

# **7 Minutes to Midnight**

by

Dennis Schebetta

Developed in collaboration with the ensemble at Bellevue Community College  
where it received its World Premiere on November 14, 2008.

The ensemble included:

Sean Altuna  
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**PLAYWRIGHTS NOTE:**

*7 MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT* is a movement and ensemble-based play. Various stage directions and textual elements were developed from improvisation exercises. As such, any subsequent performances should be catered to its ensemble. In addition to original dialogue, some textual sources include versions of the Kronos myth, excerpts from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, historical documents, and actual quotes. Whenever possible, the performers themselves should play guitar, harmonica, percussion or any other musical instruments to accompany songs. Songs include "The Great Atomic Power" by the Louvin Brothers, "Fixin' to Die" by Bukka White, "Drown Out" by The Swell Season, "Move it On Over" by Hank Williams, "Let Me Die in My Footsteps" by Bob Dylan, "No Handlebars" by the Flobots, "Dancing Days" by Carla Bruni, and "Waiting on An Angel" by Ben Harper. Feel free to replace any of them if a better one suits your ensemble.

The play consists of the following scenes:

Act One: Failure

1. Prologue: Chaos
2. Kronos Version 1
3. The Doomsday Clock: Failure
4. Fixin' to Die
5. The Doomsday Clock: Failure II
6. Kronos Version 2: The 1950s
7. The Doomsday Clock: Peril
8. Boy & Girl on the Ridge Pt. I
9. Kronos Version 3: His Version
10. The Boy & Girl on the Ridge Pt. II
11. This Is Your Life

Act Two: Fear

12. The Doomsday Clock: Fear Pt. I
13. The Nightmare
14. Kronos Version 4: Modern Times
15. The Doomsday Clock: Fear Pt. II
16. Dancing Days Are Gone
17. Kronos Version 5: This Will Never End
18. Epilogue: Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes

**PRE-SHOW:**

Audience is greeted by ushers in radiation suits (or white lab coats) and given a pin with a metallic gauge to measure for radiation. Prior to the show, there are various interval announcements for how many minutes till start (such as "Ten minutes to showtime", etc). This may be an off-stage actor or V.O.

**TIME:** Act One starts in the beginning of time then jumps to 1947 and the 1950s.  
Act Two is 1984 until present day

**PLACES:** Various

**SET:** A crater is center, the remnant of the Trinity explosion, splintering cracked earth. Mankind has built platforms over it, but tufts of sand and sagebrush seep through. The ground appears covered with a mixture of dust and sand. There are piles of scattered rubble, remnants of discarded life. Broken furniture, pieces of wood, a sink, trash, various rusted objects and debris. All covered with dust and showing signs of old age. A grandfather clock leans sideways. Everything seems unsteady, as if in the middle of an explosion. Above the stage are shattered pieces of objects, fragments of a blast explosion as if frozen in time. Throughout the show, the rubble will be used to transform each scene into what it needs to be. For instance, an overturned table becomes the dinner table in the Kronos scenes, the badminton rackets and golf club are grabbed from the rubble, the letters, masks, etc. There are white sheets covering mounds of rubble on each platform. Underneath the sheets are chairs, costume elements as well as a busted up old guitar, a tambourine, a briefcase and other junk items which will become props.

Above the stage and/or audience are LED rolling display monitors which will display words as specified in the script.

**CHARACTERS:**

*Roles are multi-cast. This play can be performed with 4 m, 4 f, or more, as suited.*

CHORUS - narrator(s), any age, gender

KRONOS - god, son of Uranus, father of Zeus

J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER -- scientist

JAMES FRANCK -- a scientist

LEO SZILARD -- a scientist

GENERAL -- commander in the U.S. Army

DAD -- plays various incarnations including Uranus and Zeus

MOM -- plays various incarnations including Gaia

SIS -- plays various including Rhea

JOANN

MARIELLEN

BOY

GIRL

KIYOSHI TANIMOTO - Hiroshima bomb survivor, minister

SADAKO

CHIZUKU

Act Two: Fear

**THE DOOMSDAY CLOCK: FEAR I**

LED: The year is 1984. It is 3 minutes to midnight

LIGHTS UP on OPPENHEIMER who has traded his acoustic guitar for an electric. He plays a modern rock chord rhythm, very reminiscent of Oasis, but its actually an updated orchestration of Bob Dylan's "Let Me Die in My Footsteps". As he plays, CHORUS members balance badminton rackets in and around the space.

