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Dramatic Publishing



THE MAN SHE WAS

BY RIC AVERILL

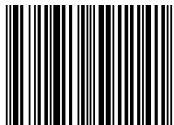
THE MAN SHE WAS

Drama. By Ric Averill. Cast: 6 to 24m., 4 to 18w., 1 to 20 either gender. In this gender-bending historical action drama based on her book *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse, and Spy: A Woman's Adventures in the Union Army*, Emma Edmonds enlists as Frank Thompson and serves as a male nurse, then a spy and finally a soldier. Emma was one of more than 400 women who posed as men to fight in the Civil War. Originally from Canada, Emma ran from an abusive father and lived in Michigan as a man, selling books door to door for a trade. Her disguise as Frank leads her into complicated relationships with Nellie, a captured Rebel woman, and Billy, her tent mate. Emma is a deeply religious woman and serves as an assistant to Chaplain Brady, who is the first to detect her secret. Frank is promoted by General Poe and defended against Simpson, a drunken camp mate who suspects her secret, in a "don't ask, don't tell" moment that speaks clearly to the complexities of today's gender-fluid culture. The final life and death actions of the play give a Shakespearean feel to the story, one clearly found in Emma's memoir. The action and battle scenes are interspersed with waiting women singing macabre poems of the day (also found in Emma's book) in an odd juxtaposition of hymn and paean to war. Emma's abolitionist convictions drive her into the war, but, while there, she faces and accepts her own gender confusion. *Unit set. Approximate running time: 80 minutes. Code: MQ4.*



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The Man She Was

*The story of Emma Edmonds
serving as Frank Thompson; a nurse, soldier and spy in
the American Civil War*

By

RIC AVERILL



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The Man She Was was first developed by the Experimental Theatre Program of Lawrence High School, directed by Jeanne Averill, in 1998.

That production was followed by a staged reading at San Diego State University's Theatre of the World Festival in 2000, and Roxanne Schroeder-Arce's McCallum Fine Arts Academy High School (Austin, Texas) received an AATE Playwright in the Schools grant to produce a staged reading in 2002.

The final pre-publication production was at the Lawrence Arts Center (Lawrence, Kansas) in 2005 under the direction of Charles Fugate of Kansas City and featuring the following youth and professional cast:

Emma Edmonds/Frank Thompson.....	Sommer Brecheisen
Nellie.....	Kelly Kelin
Billy.....	Patrick Patterson
Simpson.....	Colby Sostarich
Jeffrey Tamblyn.....	Caitleen Desetti
James Fairchild	Addison Frei
General Poe.....	Chris Waugh (guest artist)
Chaplain Brady	Morgan Nilhas
Photographer	Bethany Saylor
Warren.....	Anna Munzinger
Dying Man	Kelly Kelin
Male Nurse.....	Zoe Griffith
Surgeon	Lanae Spencer
Female Nurse	Bethany Saylor
Orderly	Lanae Spencer
Musician.....	Addison Frei

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CHARACTERS

Principle Roles (non-doubling):

EMMA: 19, posing as Frank Thompson, also as NED
JEFFREY TAMBLYN: 22, a woman posing as a male soldier
NELLIE: 24, a war widow, captured by, then friend to Frank
CHAPLAIN BRADY: Mid-30s, a Union field minister
SIMPSON: 26, a Union soldier, vulture-like and cowardly
BILLY (WILLIAM MORSE): 20, a Union Soldier, tent-mate
to Frank
JAMES FAIRCHILD: 21, EMMA's childhood sweetheart, a
Union Soldier (could be doubled)
GENERAL POE: Early-40s, strong, bearded leader
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN RICE: 22, a freed slave
PHOTOGRAPHER: 40s, a Confederate spy (could be doubled)

Speaking Chorus/Doubling Roles:

Scene 1: DYING MAN #1 (wounded Union Soldier), WARREN
(wounded Union Soldier), MALE NURSE (Union), FEMALE
NURSE (Union), SURGEON (Union)
Scene 7: CONTRABAND #1 (freed slave), CONFEDERATE
SENTRY, CONFEDERATE OFFICER
Scene 9: ORDERLY

Chorus/Doubling Roles (could use less if necessary):

ENSEMBLE (4-12w.)
UNION SOLDIERS (8-12m.)
CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS (8-12m.)
MALE UNION NURSES (2-4m.)
FEMALE UNION NURSES (2-4w.)
FEMALE CONFEDERATE NURSES (2-4w.)
CONTRABANDS, FREED SLAVES (2-4m., 2-4w.)

