

An aging actor is confronted with his past when a masked stranger holds him hostage. During the novel - a mystery and a romance - two men begin to understand how one must live with the truth, rather than embrace impossible dreams.

CIRCLES: A Novel

By James Seymour

Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12435.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

CIRCLES

Their Lives Are Circles



A Novel

JAMES SEYMOUR

Copyright © 2022 James Seymour

Print ISBN: 979-8-88531-175-5

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-176-2

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2022

First Edition

I. Winter

I winced, leaning forward to retrieve the script that had fallen to the stage floor. Ye old sciatic again. The audience would take no notice, as the words were embedded in the old man's trusty brain, a testament to his past. The lights were blistering, and it was the first preview. Though I was really off-book, I kept it nearby, should the memory short-circuit again. The role was a motherfucker, but one I knew I had to take on, having recently finished my run as Lear, held over for three-months because of the generous, even laudatory, reviews. Where else was there to go but to Krapp, Beckett's Krapp, that is, after three months as Lear?

Thirty-nine today, sound as a bell...

Even as the words were spilling out – no short-circuit in sight – I couldn't help going to the subtext, my associations that made reciting Beckett's monologue possible. Even as a young actor I'd been amazed how the mind could wander in the middle of work. Sometimes it's a terrible bother – that short circuit – when one must do anything possible to stay connected to the story, especially during a long run. This was a first preview! Other times, when things were running as they should, the memories emerge as in a flood and an actor can feel – even in front of a thousand spectators – that these magical instances are the only moments in one's life when one feels totally free, while at the same time grounded to earth. Epiphanies, perhaps? If you're fortunate those memories are fundamental to the storytelling. That's not always the case.

Just been listening to an old year, pages at random

Funny, but most people imagine Beckett's old Krapp must have been written when the playwright was in his eighties, but research upon first encountering the play in drama school revealed that S.B. hadn't even broken forty when these words were penned. Such an old soul this Sam; even as a youngster, he imagined, even then, looking into the awaiting abyss. He must have also realized when he arrived at the other end of his long life – as had this retired Lear – that there are many more memories awaiting than one can imagine at forty. I simply had to get through the first performance.

After her long viduity and the...

I reached for the dictionary, as indicated, and laid it on the table. I like this part. As a kid – and beyond - I'd always enjoyed looking up words and used to have a huge Webster's just like that one.

State – or condition of being – or remaining – a widow – or widower... being –

Or remaining?

It's not just because I thought myself a widower. I did, though I had no right, I suppose. All that happened over forty years ago, and I've been married several times since. But the association was strong and wouldn't let go. All of a sudden, I got to the part that came most easily, the section about Krapp's mother's death. So far everything had been going smoothly. I could feel I had the audience in my palm. This is why I'd become an actor.

All over and done with at last. I sat for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me.

Was it the dog that did it? There'd been a dog outside that grossly modern Evangelic chapel in Tennessee during that awful afternoon. Caleb, the kids, and the rest of her family were up front by the alter – and the casket – the open casket that I found impossible to view. Why was it open? Good Episcopalians like me and my family would never have allowed everyone to see her like that, nothing like the saucy, purely delicious human being who, only days before, had been the center of all these lives. I just sat there, unable to move, to even wipe away any of the tears that had been falling steadily since coming into the pews. Why couldn't I join the others who'd moved forward to pay their respects? Before I knew it, I was outside the wide white and glassed doors of the chapel, alone on the grass, with only a small, tan shepherd mix that had been tied with a leash to a small tree. I sat with the dog, feeling solace as my fingers explored the bony chest and wet nose.

Wait. There was silence. For how long, I wondered. Had I finally circuited? Perhaps for a moment, but then this section – the entire play, really – was about memory – and silence – so they won't notice, I thought. I couldn't let that happen again, though. I got on with it.

The dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most –

Here is where I really needed to concentrate, the point in the text that always took me to the dark center of my existence, the shattering of all that I'd hoped for, the place I needed to protect from everyone else. Just say the words, I thought.

Unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire...ⁱ

My voice reached its peak and, as the script directed, I switched off the tape, only to switch it on again immediately. I thought I was going to make it through this time, but eight times a week? Ah, to be back on the heath with all of Lear's underlings to help me through.

"Good show," Jarrod, the wry stage manager, chimed in. "You knocked off two minutes." Now, normally such statistics meant that things were progressing well, that holes in the evening had been plugged. My Lear would have welcomed such information. My Krapp wasn't so sure. Had I left a section out? I understand that Beckett's success depends on silences, those moments when the text can breathe and the audience dream. It isn't a long piece, and I didn't want to rush any of the moments.

"Well, I got through it, Boss. Hope you didn't panic when I dropped the script."

"Didn't even notice. Oh, by the way, a woman left a note for you. She said not to worry, that she'd see you soon another night," after which he handed me a small, yellow-lined paper. "She looked familiar."

"Thanks. I'll see you downstairs for notes." I pocketed the note and finished removing what make-up was necessary for this role, far less than I would have preferred, as I often looked at the world as if I was a much younger man. It was those formative years – between seventeen and thirty-seven – that remained most accessible, the most painful and full of joy. Yet

I'd lived nearly a lifetime, it seems, since those days. How did I ever get to seventy-three?

Stepping out on to 47th St., I noticed it wasn't as windy as I'd expected. Lots of talk backstage about the first snowstorm on the horizon, though it was only early December and fairly warm, so I walked west to Eighth Avenue and Joe Allen's. Here was practically the only watering hole that had survived gentrification and Covid 19, allowing one to continue a belief in old New York, those days when Hell's Kitchen lived up to its name. I'd gotten to know Joe a bit, sharing some time with him at his summer home in Vermont, but even he was gone now. Not Krapp, though. He was still around.

"You look pretty good, kid, even after surviving S.B.'s dark hole of existential recognition. I can drink to that," quipped Pedro, who could usually live up to such promises in glorious form. He'd been a longshoreman, actor, casting director, college professor, and life-long bisexual, so his wisdom was particularly worldly. We'd been friends since the Sixties and both lived at Manhattan Plaza for a time, the artists' haven on 42nd St. Few of them appreciated, I think, the beauty of that moment so long ago. Pedro was doing a small role in *Of Mice and Men* on Broadway, and I'd gotten several major roles at some of our best regional theatres, prior to living at the Plaza, where Tennessee Williams chilled when he was in town, which was seldom.

After tipping my rum and ginger beer in Pedro's direction, I pulled the note out of my pocket, reading it slowly, knowing pretty much what it would say, or at least the sense of trepidation it would engender upon reading.

“Another female admirer hiding in the mezzanine and too shy to go to the stage door?”

“No, an old friend, actually.” Old friend. How simply these labels lie waiting to be plucked to ward off further explanation. I could barely remember a time when Margo had not been a part of my life. She’d been Sudie’s best friend, the executor of her estate, my occasional lover, and for nearly a quarter of a century a film actor whose face was perpetually recognizable to nearly everyone she encountered. She’d been there when Sudie became a sensation both in Louisville and New York, and she’d been there when we put her in the ground. Only in the last ten to fifteen years had we become more strangers than estranged.

“Jerry, can you top me off again?” I whispered to the familiar barkeep.

“You’re going to let me know when you want me to come see the show, right?” asked Pedro.

I took a long gaze at him, then pronounced, “no, you’re forbidden to come anywhere near the theatre! Of course. I just want to make sure I’m ready to stand up to the reputation I’ve built with you. Christ, you’ve seen just about everything I’ve ever done.”

“Well, if you put it that way, I think you can rest assured that each of us remains pretty much a stranger to the other over a lifetime, don’t you think? Who said that?”

“Pretty much every poet or playwright that ever lived, I expect.”

It was Sunday night, the next day off, so I didn’t have to worry too much about the number of gingers I consumed. And besides, Pedro had been in Florida for several months before

returning the previous week, and we had our share of catching up to do.

