

A Play by HELEN FROST and HARVEY COCKS

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WHY DARKNESS SEEMS SO LIGHT

A Play by HELEN FROST and HARVEY COCKS Based on writing by high school students

Acknowledgements:

This play is based on writing by high school students in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in the spring of 1998. Students from North Side, Heritage, Wayne, South Side and Homestead High Schools and the Fort Wayne Community Schools Alternative Learning Program participated in writing residencies led by Helen Frost and sponsored by the Fort Wayne YWCA as part of their annual Week Without Violence Awareness Campaign.

Financial support for this project came from Target, GTE, NBD, Tokheim, Don R. Fruchey and Arts United.

Although this play grew out of true stories, all of the names, places and other details have been changed. None of the characters in the play is based on actual people.

SETTING:

The action of the play is set in an American city in the spring of this year.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

Prologue: Mrs. Appleton, reading the poem "Why Darkness Seems So Light."

Scene One: A high school classroom.

Scene Two: Outside the house of Johnny, a 16-year-old boy.

Scene Three: Same evening, outside a house in another part of town.

Segue A: Reverend Davis, monologue, "Who is Johnny?" Johnny's Mother, monologue, "Johnny is my son."

Scene Four: The next morning, inside Ginger's house, kitchen/family room.

Segue B: Rory, monologue, "Now what do I do?"

Scene Five: Later that day, in Ginger's grandmother's kitchen.

Segue C: Mrs. Appleton, monologue, "It's heartbreaking."

Scene Six: One week later, inside the home of Whitney and Megan, 12 and 15-year-old sisters.

Segue D: Megan, monologue, "It makes me mad."

Scene Seven: In front of a laser-tag place, that evening.

Segue E: Chris, monologue, "Things can happen anywhere."

Scene Eight: Later that evening, inside the home of Marcus and Nathan, 13 and 16-year-old brothers.

Segue F: Amy, monologue, "I recognized him."

Scene Nine: The next day, hospital waiting room.

CAST OF CHARACTERS (In Order of Appearance)

MRS. APPLETON....... teacher (part could be played by male, "Mr. Appleton")

TANK teenage boy

JOHNNY...... teenage girl

BEE teenage girl, Ginger's cousin

DANAE Bee's friend

COURTNEY girl at the party

RORY teenage boy

DAVID Rory's friend

REVEREND DAVIS adult (male or female)

JOHNNY'S MOTHER

CONNIE Ginger's mother

CHARLES Ginger's younger sister

ROSE	Ginger's grandmother
DIANE	Whitney's mother
WHITNEY	teenage girl
MEGAN	Whitney's younger sister
BILLY	small boy, neighbor (could be played by girl, "BILLY JO")
MARCUS	teenage boy
NATHAN	Marcus's younger brother
ART	Nathan's friend
RALPH	Marcus's and Nathan's stepfather
SALLY	Marcus's and Nathan's mother
CHRIS	teenager (could be played by girl or boy)
AMY	teenage girl, volunteer in hospital
EXTRAS	for party scene (optional)

WHY DARKNESS SEEMS SO LIGHT

PRIOR TO CURTAIN: JOHNNY is on stage, playing a saxophone as the audience enters. Taped music can be substituted.

PROLOGUE

MRS. APPLETON: (ENTERS as the LIGHTS go UP. SAXAPHONE MUSIC OUT. Begins reading the poem "Why Darkness Seems So Light.") Have you heard the angry voices, a slap against skin? Have you heard the gunshots in the kitchen at a party in the street? Do you see the broken dishes broken window, broken face? Can you see the broken hearts in the classroom in the prison at the mall? Can you feel this darkness resting on our shoulders so wide and deep it's hard to know it's there?

Can you find one corner, find a sister, brother, friend?

Can we lift the darkness

and let our light shine in?

(LIGHTS DOWN on MRS. APPLETON. SAXOPHONE MUSIC plays as interlude between Prologue and Scene One.)

Scene One

SETTING: A classroom with a desk at RIGHT side of stage. The background is generic. It will change in appearance and represent each location for the scenes that follow.

LIGHTS UP: TANK is sitting at the desk. MUSIC FADES.