OPPENHEIMER

(singing)

I WILL NOT GO DOWN UNDER THE GROUND  
'CAUSE SOMEBODY TELLS ME THAT DEATHS' COMIN' ROUND  
AND I WILL NOT CARRY MYSELF DOWN TO DIE  
WHEN I GO TO MY GRAVE MY HEAD WILL BE HIGH  
LET ME DIE IN MY FOOTSTEPS  
BEFORE I GO DOWN UNDER THE GROUND  
THERE'S BEEN RUMORS OF WAR AND WARS THAT HAVE BEEN  
THE MEANING OF LIFE HAS BEEN LOST IN THE WIND  
AND SOME PEOPLE THINKING THAT THE END IS CLOSE BY  
INSTEAD OF LEARNING TO LIVE THEY ARE LEARNIN' TO DIE  
LET ME DIE IN MY FOOTSTEPS  
BEFORE I GO DOWN UNDER THE GROUND

CHORUS

The year is 1984.  
The U.S.-Soviet relations breaks down.  
Arms control negotiations have been reduced to a series of propaganda.  
Reagan plans for a space-based missile defense program nicknamed "Star Wars".  
The movie WarGames, starring Matthew Broderick is released.

LED: Shall we play a game?

CHORUS

Fear is in the air.

OPPENHEIMER

I DON'T KNOW IF I'M SMART BUT I THINK I CAN SEE  
WHEN SOMEONE IS PULLING THE WOOL OVER ME  
AND IF THIS WAR COMES AND DEATH'S ALL AROUND  
LET ME DIE IN MY FOOTSTEPS BEFORE I DIE UNDERGROUND  
LET ME DIE IN MY FOOTSTEPS

BEFORE I GO DOWN UNDER THE GROUND  
 THERE'S ALWAYS BEEN PEOPLE WHO HAVE TO CAUSE FEAR  
 THEY'VE BEEN TALKIN' OF WAR NOW FOR A MANY LONG YEARS  
 I'VE READ ALL THEIR STATEMENTS AND I'VE NOT SAID A WORD  
 BUT NOW LORD GOD LET MY POOR VOICE BE HEARD  
 LET ME DIE IN MY FOOTSTEPS  
 BEFORE I GO DOWN UNDER THE GROUND

CHORUS

But something funny happened after the 1990s.

Oppenheimer starts playing a rock song (with distortion)  
 ala Nirvana. CHORUS breaks out into a mosh pit that  
 eventually subsides.

CHORUS

The Berlin wall fell down.

CHORUS

U.S. and Soviet relations got better.

CHORUS

But then the Soviet Union fell apart.

CHORUS

And there were a lot of nukes which were not very secure.

CHORUS

Loose nukes.

CHORUS

Which could fall into the hands of anyone...

A chorus grabs one of the shuttlecocks from the Soviet  
 pile and puts it in a silver briefcase. After walking in and  
 around the other members, it is set down for later use.

CHORUS

And that changed the game.

Oppenheimer continues playing as we transition.

**THE NIGHTMARE**

Chorus sets up a circle of chairs, begins playing a silent  
 version of "musical chairs."

## CHORUS

(singing)

“I CAN RIDE MY BIKE WITH NO HANDLEBARS  
NO HANDLEBARS  
NO HANDLEBARS”

Another chorus member picks up the microphone and starts rapping Flobots “Handlebars” underneath and in between the following. Each Chorus member stands to deliver one of the lines, moves to another chair, sits. This happens as the monologue progresses.

## CHORUS

The nightmare always starts the same way. It’s the end of summer and my mom is taking me shopping for school clothes. It ‘s a really sunny day but the sun is going down over the mountains in the west. We walk into Macy’s at Meadowwood Mall, by the shoe section. I’m walking down the aisle when all of a sudden there are these panicky screams. All these mothers and children screaming and yelling and running around like the end of the world is coming. And I think, maybe this is it, y’know, maybe this is the end of the world, who knows...I turn around to look out the glass doors of Macy’s and suddenly there is this bright light.

