shows. And after each show we sat around critiquing it. We laughed so hard I think sometimes people heard us.

KAY

Soooo ... after the shows you laugh at us behind our backs.

AL

Hmmm, that sounds so vicious the way you say it. It's not mean spirited. Oh, I made a pun there. But no, we love you! If we laugh at you, it's only in the same way you might laugh at a member of your own family, someone you love, when they do something silly. Critiquing is just a way to share the joy with each other. We even got to watch all the rehearsals. Sometimes we even messed with the staff to influence the play selection for the next season. But, just between you and me, sometimes the backstage drama was more entertaining than the show! Ha!

KAY

Really? Like what? Dish! Dish!

AL

There was that time in the show, "Memphis," when Adam had a long kiss on stage with his leading lady, Brooke. Next thing you know Adam's real life wife Mandy pops in the green room demanding that Adam take off his wedding ring! A bit harsh if you ask me! I mean it's not like the kiss wasn't in the script ... even if it was a bit long.

KAY

*(Kay laughs)*

I remember that, but it wasn't what you're thinking. Adam's on-stage character wasn't married, so he shouldn't have been wearing his wedding ring on stage. That's why Mandy said that.

AL

Oh ... well, that makes sense. I always felt that seemed out of character for an otherwise delightful person. Oh, and then there was the time that the prince took to the stage after an "Into the Woods" performance and proposed to Cinderella – and still in costume! That was so romantic!

KAY

*(Kay sighs)*

That **was** beautiful!

*(then suspiciously)*

You didn't have any hand in that, did you?

AL

Oh, no! That was as real as real could be! They just didn't know the theater seats were filled with weeping ghosts who burst into applause when they kissed! It was the best show of the year! If it was on the ballot, we would have given it a Tony!

KAY

If you don't mind my asking, what's the most mischievous thing you've ever done in the theater?

AL

Me, personally? Well ...

*(with a mixture of guilt and self satisfaction)*

I really hate to admit it ... but ... I, uh ... I rigged the voting at one of the short play festivals.

*(Kay stands up, shocked and a bit angry)*

KAY

What!?! You pushed a winning play out of the lead? But that's ... that's ... oooh, I'm so angry, I don't have words! I'm sorry, but that's terrible! Shame on you!

*(walks away from him)*

AL

No, no! I would never violate the integrity of the short "PLAYS!" That's ... that's sacrosanct! And the other ghosts would have been really pissed at me! But I ... I did that one time pick the common prop for the next season. Honestly I didn't know what the audience was thinking with some of their votes! The sock monkey was clearly the prop to go with.

KAY

Oh.

*(pause as she reflects, then grudgingly)*

OK, I admit it. The sock monkey was **clearly** the obvious choice that year.

AL

I have to say, to be honest, we all felt like we'd died and gone to heaven ... of course the 'died' part is pretty accurate.

KAY

*(Kay looks around nervously)*

So there's lots of ghosts here ... right now?

AL

*(Al sighs)*

No. There were, but not anymore. These past two years with the theater empty, one by one they all vanished. I'm the last.

RAUL

*(Raul comes out on the stage then stops and stares)*

What the hell?

KAY

*(awkwardly)*

Oh, Raul. You're probably wondering what I'm doing here with two chairs...

*(Raul picks up the chairs and exits without responding)*

Well, that was weird.

AL

Uh oh!

KAY

Oh no! When I first talked to you, you didn't answer me. Is this the same situation? Oh my God! He's dead, too! What could've happened? Was it the sword in the umbrella? Did he fall on it? That's awful! He's so young! He had his whole life ahead of him! He had a girlfriend ... or at least he had his eye on someone he wanted to be his girlfriend.

AL

Oooh boy! Um ... I ... don't think that's the situation here, Kay.

KAY

Of course that's the situation. What else could it be?

AL

*(long exhalation)*

I ... I ... I ... I really think you're overlooking the obvious here, Kay. I mean it wasn't that I couldn't hear you when you first started talking to me. But when you've been a ghost as long as me, you're used to the living not addressing you ... EVER! So it didn't occur to me that I was the one you were talking to. If he had **just** died, it wouldn't have occurred to him that you weren't talking to him.

KAY

So what are you saying, Al?

*(still missing the obvious, Al give a facial expression that conveys "please don't make me say it!" Kay returns a facial expression that conveys "what the hell does that mean?" Al gives a long, groaning exhalation.)*

AL

Kay, how is it that you can see me?

KAY

*(frozen for a long while, can't bring herself to answer the question)*

I ... I don't know, Al.

*(catching the hint and getting scared, starts to tear up)*

Because I'm a really special and intuitive person?

AL

You are a really special and intuitive person, Kay. But that's not why.

RAUL

*(Raul comes back on stage, talks to the control booth)*

As far as I can tell, everything is still working fine. I don't know what that blinking was. Or, for that matter, how those chairs got on the stage. They weren't there a few minutes ago. Must be the gremlins.

