

Just Beyond

A Musical Celebration of Heaven

PRODUCTION NOTES

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These notes are for a very basic production that can be staged simply by any size church or theater group. This work is accessible enough to be presented by a large group, such as your combined adult and senior adult choirs, plus a cast. Or it could be presented by a musical theater troupe, with cast also functioning as singers. Keep it small and simple, and it could be presented as a dinner theater production, or in a setting in your community such as a Senior Retirement complex. Expanded, it can be an evening of worship and celebration about heaven that your entire congregation shares. The suggestions for staging offered here are minimal, so that you may build upon them and adapt them to fit your presentation.

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for her ideas and input on set and staging*

Plot

The action of this drama takes place at the funeral of Sarah Elizabeth Morgan, a woman whose age would probably have been 78–80. The setting is the graveside service of the funeral, where her family has gathered. The time is present day, no particular location. It could be any family gathering at a graveside. Through the magic of theatrical device, we are introduced to the family by the deceased woman herself. We hear their memories of family and their thoughts about heaven, dying and the future our hope in Christ guarantees us.

Cast

Narrator Adult male or female, any age. The Narrator doubles as one of the non-speaking Other Mourners (see below). Narrator should be costumed in modern day clothes appropriate for a funeral.

Pastor Adult male, middle to older age, costumed in dark suit and tie, white dress shirt, conservative enough to serve as both modern day and World War II period clothing. Option: This actor may also serve as the baritone soloist for the song “Home to Heaven.”

Sarah Young (early 20s) adult woman, costumed in dress and shoes from World War II era. Her hair should be styled in appropriate period fashion.

- Homer** Young (early 20s) adult male, costumed in World War II officer’s military uniform. Hair should be styled in appropriate period fashion.
- Young Francis** Girl, age 16–18, costumed in dress, hat and shoes from World War II era appropriate for a church service, hair styled in appropriate period fashion. Option: This actress may also serve as the female soloist for the song “Home to Heaven.”
- Young Esther** Young (early to mid-20s) woman, costumed in dress, hat, gloves and shoes appropriate for a church service, hair styled in appropriate period fashion. Young Esther should resemble the older Esther enough to believe that they are the same person at two different ages.
- Esther** Older woman, early to mid-70s, costumed in modern day dress appropriate for a funeral.
- Deborah** Adult woman, early to mid-50s, costumed in modern day dress appropriate for a funeral.
- Corrie** Young, adult woman, 25–28, costumed in modern day casual dress, such as t-shirt and jeans, khaki pants or shorts appropriate for daily life as a missionary worker in Africa.
- Son-in-law** Adult male, late 40s/early 50s, age appropriate to be the husband of the Daughter character, costumed in modern day dark suit, tie and dress shirt appropriate for funeral, or optional dress shirt/tie and suit coat.
- Daughter** Adult woman, late 40s. This character is the daughter of Sarah. She should be age appropriate to be the wife of the Son-in-law character, but not too old to have a daughter the age of Sarah Jane, costumed in modern day dress appropriate for a funeral.
- Sarah Jane** Girl, age 6–8. She is the granddaughter of Sarah. Her parents are the characters’ Daughter and Son-in-law, costumed in modern day dress appropriate for a funeral.

Non-speaking Roles:

- Deborah’s Sister** Adult woman, 50s, age appropriate to be the sister of Deborah. She is mentioned in Scene 1 as one of Margaret’s daughters. She should stand next to Deborah at the graveside, costumed in modern day dress appropriate for a funeral.

- Jason** Young boy, 8–10. He is the son of Sarah and Homer, mentioned in Scene 1, who died as a child. He should be costumed in everyday period clothing of World War II era, hair styled appropriately.
- Other Mourners** 2–3 other members of the graveside cast, male and female, any age; Other child or youth (optional), costumed in modern day dress appropriate for a funeral.

Props/Set

The setting for this drama is the graveside funeral service of Sarah. The choir may sing from the choir loft, and the graveside may be set up center stage Right, in front of them.

The “set pieces” are three benches, which will be set to form a semi-circle, on which the majority of the mourners will sit with their backs to the audience. A few mourners may stand on the upstage R and L edges of this circle, as long as they don’t block sight lines. A small platform should be set in center of this semi-circle, on which the Pastor will stand when he speaks. These benches and platform may be painted basic black, or any color that will blend with the stage area of your performance.

Prop List

1. Large, black Bible for Pastor
2. Sarah’s suitcase: World War II era, large enough for her to stand it on the floor and sit on it
3. Young Francis’s gloves (Scene 1)
4. White baptismal robes for use during “Only the Redeemed.” 2 adult robes, 1 child-size robe.

