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MOTHER HICKS

by

SUZAN ZEDER

*Originally produced for
Seattle Children's Theatre
Seattle, Washington*



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(MOTHER HICKS)

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DEDICATION

MOTHER HICKS is dedicated to Mary Ellen Bridges,
whom I never met, but feel as though I know.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

This play came from somewhere and passed through me on its way to somewhere else. The idea first presented itself after I read a collection of oral lore from the W.P.A., Federal Writer's Project, written during the Depression. I was struck by the number of witch tales which provided supernatural explanations for natural disasters, and by the need of communities to create witches as scapegoats in troubled times and landscapes.

The writing of this play has been a joyous voyage of discovery for me. The witch stories, locations, and details of place and period are real and historically accurate. The characters and storyline are original and have shaped themselves through me. This play has always moved with its own power. It has told me where it needed to go next, and whenever I came to my desk there were characters waiting to talk to me.

I have one deep and serious production concern with this play. I strongly urge potential producers and directors to cast a deaf or hearing impaired actor in the role of Tuc. Although it may take a little extra time and effort to find and work with this actor, the benefits are overwhelming. It is the difference between someone copying choreographed movements and someone dancing in the language of their soul. The use of sign in this play is a language as precise as any of the words spoken aloud. If sign language is to have dramatic impact it must have meaning; it must be real and specific if it is to have emotional eloquence and physical poetry.

I have had a special relationship with this play. I wish you the same. May it help you "see the sharp sting of honey and taste the sunrise."

Suzan L. Zeder
Dallas, Texas
1986

CHARACTERS

Tuc. A deaf man, in his 20's
Girl. A foundling, 13 years old
Mother Hicks. An ageless woman in her 40's

CHORUS

(who translate for TUC and play the following roles:)

Ricky Ricks 12 years old
Izzy Sue Ricks. His mother
Jake Hammon Farmer
Howie Hammon His son, 11 years old
Clovis P. Eudy Shopkeeper
Wilson Waker Writer for the WPA
Hosiah Ward Mortician
Alma Ward His wife

SETTING

The town of Ware, in southern Illinois:

Act I: Various locations in and around town

Act II: Dug Hill, the store, a street, Cairo, the graveyard.

TIME

Late Spring, 1935

Mother Hicks

By Suzan L. Zeder

Act One

The set consists of a large open area on a gently raked stage. Downstage there are two tall telephone poles with terminals and cables. The wires stretch diagonally upstage and connect with another smaller pole. There is a feeling of uncluttered vastness reaching toward a disappearing horizon.

Opening music is a folk song of the Depression: an upbeat kind of song: not too city, not too country; that reflects the tension and trouble of the time. House lights fade with the music and a tinkling bell is heard in the silence of the darkness. A rosey hued cyclorama floods the stage.

A figure is seen silhouetted against the cyclorama. TUC pulls a large wagon, ringing the bell as he crosses downstage. As lights come up we see that the wagon is loaded with odd pieces of furniture, hung with miscellaneous costume pieces, and rigged with a variety of props. From this wagon will come many of the costume and prop pieces used by the CHORUS as they take their various roles and move the action from scene to scene. TUC pulls the wagon to a spot center-stage, and steps into a bright pool of light. The CHORUS enters behind him.

TUC signs in silence for a beat or two, then the CHORUS speaks his words.

CHORUS:

Mother Hicks is a witch, people say.
And she lives all alone at the top of Dug Hill
And she works her magic on the town below.

When cracks is seen in the dry creek bed
When the corn burns up
When a calf's born dead
Mother Hicks is a witch, people say.

When a child falls sick
And there ain't no cause
And there ain't no cure
Then everybody knows that it's witched for sure.
Mother Hicks is a witch. . .people say.

(During the following, CHORUS members come forward, speak a few lines, take an article of clothing from the wagon, and exit. TUC continues signing.)

CHORUS:

This time is Spring in 1935
A year of fear in the Great Depression.
This place is Ware. W.A.R.E.
The Mississippi River's over there.
This is southern Illinois,
But we call it Egypt.

(A single CHORUS member remains; comes forward and shares the edge of the spotlight with TUC. All subsequent translations of sign language will be handled this way: the interpreter shares the light, but gives focus to the sign.)

