

**Time at the museum**

Written by

Joana Teixeira



**Synopsis:** Time at the museum is a short play about a man, Ian, that finds himself in a museum room. Anxious and confused, Ian finds comfort with an old lady, Carmen.



**Ian** is a mid-30s man. His psoriasis gets worse the more stressed he feels. He doesn't understand jokes and sarcasm very well. After a few years in a medic institution suffering from mental issues, he finds himself in the museum. He can't waste any more time... But to go where?

**Carmen**, the keeper of the room if you will. Carmen is a sweet old lady with a strong maternal energy. She helps others find inner peace.



**Setting:** Museum room. White walls, there is a bench in DC (or two chairs as props). The audience works as a wall. The actors are facing the audience - that's where the paintings are.



**Paintings referenced:**

1. Bosch, *Christ in Limbo*(1550s)
2. Dalí, *The Persistence of Memory* (1931)
3. Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1 [Whistler's Mother](1871)

ACT IScene 1Lights on.

*IAN is pacing through the stage. Changing between scratching himself and looking at the time. CARMEN laughs.*

IAN  
Excuse me? Can I help you?

CARMEN  
Oh no, it happened again! (to the side) See this, Travis? You're always putting me in trouble!

IAN  
Who are you talking to?

CARMEN  
Oh dear, you don't want to know.

IAN  
I do. That's why I asked.

CARMEN  
It's just my husband.

IAN  
Where is your husband?

CARMEN  
Always next to me.

IAN  
Well, where is he now?

CARMEN  
Next to me.

IAN  
I don't see anyone here.

CARMEN  
Well, no one ever saw him as I did.

IAN  
(to himself) weird old lady.

*IAN's foot keeps balancing from one side to*

*another while he intensely looks to his wrist  
and scratches the arm.*

CARMEN

Are you ok, dear?

IAN

Yes, just...(Scratches harder)...my psoriasis.

CARMEN

Oh, my Travis had that, on the back of the knees.

IAN

Yes, well, I have it everywhere...

CARMEN

Everywhere?

IAN

Yes. Arms, head, neck, legs, back...

CARMEN

Oh dear... and you have someone to scratch it for you?  
Your back, I mean.

IAN

No need, I have a system.

CARMEN

And what's that?

IAN

A system is a set of connected things or devices that  
operate together.

CARMEN

*(laughs to the side)* I know, I think he's funny too.  
*(To IAN)* I asked what system you have and not the  
meaning of the word "system".

IAN

You should've been more specific.

CARMEN

So it seems! So...? What's the system you use?

IAN

I built a machine.

CARMEN

Oh wow, a machine?

IAN  
Yes, a machine.

CARMEN  
Very well done!

IAN  
Thank you, Miss.

CARMEN  
Call me Carmen.

IAN  
Ian.

CARMEN  
Nice to meet you, Ian.

IAN  
Nice to meet you, Carmen.

CARMEN  
Come, Ian, sit next to me.

*IAN sits next to her while CARMEN waves to her side, kisses the palm of her hand and blows a kiss.*

CARMEN  
(to the side) Go in peace, my love.

IAN  
Is your husband gone?

CARMEN  
Yes.

IAN  
Gone where?

CARMEN  
Where he belongs, my dear Ian.

IAN  
You seem very peaceful for someone whose husband is gone...

CARMEN  
It's ok. It's how things go.

IAN  
(sceptic) Is it ok?

CARMEN  
Yes, my dear.

*Both look to the painting ahead, IAN keeps  
tilting his head to the sides trying to  
understand the painting.*

CARMEN  
Christ in Limbo.

IAN  
Excuse me?

CARMEN  
The painting is called Christ in Limbo.

IAN  
Oh... It's awful.

*IAN checks his clock*

CARMEN  
Are you in a hurry for something?

IAN  
Uhm, no.

CARMEN  
(laughs) So why do you keep looking at your wrist?

IAN  
To see the time.

CARMEN  
What time is it?

IAN  
I don't know. It's not working

(Silence)

CARMEN  
I once had a clock that wasn't working, drove me  
insane for a whole week.

IAN  
Why didn't you put in new batteries?

CARMEN

Well, in the beginning, it was very annoying but then it gave me a sense of peace.

IAN

Peace? From not knowing the time?

CARMEN

Yes.

IAN

That's impossible! (gets up) If a clock doesn't work how can you know if you're late for something? That's just not practical at all. Our society works with time, time to get up, time to clock in at work, time to clock out of work, time to make dinner, time for a walk, time for the medication: 2 blue pills at 8 - both 8s -, a white pill after lunch, and the one that makes me sleepy until afternoon the next day, at bedtime. If the clock is not working, how can you know what pill to take?

