

Witness

A play by

John Urquhart

Adapted from the novel by

Karen Hesse

Developed through

New Visions/New Voices

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Washington, DC

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Premiere Production

Lexington Children's Theatre

Lexington, KY

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Witness

Cast of Characters

8 men / 7 women

Percelle Johnson, town constable, *mid-50s*

Sara Chickering, farmer, *mid-40s*

Leanora Sutter, *12*

Esther Hirsh, *6*

Merlin Van Tornhout, *18*

Harvey Pettibone, shop owner, husband of Viola, *40s-50s*

Viola Pettibone, shop owner, *40s-50s*

Ira Hirsh, father to Esther, *36*

Reynard Alexander, newspaper editor, *40s-50s*,

Mr. Field, retired carpenter, *85*

Johnny Reeves, preacher, *late 30s*

Olive Harvey, schoolteacher, *late 30s*

Doris Hook, *12*

Mary Thibeault, *14*

Willie Pettibone, son of Harvey and Viola, *10*

The play takes place in various locations in and around the town of

Revelation Falls, Vermont

1924

Witness: Production Notes

The Setting

The stage is a collage of platforms of different heights and orientations decorated with elements drawn from the fabric of a small rural town in Vermont: perhaps a section of clapboard siding; a stool and a table in the newspaper office; a sign marking a railroad crossing; the counter at the Pettibone grocery; and the table in Sarah Chickering's house. Actors bring on and off props and small set pieces as necessary, pantomiming many items.

Lighting

The upstage area is dominated by a simple screen or screens made of stretched muslin upon which shadows can be projected from the rear. The original concept used in Lexington was a rectangular screen integrated into the set design. San Gabrielino High School chose to build several tent-like screens suggesting the pointed hoods of Klan costumes.

These "shadow screens" are used throughout the show to supplement onstage action and reveal offstage action. By using multiple lights mounted at floor level at the rear of the stage, one or two characters can be used to suggest a group. For example, during the cross burning scene, two robed Klansmen can be projected as six figures if three lights are used. The size and clarity of these shadows will depend upon the mood of the scenes onstage, the position of the figures behind the screen, and the value of the light. By manipulating the angle of the light and the position of the players, extremely dramatic images can be easily achieved. For example, by angling the gun appropriately, the rifle used in the opening scene can appear to be several feet long. When coupled with sound, this "shadow screen" is a useful tool to build tension and bring mystery to the stage. Suggestions for its use are indicated throughout the script, and the director and designer are encouraged to explore new possibilities.

Sound and Music

The structure of the play is episodic, and there are numerous places where sound is needed to establish mood, convey information about place and time, and ease transitions between scenes. The playwright anticipates the use of a substantial score of music, radio broadcasts, and sound effects to support the text.

The musical selections sung by the congregation, as well as the litanies, are taken from the hymnal of the Congregationalist Church used at the time of the play.

Staging

The script is designed to unfold smoothly with scenes segueing from one to another in an often kaleidoscopic manner. Keep the action flowing, and don't be afraid to let the scenes tumble over one another.

Witness, an adaptation of the novel by Karen Hesse

by John Urquhart

The time is 1924. A popular song from the era plays softly in the background. Lights fade on the stage, save for one special highlighting a sign that says "Revelation Falls, Vermont, pop. 1,627". As the light on the sign fades, the actors take their places. When the lights rise again, Esther and Ira Hirsh are sitting at Sara Chickering's kitchen table. It is late Summer. Sara stands upstage with her back to the Hirshes, drying the dishes. Ira is reading aloud to Esther. The sound of a freight locomotive is heard in the distance.

The lights dim on Sara and the Hirshes. In another location on the stage, Merlin Van Tornhout enters in the moonlight. He is in the yard outside Leanora Sutter's house. He carries something in a sack. He looks around furtively, crouches, and creeps toward the Sutter's well.