CHORUS:

My name is Tuc.
I cannot speak. I cannot hear.
I use my hands and the words appear.
I hang these words in the air for you
To tell a story that I know is true;
'Cause I heard every word with my eyes.

It is deep in the early,
Just before dawn.

(Lights fade to blackout, a low throbbing electrical hum pulsates in the darkness. The sound is pierced by the shrill sound of a whistle. Lights come up on GIRL at the top of the telephone pole.)

GIRL: A dare is a dare and done. Dare and double dare, to sneak over the fence at the power station and fetch the quarter that Ricky threw there. Up and over the fence and then drop down into the cool wet grass.
(She drops down a rung.)

Then I heard it, that stinging, singing sound; racing through them wires, and round them coils and cables; like the electricity wanted to be out like lightning bolts. It's true fact, that I do dares of mortal danger. Things that no one else in town would dare to do, or dare to tell they'd done 'em.

A dare is a dare and done!

(From out of the darkness, a voice is heard off-stage. It is RICKY RICKS, a boy about GIRL'S age.)

RICKY: Girl! Hey. . . You here, Girl?

(GIRL ducks behind the pole and hoots like an owl. RICKY enters.)

Dang it, Girl come out! If my Ma finds out I'm not in bed . . .

(GIRL jumps out of the tree and startles him.)

You just made me jump to Jesus!

GIRL: You should have guessed, Ricky, them hoot owls live in trees.

RICKY: It's five o'clock in the morning, and I don't exactly feel like guessing!

(GIRL flips a quarter in the air and catches it.)

GIRL: A dare is a dare and done!

RICKY: My quarter.

GIRL: Nope, my quarter.

RICKY: I was sure you'd get electrocuted doing that dare.

GIRL: A dare ain't a dare unless there's danger. You got the money?

RICKY: I don't know why we had to do this so early. Why couldn't we wait 'till. . .

GIRL: Cause I need the money now!

RICKY: Then hand 'em over.

GIRL: *(Evasive)* Uhhh Ricky, you know how you always wanted a pet, but your Mama wouldn't let you have a dog cause it'd slobber up the house?

RICKY: Yeah.

GIRL: Well, I decided to sell you my frogs.

RICKY: Your frogs?

GIRL: I raised them since they was squiggles, they're good hoppers, and they all got names.

RICKY: Names?

GIRL: I figure frogs with names is worth more than regular.

RICKY: A deal's a deal! You promised to sell me your Tom Mix Wrangler Badge, the Buck Rogers pocket watch, and the Orphan Annie Secret Society code book.

GIRL: I did a million dares to get all that stuff.

RICKY: . . .AND all the seals you collected from the Ovaltine jars.

GIRL: I had to go through all the garbage in the whole City dump to get those. . .

RICKY: Deal's a deal! I also want the Jack Armstrong Whistle Ring!

GIRL: But Jake gave me that whistle, he sent for it with Wheaties box tops.

RICKY: No whistle, no deal.

GIRL: But it's the only thing that ever came through the mail just for me.

RICKY: *(Turning to leave)* Guess you don't want my money.

GIRL: I need that money, Ricky, I need it bad.

RICKY: Not bad enough.

GIRL: You can have the whistle! Hell-fire! You can have anything you want except my quilt piece.

(GIRL takes off her whistle-ring and gives it to him. She unfolds her quilt piece which contains her treasures in a small bundle)

RICKY: Who'd want that dirty old thing?

GIRL: That shows how much you know! This here's fine embroidery on these here initials: I.S.H. fine embroidery, by someone's own hand!

RICKY: Let's go see those frogs, maybe I'll buy 'em for a penny a piece.

(RICKY starts out, GIRL follows)

GIRL: Penny? They's worth a least a nickel!

RICKY: I kin catch'em myself.

GIRL: With names? Kin you catch them with names. . .and trained?

(GIRL and RICKY exit. Lights pick up TUC and a CHORUS member. TUC signs.)

CHORUS:

A baby girl found in town,
About thirteen years ago.
People took her in and raised her
Here, and there, and all around.
And so, she goes . . .
In and out of people's houses,
Like so many times before.
She rests a while inside a family,
Until they can't keep her anymore.
And then. . .she goes again.