TIME: 1861-1862.

PLACE: Civil War battlefields and camps.

SETTING: There are a series of platforms forming a “v” to UC. Each platform is connected to the others by ramps. Each platform is also edged by “growth”—the upstage end of each platform showing jagged objects that rise to a great height, including war ravaged trees, a flagpole, a tattered tent awning and a caisson turned sideways. UC is a scrim that changes color with mood. This may or may not have projections upon it. Furniture and props are moved on and off platforms to delineate different areas.

MUSIC: Songs are sung by the ensemble. If actors play period instruments (fiddle, banjo, guitar, fife and drum), the contribution of live accompaniment will greatly enhance the production. Music is inspired by camp songs and hymns of the mid-1860s. The play is not a musical, and the hymns could be spoken or spoken to music. There is music in the back of the book for your reference.

SPECIAL EFFECTS: This is a war play, and as such, needs some special effects like smoke, gunshots and trumpet calls. The effectiveness of the battle scenes relies on some realistic effects. Blank guns are recommended for the climax.

PLAYWRIGHT’S NOTE: The play is based on the real life of Sarah Emma Edmonds fighting as Frank Thompson. Emma wrote a book at the end of the war entitled *Unsexed, the Adventures of a Woman as a Soldier, Nurse and Spy in the Battlefields and Hospitals of the Great War*. Most of the content of this play and all of the songs are derived from that material.

The Man She Was

SCENE 1 FIRST BATTLE

(The lights come up on a smoky stage. A trumpet sounds a call to arms, and soldiers in blue and gray come running on from each side of the stage and move up onto the platforms. They freeze, facing each other in battle poses. Drums beat. Gunshots ring out. The CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS charge and shoot several of the UNION SOLDIERS, who drop. The CONFEDERATES overrun the position and leave bodies behind. The smoke clears. MALE NURSE and EMMA EDMONDS disguised as Frank Thompson, dressed like soldiers, move amongst the bodies. A wounded soldier, WARREN, cries out for help.)

WARREN. Over here, nurse. Here.

(DYING MAN #1 cries out.)

DYING MAN #1. Help, please, help.

(There are other moans. EMMA leans down and begins to dress WARREN's leg wounds.)

EMMA. Calm down. You'll be all right.

WARREN *(moaning, stricken)*. Are you certain? I hurt so bad.

EMMA. Have faith, soldier. Faith.

WARREN. They beat us, didn't they.

(EMMA looks up at MALE NURSE, who is wrapping a bandage around the head of another wounded man. He nods.)

MALE NURSE. The chaplain said to send any that can walk to the church yonder. They're setting it up as a field hospital.

WARREN *(looking up at EMMA as more gunshots ring out)*.

I'm not going to make it to the church, am I?

EMMA. Come along.

(She stands him up. He grimaces and leans on her. MALE NURSE looks at his charge, leaves him on the field, moves to another wounded soldier and helps escort him to the "church," the L V-platform, a crooked cross made of branches rising behind. They move into its pool of light. A SURGEON enters. As they settle the wounded into the church the ENSEMBLE begins to sing or speak.)

(#1: "War Horse Tread")

ENSEMBLE.

TO SEE THOSE FAIR YOUNG FORMS
CRUSHED BY THE WAR-HORSE TREAD,
THE DEAR AND BLEEDING ONE
STRETCHED BY THE PILED UP DEAD.

(CHAPLAIN BRADY enters, looks about and nods to EMMA.)

BRADY. Frank, let me give you a hand.

(EMMA nods, and BRADY helps her get WARREN settled. BRADY calls to the SURGEON.)

BRADY. Surgeon.

(EMMA looks up at BRADY, to the SURGEON and then to WARREN.)