The sound of the train grows louder. Merlin puts down the sack and lifts the cover from the well. He pauses, then picks up the sack. Behind him, Leanora Sutter enters carrying a bucket. She sees Merlin and stops, but he does not see her. Merlin studies the sack for a moment, then he hurls it away. He starts to replace the cover of the well, but before he can close it, he sees Leanora and freezes. The train whistle blows as the lights dim on Leanora and Merlin. The screen brightens. Lights rise again on Sara and the Hirsches.

On the upstage screen we see the oversized, distorted shadow of a figure, holding a rifle. The rifle is pointed at Esther and her father. Esther looks up, toward the gun. The sound of the train increases. A shot rings out, Sara screams. Merlin drops the lid of the well. Blackout.

The sound of the onrushing train becomes overwhelming, then stops abruptly.

Scene 1> (Music. Transition to the Pettibone Grocery. Harvey leans on the counter, reading one of the yellow flyers. Viola is working. Their son, Willie, sits reading a dime novel. Doris is taking off her apron and preparing to leave.)

Harvey: It's up to us, Vi.

Viola: It always has been, Harve.

Harvey: You know what I mean.

Viola: Do I?

Doris: Are you coming tonight, Mrs. Pettibone?

Viola: I wouldn't miss it for the world, Doris. Tell your mother to stop by the house when she's ready.

Doris: Yes m'am .

Viola: And tell her I'll be wearing my best hat!

Doris: I will!

(Doris exits)

Harvey: I'm telling you, Vi. We might as well join. (indicates flyer)
They're good men. 100 percent American men. And women too. They might bring us some business. Bronson won't join, he's made his feelings clear. We could use the business.

Viola: Harve, you don't want to join a group like that. You're a grocer.

Harvey: They have parades, Vi, and picnics. And speakers from all over. Wouldn't you like that? Picnics and speakers?

(pause)

They do good, Vi.

(Willie is at the window.)

Viola: What you see, Willie?

Willie: It's that girl. The one stayed with Miss Chickering last summer.

Harvey: The one that talks so funny?

Viola: She's only six years old, Harve! (to Willie) Don't stare out the window like that, Willie. (goes to window)

Willie: But . . .

Viola: And don't but me. Now get those cans of tomatoes up on the shelf.

Harvey: (at the window) This is just what I'm talking about, Vi. These people, these foreigners, think they can waltz into town and . . .

Viola: Harvey! That's enough. (pause) Now, I'm going to out tonight, Harve. With Jewel, to see Doris and the girls dance in a concert at the school. You want to come? It'll be nice, Harve. They're calling it 'the fountain of youth.' Harve? Are you listening to me?

Harvey: (holds up yellow flyer) They're here, Vi, like it or not. We might as well join.

Viola: I don't think so, Harve.

(Dance music is heard as the scene transitions from the Pettibone Grocery to a dance rehearsal at the school. Suddenly the needle of the record player skips horribly across the record. A gaggle of girls is making a fuss. Their shadows appear upstage on a screen.)

Doris: It's not my fault, Miss Harvey. I can't help it.

Olive: Now, Doris, that's quite enough!

Mary: I'm going home.

Olive: Mary Thibeault, you come back here!

Doris: Me too!

Mary: Mama said I don't have to dance with any colored girl.

Doris: I don't mind dancing with her. Just for her not to touch me, that's all. She can't touch me.

Olive: Girls, please. We need to rehearse.

(Leanora Sutter bursts onto the stage and collapses, sobbing. Olive Harvey follows. Doris and Mary may enter, or they may remain as shadows on the screen.)

Now Leanora, wait a minute.

Doris: I just don't want her to touch me, that's all.

Olive: Doris! That's enough. Now go back inside and sit down.

Doris: She's got a temper, Miss Harvey. She's wild.

Mary: I'm going home. Mama said . . .

Olive: Yes, thank you, Mary. Please go.

(Miss Harvey goes to Leanora.)

I am so sorry, Leanora. I want to apologize for the way those girls behaved. They simply forgot their manners. (pause) You dance beautifully. But you must learn to control that temper of yours.

Leanora: Why can't folks just leave me alone?