TANK: (Head down on his desk; after a pause, looks up and addresses the audience.) That one poem the teacher read got me thinking. She

said, "Respond to this poem in writing. What do you have to say about violence?" (Laughs.) If I could write... and I can't... it would be the biggest book anyone ever wrote. (Doodles as he thinks.) Well... I guess it gets us out of doing our vocabulary for a couple days. (Looks back down at his paper and writes something. He scratches it out, writes something else, then holds it up and reads it out loud.) "At this time I'm briefly going to tell you about the time a single bullet changed my life forever. It was a warm spring evening, the fifteenth of May. Ginger and Johnny and me were sitting on Johnny's porch, listening to 'Live and Die in L.A.' [or a current song]." (Looks up. He is tentatively pleased with what he has written. He looks back down at his paper and continues writing. LIGHTS DOWN.)

End of Scene One

Scene Two

SETTING: JOHNNY'S front porch. There are several chairs DOWNSTAGE.

LIGHTS UP: JOHNNY, TANK and GINGER are sitting on the porch, listening to a boom box playing loud music.

JOHNNY: Hey, Tank, I gotta get me a job. It's gonna take a lot of money to keep this Buick LeSabre on the road. Glad school's almost out.

TANK: What you talkin' about, Johnny? You never go anyway. How many times you been to school this past month?

JOHNNY: Every time I go, I get in some kind of trouble. Didn't get my homework done or they don't like the clothes I'm wearing. It's always something. I'm thinking of quitting. I can always get my GED.

TANK: Yeah, that's what I'd do too, except I want to do second year metals next year.

JOHNNY: I just want to learn auto mechanics. All I really care about is my saxophone and my ride.

GINGER: You keep talking about your new Buick, Johnny. When do we all get to ride in it?

JOHNNY: I got a full tank of gas. Let's go somewhere... see where we end up.

GINGER: We could drive across town. I heard about a party out by my cousin's house.

JOHNNY: (Rolls his eyes.) No way, girl. You don't know the dudes in that part of town. They don't like us going out there.

GINGER: It's fine. My cousin's friend told her about it. It's a big party. They won't even know we're not from there. Some other kids from school might go.

TANK: Who?

GINGER: Marcus, and maybe Whitney.

JOHNNY: Ginger, you know your father will get mad if you go out there.

GINGER: Now tell me, how will he know?

JOHNNY: I know your father. He finds out everything. You'd be grounded for life.

GINGER: He won't find out. What could happen?

JOHNNY: Tank, you talk her out of this!

TANK: Lighten up, man. It can't hurt just to drive out there and check it out.

JOHNNY: (Looks from GINGER to TANK and shrugs.) Okay, but just until midnight.

GINGER: Your Buick LeSabre turns into a pumpkin at midnight?

TANK: (Laughs.) And Johnny turns into a rat.

JOHNNY: You can laugh, but if anything happens, it's your fault.

GINGER: Nothing's going to happen. Let's go! (ALL EXIT, TANK carrying boom box still playing CD. LIGHTS FADE, MUSIC FADES.)

End of Scene Two

Scene Three

SETTING: Same evening. In front of BEE'S house, across town. Table CENTER STAGE. Chairs UP RIGHT, loveseat LEFT.

LIGHTS UP: PARTY SOUNDS of music, laughter and talking in the background, OFFSTAGE. BEE, MARCUS and a few other people are ONSTAGE, talking.

GINGER: (ENTERS with JOHNNY and TANK.) There's my cousin, Bee. And there's Marcus. Looks like Whitney didn't come. (MARCUS EXITS without noticing them.)

BEE: (Approaches GINGER, TANK and JOHNNY.) Hey, girl, what's up?

GINGER: I told you I'd get here somehow. Johnny just bought a car. (*Nods towards JOHNNY.*) He brought us. This is Tank.

BEE: Good to meet you. Come on in. There's a keg in the kitchen. People out back are rolling blunts. (*Motions taking a drag.*) Game of spades going on upstairs.

JOHNNY: I'll just stay out here for a while.

GINGER: (To BEE.) He's nervous 'cause he doesn't know this crowd.

BEE: Well, come on back whenever you want to. (She EXITS through door on back of porch.)

JOHNNY: (*To GINGER.*) What you talkin' about, girl? I ain't nervous. I got my "nine." (*Pats his pocket.*) Ain't nothin' gonna happen to me.

GINGER: (Alarmed.) What? You don't need that here. Put it back in the car!

JOHNNY: Don't worry. I don't plan to use it. I just carry it for protection.

GINGER: Johnny! Someone could see you with that.

JOHNNY: I know how to keep it to myself. You didn't even know I had it on me.

TANK: She might be right, Johnny. If the cops bust this party, you could get caught with it. Why don't you take it back to the car?