I mean, it’s like when you are a stupid little kid and your sister dares you to stare into the sun too long and you want to keep staring but the sun is like jabbing needles into your corneas. Y’know? For a second I remember that stupid black and white public service cartoon about the turtle, “Duck & Cover” but I don’t want to duck. I want to see what’s going to happen. I see the mannequins in the store against the light from the windows and they are like silhouettes, but then I think maybe those aren’t mannequins, maybe they’re people, I don’t know, it’s hard to tell. They’re not moving.

It’s like time has stopped.

I feel this intense heat all over my face, like I’ve been lying on the beach far too long. A horrible noise rumbles and creaks. I think its the building around me. I feel my breathe get sucked up by something.

And this is the craziest thing but I feel my heart stop...my mind is vaporized...my body dematerializes and there is nothing. It isn’t like I die and suddenly see St. Peter at the pearly gates...I mean nothing.

Darkness. A void.

Then I wake up and go to school. Yeah, I’m usually late to first period. But my teacher doesn’t care. I sometimes forget I even had the dream until I’m getting my chocolate milk at the 7/11 and it occurs to me as I’m passing over a couple of bucks to the zit-faced clerk that I like totally died the night before. I like to think that if the shit really does come down, y’know, like if the U.S. and the Soviets actually nuke each other, I like to think I’m mentally prepared.

I got practice for that kind of thing.

## CHORUS

(singing)

“I CAN RIDE MY BIKE WITH NO HANDLEBARS  
NO HANDLEBARS  
NO HANDLEBARS”

**KRONOS VERSION 4: MODERN TIMES**

LED READS: Kronos version 4. Modern times.

MUSIC plays in background as if on faraway radio, sounding similar to what we were just hearing. DAD, SIS and MOM in same positions as earlier 1950s version. In this version, realism is taken to the extreme, with long uncomfortable pauses and modern gestures.

KRONOS

Kronos version four. Modern day.

SIS

Dad, you want another beer?

MOM

The food should be about done.

EXIT SIS to get the beer and MOM follows. SIS returns with the beer, tries to whisper in Dad’s ear.

SIS

Watch out for your son.

DAD

What?

MOM

(enters with tray)

Watch out! Hot plate coming through!

Mom drops platter on the table, pushing SIS aside.

DAD

Ham? Again with the fucking ham?

MOM

It’s honey baked ham, just how you like it.

DAD

Every day its fucking ham. I mean, for God's sake, woman, are you trying to kill me?

MOM

Kill you?! Oh, that's...you're too much. Ham is your favorite. You want more potatoes? More of the cobbler?

DAD

Can you sit down so we can eat?

ENTER KRONOS with GREG.

DAD

Who the hell is this?

KRONOS

This is Greg.

SIS

Since when have you two been friends?

KRONOS

He's helping me with--

DAD

(overlapping)  
What is this?

KRONOS

--my math homework.

DAD

Another mouth to feed?

KRONOS

We've been friends for, y'know, awhile. Right, Greg?

GREG

Yeah, awhile.

SIS

Yeah, right.

MOM

Dinner is ready. Please let's sit down to eat.

SIS

I'm going to get some juice. Anyone want juice?



KRONOS

Yeah, some juice.

MOM

Oh, I forgot the rolls.

DAD

Can you turn off that music? Is it too much to ask to have silence at the dinner table?

EXIT SIS and KRONOS. MOM Follows, leaving Dad and Greg alone at the table. MUSIC cuts out. Silence.

DAD

So. You're Craig?

GREG

Greg.

Pause.

DAD

You're helping him with math. That right?

GREG

Yeah. Math. Right.

DAD

You ever do any time?

GREG

Smells good. The rolls.

DAD

My wife can't cook worth a damn. Her rolls are hard as a rock. You ever eat a rock?

GREG

No, sir.

DAD

So, how's he doing?

GREG

Who?