(There is the sound of distant thunder. From off stage JAKE is heard.)

JAKE: Girl! You come here, Girl!

(He enters carrying a duffle.)

I want to get off before the storm!

(GIRL enters at a run, she is clutching an old sock.)

GIRL: I got it. Jake! I got it!

JAKE: *(Not listening to her.)* Now, I told you, I need to be in Cairo by this afternoon and I can't go until I see you safely to the Wards.

GIRL: Sit down, Jake.

JAKE: Ellen and Becca packed up all your things, all they could find.

GIRL: Sit down.

JAKE: No, Girl. This one time you're not going to get me buffaloed I've got to get going.

GIRL: No, you don't!

JAKE: Girl, I told you.

GIRL: I got it for you. I got the money.

JAKE: What?

GIRL: I been collecting bottles at a penny a piece; I run groceries for Mr. Eudy, pulled weeds for Miz. Snipes, and sold some stuff. I got six dollars and forty-three cents.

(GIRL hands him the sock proudly. JAKE sits on a stump.)

JAKE: Girl, that's real fine; and Ella and me, we're grateful, but I need a bit more for the mortgage.

GIRL: How much?

JAKE: Two hundred and fifty six dollars.

GIRL: *(Simply)* That's a lot of frogs.

JAKE: Huh?

GIRL: I kin earn it. I kin get me a real job....

JAKE: It's over. They took the farm and they'll sell it for back payments. I can't stay where I can't work.

GIRL: Bob Ricks digs ditches on the county road, Ricky told me.

JAKE: That's a WPA job. WPA stands for "we piddle around!" I wouldn't take a handout from those crooks in Washington if my life depended on it. There are jobs in Cairo, real jobs.

GIRL: *(Pleading)* Take me with you.

JAKE: I can't.

GIRL: I could get a job in Cairo. I could give you and Ellen all the money.

JAKE: I wish we could take you. Hell, I like you better'n some of my own kids. But you're not kin and I can't take responsibility for another living soul right now.

GIRL: I won't take up much room and I won't eat hardly nothing.

JAKE: Girl, neither God nor nature ever sent me anything before that I couldn't handle. Last year, when the flood came, I built a wall with sandbags. When we had that tornado, I knew how to get everyone in the shelter and wait it out. Even a war's got enemies with bullets; but there's something happening in this country now, like a terrible silent storm. I can't see it, or hear it, and I don't know how to fight it, and it scares me.

(There is a pause. GIRL knows she can't change his mind. He hands her back her money.)

GIRL: *(Very vulnerable)* I got used to your family, Jake.

JAKE: Hush, now.

GIRL: I never got used to anything before.

(JAKE pulls out a plug of Red Man chewing tobacco, GIRL holds out her hand for some too.)

JAKE: Chewing tobacco is one bad habit you'll have to break. Alma Ward will probably have a heart attack first time you spit.

GIRL: *(Suddenly angry)* I ain't going to live with no grave digger.

JAKE: Mortician.

GIRL: He digs graves, don't he?

JAKE: At least, Hosiah Ward will never be out of work.

GIRL: I won't go to the Wards. He smells like chemicals and she's got a face like somebody's foot.

JAKE: Alma Ward is a nice woman and they can afford to give you a good home.

GIRL: I won't go!

JAKE: They're the only one's in town who'll take you. You just about used up everybody else.

GIRL: I'll run away. I'll hitch me a ride to Cairo and I'll find my people.

JAKE: I told you, Girl, we can't...

GIRL: I mean my real people!

JAKE; (*He has heard this before*) Oh, Girl...You better roll up that tired old dream and put it away. Your people are long gone, or never were.

GIRL: (*Very upset*) That's all you know! Maybe they're rich, Jake! Maybe they got a truck bigger'n yours; maybe they got a family, better'n yours! Maybe they got jobs and lots of money!

JAKE: If they're so rich, how come they never found you?

GIRL: 'Cause I'm hard to find!

(She throws the money at him and runs off. He picks it up and takes off after her.)

JAKE: Dang it, Girl! You come back...

(Lights return to TUC and CHORUS member. TUC signs.)

