

MAINTENANCE

by Faith Hart

COLOR KEY

Teal text indicates language directly pulled or very closely adapted from source materials.

Purple text indicates original writing by Faith Hart.

Orange text indicates an audio recording that will be played aloud.

Italics indicate stage directions.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

TRASH PROPHETESS— Stands outside of time. Transcended housewife. Queen of garbage. Tall with a birdlike quality. Femme person of any gender. Sparkly, hungry eyes. One foot on earth, one in another realm. Must be comfortable wearing elaborate garments, makeup, and hair. Dance or movement background a plus. Immersive experience a plus.

GARBAGE MAN— Black man, 20s or 30s. Chicago sanitation worker. Formerly incarcerated. Obviously an older brother. Deep, curious eyes. Really looks at people. Charming as anything. Handsome, flirtatious. Rough hands. Weathered, sometimes pained way of moving, but an undeniable strength. Must be comfortable handling garbage with provided PPE.

This text features [original writing by Faith Hart](#), as well as language adapted for performance from the following sources...

Mierle Laderman Ukeles | [“CARE” Manifesto & Project Proposal \(1969\)](#)

Mierle Laderman Ukeles | [“WHY SANITATION CAN BE USED AS A MODEL FOR PUBLIC ART” \(1984\)](#)

Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art* (MIT Press) | [“Interview: Mierle Laderman Ukeles on Maintenance and Sanitation Art” \(2001\)](#)

Featuring audio clips from...

This American Life | [Episode 249: “Garbage”](#)

StoryCorps | [“We Go Up Together Or We Go Down Together”](#)

Martin Luther King Jr. | [“I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” Speech \(Transcript\)](#)

NPR Throughtline | [“The Litter Myth”](#)

The audience has gathered in the lobby of The Edge Theatre. They are given plastic gloves to wear. As they gather, someone eats a banana right outside the window, which slowly draws the attention of the audience. They throw the banana peel on the ground and come inside to join the audience.

Outside, through the window, the TRASH PROPHETESS emerges, waves at the audience, and slips on the banana peel. The slipping becomes spinning and the spinning becomes a dance. She's wrapped in bubble wrap and it unravels as she spins. She swings open the door, panting and out of breath. She has a plastic baby doll strapped to her body and throughout the play, she comforts and attends to the baby— sort of. Standing in the doorway, she straightens her garments, catches her breath and launches into the monologue.

Once the TRASH PROPHETESS has entered the building, the GARBAGE MAN emerges outside, picks up the banana peel and bubble wrap and begins changing the bag of the trash can in front of the theatre.

The TRASH PROPHETESS is holding up her baby and delivers the next lines to it.

TRASH PROPHETESS

The Death Instinct and the Life Instinct.

The Death Instinct: Separation. Individuality. Avant-garde par excellence. To follow one's own path to death. Do your own thing.

The Life Instinct: Unification. The eternal return. The perpetuation and maintenance of the species. Survival systems and operations. Equilibrium.

Two basic systems: Development and Maintenance.

Development: Pure individual creation. The new! Change! Progress! Advance! Excitement! Flight! Or fleeing.

Maintenance. “Maintain”: it means “to practice an action habitually.” From the old French “maintenir”— from the old Latin “manu tenere”— from the time before words. That Latin— “manu tenere”— means to hold in the hand.

Keep the dust off the Pure Individual Creation. *Preserve* the new. *Sustain* the change. *Protect* progress. *Defend* and *prolong* the advance. *Renew* the excitement. *Repeat* the flight.

The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage Monday morning?

The TRASH PROPHETESS waits for the audience to respond and when they don’t, she hands a few audience members trash grabbers and garbage bags. Low, mystical music begins to play as she beckons the audience to follow her outside. The boom box is on his wagon, he’s listening to 90’s R&B. He’s singing along. The TRASH PROPHETESS guides the audience to the alley, as the mystical music continues. Two AUDIENCE WRANGLERS walk amongst the audience and gesture to them that they should line up against the sides of the alley. The GARBAGE MAN places the old bag in his wagon. Once the audience has passed him, he turns the corner and follows them.

