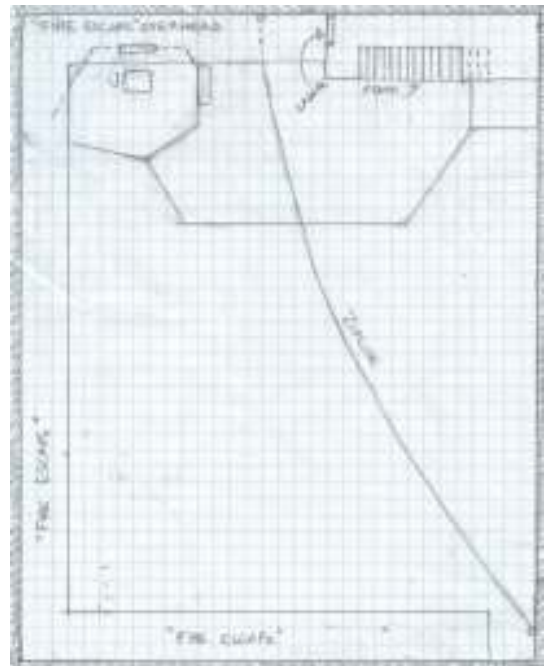
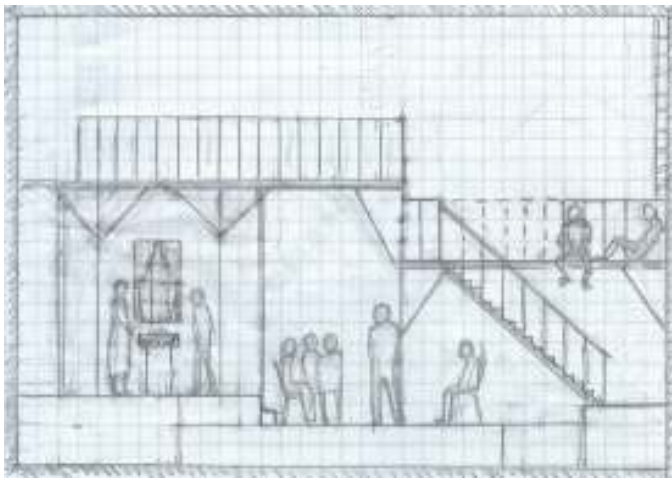


The Conversion of the Jews, by Philip Roth
An adaptation for the stage by Nancy Linden

This is the final scene from an adaptation of the short story, The Conversion of the Jews. Ozzie is a young Jewish boy who is convinced that, if he felt so inclined, God would be quite able to make a baby without the assistance of human intercourse, and Jesus' might indeed have been a virgin birth. This blasphemous theory gets him slapped by his mother and his teacher, and contempt from his friend Itzie, who favors intercourse. Ozzie persists.

Set:

Stage Right is Ozzie's home—simple, a table with menorah, a partial wall in which a single window discloses twilight. Center Stage will be occupied by a schoolroom. Stage Left a flight of stairs rise to a "fire escape" which encircles the entire periphery of the theater house. At the end of this "fire escape", in the far corner of the house, a zipline runs down to the center of the stage. A somewhat lower "fire escape" continues to the left stage wall, communicating with the higher one by a ladder. Here the boys sit during the first scene, discussing the relative merits of immaculate conception and intercourse. The staging is simple: characters enter and exit in the shadows, bringing with them any props they may need (chairs, candles). "Stage Right" and "Stage Left" are from the actors' point of view; "House Left" and "Right", from the point of view of the audience.



Lighting:

Scenes on the fire escape are lit as if through the broken shadows of the fire escape. "Home" is lit as if by candlelight and twilight. The classroom scenes are brightly lit. When Ozzie is out on the fire escape over the house, the house lights will come up. A spot from above his rig will light his descent. There will be a sense of sky: grey, darkening, twilight.

Notes on Flying Ozzie:

A block-and-tackle arrangement is rigged on the zipline, controlled from house floor. A traveling block rides along the zipline, with a wire which will attach to a harness which Ozzie wears under his clothes.

The Conversion of the Jews, Scene Four:

Ozzie has insisted that Jesus could have been the son of God, if God had wanted to have a son. The Headmaster slaps him for this blasphemy. Lights come up full on classroom area. There is blood from Ozzie's nose. Ozzie screams and runs out the "door" downstage. The other boys stand. Classroom lighting out. Stage Left portion of back wall is lighted, silhouetting the fire escape and the figures. Ozzie circles Left to the foot of the fire escape stairs, pauses and looks about, scrambles up the stairs and runs left along the lower fire escape platform to Stage Left wall. Looks down, watches: all in classroom stand still in amazement, then Headmaster Binder heads to the fire escape (same route). As he starts up the stairs, Ozzie runs back center and up the ladder. As Ozzie reaches the second level, Binder reaches the top of the stairs and grabs his ankle. Ozzie kicks himself free, hitting Binder in the face. Binder staggers back, pauses, clinging to the railing, then retreats down to the Stage Left platform. During the chase a few of the boys have poured out into that area; the others now join them.

