

BELFAST: From “DARKNESS LIFTING”

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Note: In the initial performance of “Darkness Lifting,” all 25 characters of this play were performed by four actor/musicians who also supplied the live music to each section. In this section, Edd Key played the CATHOLIC and the PROTESTANT as well as the SON and the MAN. The MOTHER –a Northern Ireland grandmother born on the Catholic side but disavowing either –was played by Tressea Holmes. The play was directed by Eddie Levi Lee.

(Begin with PROTESTANT entering to fife music performed in the background. He enters banging the drum of Ulster. He circles around a kitchen chair and tea setting. The noise is extreme, the action deliberate. Eventually, MOTHER takes her place at the table and quietly pours herself a cup of tea. As the drummer continues circling around her, she purposefully goes about her business knitting a very large blanket and is having a cup of tea. Eventually the noise subsides and the PROTESTANT exits)

MOTHER:

(To audience)

Well, what do you say we have a wee cuppa? I’m needing a break from this monstrosity, and you’re looking a little desparet yerself. Fact, ya look like corn beef. What do you say, then? A wee cup in the hand? It’ll put the color back in ya (Pours cup) Best thing about tea is that you can’t be knittin while you’re drinkin’. It’s a daaft excersize in stupidity, knittin is -strictly for the old folks two sandwiches short of a picnic. I’m only doing it to keep a cigarette outta me hand. And as you can see by the size of this monster, I’ve had quite a habit and for quite some time.

(Beat, she takes a sip of tea)

That tea’s still a bit hot isn’t it? Well don’t blow on it! It’s not yer birthday and I haven’t fixed ya a cake. Just wait, is all -nobody’s gonna take it from ya. You Americans, always moving like it’s always more important to be there than it is here. Well, one thing, you keep the airlines in business.

(Suddenly)

‘So show us the litter, then,’ is that what you’re askin’? Well, if you insist. I’ll have to dig up the family photo. Might take some time... (The photo is right on the table and she knows it) -Ah, you’re in luck. It’s right here on me table. (Beat) See, now there’s four sons, three daughters, three husbands, three wives, twenty-four children, four great-grandchildren. (Beat) Then there’s Jim -there, off to himself. Sick all his life and died a few months later. He was a good boy - knew right from wrong. (Pause) Your children are on loan to you from God, and the terms is that you show ‘em their way on this earth. (Beat, then with renewed enthusiasm)

This tall one, here, Martin, it was just last Spring he tried to talk back to me. With him being over six foot and nearly twenty-two year of age, it limited my ability to discipline him right there and then. So I said to him, "You wait, I'll get you in your sleep!" Wouldn't you know that night he invites his friend over -Jimmy O'Neil. Good boy; a bit of long talker, maybe. Surprised, I'm sure, when he's awoken in the middle of the night by the crack of me slipper on the side of his head. Martin's over in the next bed just laughing. "Don't laugh," I says "I'll get you tomorrow night!"And I did.

You haven't asked me yet what side I'm on, what foot I kick with, who's my favorite football team, Celtic or Ranger? Do I buy my fish and chips on the Shankill or the Falls, or any of the other idiot ways people have of separating each other out. Well, I'll tell you this much, I live in Glencairn, and here in Glencairn the house are built by the hands of Catholics and Protestants, both. Because God didn't put people into this world with labels, and if God didn't, I'm not going to, and you shouldn't either. The whole thing's an insult to your intelligence, if you ask me, and even if you don't ask me, I'll tell you anyway.

(Shift to CATHOLIC, who appears in area behind MOTHER. Shift focus as MOTHER continues her tea)

CATHOLIC:

But! (Beat) You got to know how to recognize a Protestant. Their eyes are closer together. That and the way they pronounce their "h's" (Does the pronunciation). Or if you listen, they'll be the ones beating their drums, marching up and down the streets -our streets, our neighborhoods - singing that damned, "The Sash Me Father Wore," like they was a school band on their way to a football match.

It's quite simple, you know: Northern "Ireland." It's not, Northern "England." And yeah, the English sent a bunch of 'em here a few hundred years back to keep the Irish in line, and I suppose it has been their home for a few generations on that. But the rest of the country got free of 'em in 1920's, and now it's our turn. "Sagirse zo ceo" - "Freedom forever."

How many coffins have I followed down the Falls Road? How can you expect me to see anything but what I seen? How many times did an explosion go off, and feel the sickness to the very depth of me until the news came back: "Thank God, it wasn't one of ours..."