JOHNNY: Okay, fine. But if it's up to me, I say let's all go back to the car and split this whole scene. Don't none of us belong here. (He EXITS.)

GINGER: (To TANK.) Do you know why he's been so worked up lately?

TANK: (Pauses before answering). He has his reasons.

GINGER: What reasons?

TANK: I ain't saying.

GINGER: Is he in some kind of trouble?

TANK: Could be.

GINGER: Does he know something he shouldn't know?

TANK: Ginger, you ask too many questions. (SOUND of CAR PULLING

UP and LOUD CAR STEREO.)

TANK: Look at this car pulling up. I don't like the look of that dude

that's driving.

GINGER: You know him?

TANK: Not really, but I've heard about him and I don't want nothin' to do with him. (CAR STEREO stops, SOUND of CAR DOORS

SLAMMING.)

RORY: (ENTERS along with DAVID, COURTNEY and DANAE.) You

ain't from around here. Where you from?

TANK: Why? Who wants to know?

RORY: Me. That's why I asked.

GINGER: My cousin invited us.

RORY: I ain't askin' about no cousin. I said where you from?

TANK: That's our business.

RORY: (Cocks his head, studies them for a minute, addresses TANK.)

You want to talk business? You looking for some heat?

TANK: (Shrugs, acts casual.) How much?

RORY: Fifty bones.

TANK: Let me peep it out.

RORY: (Pulls out a gun.) Here you go, Dogg. (Takes clip out.)

TANK: It looks tight, but I ain't got enough. Would you take forty?

RORY: Nope, I need fifty.

TANK: Come on, Dogg.

DAVID: (Yells.) He said fifty!

TANK: Why you yellin', man?

DAVID: 'Cause you're tryin' to rip off my boy.

TANK: That's 'cause you're chargin' too much! (Hands gun back to RORY, who puts the clip back in and puts it in his back pocket.)

DAVID: Maybe where you're from, it's too much. (*JOHNNY ENTERS.*) Around here, people know what things are worth. (*To RORY.*) Let's go, bro'.

JOHNNY: What's goin' on here? (DAVID, RORY, COURTNEY and DANAE start to walk away.)

TANK: They been rattin' us out.

RORY: (To DAVID, but over his shoulder so that TANK and JOHNNY will hear.) Maybe we should teach them a little respect before we go.

JOHNNY: (Walks towards RORY. TANK follows. GINGER stands back.) Go ahead, then.

GINGER: Johnny! Tank! Don't get into this! Just ignore them. Let's go.

RORY: Listen to the girl. Time for you to go. (Shoves JOHNNY.)

JOHNNY: (Ignores GINGER.) We'll go when we're ready. (Shoves RORY.)

RORY: (To his friends.) Let's help them get ready. (He and DAVID rush toward TANK and JOHNNY. GINGER moves to help. TANK restrains her. A fight breaks out. COURTNEY and DANAE stand by watching.)

GINGER: Stop! Come on, let's go! (Still trying to help.)

TANK: No, Ginger. (RORY throws a punch at JOHNNY that grazes his shoulder, throwing him off balance. DAVID quickly throws a punch at JOHNNY, but JOHNNY is able to grab DAVID'S hand and stop the blow. RORY, at the same time, moves behind JOHNNY, grabbing him around the neck and breaking his grip on DAVID'S hand. JOHNNY struggles to free himself from RORY'S grasp. DAVID moves in, punching JOHNNY in the stomach, doubling him over. RORY trips JOHNNY, forcing his legs from under him. JOHNNY falls to the ground, and RORY and DAVID start kicking him. JOHNNY keeps trying to get up, but RORY and DAVID keep kicking him down. The OTHERS are watching and cheering them on.)

RORY: What you staring at? I'm finished with this dude. (Gives JOHNNY one final vicious kick, then turns to walk away. JOHNNY struggles to his feet, springs forward and jumps on RORY'S back. RORY knocks JOHNNY off his back and turns around as JOHNNY falls to floor on his back. RORY takes out his gun.) You didn't get enough yet? (EVERYONE becomes quiet, watching. RORY points gun at JOHNNY.)

GINGER: No! No! Stop! (RORY fires gun.) He's been shot!

RORY: (To his friends.) Come on. Let's go. (He, DAVID, COURTNEY and DANAE EXIT. GINGER and TANK run to JOHNNY. SOUND of CAR DOORS SLAMMING, TIRES SCREECHING. Then QUIET. SPOTLIGHT ON GINGER, TANK and JOHNNY.)