General Staging Instructions

You will light three main areas where scenes will take place:

1. Graveside scene should be set at center stage. The party of mourners will remain on this set for the entire drama. These actors include:
 - Pastor
 - Esther
 - Deborah
 - Deborah’s Sister
 - Son-in-law
 - Daughter
 - Sarah Jane
 - Other Mourners

2. Light a small area downstage, Left. This will be where you play monologues or vignettes, or where Sarah can sit on her suitcase and listen to the others. If you have steps leading up to the front of your stage, utilize these levels for variety and sightlines during monologues.
3. Light a similar area downstage, Right for parallel uses.

The party of mourners at the graveside will remain in place onstage for the entire performance. When they are not involved in the scene or the choir's song, they should remain as still as possible. The Pastor should step to the platform to deliver his speeches. At other times, he may sit with the others on the benches or stand to one side. These actors, while remaining still, should not look unengaged in the scene. They should choose an appropriate graveside pose and freeze in it. They may choose different poses for each time they freeze.

Sarah will remain onstage for the entire performance. She will use her suitcase to sit on and listen to the other actors when she is not involved in the scenes. When she is sitting, position her just on the edge of the lighted area DSL. It is through Sarah's "listening" that the audience gets to hear the stories told by the characters.

With the exception of the Pastor (who speaks to the funeral party), all characters speak their lines out toward the audience. Even if they have dialogue with another character, they do not turn to that character. These lines of dialogue are either memories, or (in the case of Sarah Jane) imagined conversations. Since Sarah is deceased, she cannot interact with any characters, just remember conversation she had with them.

SONG-BY-SONG STAGING SUGGESTIONS

"Just Beyond"

Prologue/Narration (segue from "Just Beyond")

The actors (funeral party) take their places at the graveside set as the Narrator performs his/her monologue at either DSL or DSL spots. (light the graveside set dimly in background) This narrative should fit exactly over the "Just Beyond" play-off music. Afterward, the Narrator joins the funeral party.

Sarah should slip into the graveside setting along with the other actors. Position her standing upstage of someone so that we don't notice her until she steps out in Scene 1.

Scene 1

Lights up on graveside. Pastor should be in place on the platform. As he speaks, Sarah steps out from the funeral gathering and moves downstage L. (bring up DSL light; dim graveside lighting)

Sarah delivers her lines standing in DSL spot.

Homer (and later, Young Francis & Young Esther) enter from offstage. You may play them DSL just over Sarah's shoulder, if she is placed on a lower step, or you may play them DSR. They exit offstage. These characters are not part of the graveside funeral party.

During end of Sarah's speech, when she begins to remember the old time revival meetings, Pastor should remove his suit coat so that he may play the 'revival preacher' in his shirt sleeves. As she begins to recite the Scripture, bring lights up on Pastor when he joins her. When he takes over the last lines, the graveside set is now going to become a Revival Meeting scene.

“Home to Heaven”

As music begins, Sarah leaves her suitcase as Homer enters from offstage. They join hands and together join the group on the benches. Some of the funeral party will become the Revival “choir”, standing just in front of the Pastor's platform, facing their “congregation.” Young Francis and Young Esther enter from offstage and join this small choir. Young Francis should be center, since the Pastor sings the first solo and Francis sings the second solo. The “Revival choir” should sing along on this song with the actual choir. The “revival congregation” members on the benches should respond, clapping or patting their feet, etc. They may even sing along by the end of song. Get excited! This is an old time revival!

Scene 2

Following song, Homer, Young Francis and Young Esther exit the stage. The funeral party resumes its place at the graveside scene. Sarah returns to her suitcase DSL, Deborah crosses to DSL, and Esther crosses to DSR. (lights up on Esther DSR, down on Sarah and Deborah, DSL)

Esther returns to graveside after her speech. (lights out, DSR; lights up DSL on Deborah) Corrie enters and takes position DSR. When Corrie joins Deborah in reciting the scripture, lights should come up on DSR.