(Exit CATHOLIC)

MOTHER:

As for me, I'd rather have the company of children. They don't lie and they're not deceitful. Look at this here (MOTHER Takes out a lipstick and nail polish) Little Meggin from down the street brought me some lipstick and nail polish for my birthday. "Why thank you very much!" I says to her, and maybe I'm making a bigger deal of it than is really the case. Anyway, she looked at me a wee bit puzzled: "Do you like it?" she asked, and just as surprised as she could be. "Why yes, I think it's great," I said to her. "Well," she says, "They was only free samples my mom got from the Avon lady."

(Beat)

And I'll never forget seeing the children frog-marched down the street, guns pointed at 'em like criminals, and them born innocent, wanting nothing more than life and love. What's gonna happen to 'em when they're all the time being told they're wrong or they're bad or they're no good? So I got on my feet and I put together a little bit from here and a little bit from there, and in no time we had us a community center. And a great place it was: Except for Bingo on Saturday and social night Fridays, the rest of the time, it was a place where the kids could go and be kids, to laugh, and have fun. Why, we even had Horace Jay the magician, doing a show for free. You should have seen them kid's face light up when he made things disappear: "Oh no it's not there!" he'd say, and the kids coming back: "Oh yes it is!" "Oh, no it's not!" "Oh yes, it is!" -and sure enough, Ole Horace Jay, -it wasn't. (Beat) In a few weeks time, neither was the community center. They burned it to the ground...They burned it to the ground!

(PROTESTANT enters again with the drum of Ulster which he uses to punctuate his dialogue. It is the type of drum they used in the marches with insignia of one side. His movement is always in a particular circular direction to feature that one side)

PROTESTANT

But, you must remember! (Beat, Then hits drum) I'm tired of hearing that we don't have no culture. You want to see culture? (Bangs drum, and an Orange Order banner flies down from rafter) How about the Battle of Boyne! Drove out James to keep this land in Protestant hands, from me great Grandfather, to me grandfather, to me father, to me: William of Orange -the Orange Order: Twelve lectures that take me on a trial in the Bible where I'm told how to lead my life, the forces of law and order; the loss of law and order; Orange -Order Are you telling me we fought and died in two world wars for nothing, and for no reason? No culture? No sir. No sir, -ree No -sir -ren -der. No surrender...no surrender.

(Settles)

Because if we don't -if we let go for just one second.... How many coffins have I followed down the Shankill road? How can you expect me to see anything but what I seen? How many times did an explosion go off, and feel the sickness to the very depth of me, until the news came back: "Thank God, it wasn't one of ours..." Fifty-two-percent -us to 48-percent -them. But there's

more and more of them -you can spot 'em by the way they pronounce their 'h's. That and the fact their eyes are further apart. And now, they're saying we can't march here or we can't march here or we can't march there, because now it's a Catholic neighborhood. A Catholic neighborhood it wasn't when we chose our routes, when me great grandfather chose our routes, and now them saying we can no longer march down the Queen's highway!

(Gets up and starts marching around MOTHER again banging drum)

Well we are here, by God, do you see? Thousands that come before me -thousands that walked this road -just as I am today. And we are going to live our lives as been given and decreed under law -for God and Ulster! For God and Ulster!

(Sings "The Sash my Father Wore." MOTHER has remained seated, unaffected, drinking her tea. PROTESTANT exits)

MOTHER:

They burned the community center to the ground. And you're thinking that "they" was "them" - the other side -the Protestants? But it was our own who done it. Because we wouldn't let 'em drink more than the one night a week. Because we wasn't givin' them enough profit. Who did they think they was, anyway? What was more important than doing it for the kids?

Cause it's Sinn Fein, you know: "Ourselves alone"

(CATHOLIC enters)

CATHOLIC:

But, you must recall! (Beat) When we run the police out of the neighborhood because they was themselves was doing more harm than good -burning our houses, callin' our women whores.. Well, what's left, then? Whose gonna provide the law and order, but we, ourselves? Cause, when there's no authority, there's always them ready to take advantage. "Unsocial behavior." So we'd find the ones who were to blame, ring 'em up, 'be at such and such a place at such and such a time. We'll phone you an ambulance for later.' They'd come, all right -where else was they to go?

Drills to the kneecaps. Every time they'd try to sit down or stand up, they got a reminder of what they shouldn't have done and why they shouldn't have done it.