Olive: How alone do you want to be, Leanora Sutter? You're already nothing but a wild brown island in this school. (pause) Now promise me you'll dance in the recital tonight and won't make any more trouble. **<Scene 1**

Scene 2>

Johnson: Be careful what you put in your story, Reynard. You don't want to scare people into thinking there's a murderer running loose in Revelation Falls.

Alexander: Even if there is?

Johnson: You know what I mean.

Alexander: Now Percy, you know as well as I do that murder is good for business, if you're in the newspaper business. Look at all the fuss they made in Chicago over the killing of that Franks boy. Think of all the papers they sold.

Johnson: This ain't Chicago!

Alexander: Never mind that. Folks 'round here are no different from anybody else.

(Sara enters with an enameled wash basin)

Sara: You'll want to look at this, Percy.

(Sara gives Johnson the basin.)

Alexander: What you got there, Sara?

Sara: The bullet. Doc Flitt cut it out.

(Johnson fishes out the bullet, examines it)

Alexander: (to Sara) What's Doc say, Sara? Is there any hope?

Sara: Doc says he's done all he can. It's up to God now.

Alexander: I see. (pause) Who would do such a thing, Sara? <Scene 2

Scene 3>

Hirsh: And so, he hopped and he hopped all around the village. Finally, he says "Rabbi, how can I learn the Torah this way?"
(Esther claps, Hirsh catches his breath.)
He learned his lesson, yah.

Esther: Daddy making funny stories.

Hirsh: Not stories, no. This is history. History of Jewish people.

Sara: Hopping on one leg?

Hirsh: Oh, sure. Jews are always hopping.

Esther: Hop, hop, hop!

(Hirsh corrals Esther and places her on his lap)

Hirsh: Now, some days, you know, not everything is so good for everybody, yah. Not for you, not for me, not for Sara.

Esther: Not for Bossie the Cow.

Hirsh: Not even for Bossie the Cow. But remember always that the Jews are God's special children. Wherever the children of Israel may go, God watches over them, yah?

Esther: All the times?

Hirsh: All the times. God hears everything. God sees everything.

Esther: Everything?

Hirsh: Yah! Everything. God is always watching.

(the indistinct shadow of a Klansman appears on an upstage screen)

Esther: (pause) God is watching Leanora too?

Hirsh: Leanora Sutter? Your friend from school?
(Esther nods)

Of course he is! And now little one, is time for you to go to bed.

(sings) Shlof mayn kind, shlof keseyder
Zingen vel ikh dir a lid
Az du, mayn kind, vest elter vern
Vestu visn and untershid.

<Scene 3

Scene 4>

Johnson is still examining the bullet. While Johnson and Alexander talk, Sara enters with a bucket and begins to clean the floor. The water reads red when she wrings out the cloth.)

Alexander: What kind of gun was it, Percy?

Johnson: Rifle.

Alexander: How can you aim a rifle through a keyhole in a door?

Johnson: You can't. You can shoot a rifle through a keyhole, but you can't aim it 'cause you can't see.

Alexander: So the gunman couldn't see who he was shooting at.

Johnson: Evidently not.

Alexander: That means he could've been trying to shoot the girl, Mr. Hirsh, or even Sara.

Johnson: Or none of the above.

Alexander: What do you mean?

Johnson: Maybe he was just trying to scare 'em.

Alexander: Or maybe it wasn't a he?

(pause)

How many families in this valley own a rifle?

Johnson: Every single one.

Sara: And how many of those families have joined the Klan?
(pause, Sara wrings out the cloth)

Alexander: (to Sara) Sure was a lot of blood.

Sara: Too much blood, Reynard. (rising) A body only has so much blood.

<Scene 4

Scene 5>

(Transition to Mr. Field's house. Field enters, sets up an easel, and begins to paint. He sees so poorly his nose nearly touches the canvas as he works. Leanora enters.)

Leanora: Mr. Field?

Field: Come in.

Leanora: I'm Leanora Sutter. Miss Stockwell, our landlady, says you been feeling poorly. Asked me to stop in and see if I could be any use to you?

Field: You're Wright Sutter's girl?

Leanora: Yessir.