He parks his wagon.

The TRASH PROPHETESS and the GARBAGE MAN take their places, facing each other. An electronic dance beat begins to play.

MOVEMENT SEQUENCE #1

The music stops and they split off from each other. Faith hands the TRASH PROPHETESS a toothbrush and spray bottle and she begins to scrub an impossibly filthy surface, like the ground or the garage door. The GARBAGE MAN switches on his boombox. “This American Life” plays.

The GARBAGE MAN makes rounds, pulling out pre-set prop trash from the Edge’s dumpsters and depositing them into his wagon. The bag that lands on top should be open.

ROBIN NAGLE “Trash today— the meaning of trash today, in part, is about a different kind of relationship to time that we have now. We depend on disposability, to move at a certain kind of speed. You and I had a cup of coffee this morning. It wouldn’t occur to us to save the cup, rinse it out, use it again. It wasn’t a ceramic cup. If it were a ceramic cup, I’ve got to keep it somewhere so it’s not going to get knocked around in my backpack and broken. I’ve got to bring it home and wash it, carry it out again. I have to remember it the next day. There’s even a whole way in which our mental life is organized that depends on disposability. I don’t have to pay attention to—when I go to the grocery store, once in a while, I remember to take a cloth sack, but usually I don’t, because they’ll give me a plastic one. I know that.”

IRA GLASS “Given how it’s just one of the unquestioned facts of modern life that somebody’s going to come and pick up almost anything, almost anything today, it’s amazing to think just how recent an innovation garbage collection is. Cities have been around for thousands of years. And for most of that time, spoiled food and household waste was just left outside, on the street, just to rot.

ROBIN NAGLE The city was, compared to today, unimaginably filthy. Gunk and mud in the streets, ankle-deep with rotting horse carcasses and piles of animal dung. Just really unimaginably dirty.

The GARBAGE MAN returns to his wagon, turns the volume down and takes a sip of Gatorade, spilling a little. He considers this and smiles. He smooths his collar, rubs at the stain. The GARBAGE MAN speaks directly to the audience and waits for them to respond when he asks a question.

IRA GLASS This finally changed in the late 1800s. New York created a sanitation department first in 1881, but it didn't actually accomplish anything until 1896, when a civil engineer slash Civil War vet took over."

ROBIN NAGLE "In 1896, a guy was appointed commissioner named Colonel George Wearing. And he came in and he turned it around. He had some very savvy ideas. He put the men in white uniforms to suggest cleanliness, and he gave them pith helmets, like the local cops of the day wore, to suggest power— enforcement power. And he set out the routes. He gave them standards they had to meet each day. He organized, he bureaucratized the job, but he also made the men accountable. So there are before and after pictures of streets around the city that were this ankle-deep muck before he came. And then after he came, they're pristine. You can see the curbs very nicely defined. There's no garbage anywhere. And they got the nickname "White Wings" because of their uniform.

And the men had an interesting status now that they have since lost. There were parades down Fifth Avenue every year for a long time. And the White Wings were heralded as the heroes who had cleaned the streets effectively for the first time in the city's history."

He asks audience members until someone says an office-y job, something like “data analytics” or “social media management”, etc. He’s amused.

GARBAGE MAN It’s a beautiful day, huh? A real good day, nice to be working outside. What do you do?

I don’t know what those words mean but you sound smart saying them. Good for you. You sit in a roly chair? Drink those little paper cups of water from the upside-down coolers? Can you imagine me in a collared shirt? In meetings saying shit like “to piggyback off of that...” or “synergy”... “per my email”...

Maybe in another life. But hey, I feel pretty lucky.

I was a confused kid. I didn’t have a dream job, was throwing things at the wall to see what struck. Got in trouble right when I turned 18 and did a little time, just a couple months but enough to give me a record. Talk about feeling tossed out.