We gotta stick together, you know, or we'll be speaking the Queen's English till the day we die and then buried under the Union Jack. It's our own, you know. ...(Continues in Gaelic) Ni heart zo cur le ceile: There is no strength until there is unity

(Continues in Gaelic)

MOTHER

I found the very boys who burned the community center and I called 'em on it -right there in front of everyone. They weren't expectin' that, and the one, he says to me: "If you wasn't a lady we'd knock your teeth down your throat." And so I took out me teeth, right outta my head, and I said, "Here, I'll make it easy for ya..." Well, they wasn't expectin' that, either. I always tell my kids, you don't need a crowd to stand up; you stand up and say what's right, and if you're right, well, then you're in God's army, and that's the best one....(Suddenly reflective) But they got my boys over it. Got 'em coming out of a working men's club across the street. My youngest, they broke his ankle in several places and the other's missin' part of his ear. The boys, they said to me, "Ma, you're just gonna have to keep your mouth shut. It's us and not you they'll knock into the middle av next week!" (This effects her, causes her to pause) But I can't help but believing that any one of 'em, if given the chance, wouldn't want rid of this whole mess just as quickly a change in the Irish weather. It's that we're stuck, you know: Laying under the weight of this whole big Irish rock. And I says to myself, 'Just what do you think you can do about it, anyway?' (Focusing on the cross) Christ, you come on this earth so people could see things a different way. And look see what they done to you... (Beat) And it's why they drink in the Pubs all night, them and theirs: In their own stupid way, they want the same thing everyone does -to get out from under.

(MAN enters at bar. We are not sure if he is Catholic or Protestant)

MAN:

All right, then, turn the noise up, would ya? And keep the drinks flowin'. It's gettin' so quiet in here, I can almost hear myself think.

(Elvis Presley song is part of the bar music)

That's it, that's him, that's the one right there -Elvis! The King! You see, all those words in all those songs -going to a jailhouse party with some kind of dog and the lot - and I don't believe he's ever said a damned thing! What does it mean, "Be my Teddy Bear?" I'll tell you what it means: Nothing at all. And that is why he's king in my book. Because if you say something, just say nothing at all.

(ELVIS song continues in the background, MAN swaying to, and getting lost in it)

(Then, he finishes his Guinness, and comes up on the other side in a different frame of mind, as ghost of ELVIS appears behind the projections screen)

I imagined one time, I was sitting at the bar, and there he was... Elvis, right there at the corner seat. And I look across, take a sip of me Guinness, and I say, "Hi." And then, he says...

GHOST OF ELVIS:

(Shadow behind screen)

Hello.

MAN:

...just like that. "Hello." And you know, he's lookin like he's in some kinda fix, he is. Turns out -him not being from here and in fact havin' been dead for quite some time- turns out he's all confused about this new cold-filtered Guinness, and what's the difference anyway between regular and cold-filtered.

GHOST OF ELVIS:

Is one cold and the other one not so cold?

MAN:

"No," I says to him. "Fact, they're both cold."

GHOST OF ELVIS:

Well then, if they're both cold and they're both Guinness, what's the difference?

MAN:

So I says to him, "Well to tell you the truth Mr. Presley," -I felt that, 'Mister Presley' was still the right thing to call him in spite of the fact that we had been drinkin' buddies for quite some time, now - I says, "To tell you the truth Mr. Presley, I myself have been drinking both the regular and the cold-filtered for quite some time now, and I'll be turned upside down if I can tell that there's any difference at all." So he does a little bit a...

GHOST OF ELVIS:

'Eanie meanie minie mo'

MAN:

...kind of a joke see, him being the king of rock and roll, and it lands on the regular Guinness, which is what he orders. And then, glass in hand, he turns to me and says...

GHOST OF ELVIS:

Well, here's to you.

MAN:

...and I raise me own. So we have a few, you know, and we're talking about nothing at all -I mean, just nothing at all. And we're just sitting there, see, and finally, I says to him "You want to hear a little, "Love Me Tender?"

(MAN sings it poorly but with effort)

...And he says to me...

GHOST OF ELVIS:

Pretty fair. Pretty fair, indeed.

MAN:

(As Elvis, impersonation)

'Well, thank you. Thank you very much.'