DAD

Are you stupid?

GREG

No, I just...

DAD

My son. How is my son doing with math? His grade?

GREG

Better.

Long pause.

DAD

Where the fuck are the rolls?

ENTER KRONOS, SIS and MOM. SIS puts glasses on the table.

SIS

Hey, Craig, you want some juice?

KRONOS

It's Greg and he doesn't want any juice.

GREG

Sure, I'll have some juice.

KRONOS

You don't want juice.

DAD

Can we stop this fucking circus and eat now please?

They sit and eat, their forks make noise on the plates.  
Long pause.

KRONOS

This is really good, Mom.

MOM

Thanks, son.

Pause.

DAD

So. Kronos.

KRONOS

Yeah?

DAD

Me and Craig here were...

It's Greg. KRONOS

Talking about your math grade. DAD

Yeah. KRONOS

How is it? DAD

Fine. KRONOS

Can we not talk about this at the dinner table? MOM

Needs to be better than fine if you ever want to borrow the car ever again. DAD

May I be excused? SIS

Where are you going? KRONOS

Up to my room. SIS

You should stay here. KRONOS

I want to leave. SIS

Please, just stay at the table. Let's eat our dinner like a normal family. MOM

SIS gets up but is pulled down by Kronos.

Sit down! KRONOS

Hey! Don't you grab your sister like that! Who the hell do you think you are? DAD

Can someone pass the rolls, please? GREG

DAD

Everyone just shut up and eat.

Silence.

DAD

You're all worthless. If I could shove you back into the womb right now I'd do it.

KRONOS

Fuck you!

DAD

Don't you fucking talk to me like that!

KRONOS

(under his breathe)

This is it.

KRONOS EXITS, followed by DAD and GREG.  
SOUND of gunshot. Pause. Sis paces as Mom looks off.  
KRONOS ENTERS, goes to Mom, then goes to table and slumps down. MOM EXITS. SIS goes to Kronos and sits with him, holds his hand. They move slowly as twenty years of time passes. They eat. ENTER MOM, slowly walking to the table with a glass in her hand.

KRONOS

Your work called today.

SIS

Did they?

KRONOS

Asked if you were going to come back and pick up your things.

SIS

Did you tell them to burn them?

KRONOS

So you got fired?

MOM

Can someone refresh my drink?

KRONOS

You've had enough, mother.

SIS

It was just a temp job.

KRONOS

What are you going to do now?

SIS

I'm going to get a glass of wine.

MOM

Be a dear and get me another glass of vodka, would you?

KRONOS

The doctors told you not to drink.

MOM

Oh, I'm fine.

SIS

She can drink if she wants to.

KRONOS

You need to get another job? You hear me?

EXIT SIS.

MOM

(calling out)

On the rocks with a splash of lime.

KRONOS

You're such a child.

MOM

You forget your place.

KRONOS

You owe me.

MOM

Nothing. I owe you nothing. I brought you into this world.

Pause. They eat. Sound of their forks on the plates. SIS enters with ZEUS and GREG.

KRONOS

What's this?

Your son. SIS

Who? KRONOS

Surprised? SIS

I should've known. After all this time. KRONOS

GREG comes up from behind KRONOS, grabs his arms. ZEUS punches him in the stomach, in slow motion.

Don't! MOM

Mother? KRONOS

We agreed! MOM

You agreed...? KRONOS

Not to hurt you. MOM

This will never end. KRONOS

EXIT GREG with KRONOS. ZEUS sits down at the head of the table. MOM sits next to him. SIS standing. This is the same configuration as at beginning of scene.

## **THE DOOMSDAY CLOCK: FEAR II**

LED: The year is 2008. We are now 5 minutes to midnight.

KRONOS, DAD, MOM, SIS and GREG start the previous Kronos scene over again, in the same positions. They move in tableau, from one tableau to another, saying their line as the other Chorus members watch.

SIS

Dad, you want another beer?

MOM

The food should be about done.

SIS exits to get the beer and MOM follows. Tableau.

CHORUS

It is now 2008 and the Doomsday Clock is set at five minutes to midnight.

SIS returns with the beer, tries to whisper in Dad's ear.