Ozzie watches Binder descend. Out of breath, sits, cries. Then straightens, rises, slowly moves center, slowly revolves, arms wide. Lights up on entire back wall. Stands, arms spread wide, looking forward. He looks at the blood on his shirt. Binder and boys are frozen, dark shapes, during this time.

OZZIE: This is what Jesus does.

(Celebratory: he flings arms up, runs toward the Stage Right wall, looks up, spins around and back to center. Spot on Ozzie, lights up on Stage Left platform, where Binder and boys are.)

BINDER: You, Oscar Freedman! You get down from there!

OZZIE: --no.

BINDER: Don't say "no" to me! You come right down!

OZZIE: I don't have to. I can do anything. I am Jesus. Look! *(shows him)*

BINDER: What? Have you gone crazy, Oscar? Don't be such a putz, get down here!

OZZIE: I don't have to! I am Jesus, and Jesus is God, and I am God, and this is my world, and I can do anything. Anything! I can make light! Look at all the light I have made! Isn't that wonderful? I put it all in the sky, look at my sky! Isn't it beautiful? *(he stands in awe, looking)*

This is God, this is me! This is me, God!

(He takes off Stage Right toward ladder at House Left wall. Binder proceeds center, boys follow variously.)

BINDER: Oscar Freedman, you are in some very serious trouble! You come down right now! I'll give you a count of 3. Are you listening to me?

OZZIE: No! No, no, no! *Ozzie scrambles up ladder and takes off along House Left wall, flapping arms, crying "this is me, God" and "look at me" and "wheee!"*

BINDER: One! *(Stands looking after him for a beat, then proceeds SR and into the house, followed by boys. House lights up to half. Stage lights out, except for a spot on Itzie at center, where he pauses and watches Ozzie for a beat)*

ITZIE *(rapt)*: Ozzie, are you gonna fly?

OZZIE: *(It's an idea! Ozzie stops to consider.)* Yes.

ITZIE *(excited)*: Really? Are you really gonna fly?

(Ozzie resumes running and playing and flapping, runs to Stage Right stanchion, swings out over the audience. House to full. Binder and boys troop up House Left aisle beneath him.)

BOYS: Look, he's gonna fly! Fly, Ozzie!

BINDER: Stop that! No! Of course he's not going to fly! He can't fly!

ITZIE: Yes, he can!

BINDER: He's not going to fly! He's not a complete idiot! Oscar! Don't be a complete idiot!

BOYS: Do it, Ozzie! Fly!

BINDER: No, Oscar, please! Do not—!! Do you hear me? Come down from there! I'll give you a count of three! One!

ITZIE: Ozzie, don't let him tell you what to do! Go on! Fly!

BOYS, VARIOUSLY: Just jump off and fly, Ozzie! You can do it! Fly, Ozzie!

BINDER: No, Oscar! No! You can't fly! Don't say that, he'll fall!

BOYS: Fly, Ozzie! Fly! Look, he's gonna fly! *(their cries continue to overlap with Binder pleas)*

BINDER: No, Oscar! Please! Don't listen to them! Just stop all this crazy business and come down here. I won't punish you. You're not in trouble. Just please come down. Please. *(he falls to his knees, head in hands)* Please, please, please!

Cries rise to a chaotic chorus: boys egging on, Binder threatening, counting down, crying. Ozzie runs along fire escape, flapping arms, crying "Wheee!" Mother enters, looks at the melee, confused. Boys see her, fall silent. Ozzie stops running, stands transfixed, arms spread wide. House lights down to half, spots on Ozzie and Mother. Mother looks at Rabbi.

MOTHER: Rabbi, have you hurt yourself? What are you doing in the street? *(Binder raises his head toward Ozzie)* Ozzie, is that you up there? What are you doing?

ITZIE: He's going to fly.

BOYS: Fly, Ozzie, fly, Ozzie, fly! *(House lights up to full; action resumes)*

MOTHER: He's going to fly. What are you saying? Ozzie, my baby, my little mensch, come down to me! Rabbi, get him down! He will fall! He will break his head!

BINDER: I can't, I can't—it's for them. He won't listen to me. He's doing it for them.

MOTHER: For them?

BINDER: Yes.

MOTHER: Why for them?

BINDER: They want him to—

MOTHER: For them he's doing it! For them he's going to break his head! A martyr I have. My little martyr.

BINDER: Oscar, please, *please* come down!

MOTHER: Don't be a little martyr, Ozzie! Ozzele, my little cabbage, don't break your head for them, come down to me, come down to your mamma!

A police officer joins them:

POLICEMAN: What's going on here? Is there some kind of trouble? (*she points up*) Hey, there, you! You can't be up there; that area's restricted! That's workmen only! Get down!

MOTHER: Ozzie, come down! You'll get arrested, they'll put you in jail! Come down, my baby, don't fly!