TANK: Stay with him. I'll call 911. (He EXITS as GINGER holds JOHNNY.)

JOHNNY: (Quiet voice, weak). Ginger, it's gonna be okay. Trust me.

GINGER: (Crying.) I'm sorry. Johnny, I'm so sorry.

JOHNNY: Please don't cry. It's gonna be okay.

GINGER: No, it's not. I shouldn't have asked you to come here. Where are you shot?

JOHNNY: Here in my side. It's bleeding pretty bad.

GINGER: (Takes off her white shirt—has another shirt on underneath it—and presses it to JOHNNY'S side.) I'll try not to hurt you.

JOHNNY: You'll ruin your new shirt.

GINGER: Do you think that matters now? You're really hurt. What can I do?

JOHNNY: You can't do anything. You better go. I don't want you getting involved in any of this.

GINGER: I'm not leaving you, Johnny. What was that guy's name?

JOHNNY: It's better if you don't know. You get out of here now before the cops come and start asking questions. (*Grimaces in pain.*)

GINGER: No! I can't leave you here alone.

JOHNNY: Please go now. I'll call you tomorrow morning and... oh... I'm dizzy...

GINGER: Keep talking to me, Johnny.

JOHNNY: Nothin' more to say. This was bound to happen sometime. Go home now. You're a nice girl, Ginger. Stay out of this mess. Take my car and drive yourself home, and don't say nothin' to no one. (Struggles to get his keys out of his pocket, drops them on the ground, then falls limply in GINGER'S arms.)

GINGER: (Crying.) Tank! I think he's dying! Tank!

TANK: (ENTERS.) An ambulance is on the way. We better get out of here now, Ginger. The cops will be here and they'll be asking questions.

GINGER: But, Tank, we can't leave him here! (SOUND of SIRENS in the distance.)

TANK: We have to. And don't leave your shirt here. (Lifts JOHNNY'S head out of GINGER'S lap, lays him gently on the ground, picks up JOHNNY'S keys and offers GINGER a hand to help her up.)

GINGER: (Kisses JOHNNY'S forehead, still crying. Then takes TANK'S hand to get up.) Goodbye, Johnny. I love you. I'm so sorry.

TANK: Let's get out of here. (SIRENS get louder. TANK and GINGER EXIT, with TANK pulling GINGER urgently away as she looks back at JOHNNY. BLACKOUT except for SPOTLIGHT on JOHNNY.)

End of Scene Three

Segue A

SETTING: The monologues are spoken at the front of the stage during the scene change.

SPOT LIGHTS UP: REVEREND DAVIS ENTERS and stands on one side of the STAGE. He carries a bible. JOHNNY'S MOTHER ENTERS on other side of the STAGE.

REVEREND DAVIS: Who is Johnny?

Johnny could be an honors student headed for college.

A five year old in his kitchen making Kool-Aid with his cousin.

A youth worker returning home from a church trip to Chicago.

A young woman expecting twins any day now.

One of her unborn twins.

A 13-year-old girl walking to school.

A first grader walking home from school.

A girl whose parents think she is at school.

The aunt of a 6-year-old.

The mother of a 12-year-old.

The father of a 2-year-old. (SPOTLIGHT OUT on REVEREND DAVIS and UP on JOHNNY'S MOTHER.)

JOHNNY'S MOTHER: No. Johnny is my boy, my only son, my best friend, my life. He always has a smile for everybody. His laugh makes us all laugh, even when we don't know what we're laughing about. If

something is wrong with your car, or your friend's car, he'll drive it around the block and hear what's wrong and fix it. You try to give him money for it, he'll give it right back. "What are friends for?" he'll say. And you should hear my Johnny play the saxophone. Quiet and slow, it can make you cry. (SAXOPHONE MUSIC is heard. BLACKOUT.)

End of Segue A

Scene Four

SETTING: The next morning. The kitchen/family room with eating area of GINGER'S house. RIGHT there's a table with three chairs. LEFT is a chair in front of a television.

LIGHTS UP: CONNIE is sitting at the table drinking coffee and reading a newspaper. CHARLES is watching TV across the room, flipping channels. SAMMIE sits at the table in her pajamas, eating a bowl of cereal, silently watching this whole scene.

CONNIE: Another shooting in the paper this morning. Some kids at a party across town.

CHARLES: I saw that on the news. One of them died. What are these 16-year-olds doing with guns, anyway?