*Ian walks around the stage at a frenetic pace.*

IAN (CONT)

I need to get batteries.

CARMEN

Come, boy, sit next to me.

*IAN sits down.*

IAN

I need to know what time it is. Do you have the time?

CARMEN

No dear, my clock still doesn't have batteries, see?  
(Shows her wrist to IAN)

IAN

7:45? For you, it is always 7:45?

CARMEN

Well, for everyone is 7:45 twice a day, is it not?

IAN

Uhm, yes... but how will I know when it's time to go?

CARMEN

It's not important.

IAN  
It's not?

CARMEN  
No.

IAN  
I guess it's not.

*IAN relaxes back. He keeps turning his head to the sides trying to understand the painting.*

CARMEN  
The Persistence of Memory.

IAN  
Where's the other painting?

CARMEN  
What painting?

IAN  
I liked the other one better.

CARMEN  
Why's that?

IAN  
This one makes me feel warm... The other one is scary, but I don't mind scary. I mind warm. What's happening with the clocks? Why are they all melted...?

CARMEN  
Sometimes you need to let go of something in order to rest. Even if sometimes, that something is who you are or what time it is.

IAN  
That doesn't make sense! (Gets up) How can you let yourself go? If yourself is who you are and you let it go, you would be just... no-self! That's crazy! Nay, it's impossible! The self needs to be something. No-self is just... Nothing. No one can be nothing. We're flesh. Everything we have is... what we are!

CARMEN  
What do you call a body with no soul?

IAN  
Soul? What does the soul have to do with anything? (takes his hands to his head) Soul? Is that something



that the painting refers to? The soul? Well... a body with no soul is just... erm... I- I can't understand it!

CARMEN

I know boy, here, come sit with me. (IAN sits) You can let it go now.

IAN

But I need to know... what's a body without a soul?

CARMEN

It's ok dear, let it go...

IAN

Is it ok?

CARMEN

Yes.

*IAN relaxes again. There's a new painting on the wall now: an old lady sitting on her side.*

IAN

What's this painting now?

CARMEN

(laughs) Whistler's Mother or Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1.

IAN

That's a good name.

CARMEN

I agree.

IAN

What does "getting old" mean to you?

CARMEN

Not much. I'm already old, my dear. What does it mean to you?

IAN

I haven't decided yet...

*There is a moment of silence. Ian is figuring out what to say*

IAN

I guess I don't like getting old. I don't want to get

older.

CARMEN  
Why?

IAN  
There are days when my legs can't walk, my arms hurt  
and my head keeps spinning. I don't want the old  
version of me to go through the same.

CARMEN  
That's very nice of you, Ian.

IAN  
I am tired.

CARMEN  
I know dear, but it's ok

IAN  
it's ok.

CARMEN  
Yes

*IAN stops scratching from this point. He rests  
his head with his eyes closed on CARMEN  
shoulders while she strokes his hair. After a  
while, IAN opens his eyes and looks at his  
wrist.*

CARMEN  
What time it is?

IAN  
I don't know. But I know I don't have much time left.

CARMEN  
Time left where?

IAN  
In here. This painting makes me feel sad. I hope I  
don't see this painting when I'm going.

CARMEN  
Where are you going?

IAN  
I don't know yet, they are still deciding.

CARMEN

I see.

*IAN takes his head off Carmen's shoulder.*

IAN

I really must go.

CARMEN

When are you going?

IAN

I-- I don't know.

CARMEN

Do you want to go?

IAN

I don't know. (he gets up to think for a while) I want to stay here. I like it in here. I like you. We're friends.

CARMEN

Come Ian (she gently patches his seat), sit here my dear...

*Ian sits next to her and Carmen puts her hand on his shoulder*

CARMEN

When the time comes, you have to go.

*IAN rests his head with his eyes closed on CARMEN's shoulders while she strokes his hair*

IAN

It's ok. Everything's ok.

THE END

## [Informal] Commentary

(Please note that this is only a transcript. The original commentary was recorded and submitted as an audio file).

Time in the museum is a psychological drama with the main theme being *letting go of control*. This was not a recent idea, however, I always felt I could not make it justice in my normal genres. Using a stage play was definitely the best medium I could have used for my story. And the adaptation for a radio drama, helped me understand the limitation of visual cues.

This play is very simple, yet it has a big psychological impact – it makes the audience think. It has simple yet peculiar characters. With such different characters, the play came out very naturally and for this reason, I do not feel I had big challenges, either during production or during adaptation to the radio.