“What was the name of that little chickadee I met before I left for the Keys? She still on your radar?”

I shuttered a bit. Unfinished business I was determined to avoid until I had a better handle on the role, or at least until we opened. “I’m not sure I can keep up with someone in their late thirties anymore. I’ve been sleeping a lot these days. Not that I regret it. I need to.”

“Take it from me, my brother. These creatures will keep you young. How do you think I feel after ten weeks with Shelly in Paradise?”

“Sore in all the right places?” I chuckled. “Why don’t you come for opening?”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I think I can safely say I’ll be there. Besides, I don’t think I’m going to have anyone else there.”

“No chickadee?”

“Don’t ask.”

There was a smaller crowd than usual, as most shows had finished the week with a matinee and some weather was on its way. Hence, I was in no hurry to get home to the West Village, especially since I was feeling as though I’d gotten over a major hump that weekend at the theatre: getting through the play without short-circuiting. In fact, were it not for the note, I would be feeling nearly ecstatic, the way an impending opening might have felt during my first decade in town.

“Do you remember opening night for Lanford’s *Lemon Sky*?” I asked Pedro.

“Holy Bejesus! That was the year we met. I was practically homeless, I remember that.”

“Practically? Where was that party? Some hole down on East 5th, I think.”

“East 4th, just down from La Mama,” Pedro confirmed. “God, you were cute in that.”

“You weren’t so bad yourself. Quite a scene, though. Not exactly what I’d imagined on my high school drama club’s opening nights. There we were, surrounded by all these characters I’d only read about, and they were coming up to me!”

“Well, you were practically the only straight one there.”

“True,” I confirmed.

“Bob Patrick, Ellen Stewart, Sam Shepard...”

“Warhol!

“Yes, Andy and his army of cameras.”

“That was the night I met Tennessee, cackling away in a corner with some of Andy’s gang, Joe Dellasandro, I think, and Candy Darling.”

How was it, I thought, that I had found myself amidst such a coterie of cultural liberators – dysfunctional genius misfits – having survived the most typical suburban upbringing one could imagine? It was all there in Lanford’s play: the denial of innocence. I’d certainly been aware of the unusual circumstances of those years: the painful, daily reminders of what a colonial war can mean for even as large and self-satisfied a country as this one, but I’d never imagined being at the center of such a sea of revolutionary creativity.

“I remember you brought me home that night,” said Pedro meekly.

“Well, somebody had to,” I said to him with a huge grin.

“Indeed. I hadn’t discovered what, which, why, or where I was at that point.”

“Tell me something, P. Didn’t you feel that night – or some night like it then – that anything was possible? That whatever shit was ahead of you it would all fall into place, that you were in the spotlight, way beyond others who were struggling for some kind of attention, and that you wouldn’t have changed anything or even hoped for anything more, because that would mean becoming greedy?”

“No, man. I felt as though I was in the deepest hole and worst of all, it was a hole I dug. That’s what brought me to these folks. Deep down they were as sure as I was that they’d never get out of their own black holes. That’s what kept them writing, digging, kept them engaged and creating.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I sighed. “But we got there, didn’t we P? P, B, and J?” Pedro, Ben, and John, whose story – and memory – kept Pedro company, in much the same way that the memory of Billy was my battery. John and Billy were the glue, long dried. Pedro and I shared a mutual belief that in view of our past, our present made sense.

III. Winter

“You staying for another, P?”

“I suppose I’d better behave myself. If one finds himself snookered and blacked out in the morning on a corner in Key West, he can end up becoming the laughingstock. That happens here, he can wake up dead.”

“What a wise old geezer you’ve become, Bud,” I answered, smiling into my ginger.

“Were that true I’d be a retired professor emeritus writing my memoir on a Connecticut farm.”

“Yes, but you’d be such a boring old dullard, you’d have nothing to write about.”

“Right you are, if you think you are,” quipped Pedro, collecting his full-length leather jacket and Dylan cap before heading for the exit. “Give my best to Margo, by the way.”

“What? How did you know?”