CONNIE: I'm just glad Ginger has better sense than that. She seems to hang out with a good bunch of kids. No drinking or smoking.

CHARLES: We don't know that. Hard to tell what the kids are getting up to these days.

CONNIE: Well, I try not to be suspicious. She's never given me any reason not to believe her.

CHARLES: Where was she last night?

CONNIE: I think she said something about going to Bee's house, but I might have that wrong. I was on the phone when she told me and then she rushed out. I haven't really talked to her since she got home. She got in late.

CHARLES: She better have a good reason. (GINGER ENTERS, sits down at the table.) Your mother tells me you got in late last night.

GINGER: Yeah.

CHARLES: What time?

GINGER: I don't remember.

CHARLES: What do you mean, you don't remember?

GINGER: Dad, I just don't. I didn't look at the clock.

CHARLES: Well, you're grounded next weekend.

GINGER: That's not fair. I had a lot on my mind last night. I couldn't

get home when I was supposed to.

CHARLES: Well, a couple nights at home should clear your mind and make you think a little harder next time. (GINGER starts to answer, then changes her mind and stares down at the table.)

CONNIE: What is on your mind, honey?

GINGER: Nothing.

CONNIE: You just said...

GINGER: Never mind, Mom. I don't want to talk about it.

CONNIE: How can we help if you won't tell us what's wrong?

GINGER: You can't help.

CONNIE: You might be surprised.

GINGER: You might be surprised. (CONNIE looks startled at this

remark but doesn't say anything.)

CHARLES: Don't talk back to your mother.

GINGER: Could everyone just leave me alone?

CHARLES: (Flips channels on TV.) Here's something about that

shooting last night. You know any of these kids, Ginger?

GINGER: (Goes over to look at the news. Stands behind CHARLES,

fearful. CONNIE'S back is to Ginger.) Did anyone die?

CHARLES: Yeah, kid named Johnny something. Looks like another case of someone being in the wrong place at the wrong time. They're looking for witnesses. (GINGER abruptly, but quietly, EXITS.)

CHARLES: Now what's got into her?

CONNIE: I don't know. Lately, I've given up trying to figure her out.

End of Scene Four

End of Script Sample

PRODUCTION NOTES

PROPERTIES

BROUGHT ON, Pre-opening: Saxophone (JOHNNY).

BROUGHT ON, Prologue: Book of poems (MRS. APPLETON).

BROUGHT ON, Scene One: Pad of paper, pencil (TANK).

BROUGHT ON, Scene Two: Boom box (TANK).

ON STAGE, Scene Three: Soft drinks, plastic cups on large table.

BROUGHT ON, Scene Three: Gun, car keys (JOHNNY); gun with clip (RORY); white shirt (GINGER).

BROUGHT ON, Segue A: Bible (REV. DAVIS).

ON STAGE, Scene Four: Coffee mug, newspaper, cereal bowl, spoon on large table, remote control.

BROUGHT ON, Segue B: Newspaper (RORY).

ON STAGE, Scene Five: Iron and ironing board, piece of clothing on ironing board, teapot, cup, saucer on large table, stuffed animal, afghan on loveseat.

BROUGHT ON, Segue C: Newspaper, scissors, file folder with clippings (MRS. APPLETON).

BROUGHT ON, Scene Six: Deck of playing cards (SAMMIE, MEGAN); purse, money (DIANE); filled grocery sack, makeup, curling iron (WHITNEY).

ON STAGE, Scene Seven: Tables and chairs.

BROUGHT ON, Scene Seven: Can of Coke (MARCUS).

BROUGHT ON, Scene Eight: Liquor bottle, gun (RALPH); gun (NATHAN).

ON STAGE, Scene Nine: Magazines on coffee table.

BROUGHT ON, Scene Nine: Wheelchair (AMY); arm sling (NATHAN).

SET DESCRIPTION

The settings can be presented simply, through the use of a few pieces of furniture that can be arranged in a different pattern for each scene. See diagrams at end of playbook.

The original production was played on an open stage and utilized two small round tables, one large round table, a small settee or loveseat, one coffee table, a small portable television set and eight chairs.

To vary the appearance of the large round table, different tablecloths and centerpieces were used in each scene when it was needed. The look of the settee was changed by an exchange of pillows and/or throws for each of its scenes.

Two chairs were permanently located before the front curtain, one at STAGE LEFT and one at STAGE RIGHT for SCENE ONE and all SEGUES. Scene Two consisted of three chairs CENTER STAGE, also played before the front curtain. The actors at the end of the scene carried them off for placement in Scene Three.