SIS

Watch out for your son.

CHORUS

The last time it moved was January of 2007

ENTER MOM with tray.

MOM

Watch out! Hot plate coming through!

CHORUS

After North Korea tested nuclear weapons and Iran started their own nuclear programs.

ENTER KRONOS with GREG.

KRONOS

This is Greg.

SIS

Since when have you two been friends?

CHORUS

Today there are over 27,000 nuclear warheads in the world.

SIS

I'm going to get some juice. Anyone want juice?

KRONOS

Yeah, some juice.

EXIT SIS and KRONOS. MOM Follows, leaving Dad and Greg alone at the table. Tableau, etc.

CHORUS

2,000 warheads are ready to launch.

DAD

You're helping him with math. That right?

GREG

Yeah. Math. Right.

CHORUS

Weapons of mass destruction.

ENTER KRONOS, SIS and MOM.

SIS

Hey, Craig, you want some juice?

CHORUS

“Now I am become death. The destroyer of worlds.”

DAD

So. Kronos. Your grades?

KRONOS

Fine.

CHORUS

But now the threat of nuclear terrorism looms over all of us.

SIS

I want to leave.

KRONOS

Sit down!

DAD

Hey! Don't you grab your sister like that!

Tableau.

CHORUS

Loose nukes.

KRONOS

Fuck you!

DAD

Don't you fucking talk to me like that!

KRONOS

(under his breathe)

This is it.

Tableau before their EXIT.



## CHORUS

An atomic bomb with a 10 kiloton yield can fit into a briefcase.

SOUND of gunshot. KRONOS ENTERS, hands outward. He goes to Mom.

## CHORUS

Briefcase bombs were built by the Soviet Union.

SIS goes to Kronos and sits with him, holds his hand. MOM enters.

## CHORUS

After its collapse, many of them have not been accounted for.

## KRONOS

So you got fired?

## MOM

Can someone refresh my drink?

## CHORUS

Somewhere a clock is ticking.

## KRONOS

What are you going to do now?

## SIS

I'm going to get a glass of wine.

## EXIT SIS.

## CHORUS

Experts say it is not a matter of "if". It is a matter of when.

## KRONOS

Don't be ungrateful.

## MOM

I brought you into this world.

## CHORUS

Tick.

ENTER SIS with ZEUS and GREG. KRONOS stands.

Your son. SIS

I should've known. KRONOS

ZEUS punches him.

Tick. CHORUS

Mother? KRONOS

Tick. CHORUS

This will never end. KRONOS

Tick. CHORUS

EXIT GREG and KRONOS. DAD sits at head of table.  
MOM sits next to him. SIS standing, as before.

(whispers) KRONOS

Boom.

**DANCING DAYS ARE GONE**

OPPENHEIMER

Let me look back a moment;  
The slower, fainter ticking of the clock is in me.  
Exit, nightfall, and soon the heart-thud stopping.

OPPENHEIMER grabs guitar, plays opening of  
"Dancing Days". Harmonica joins in.

MOM

What do we see when we look at Kronos?

SIS

We all talk about him like its his story.

MOM

The baby of the family.

SIS

Just because he was the one.

MOM

The only one.

SIS

Who took up the scythe and...

MOM

He saved me. He saved all of us.

SIS

Maybe we didn't need saving.

KRONOS eats, oblivious to the others. Oppenheimer plays underneath. MOM talks to audience.

MOM

It was no picnic for me as the Earth, let me tell you. Sure, I brought everything into this world. I gave birth to the Heavens and he became my husband. There was my first mistake. I used to love how we were always facing each other, his stars twinkling down upon me as I gazed up at him. But it changed. He changed. Marriage is tough enough without having a father who is constantly afraid of his own children. And it isn't easy being a mother. I did the best I could and under the circumstances, I think I did pretty well. I mean, most of my children turned out all right. Those were tough times. Yes, Kronos went a little, well, too far with rescuing me. Some boys store up a lot of anger towards their fathers and take things past the point of decency. I didn't tell him to cut off his...Well. Let us not forget that I was being forced to have sex with him over and over again. Is that not something we want to talk about? Is that unsuitable table conversation? So if you want to go ahead and ask if I feel regret, if I feel sorry about what became of him, well, no. I don't feel one bit of sorrow. He deserved it. And besides, look at all the good that came of it...I mean, Aphrodite, the goddess of love, arose from the foam in the sea. She is so delightful. If you don't know her yet, you're missing out. The point is without some destruction there could be no love.