“Come on, man. How long have I known you?” In a few seconds he was gone, as if he’d dissolved into the mist now forming on West 46th St.

I followed him out the door only minutes later after downing my last ginger. The night was becoming slightly treacherous, though it was still warm enough that what fell was more spritz than solid snowflake. I knew I should have hailed a cab at Ninth Ave., but couldn’t fight the urge to walk, lucky as I was – despite the sciatica – to still have legs built to traverse the city’s streets with vigor.

What a great expression, that word, “vigor.” I couldn’t imagine it had found much use before the early Sixties when JFK virtually invented it – or so it seemed to those of us trying to believe in Camelot. With what leisurely confidence the new president had promised we’d entered a new age, invigorated by the denial of old things and old ways. He seemed to recognize that a whole new cadre of smart young people could pick up the marbles left by that generation born in the last century and march forward with what? Yes, vigor! I’d been lucky enough to see it firsthand, having attended – thanks to the awakening of my mother’s mind – the 35th president’s inauguration. Too young to recognize the prescience of the moment, I knew it was something unusual, witnessing the beauty of this man and his wife from only yards away, the charm and grace of a whole family determined to make young people relevant. Frigid as my feet had become during the accompanying blizzard, even a twelve-year-old could recognize the country was on the verge of consequential change.

My late-night vigor had gotten me to 38th St., just beyond Port Authority, at which time I remembered the countless bus trips I’d taken as a teenager on my way to acting classes at the Circle in the Square on Bleeker St., where I’d gotten my first taste of Village life. Not only was I developing some serious acting chops, but after classes on those Saturdays I’d walk with my new weekend companion – a fellow student and rather voluptuous brunette from Long Island – through every street nearby, dropping into the record shops (which were everywhere), checking out the latest vinyl, especially those of the new breed of emerging folk artists, singer-songwriters like

Tom Paxton, Buffy Saint-Marie, Richie Havens, and the unforgettable Phil Ochs. These were the sounds of liberation that drew me to that place and time, nearly gone now and, perhaps, lost forever, dwarfed by a landscape of steel swallowing up any vestige of the old town.

These and other recollections accompanied me further south, just beyond 14th St., for so many years the unspoken barrier between an up or downtown sensibility. I was proud to consider myself a character of the latter for over thirty years now, one of the survivors still anxious to pay tribute to the many who didn't make it that far. Just a few blocks further – despite a sciatic hip that was beginning to hinder my pace – I would be home and safely ensconced in my own cloistered universe.

The spritz in the air seemed to have lessened a bit, moistening my warm face and becoming a fog that hid most everything around me. The streets had emptied of nearly all life, which is why I took notice just beyond 13th St. of a figure about a block behind me that I swore I'd first seen up around 22nd St., when I'd taken a short detour to spend a few minutes peering into the park by the seminary, one of my favorite spots in Chelsea and a location for Billy's short piece about the vampire Oscar Wilde. More of that later.