EMMA. Your leg. It's not enough to bandage it.

WARREN. No.

(EMMA grabs his arm as the SURGEON approaches.)

EMMA. There's no other way, lad. You're losing lots of blood. Nothing any of us can do.

WARREN. I'd rather die. I would.

(They look at him. BRADY leans down.)

BRADY. Lad, what's your name.

WARREN. Warren.

BRADY. Warren. Your mother wants you home. Better go to her missing a leg than on to Jesus whole.

(EMMA holds on to WARREN as SURGEON moves to his feet, cutting saw in hand. BRADY and EMMA block the SURGEON's work from the audience.)

EMMA. Hold onto my arm, Warren. You can squeeze it as hard as you wish.

(There is a sound like sawing, and WARREN screams. EMMA looks up at the SURGEON and then to BRADY, who prays.)

BRADY. Father, be with this lad, who calls to you with his last ounce of courage, who screams for your mercy. Be with him.

(Other patients moan and scream. Several other MALE and FEMALE UNION NURSES and soldiers enter with other wounded men.)

FEMALE NURSE. We've got more. It's a slaughterhouse out there.

(WARREN passes out. SURGEON looks down.)

SURGEON. Who's next?

(He looks around, and one of the nurses nods to the SURGEON, who approaches. EMMA stands and moves quickly outside to C. BRADY looks on. EMMA leans over and is almost sick. Then she looks up at the sky. Gunshots ring out. She looks offstage R and then back at BRADY.)

EMMA. They're closer. We'll be captured.

(The SURGEON hears her and calls out.)

SURGEON. Off with you, Chaplain. Take the nurses back toward Washington. There's nothing more you can do here.

EMMA *(to SURGEON)*. You can't stay.

SURGEON. These lads will need a doctor in a Confederate prison as much as they need one here. Be off with you.

(Gunfire rings out and a CONFEDERATE SOLDIER is seen moving on R, hiding behind one of the trees that grow up behind the platforms. EMMA grabs BRADY and another nurse.)

EMMA. Come on, then, Chaplain.

BRADY *(looking back at the SURGEON)*. God Bless and good luck, surgeon.

EMMA. Hurry!

(They run off L as several CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS enter R, surrounding the church. They enter it and immediately

knock down the SURGEON. Lights dim. Smoke covers the L exit of the field hospital occupants. Gunfire and drums are heard as a group of UNION SOLDIERS come on from the R, pursued by several CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS. Two UNION SOLDIERS are killed, and the CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS run past them and off. A tall, lanky, ragged UNION SOLDIER with a beard, SIMPSON, enters and turns over the corpses, scavenging through pockets, looting the bodies. EMMA comes running in, stops.)

EMMA. Are they still alive?

(SIMPSON glares at her.)

SIMPSON. Just checking. *(He pilfers and pockets a knife.)*

Don't think you need to wait around for these 'uns, nurse.

EMMA. You're not a nurse.

SIMPSON. I'm a soldier.

EMMA. Where's your unit?

SIMPSON. Got left behind, up at Bull Run. Working my way back up there.

EMMA. Not what it looks like.

SIMPSON. How'd you know what bein' a soldier looks like, boy? You some damn Quaker—fixin' wounds instead of makin' 'em?

EMMA *(she's angered by this)*. You some vulture, then, *man?* Hanging back and pickin' the pockets of the real fighters? You disgust me. *(She starts to move past him. He grabs her.)* Let go. I have wounded to tend.

SIMPSON *(holds up the knife he just took from the body)*. What you seen here is soldier's business, nurse. You understand?

EMMA. Better than you think.

(She shakes her hand loose and runs along. He watches her leave and returns to the bodies. More smoke and gunfire as SIMPSON and bodies leave. Another charge as retreating UNION SOLDIERS enter from L. One is wounded. EMMA enters from R. Several UNION SOLDIERS run on R and drive the CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS back. EMMA goes to JEFFREY TAMBLYN, a soldier who is wounded, and kneels down. The lighting becomes focused and almost surreal.)

JEFFREY *(in an oddly high voice, clinging on to life)*. Nurse, how bad?