Various: two or three additional people enter from back of house: "What's going on?" "Who's that?" Two or three from out of the audience: "Alright, that's enough now." "Get him down." "That boy can't fly." Boys' cries continue, all voices overlapping, to crescendo, then Ozzie pauses halfway along back of house, arms wide. All fall silent, house lights dim to half, spot on Ozzie. Ozzie stands quietly, looking at the sky. A beat. Blotnik, the elderly custodian, emerges from shadow and walks slowly down to midway along House Right wall, leans against wall. Spot on him. They are about 15' apart.

BLOTNIK: My little turnip, what do you see up there? Are you looking at God? It is peaceful up in the sky. Look around you. You can see very far; you can see much of God's world; is it not a beautiful place? Do you know that you are a part of God? (*Ozzie looks at him, sits, legs dangle over.*) Can not you feel that? Down here we are afraid to go up there with God. We get busy, and then we don't have time; we must work, and prepare our lessons, and hurry away home to our mother. Down here, a boy that asks many questions will get in trouble, because we don't know what answers to tell him, and we are afraid of being wrong. We say, no, this is true, or this is true, or this is true; we forget to look and ask whether that thing that we say is really true. We get old, and we get tired, and our eyes don't see so good anymore, and it's not so easy to see God's world. We forget that it is beautiful, and we forget how to be free and to have peace. But maybe you will remember.

Little radish, you can come down now. It is time. You know what you know. You will not learn anything more up there in the sky. You must come down here and live with the rest of us, and go to school, and make a family, and think about the little things, instead of the big things. You must grow

old, like us. Someday you will be as old as I am, and your knees will hurt you, and you will forget what you ate at breakfast, and you will wonder what you are doing alive; but then you will see a little turnip who wants to know about God, and who asks many questions and gets in trouble and runs away to see what God looks like, and then you will remember when you were up there in the sky.

Now you can come down.

Ozzie stands, raises arms. Pause. Looks at his mother.

OZZIE: Mamma?

MOTHER: Yes, my baby.

OZZIE: Mamma, get down on your knees, like Reverend Binder.

MOTHER: Oscar—

OZZIE: Get down on your knees, Mamma, or I'll jump.

Mother kneels.

OZZIE: Everybody kneel. *(house lights slowly up to full)*

A few other actors kneel.

OZZIE: Everybody. All of you. Kneel.

All actors kneel. The audience may kneel.

OZZIE: Rabbi?

BINDER: Yes, Oscar?

OZZIE: Rabbi Binder, do you believe in God?

BINDER: Yes.

OZZIE: Do you believe God can do anything? Anything?

BINDER: Oscar, I think—

OZZIE: Tell me you believe God can do anything.

BINDER: God can do anything.

OZZIE: Tell me you believe God can make a child without intercourse.

BINDER: He can.

OZZIE: Tell me!

BINDER: God can make a child without intercourse.

OZZIE: Mamma, you tell me.

MOTHER: God can make a child without intercourse.

OZZIE: Now everybody say it.

ALL ACTORS: God can make a child without intercourse.

Ozzie stands quietly, looking around.

MOTHER: Ozzie? You'll come down now?

OZZIE: Mamma, don't you see—you shouldn't hit me. He shouldn't hit me. You shouldn't hit me about God, Mamma. You should never hit anybody about God—

MOTHER: Ozzie, please come down now.

OZZIE: Promise me, promise me you'll never hit anybody about God.

ALL: I'll never hit anybody about God.

Ozzie drops his arms, turns, walks slowly back to House Left, starts toward stage, pauses, turns, long look around; suddenly runs, arms spread, back to House Right. Dresser is standing by in the shadows with tackle, hooks it into the harness which Ozzie is wearing under his clothes, and Ozzie takes off soaring out over the audience.

OZZIE: Here I come!

20 second descent

House lights to full, stage lights to full

Spot on Ozzie from directly behind him

Spot remains on Blotnik

A cry, a singing note from Ozzie—"here I coooooome"

Overlaps with:

Glo-o-o-o-o-o-o-ria, klezmer music, the Superman theme

Overlaps with:

Mother screams

Ozzie crumples to the stage floor, center. Mother to him, bends, embracing him.

House lights out. Spot remains on Ozzie and Mother, dimmer spot on Blotnik.

MOTHER: My Ozzie, my little mensch, don't die, my baby! My life, my joy, my pretty baby!

Ozzie sits up, within her arms, bruised but not damaged.

See, you are alive, my Ozzie! You are alive, and it is a miracle! Let us go home now, my little chickpea, my Ozzele.

Mother helps him up, sheltering him, half-carries him into Home. She sits on chair at center of Home, bending over Ozzie, who sits on the floor beside her arms around her waist. She rocks him gently, humming a lullaby. The others remain kneeling.

Lights: Back wall lighted amber, brightest Stage Right, behind Home. Entire forestage in darkness, except for the Home. Warm low-level lighting is centered on the mother and son. It is shuttered off to stay within the arched shapes formed by the diagonal bars of the fire escape supports; above the diagonals the scrim disappears. The effect is that of a medieval triptych. A pin spot from directly overhead focuses on the heads and shoulders of mother and son. Spot remains on Blotnik, low level. Hold 5 seconds, fade all.