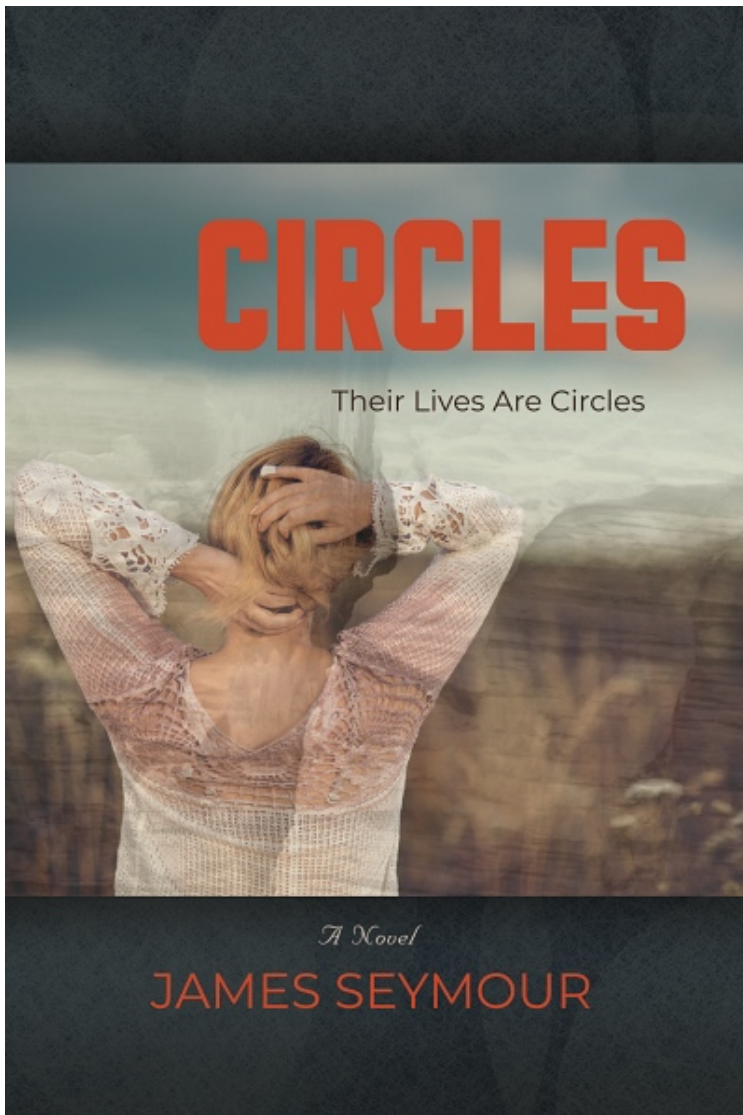
At the moment I was spooked by this creature I imagined might be following me. I laughed at myself, remembering a similar scene in the Oscar Wilde, but as I continued down 9th Ave., I couldn't shake the idea that I was the focus of a prowl, especially after reading Margo's note. Even with the heightened pain in my upper leg, I picked up the pace, acknowledging my heart had begun pumping with a new... what? Vigor? By then

I'd passed the corner of Perry and Washington, only a few blocks from my apartment at 10th and West 4th, opposite Small's jazz club. In what other city would you have an address at the corner of 10th and 4th Street? After turning east on Charles St., I thought I'd test this paranoia by slipping into the alcove at the Ale House to wait and see if this figure was still behind me. I felt absolutely silly, as if there wasn't enough drama in my working life, I had to add even more during my off-hours. But then, the note, with what I imagined even at its first read was a sort of coded message.

I waited what seemed about ten minutes and was about to step back into the street when I was astonished to see this thin man, distinguishable by a sort of brute... what? Vigor? Too far away to differentiate facial details, he demonstrated an intent that had caught my eye the first time I noticed him. Why was he stopped right there in front of the bar? Did he actually look familiar or was this more of my mind playing tricks? What to do, I thought. Why not just walk out directly in front of him and continue walking home? Or confront him even? But I was a man with an overgrown imagination, necessary to do what I did for a living. I simply lacked the nerve in real life. The dark interior of the ale house slowly revealed a few regulars huddled around their favorite spots. I contemplated going in for one last pint, but it was getting late and when I turned to face outside again, the man had disappeared. How desperately I needed the day off and a full night's sleep.

Convinced finally that a combination of aging, tired brain cells and weather right out of a Sam Spade film noir had led to my silly presumption of impending doom, the limping Krapp,

looking quickly to see if anyone had noticed his childish behavior, resumed his walk; Odysseus nearing his home port. After checking a few times to confirm there was no one behind me on the same trajectory, I turned the corner by the synagogue and headed south. Before I reached my basement floor-thru in the beloved old brownstone I'd called home for over thirty years, I took out my keys and unlocked the metal gate below the stoop. It was then that everything went dark, and a sharp pain enveloped my neck and upper back.



An aging actor is confronted with his past when a masked stranger holds him hostage. During the novel - a mystery and a romance - two men begin to understand how one must live with the truth, rather than embrace impossible dreams.

CIRCLES: A Novel

By James Seymour

Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12435.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**