Additional set dressing may be added if desired.

CASTING

The original production was cast in an ethnically diverse community. Casting was racial-blind, with one exception. The decision was made that Marcus and Whitney should be the same race in order to maintain the focus of Scene Seven on sexual violence and away from racial stereotypes. Families and groups of friends were deliberately cast in racially mixed groupings.

LANGUAGE

The play includes slang and other references that is current at the time of publication, but this will change. Actors are encouraged to update the language as appropriate.

SOUND

Pre Opening and Prologue: Saxophone music.

Scene Two: Music from boom box.

Scene Three: Party sounds, tires screeching, car pulling up, car stereo,

car doors slamming, gunshot, siren.

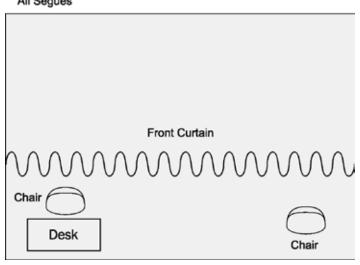
Segue A: Saxophone music.

Scene Seven: Music, sounds of laser-tag.

Scene Eight: Gunshot.

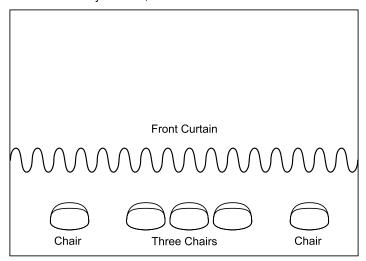
SETTING:

Prologue Scene One All Segues



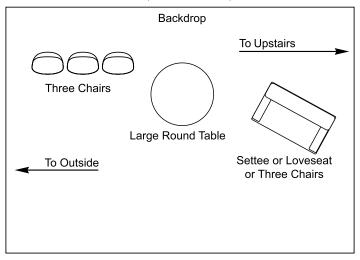
SETTING:

Scene Two Outside Johnny's House, Front Porch



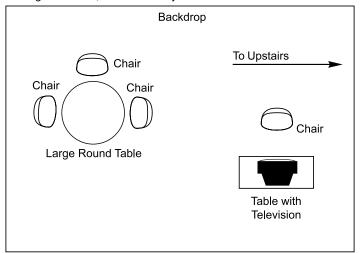
SETTING:

Scene Three
Outside house in another part of town, on porch.



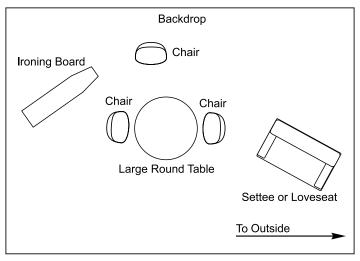
SETTING:

Scene Four Ginger's House, Kitchen/Family Room



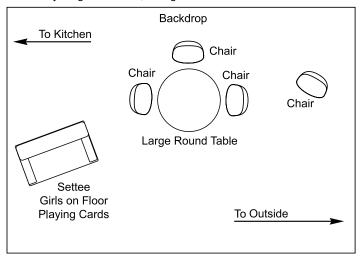
SETTING: Scene Five

Ginger's Grandmother's House



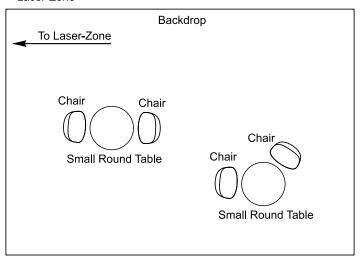
SETTING:

Scene Six Whitney/Megan's House, Living Room



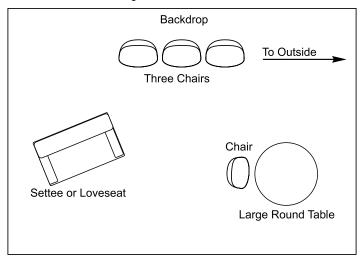
SETTING:

Scene Seven Laser-Zone



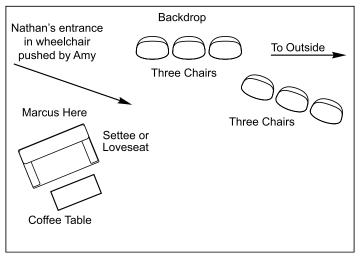
SETTING:

Scene Eight Nathan/Marcus's Living Room



SETTING:

Scene Nine Hospital Waiting Room



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