(Conclude with one of performers singing Elvis song, likely in opposition to type:
i.e. African-American woman singing Elvis, or other non-traditional arrangement)

(Shift to MOTHER, drinking tea)

MOTHER

And in fact, and it's sad to say, they're the most sane when they're two sheet to the wind. It's the things they say when they're sober makes you think they've got a few tiles missin' Like just the other day, there's one living down the street -wee git she is, and in it up to her eyeballs. Her son's locked up now, political prisoner they call 'em -bit of a hero with some. And she looks at the picture of me litter -the memorial plaque on the wall -and she says, "It's a real tragedy about your boy, Jim." (Beat) I know I should hold my breath, not say what I was thinking, just leave it be and get another cuppa. But ah'm cross as two stick, bout it, and can't get a hold of me tongue with a pair of metal pliers. And so I says: "My Jim died in my arms with me saying prayers over him. He was a good boy and he went straight to God. But your son's perfectly healthy, sitting in a prison, now, far away from anything good, and for what?"

(Begin the music of marching in background: Irish -Catholic- marching music)

And one day, just outta the clear blue sky, they's saying there'd be a parade. 'A parade?' I thought. Wasn't it usually them on the Shankill that did the marching? No, they say, this is a parade of our people: August 15th. 'Our people', I wondered... 'Our people...' Well, you know it may not seem like it, but I try to get along, and so why not? The next thing you know, we're all dressed up like dolls, and walking to the Falls lookin for a "parade." And sure enough, there is one.

(To the music SON enters and begins to march in counter clockwise direction around MOTHER, showing the other side of the same big bass drum, which has a shamrock or other insignia that would show it to be Catholic)

And a shiver comes over me. Here it come, the big bass drums and the music -just the same - everybody marching in step like they no longer had a mind to do anything else but go right straight ahead of 'em. And then I see the most remarkable thing I ever seen in me whole entire life. Within that band -carrying him a big base drum with an Irish Shamrock, and "Gale di Brock," there's me own son -me own flesh and blood -and he's banging away on this thing like

he was born into this world to do nothing more than that. Just go home, I says to myself...Wait till he's asleep and you can hit him with both slippers. But wouldn't ya know it: Next thing, I'm pushin' my way through the crowd until I'm right there walking beside him, like all I'd need was for someone to hand me some kinda drum myself.

(MOTHER is not walking beside SON as though marching with him)

SON:

(Fearful)

Mother...now don't do anything that'll embarrass us both.

(SON continues to march, MOTHER in step)

MOTHER:

'And so, son,' I says, 'just when did you get it in your head to get ya a drum and a fancy uniform and be a part of this whole thing' -I'm wondering.

SON:

It's just a parade mother and it's just a drum; there's nothing more to it than that.

MOTHER:

(Sarcastic)

Just a parade and just a drum, is it? Like we was living in New York City marching to Saint Paddy's Day up and down Fifth Avenue? Like it ain't got a thing to do with anything at 'tall. 'Just a parade,' like, 'just a wee cuppa tea in the hand,' or a 'fish supper, a pastie, an' a hot pea.'

SON:

Mother, please, go back and watch the parade. People are beginnin' to notice.

MOTHER:

Beginning to notice, are they? And what are they beginning to notice? The fact that I can remember me father wringing the blood out of his shirt when he'd come home from work because they -them, the other side -used to drop hammers on him when he was at work; or that they nailed his boots to the deck of the shipyard and put asbestos powder in his baking soda, and all because he wasn't one of them; because he followed the Pope? You must be remember them frog marchin' the kids down the street, burning our houses and threatenin' the women and children, saying, "...and we'll be back to roast your turkeys for Christmas"; telling the children they seen their mother sleeping with other men. So nobody's gonna be noticing any of that. Nobody's gonna be noticing the fact that we got every reason in the world to hate and to march in a thousand parades. But you're saying it's just a parade?

SON:

Mother, you're startin' to make a fool of both you and me.

MOTHER:

A fool of us, am I? I'll show you how I'm gonna make a fool of us!

(MOTHER suddenly takes her shoe off and puts the heel through the base drum, stopping the SON in his tracks)

SON:

Oh, now mother. What did you go and do that for?

(SON exits. MOTHER returns to her seat)

MOTHER:

He had to pay for the drum, I wouldn't give him a penny for it. Not one penny. For the first few weeks he didn't have much to say to me and I was thinking that was his choice. But in time, it all went away. Finally, I asked him: "So, son, are you the worse for any of it?" No mother, I'm not the worse for it... "Revenge is mine" says the Lord. (Pause) And as a matter of fact, Amen to that.

END

"Darkness Lifting" is available for independent production. It can be performed in association with local or international Habitat for Humanity affiliates. It is also available through a World Communities residency. For more information or for a complete script, please contact tdetitta@earthlink.net