A guy I knew inside had an uncle who was a sanman, was looking for a couple more hoppers so when I got out, I came straight to see him. I was ready to get on my knees and beg but he looked at me and I think he could tell—that wasn’t me. It was circumstance.

When I was growing up, it just didn’t occur to me to dream of being something unique. I couldn’t picture living to be an adult. I was just doing what other people did. But inside, I started praying. I prayed to go outside. I read a verse about streets of gold, another about a land flowing with milk and honey.

“Do you ever get used to the smell?” People ask me that a lot.

No. I don’t.

He switches the boom box to another station. NPR “Throughline” plays. During the following clip: The GARBAGE MAN stands in front of his wagon, looking through the prop trash bag and recycling. He finds a few recyclable bottles and deposits them into the recycling. He finds trash in his recycling bin and deposits it into the trash can. Then, in the trash, he starts to find bizarre items (a severed human hand, a single floret of broccoli on a styrofoam wrapped in an absurd amount of plastic wrap, with a Trader Joe’s logo, etc.)

The TRASH PROPHETESS changes approach— spraying walls, the street, the garbage cans, etc. with cleaning spray and a tiny cloth or using a miniature dustpan to try to clean the street.

HEATHER ROGERS “I wanted to understand. Like, if you’re sitting - you order a takeout meal, and you’re sitting there after you’re done, and there’s the bag and the container and the napkins - I wanted to know how did that become normal? Like, how did that become OK? Because it’s, like, very different than the way people ate and handled food 100 years ago.”

RAMTIN ARABLOUEI “So what about, like, the 1940s, 1950s? How did people eat and drink things then?”

HEATHER ROGERS “You would drink your soda or your beer, your milk, and then take the bottle back to the store, or the milk delivery person would pick it back up the next day from your doorstep or whatever. And that was the norm... And slowly that starts to change. So what happens is—and there’s all these forces that come together after World War II. And they’ve been kind of, like, building before that, but it’s just— you just have this, like, rush of consumption.”

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4 “First thing I’m going to do after the war is get a vacuum cleaner and a maid to rent.”

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #5 “I want a car. I don’t care how much it costs.”

HEATHER ROGERS “And this massive capacity for manufacturing.”

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #6 “Yes - cars, radios, vacuum cleaners, nylons, juicy steaks. It sounds almost like a dream.”

RAMTIN ARABLOUEI “So imagine you’re a beverage-maker at that time - selling soda, milk, stuff like that. With all of the buying going on after World War II, you’re probably thinking, how am I going to maximize my profits? And then you’re thinking, the old way of reusing glass bottles probably doesn’t make much economic sense anymore.”

HEATHER ROGERS “There’s this one plastics industry conference. I think it was in 1956. And one of the speakers at the conference looks out at the crowd, at all the plastics manufacturers in the room, and he says to them, your future is in the garbage wagon.”

RAMTIN ARABLOUEI “Think about that for a second. There’s a group of plastic-makers sitting in a room, who are trying to get in on this, to break into the bottling industry. And they’re being told that, for them to make it rich, their products needed to be actual trash.”

HEATHER ROGERS “It doesn’t get more clear than that. There’s this real consciousness of, like, if we can get people to throw things

away, they will buy more stuff. And if you think about it, it's brilliant."

TRASH PROPHETESS

I am a woman. I am a mother. I am a wife. I am an artist. Random order.

Development

and Maintenance .

I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving. The baby needs—the baby—the baby needs. The baby's crying, I'm crying There's shit on the floor, there's shit on the ceiling

Do you ever get used to the smell?

I am an artist and I must survive.

People "Do you *do* anything or do you stay at home?" Never in my life have I worked harder.

I studied Abstract Expressionism. Jackson Pollock appeared autonomous

didn't need anybody, hardly needed gravity did he ever call his mother?

he said move into the unknown. alone

I I I I I I I I I I I

who holds you up? who supports you? who cooks the food? who sources the raw materials? who are the people? who are the people who are taking them out of the ground and what are their working conditions and what are the pollution costs of moving materials all around the world and who is paying for what and and and and

any fact of human life

She makes a crude gesture indicating sex → pregnancy → birth.