Field: (without looking) I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Sutter.

Leanora: Thank you, sir.

(pause, Leanora creeps in to peek over his shoulder. As she draws near, Field sneezes mightily. Leanora jumps.)

Leanora: Oh!

Field: Excuse me!

Leanora: I'll be in the kitchen, Mr. Field. (to audience) I washed up his dishes, swept his floor, and boiled some potatoes for his supper. Mr. Field kept painting all afternoon. I thought he was the oldest person I had ever seen. While I worked, he talked. At first I didn't listen, 'cause, well, Mr. Field is a white man. But then he started in on war stories.

Field: Folks 'round here like to talk about the "great war," that "World War" they had over in Europe. But I served in the Civil War, right here in the United States of America. I was a bugler, in the 2nd Regiment of Vermont Volunteers. Do you know why I volunteered? Because I could not abide the idea of slavery. I fought to free the Negroes.

Leanora: (to the audience) Mr. Field talked without ever really lookin' at me. I don't know if he could see me well enough to judge the color of my skin.

(Music, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic")

Field: I'll never forget the day I saw the brigade of Negroes under General Burnside. Like a long streamer of dark silk, they were. They were a sight, that line of Negroes marching toward the rebels, straight as a dress parade.

Leanora: What happened to them?

Field: Well, those Negro soldiers chased the rebels off. Every one.

Leanora: They beat 'em?

Field: Yes m'am. It was a sight to behold.

Leanora: (pause) I have to go now, Mr. Field.

Field: You come by any time, Miss Sutter.

Leanora: Thank you, sir. (to the audience) I marched home that day, in a straight line, with my back tall, thinking about that regiment of men—just like a streamer of dark silk.

Chorus: (singing offstage)

Glory, glory, hallelujah! Glory, glory, hallelujah,
Glory, glory, hallelujah, his truth is marching on! **<Scene 5**

Scene 6>

Alexander: Merlin! Merlin, can you spare me a moment of your time?

Merlin: Well, Mr. Alexander. It's actually your time, seeing as how I'm working for you.

Alexander: I would rather you chose to listen. No writer wants to coerce his audience into being attentive.

Merlin: This another editorial?

Alexander: One that you might find of particular interest. Now sit tight and tell me what you think. "Where Will This Lead Us?" That's the headline.

Merlin: Yes sir.

Alexander: On arrival in a town, the Ku Klux Klan appears to serve the best interests of the community, "cleaning it up", by keeping a vigilant eye out for loose morals and lawbreakers. But what is the Ku Klux Klan? Is it the patriotic, 100% American organization it claims to be?

Alexander: (contd) What is 100% American? What about Catholics, Jews, Negroes, citizens of any other race or color who were born here? Whose fathers were born here? Whose grandfathers were born here? Are they not every bit as American as the Klan?

(pause, looks at Merlin)

And should we, the good people of Revelation Falls, trust these men? Men who work in the dark, wearing hoods and masks? Men who burn crosses in the night, and harass those among us that they do not consider to be 100% American. What good can come of it? (pause) Where will this lead us?

(pause)

Well, Merle, what do you think?

Merlin: I think it's about time to load the truck, Mr. Alexander.

Alexander: I see.

Merlin: (starts to go) Mr. Alexander?

Alexander: Yes?

Merlin: I want you to know, I'm really grateful, you letting me have this job, and the way you got me out of jail when I went after Mary. (pause) But please be careful what you say, sir? About the Klan.

Alexander: It's all about truth, Merle. A newspaperman has to tell the truth.

Merlin: Good night, sir.

Alexander: Merlin?

Merlin: Yessir.

Alexander: How long you been working for me now?

Merlin: Goin' on a year, I guess.

Alexander: Time you had your own keys, don't you think? (hands him the keys) There's one for the back door and one to the storeroom. And one for the truck.

Merlin: Thank you, sir.

Alexander: Lock up for me, will you Merlin? **<Scene 6**

Chorus: (sings) Once to every man and nation
 Comes the moment to decide,
 In the fight of truth with falsehood,
 For the good or evil side.

The End