Each painting represents a stage of the play. Firstly, Christ in Limbo represents the setting. The two characters interact with each other in a museum limbo-like type of room. The quietness of a museum was something that always intrigued me. [Loud minds always try to find quiet spaces.] The second painting represents the main conflict: Time and Control. Ian does not understand the painting and what it might mean. For this reason, he fights to get a meaning that makes sense. Carmen teaches him that it is **ok** not to have a meaning sometimes. The last painting was probably the most important of the play. Whistle's mother – the street name of the painting – represents the end of the play and the end of life. It makes Ian question death and at the same time introduces the conclusion of the play.

There is no backstory for either of the characters. Through the play, we can assume Ian has some skin issues that relate to his stress levels. I saw limbo as a way to represent the *place in between*. Where you are nothing and nothing matters. A place where you can *let go* and rest. And for this reason, having characters showing their background seemed unnecessary. There is a moment, when Ian is ranting about time when he asks himself how we would know what pill to take, making the most attentive audience doubt his health, also since it is not explicit whether his mental or physical health is involved might make the audience engage more and look for answers.

The fact that the audience is not very sure about what is going on, works in such a short play because it generates a high engagement level, but is not long enough to make it boring.

I would consider the play [to have] an open ending, physically and mentally for both the characters and the audience.

## Reference List + Annotated Bibliography

Bentley, E. (2010) *The Playwright as Thinker: A Study of Drama in Modern Times*. 4edn. University of Minnesota Press.

Bentley draws the argument that one needs an intellectual environment to thrive in Modern theatre [ 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 20<sup>th</sup> century], both as a viewer and playwright. Considering the time and the place [America] when this book was written, I assume I do consider some of the main points and distinctions that the author argues somewhat outdated. However, I strongly believe that it is indeed important to find a balance between intellectual pieces and creative pieces. Creative pieces need something to hold them to the ground, and this book supports the idea that critical thinking serves that purpose, both as a reader and as a writer.

Dalí, S. (1931) *The Persistence of Memory* [painting]. The Museum of Modern Art, NY, USA. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79018>

Farr, J. D. (2010) *Borderline*. <https://www.10-minute-plays.com/dramas/borderline.html>

Follower of Hieronymus Bosch. (1575) *Christ in Limbo* [painting]. Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana, USA. <http://collection.imamuseum.org/artwork/79340/>

Pike, F., & Dunn, T. (1996). *The playwright's handbook* (pp. 82-103). Plume Book.

Before starting to elaborate my creative piece, I decided to follow the framework given by this book to write a few plays (or at least future prompts). Starting with a vision/statement, followed by exploring the raw materials, create a premise and from there start creating my play. Pike and Dunn (1996), advice writers on how to structure the first part of any creative piece, the “how to start”.

For this assignment, *The playwriting's handbook* was incredibly helpful, more on the developed than the creative idea *per se*. Even though the piece I am submitting was not derived from this framework, Pike and Dunn were still helpful in shaping *Time in the museum* and make sure that the

entire piece was following just one vision. It is a source that I use and abuse in my future work (even if it is not drama related)

PsychCentral. (December 2, 2017) *Why Too Much Self-Control Can Be a Bad Thing*.

<https://psychcentral.com/blog/why-too-much-self-control-can-be-a-bad-thing#1>

The creation of this play was not based on research, but its development was. After the first draft, there was a need to explore the depth of the characters. Ian, throughout the play, must learn that letting go of control is okay (and necessary). For that reason, I did some efforts to understand the mental attributes and physical signs that would involve someone being overcontrolled.

PsychCentral post about the consequences of being overcontrolled [medically reviewed], lists some of the attributes of such personal trait including being perfectionist, having a hard time relaxing, feeling aloof, having extra attention to details, being excessively rigid, and others (PsychCentral 2017). Said research also helped me define Carmen's Personality by contradicting her traits with Ian's (relaxed, no need to have attention to detail, flexible and with a very maternal/familiar energy).

Whistler, J. A. M. (1821) *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* [painting]. Musee d'Orsay, Lile, France. [https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire/commentaire\\_id/portrait-of-the-artists-mother-2976.html](https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire/commentaire_id/portrait-of-the-artists-mother-2976.html)

Painting and photography are always aids for the creation of my best work – I am a big fan of visual inspiration. When I found this painting some time ago, I built a story in my head about what happens when we get old. A few weeks ago, this painting crossed my mind again and I just had to take advance of that prompt to write something. I did not inspire any of the characters in the painting, instead was inspired to create a vision related to it. The plot goes around Time and Control. When you get old is easy to struggle with the sense of losing both: Losing control of your life and the feeling like the time is running out.

Wykes, W. (2006) *The Sculptor's Funeral*. [https://www.10-minute-plays.com/dramas/sculptors\\_funeral.html](https://www.10-minute-plays.com/dramas/sculptors_funeral.html). Adapted from Cather, W. (1905) *The Sculptor's Funeral*. McClure's