She waves at the air, at everything else.

He pulls out a sweat rag and tries to cool himself.

GARBAGE MAN This is the kind of work folks only notice if it's *not* done. If we stopped for even a day, a week, a month— can you imagine? It would be unthinkable. We'd be seeing parts of ourselves we're not ready to see.

TRASH PROPHETESS

Sanitation is a large-scale model of a small-scale trap. corporeal bodies
tethered and needing, material
consumption calcification coagulation
exertion exhaustion excretion
wanting wasting wastemaking.

Sanitation is the process to accept, confront, manage, and even *use* decay.

To say I SHIT and I EAT and I NEED things,
many things,
many little plastic-wrapped things
to stay alive and here is the proof.

we say “put it away!”
there is no more “away”

MOVEMENT SEQUENCE #2

TRASH PROPHETESS

wash the dishes

clean the floor

wash your clothes

wash your toes

change the diaper

mend the clothes

there's a hole in the fence

keep pappy happy

throw out the stinking garbage

watch out don't put things in your nose

what shall he wear

he has no socks

keep him happy

pay your bills

don't litter

save string

wash your hair

change the sheets

go to the store

I'm out of perfume

unclog the drain

tighten the faucet

say it again—he doesn't understand,

seal it again—it leaks

this art is dusty

put the toilet seat down

wear a gown

keep it tight

stay young

GARBAGE MAN

wake up at 6

take a shower

go get dirty again

put on the boots

drive to the plant

hop on the truck

drive down the block

open the can

pick up the stinking garbage

throw it in the truck

move faster

hit boss man's quota

keep him happy

watch your hand

there's broken glass

the glove is torn

the bag is ripped

steer clear of the drip

plug your nose

compact it tiny

sort the glass

recyclables

say it again— they don't understand,

recyclables only, trash only

the engine's rumbling

go back to the plant

spray the truck down

muscles ache

stay young

The GARBAGE MAN switches on the boom box. He drinks water with ravenous thirst, ending by squirting the water onto a sweat rag and washes his face/cools himself off.

The TRASH PROPHETESS retrieves a mop and bucket and begins mopping the dirty pavement to no avail.

NPR "StoryCorps" begins to play.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. "The issue is injustice. The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers. Now, we've got to keep attention on that. That's always the problem with a little violence. Now we're going to march again, and we've got to march again. We aren't going to let any mace stop us. I remember in Birmingham, Alabama, when we were in that majestic struggle there. And Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth and they did come; but we just went before the dogs singing, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round." Bull Connor next would say, "Turn the fire hoses on." And as I said to you the other night, Bull Connor didn't know history. He knew a kind of physics that somehow didn't relate to the transphysics that we knew about. And that was the fact that there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out. And we went before the fire hoses; we had known water. If we were Baptist or some other denomination, we had been immersed. If we were Methodist, and some others, we had been sprinkled, but we knew water. That couldn't stop us."

KAMILAH KASHANIE "What you just heard was a piece of the last speech given by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It was April 3rd, 1968 and the country was at a tipping point. He would be assassinated the very next day."

CLARA JEAN ESTER "That was a really devastating time for our country. And it still

gets to me when I share it, even though it's over 50 years ago."

TAYLOR ROGERS "Our day was awful every day. We had these tubs that we had to put this garbage in. You put that tub on your head or your shoulder, whichever was comfortable for you to bring it out. Most of those tubs had holes in them. That garbage would leak all over you. By the time you got home in the evening, uh, you had to pull out those old dirty clothes, where maggots had fell all on you."

ELMORE NICKLEBERRY "I had maggots run down to my shirts, and then maggots would go down in my shoes. And we worked in the rain, snow, ice and rain. We had to. If we didn't, we'd lose our job. They said, a garbage man wasn't nothing."