*(This last remark gets Al's hackles up, but given Kay's emotional state, he lets it go.)*

KAY

*(desparately)*

Raul?

RAUL

*(He still does not respond to her. Raul sighs.)*

I suppose it's time to get dressed for the service. It's hard to believe Kay's not with us anymore. I'm really gonna miss her.

*(lights go out and he exits the stage, the ghost light is still on; Kay approaches and as she touches it, the light blinks. Al approaches her. She reaches out and finds she can touch him.)*

KAY

I'm ...?

*(Al nods his head, she starts to cry and they hug)*

I remember now. I was in the hospital ... the pandemic. But if I died at the hospital, how did I get here?

AL

Because you're a stage manager. No matter where you are, your spirit is always here. You love this theater and it loves you, too.

KAY

It does?

AL

*(Al nods)*

Besides, no ghost wants to stay at the hospital!

*(pause)*

I know this is traumatic for you, Kay. Everything in your life has been turned upside down and here you are stuck with someone who is a stranger to you. But I would just like you to know that though I may be a stranger to you, you're no stranger to me. I've seen you stage manage so many plays. I've seen you design and set up lights.

*(pause)*

At this point I feel compelled to mention that not a single light **you** ever hung came loose and fell to the stage! That's something I really admire!

KAY

*(Kay laughs)*

I imagine so.

AL

I saw you not so long ago on this very stage dancing, singing and acting. You loved it. I saw you as a child singing in the Christmas play. And I saw you as a young tot brought here by your parents when they were working on shows. Back then you were such a ... special ... and intuitive little girl.

*(Al takes a few steps away from her, turns back to face her and smiles as he waves)*

KAY

*(Kay smiles and waves back; then suddenly gasps)*

It was you! It was you, I remember it now! My parents were busy and I was feeling lonely and you smiled at me and waved – just like that! I walked over to you and said I was bored. You told me there were toys in the library upstairs. We went up and while I played with the toys you told me a story. I fell asleep on the couch.

AL

And I stayed and kept watch over you.

KAY

I woke up when my parents, my very frantic parents found me.

AL

Sorry if I got you in trouble.

KAY

I told them about you, but they said you were just a dream. But you weren't a dream!

*(Al shakes his head 'no')*

It's so good to finally meet you again.

*(She walks up to him holding out her hand to shake his, then pulls him in for a big hug. The sound of a crowd gathering can be heard off stage. Kay turns to look and is surprised.)*

Hoooly shit! Is that Bob? And there's Scott, John and Earl! And Maggie! And Kitty and Sam!

*(several voices offstage call out, "Kay!" Kay runs offstage to greet them.)*

AL

They've all come back!

*(He goes to follow Kay, but stops before exiting; looks back at the ghost light. Walks back to it.)*

Thanks for keeping me company old friend.

*(Al blows the ghost light out like a candle leaving the stage black. We hear quick steps and suddenly the ghost light*

*comes back on. Kay is on stage with Al and she is the one who turned it back on with a touch.)*

KAY

Are you crazy? Safety first, Al! Safety first!

*(They exit together.)*

The End

Dedicated to Bob, Scott, John, Earl, Maggie, Kitty & Sam and so many more.

With special thanks to Jasen, Mandy, Adam, Brooke, Meg and Tom who gave permission to use their names.

And a special dedication to my wife, Sue, who had more ghost stories to share with me than anyone!

Prop Note 1 – *[As is written in the script, this umbrella has a sword in it. This is not a hard to find object. There are loads of them available on the internet from very expensive models down to dirt cheap.]*

Technical note 1 – *[To create the illusion of Al's hand passing through the light, have the ghost light and stage lights simultaneously blink to create a strobe effect. If the illusion doesn't work, just have him touch the light.]*

*Technical note 2 - [Al's voice here is exceptionally loud with echo to give an impression of the supernatural. If the actors are mic'ed, turn the volume up on Al's mic for this phrase with loads of echo, if not mic'ed, pre-record this phrase and play it back at this point with lots of volume and echo. Al can either lip sync to the recording or speak with it, whichever gives the best effect.]*

Special Note to Producers and Directors – In general theaters are not allowed to make changes to a script. But there are some changes that I, as the author, will approve in advance. This script pays tribute to certain people who were the foundations of theater local to me and who have since passed. So where Kay says

“Hooooo shit! Is that Bob? And there's Scott, John and Earl! And Maggie! And Kitty and Sam!”

I give you permission (and even encourage you, actually) to change those names to reflect and pay tribute to the foundations of your own theater.

If you have a short play festival, feel free to use the name of your own festival. And if you have your own costume designer, then in Kay's line –

“Have you been living here during the pandemic? You look like you raided the costume shop with that get up. Jasen's gonna be pissed at you!”

you have permission to use your costume designer's name. Any other ideas you may have, please ask.

Gary Davis