CHORUS:

There's a certain kind of spell
In the air, everywhere.
You can tell, very well, that it's fear.
Things begin to disappear.

Gone is the money in the bank.
Gone are the jobs.
Gone are the homes, and the families and their plans.
But they seemed so safe!
But they seemed so sure!
All of a sudden, everybody's poor.

Where did it go?
Who took it all away?
Mother Hicks is a witch, people say.

(RICKY RICKS enters at a run from the opposite side and nearly collides with TUC. RICKY backs off, frightened, and ducks behind a tree stump. From off-stage his Mother, IZZY, calls.)

IZZY: Ricky Ricks, you get back here and eat your oatmeal! You'll get it for supper, see if you don't!

(She enters, sees TUC, shouts and waves to him.)

TUC! Oh, Tuc, I've got something for you! Now you wait right there.

(To herself)

I don't know why I do that. I know perfectly well that boy is deaf as a fire plug, but I always call out to him!

(IZZY exits back into her house as HOWIE enters looking for GIRL. RICKY pulls HOWIE down behind the stump hiding from TUC, who busies himself with his cart.)

HOWIE: Ricky! You just about yanked my arm off.

RICKY: Sorry.

HOWIE: You seen the Girl, my Pa's lookin' everywhere for her.

RICKY: I thought you were leaving today.

HOWIE: That's why I'm lookin'. She's got the keys to his truck. I gotta go.

(He starts off and RICKY yanks him back.)

Ricky!

RICKY: You got time for one last dare.

HOWIE: Ricky!

RICKY: Dare and double dare, you owe me one!

HOWIE: I do?

RICKY: You remember that time you dared me to piss on the electric fan while it was running?

HOWIE: Oh yeah.

RICKY: Well, now, you gotta sneak up behind Tuc and touch him without him seein' you.

HOWIE: That ain't nothin'.

RICKY: But you got to use your whole hand and not just one finger.

HOWIE: *(Not so sure)* You do it.

RICKY: Go on, it's your dare.

HOWIE: I ain't got time, and my Pa's really mad, and...

(HOWIE starts to rise and RICKY yanks him back again.)

RICKY: You got time for this.

HOWIE: Okay! Okay!

(HOWIE starts moving toward him and hesitates.)

RICKY: What's the matter?

HOWIE: I'm going...I'm going...

(HOWIE inches toward TUC, RICKY pulls back his sling shot and takes aim at TUC, HOWIE looks back and sees what he's up to.)

HOWIE: Ricky Ricks, you dumb ass, if you hit him he'll probably kill you.

RICKY: I'm just giving you some cover.

HOWIE: Yeah, sure.

RICKY: Go on.

(Slowly, HOWIE inches toward TUC and just as he gets there, almost touching him, RICKY lets the stone fly, which hits TUC who whirls around. TUC makes a face at HOWIE who screams and races back to the stump. RICKY doubles up with laughter. GIRL springs from nowhere and lands on RICKY, beating him up.)

GIRL: The dare was to touch him, not to hurt him.

HOWIE: Girl!

(TUC starts toward them as JAKE enters at a run and pulls them apart.)

JAKE: It's Okay, Tuc. I got 'em.

(TUC nods, gestures and crosses back to his wagon but continues to watch.)

JAKE: *(To GIRL)* Wouldn't you know I'd find you fighting.

HOWIE: I found her for you, Pa! I found her!

GIRL: No you didn't.

HOWIE: Yes, I did.

GIRL: Shut up, Howie. *(To Jake)* They was throwin' rocks, trying to hit...

RICKY AND HOWIE: No, I wasn't.

HOWIE: It was Ricky, he's the one with the...

RICKY: Shut up, Howie...

JAKE: Now, Girl...

(RICKY picks up the car keys which have fallen in the scuffle. HOWIE snatches them away.)

HOWIE: I found 'em for you Pa, I found the keys!

RICKY: No, you didn't.

HOWIE: Yes, I did.

JAKE: Shut up, Howie. Now, Girl, you are coming with me to the Wards, and you are coming, now.

HOWIE: *(Taunting)* We're going to Cairo, and you can't go! We're going to Cairo, and you can't go! We're going to...