TAYLOR ROGERS "It was awful. And one of the main things that really set us off real good was that two of the workers got crushed in a compactor. They got in that compactor to get out of the rain, one rainy day and they got up in that compactor and they tripped on some kind of lever that crushed them to death."

ELMORE NICKLEBERRY "It was rough. We see some... we seen some terrible things then. Sometimes you cry. Sometimes you get mad and get up in the morning and I say, "I ain't going to work." And then see my kids, and I look at them, and then I say that I had to go to work because that's the only way I could feed my family."

TAYLOR ROGERS “All we wanted was some decency and some dignity. We...we wanted to be treated as men, so we said that this is it. Thirteen hundred sanitation workers, we all decided that we wasn’t going to take no more. You know, if you bend your back, people will ride your back. But if you stand up straight, people can’t ride your back. So that’s what we did. We just stood up straight and said, “I am a man.”

GARBAGE MAN

I never knew King gave that speech to sanmen. They didn’t tell us that in school, or I wasn’t listening. Some guys out in New Orleans went on strike in 2020, they were making less than \$11 an hour in that heat. They were holding the same sign. I Am A Man.

The GARBAGE MAN picks up a discarded wooden board, with nails standing up.

See how this is put out, with the nails standing up? Like a medieval weapon? They’re supposed to drive the nails down or take them out. It’s like Russian roulette.

They throw everything in here. They throw all kinds of– this is garbage, after all. Just garbage. They don’t think that another human being has to come and pick this up. That has responsibility, that has loved ones. Just here for eight hours, just wants to do his job out here, safe as possible, and make it home. People don’t consider the fact there’s another human being’s got to pick this up.

One day, we were in Andersonville. It was over 90 degrees, humid. We were very tired. Starting-to-feel-sick-kinda-tired, kinda-hot. We loaded a lady's garbage into the truck and sat down on her porch steps for a minute. She opened the door and she said to us: "Get away from here, you smelly garbage men. I don't want you stinking up my porch. Biiiiitch—excuse my language— the garbage came from you, not us. If the shit stinks, look no further than your own ass. Still, that moment crystallizes the *denial*. It's still stuck in my throat. I can't tell you how it feels when people think we are a part of the garbage.

Yeah, I'll listen to that Dr. King speech when I get to feeling low— when the smell seeps into my mind, starts chipping away at me. People don't make eye contact. People don't say thank you.

Well, that's not entirely true. Look at me, I'm just feeling sorry for myself. Every route's got a toddler obsessed with garbage trucks. There's one who lives down the block, little guy named Thomas. Him and his mother—his Renaissance painting, devastating, oooooooh-wee mother they'll be waiting on the curb every Thursday. His little hand rolling this plastic truck back and forth, wide-eyed wonder and there I am.

I Am A Man.

I wonder, where do those kids go? When does the fascination end?

The parents encourage the fascination as long as they don't become us.

I know I'm nobody's hero. I don't need to be lionized. I don't want to be pitied. I just wanna be somebody. When I first came on the job, there was one old timer... I remember Gordy Flow was his name. One day, he stopped the truck. He tells me, "You look down this block first. See the sidewalks are all crowded up with garbage?" I'm like, "Yeah, obviously. That's kind of our whole thing." I think nothing of it. My father always told me to respect my elders. I get to the end of the block and he stops me again. "Get out of the truck, look back. Nice and clean, right? People could walk on the sidewalk. Guys can make deliveries. Be proud of yourself." I got it then. I saw the absolution we brought. Saw it holy. See, me and the guys are always talking about wanting dignity. But our work is already dignified. People just gotta catch up.

What I do is something. I'm good at it, it helps people, and that's something. More than I thought I'd be.

The TRASH PROPHETESS clears her throat. She pulls a tablecloth out of thin air, covering the lid of a trash can. She pulls out two pieces of bread, peanut butter, jelly, and a knife. She makes the sandwich while reciting the poem. She then puts the sandwich into a ziplock bag, then into a paper sack with a bag of chips. At the end of the poem, she gives the lunch bag to an audience member.