EMMA. Can you stand?

JEFFREY. I don't think so.

EMMA. We've got to get you to the next field hospital.

JEFFREY *(grabbing EMMA's arm)*. No. Please.

EMMA. There's liable to be another charge. Let me help you.

JEFFREY. No, I know how bad it is. Please, listen to me, and remember. I'm Jeffrey Tamblin, third Massachusetts. I hit three Rebs before they got me.

EMMA. We need to get a surgeon.

(EMMA looks around, but JEFFREY takes her sleeve and holds it firmly.)

JEFFREY. Don't try. No surgeon. No hospital. *(Groans again.)* Tell me the cause is worth this.

EMMA. Yes. Yes, you've done well. We're freeing a people. Like Moses.

JEFFREY. Like Harriet Tubman.

EMMA. We must get a surgeon.

JEFFREY. It's too late. Please, promise me something.

EMMA *(looks around, uncomfortable)*. I will, Jeffrey.

JEFFREY. What is *your* name?

EMMA (*hesitates for a moment*). Franklin Thompson. Frank.

JEFFREY. Frank. If I go to the hospital, they'll know.

EMMA. Know?

JEFFREY. I'm a woman. (*Pause.*) Please don't laugh and don't condemn me.

EMMA. I won't. I wouldn't.

JEFFREY. I need you to bury me yourself. Right here. Don't let them strip me or send my body home.

(EMMA nods, somewhat shocked. JEFFREY gasps and leans over.)

JEFFREY (*cont'd*). Tell my unit I died a hero.

EMMA (*holds JEFFREY close*). You are a hero.

JEFFREY. Somehow I knew you'd understand. I feel I can trust you. As I trust the Lord ...

(JEFFREY slumps over. EMMA stands, takes a shovel from her pack and "digs" at the edge of a platform, R, as ENSEMBLE sings.)

(#2: "Fate Unite the Faithful)

ENSEMBLE.

IF FATE UNITE THE FAITHFUL BUT TO PART,
WHY IS THEIR MEM'RY SACRED TO THE HEART?
WEEP NOT AT NATURE'S TRANS'NT PAIN;
CONGENIAL SPIRITS PART TO MEET AGAIN.

(During the song, EMMA finishes digging, drags the body to the grave and covers it with a sheet. BRADY enters and approaches her.)

BRADY. Are you all right, Frank?

EMMA. Maybe you could say a few words, Chaplain Brady.

BRADY. Someone you knew?

EMMA. Someone very close to me.

(BRADY bows his head.)

BRADY. Lord, we commend this body to your safe-keeping.

(Gunshots.)

BRADY *(cont'd)*. In Jesus name, amen. War time prayers are short by necessity, Frank.

(EMMA nods, and they run off as ENSEMBLE sings.)

(#3: “Sweet Be the Death”)

ENSEMBLE.

SWEET BE THE DEATH OF THOSE
WHO FOR THEIR COUNTRY DIE;
SLEEP ON HER BOSOM FOR REPOSE,
AND TRIUMPH WHERE THEY LIE.

SCENE 2 CAMP

(During the music, UNION SOLDIERS and camp followers enter and set up semblance of tents, L. BILLY [WILLIAM MORSE] sits near one of the tents. EMMA enters and greets him.)

EMMA. Billy, I'm glad to see you survived!

(They shake hands.)

BILLY. When I go it'll be in a blaze of glory, Frank, which means it's got to be a battle we're winning.

EMMA. That can come none too soon.

BILLY (*gives her a cup of coffee*). They got our hands tied, that's what General Poe says.

EMMA. Come on, Billy, Little Mac knows what he's doing.

BILLY. Yeah, I suppose. But you and I didn't join to beat the bushes all the way back North.

(SIMPSON enters, stops and stares at EMMA. BILLY notices the tension and introduces them.)

BILLY (*cont'd*). Frank, this is Simpson. Most of his unit's gone, so he'll be joining us till our three months are up.

(EMMA looks at him. BILLY nods an introduction to SIMPSON.)

BILLY (*cont'd*). Frank Thompson.