MOM stands away from the table.

SIS

(addressing audience)

What's the big deal about love, anyway? Aphrodite? Please! She makes me want to puke. Imagine the most self-conceited and arrogant person on the planet, a woman who surrounds herself with men that instantly fall in love with her so that she doesn't have to do anything for herself. If she wants a basketful of diamonds, she just has to wink at some billionaire. If she wants a grain of sand from the deserts of Ethiopia, all it takes is a sigh. Has she ever suffered? Folks always told me my heart would grow but I didn't find that happening. I find my heart getting smaller and smaller. I spent years of pain and

sorrow as I watched my husband--scheming, devious, crooked Kronos--devour my children. Not just once. Five times. Yeah, it made me a little bitter. I used to be filled with love. When I was younger. Some say that with age a purpose comes clear. I see the opposite. I see us growing backwards in time. I see us devolving. I see us repeating the same mistakes. Over and over.

MOM

Again and again.

SIS

Over and over.

MOM

Those dancing days are gone, my dear.

SIS

In Zeus I see my salvation. A new age. An age of love. And peace.

MOM

(singing)

COME, LET ME SING INTO YOUR EAR  
THOSE DANCING DAYS ARE GONE  
ALL THAT SILK AND SATIN GEAR  
CROUCH UPON A STONE  
WRAPPING THAT FOUL BODY UP  
IN AS FOUL A RAG

MOM & SIS

(singing)

I CARRY THE SUN IN A GOLDEN CUP  
THE MOON IN A SILVER BAG  
I CARRY THE SUN IN A GOLDEN CUP  
THE MOON IN A SILVER BAG

MOM

CURSE AS YOU MAY I SING IT THROUGH  
WHAT MATTER IF THE KNAVE  
THAT THE MOST COULD PLEASURE YOU  
THE CHILDREN THAT HE GAVE  
ARE SOMEWHERE SLEEPING LIKE A TOP  
UNDER A MARBLE FLAG

They all join in on the chorus.

CHORUS

(singing)

I CARRY THE SUN IN A GOLDEN CUP  
THE MOON IN A SILVER BAG

I CARRY THE SUN IN A GOLDEN CUP  
THE MOON IN A SILVER BAG

MOM

(singing)

COME LET ME SING UNTO YOUR EAR

SIS

I THOUGHT IT OUT THIS VERY DAY, NOON UPON THE CLOCK

MOM

ALL THAT SILK AND SATIN GEAR

SIS

A MAN MAY PUT PRETENCE AWAY WHO LEANS UPON A STICK

MOM

MAY SING AND SING UNTIL HE DROP  
WHETHER TO MAID OR HAG

CHORUS

(singing)

I CARRY THE SUN IN A GOLDEN CUP  
THE MOON IN A SILVER BAG  
I CARRY THE SUN IN A GOLDEN CUP  
THE MOON IN A SILVER BAG

As song fades, DAD sits back down at his seat and KRONOS moves over towards GREG. They all go back to their starting positions of the scene and freeze.

### **KRONOS VERSION 5: THIS WILL NEVER END**

LED READS: Kronos, version 5. This never ends.

MUSIC: Hank Williams “Move it on Over” plays. Repeat of the tableau scene only this time without any words. The actors move through the tableaux, first at a slow pace, but eventually picking up speed until the movements blur and the bodies seem to be thrown around as if controlled by other forces.

MUSIC ENDS but the bodies keep going. LIGHTS FADE OUT on the movements.

KRONOS (V.O.)

Everyone waits for something.

In darkness, we hear SIREN. The darkness changes to BRIGHT RED LIGHT which gets BRIGHTER and BRIGHTER from behind the actors who are in various areas of the stage in various poses. CHORUS makes sound of ticking clock.