“Only the Redeemed”

During this song, the graveside set will become a baptismal scene. To do this, move the front center bench onto the Pastor's platform, leaving the two side benches in place. Pastor should remove his jacket and do this scene in shirtsleeves. He stands on the platform behind the bench, which will serve as the “baptismal pool.” Corrie will stand to one side, helping various actors don a baptismal robe, so that they may be “baptized.” After putting on a robe, the actor will come to kneel on the bench before the Pastor, and those sitting on the benches will become the congregation. The Pastor will mime pronouncing a baptismal blessing and lean the kneeling actor back “into the water.” The

“congregation” will respond with joy after each candidate is baptized. Family members may hug each other, etc. The next candidate then takes their place, and they pass off their robe to Corrie and join the “congregation.” You may choose any of the actors to be baptized. Choose a variety: Homer, Sarah Jane, some of the “other mourners,” and so on. The idea is to communicate that all people, of any age, from any time in history, will have a place in heaven because they have received salvation through Jesus Christ. (Sarah remains at her suitcase, lights out DSL and R)

Scene 3

Following the song, you may use the “Only the Redeemed Tag” to cover the time it takes to replace the bench and return the funeral party cast to their positions. Corrie can drape the baptismal robes over one arm and carry them with her as she exits. First, however, she will deliver her monologue in the lighted area, DSR. (After her monologue, lights out DSR, Corrie exits, as lights up DSL for Son-in-law’s monologue.)

At close of Son-in-law’s monologue, as music begins to “Come Harvest Time,” the Daughter can turn back to notice that he has slipped away from the graveside service, and she can cross DSL to him to comfort him. Perhaps they can hug, and then can stand with backs to audience, facing choir, his arm around her shoulder as the choir sings—almost as if they are standing back from the graveside group watching them for a moment. This can only be done if you are able to use steps up to the front of your platform, so that you can place the Daughter and Son-in-law on a lower step. That way, they don’t block sightlines of the choir. (Lights begin to dim on DSL during this action and are out for song.)

“Come Harvest Time”

“I Shall Know Him (My Savior First of All) *with Face to Face*”

(Note: All focus should be given to the choir during the above two songs.)

Scene 4

After choir songs, Daughter and Son-in-law are still DSL, with Sarah sitting nearby. As lights come up DSL, Son-in-law can hug his wife and go back to the graveside group while she remains to deliver her monologue. Since Sarah is sitting very near by, and this monologue describes her last moments of life, her face should reflect the different emotions described in the monologue. Her reactions to this monologue are a very important part of the delivery of the scene.

“No More Night”

Intro to this song begins under Daughter’s last lines. Soloist should move in the darkness to DSR area. (lights out on Daughter DSL, up on soloist DSR as solo begins) This soloist may be one of the non-speaking Other Mourners, but if he is a strong voice, which you need in the choir until his solo, he should remove any choir robe, etc before singing his solo.

Scene 5

Sarah Jane crosses from the graveside setting to DSR. This is where it is helpful if you have a step leading up to your stage level so she can sit down. Ideally she will be sitting in this spot, so that Sarah, sitting on her suitcase, will be just above and upstage of her, close enough that they can have this conversation naturally. (Remember, Sarah Jane never speaks toward her grandmother, but out to the audience. (She is imagining this conversation.) There should be no physical contact between Sarah and Sarah Jane.

When Sarah mentions Homer being in heaven, he enters and comes to stand by her, placing a hand on her shoulder. Jason enters also (Jason is their son, who died as a boy). He crosses to stand by Sarah and take her hand.

“Alleluia”

The main focus during this song should be on the choir. This is a moment of praise and worship. So the actors remaining out front (Sarah, Homer, Jason and Sarah Jane) should be unobtrusive. However, their body language and facial expressions should indicate that they are actively involved in this time of worship. It’s as if they can hear the music that is being sung in heaven.

When the “Doxology” begins, bring lights up dimly on graveside setting . The actors there begin to stand, one by one, slowly, until the whole group is finally standing. Sarah, Homer, Jason and Sarah Jane are the last to stand. This is a reverent moment.

When the song is finished, give it enough time to die away in the room, for the audience to absorb the depth of the moment before you begin the intro to “Shall We Gather at the River.”

“Shall We Gather at the River”

Scene 6

As choir sings, Sarah, Homer and Jason move to downstage center, where they stand, hand-in-hand. (Bring up lights across the front of stage.) Daughter, Son-in-law and Sarah Jane join them on one side, while the Pastor, Esther, Deborah, Corrie and Deborah’s Sister join them on the other side. All other cast members (past and present day) join this line as it forms across the front of the stage.

Sarah begins the dialogue, while the underscore continues under their scriptures. It should finish with Pastor’s verses. The characters speak to the audience, summing up what we have learned about heaven. Sarah’s closing lines of scripture begin dry. Cue the intro to “Just Beyond (Reprise) as indicated in the score.

“Just Beyond (Reprise)”

Cast may either remain across the front of stage, singing along with the choir, or they may move into clusters of groups, some standing DSL and DSR, some gathered (like a family portrait), utilizing the graveside bench set at center stage. All should be facing the congregation at the end and freeze.