TRASH PROPHETESS

A POEM! ENTITLED "ATLAS"! BY U.A. FANTHORPE!

"There is a kind of love called maintenance
Which stores the WD40 and knows when to use it;
Which checks the insurance, and doesn't forget

The GARBAGE MAN sits down on a pallet. He pulls a paper sack from his wagon. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a bag of chips, Gatorade. He eats while he talks.

The TRASH PROPHETESS sits next to him, tenderly giving the baby a sponge bath with mop water.

The milkman; which remembers to plant bulbs;
 Which answers letters; which knows the way
 The money goes; which deals with dentists
 And Road Fund Tax and meeting trains,
 And postcards to the lonely; which upholds
 The permanently rickety elaborate
 Structures of living, which is Atlas.
 And maintenance is the sensible side of love,
 Which knows what time and weather are doing
 To my brickwork; insulates my faulty wiring;
 Laughs at my dryrotten jokes; remembers
 My need for gloss and grouting; which keeps
 My suspect edifice upright in air,
 As Atlas did the sky.”

GARBAGE MAN My brother, he was the smart one. He was going to achieve something. Creative! Wrote fuckin’ poems, drew sunsets and shit. In school, he acted in a *play*, on a stage, learned a bunch of words. He was the guy in Hamlet– what’s his name?

Hamlet.

He died last year. My brother.

All things considered, it was as good a death as we could’ve asked for. He’d been sick for a long time. 5 years. 5 years we took care of him– fed him, bathed him, dressed him, bed pan, everything. I’d never been so close to anybody. Real... *intimate* with his living, dying body, with his waste.

When he died, the hospital staff said we could have ten minutes with him before they wheeled his body away. They said it was hospital policy. They said something about cleanliness. As if he was suddenly dirty. As if any part of him could ever be foreign to me.

So they took him and my empty hands were grasping for something to do, some way to be a part of what was happening. I wanted something to do. He was mine— not the doctors', not the nurses', not the funeral staff's.

It reminds me of my work. Of the disconnect between folks and their decay, the casting off, casting off. Onto somebody else, somebody faceless. We're totally passive. Untethered.

You know, 200 years ago, there was no funeral industry. There was the dirt and the hands of the people who loved you.

I felt responsible for him, to him. It's not that I needed to dig the grave myself, I just wanted... I don't know what I wanted. I think I... *wanted* obligation, inconvenience. To see him through. My brother.

TRASH PROPHETESS

out of free choice, desire and great blessing, I had a baby. I became a mother maintenance worker. I learned the great artists—Pollock, Duchamp, Rothko—didn't change diapers. I had fought so hard to get their freedoms. I fell out of their picture.

The GARBAGE MAN motions for the audience to touch the ground with him, laying down the ropes.

I loved this baby, madly, twirling. I was in a full crisis.

I named my maintenance “art”. collided freedom into its opposite. re-saw the world like, for, and with my baby.

I start to feel swallowed up
like the dishes are never done
but I feel myself alive. touching the earth
I keep another alive, too
what is love but maintenance?

The GARBAGE MAN and the TRASH PROPHETESS stand with their hands up like before, but with the baby in hand now. The AUDIENCE WRANGLERS secure a velcro strap to one of the GARBAGE MAN and the TRASH PROPHETESS’ ankles, connecting them to the garbage ropes. They pick up their trash grabbers and walk, collecting trash along the way, southbound down the alley. They turn the corner, and disappear. “Garbage Truck” by Sex Bob-Omb plays. The AUDIENCE WRANGLERS collect the gloves and offer hand sanitizer to audience members.

END OF PLAY

GARBAGE MAN I think of Psalm 90.
“Teach us to number our days. So we may be kept, so we may gain a heart of wisdom. Return, oh God, how long? Establish the work of our hands, oh God. Yes, establish the work of our hands.”