EMMA. We've met.

SIMPSON (*glares at her, looks to BILLY*). This little friend of yours was playing "nurse girl" on the battlefield.

(EMMA bristles. BILLY shakes his head.)

BILLY. Watch who you're callin' names, Simpson.

SIMPSON. I didn't call the "little woman" any names.

EMMA (*walks over to SIMPSON*). I'm a nurse 'cause they said the division was full when I joined. I'll be fighting before the war is out. Harder than you, I'll warrant.

(SIMPSON stands, snarls.)

SIMPSON. You callin' me a coward?

EMMA. I'm calling you a vulture.

(They begin to fight. BILLY moves between them.)

BILLY. Come on, gentlemen. The officers prefer we fight the Rebs.

(BRADY enters, and they back away from each other. BRADY smiles and talks to FRANK.)

BRADY. Frank, there's another Canadian over at the hospital tent, from New Brunswick. I told him you were a neighbor and he asked to see you.

(EMMA looks a little worried.)

BRADY *(cont'd)*. Name's James Fairchild.

EMMA *(sharply)*. Who?

BRADY. James Fairchild. You remember him?

(EMMA shakes her head. BRADY leans closer to her.)

BRADY *(cont'd)*. I don't think he's long for this world. You might be able to cheer him up.

EMMA. I'll do my best.

(She walks off R and waits for BRADY, who looks at BILLY and SIMPSON.)

BRADY. See you fellows at chapel this evening?

(SIMPSON chuckles and sits. BILLY nods. BRADY joins EMMA, and they walk up over the platforms to the "hospital tent," R. Several wounded and some nurses have taken their

places, including JAMES FAIRCHILD, who is leaning back, shivering, his leg and chest bandaged.)

BRADY (*cont'd*). James. This is Frank Thompson.

(EMMA looks at him and turns her back immediately, stepping away as she recognizes him.)

BRADY (*cont'd*). Frank, you all right?

(EMMA looks around again and realizes JAMES does not recognize her.)

JAMES. Thompson. I don't think I knew any Thompsons.

EMMA. I left some time ago.

(BRADY nods.)

BRADY. I'll leave you to remember old times.

(He exits. JAMES does his best to sit up.)

JAMES. What part of New Brunswick were you from?

EMMA. My family had a farm near Magaguadavic.

JAMES. That's so close. We were near Dumfries. Do you know me?

EMMA. I think I've seen you about.

JAMES. You look familiar. You look so familiar.

(He reaches a hand up toward her, and she turns away.)

EMMA. You're a little delirious.

JAMES. Do me a favor?

EMMA. Of course.

JAMES (*coughs*). You have to get word back for me—to Magaguadavic—to a girl. A girl I cared for. Emma Edmonds. You know her?

(There is a pause as EMMA lets this sink in.)

EMMA. Yes, I know who she is.

JAMES. Find her. Tell her. (*Thinking what to tell her.*) There is so much I want to tell her.

(EMMA puts her hand on JAMES' hand.)

EMMA. Tell me.

JAMES (*smiles, nods, remembering*). You know, she wasn't so lovely as she was strong, almost handsome.

EMMA (*tentative*). You would tell her she wasn't lovely?

JAMES. Oh, no.

EMMA. Not lovely ... she was homely?

JAMES. No, I don't mean that. (*He smiles, remembering.*) She loved to outdo me. She could run and ride, shoot and hunt. I could barely keep up. She dressed like a boy half the time, but she was too ... too pretty to be mistaken.

EMMA. You never ... you never told her this?

JAMES. She ran away before I could ask her father's permission to come courting. I've often wondered if she ran from me.

EMMA (*before she catches herself*). No.

(He looks at her.)

EMMA (*cont'd*). How could that be? You're a handsome, intelligent man.

JAMES. I should have been bolder back then, but I was afraid.

EMMA. Of her?

JAMES. No, her father. He was a mean man. Always a scowl on his face.

(EMMA frowns.)

EMMA. Yes, I remember him well.

JAMES. I could tell her now. Now that he's dead.

(EMMA is shocked. She stands, taken back by this new information.)

EMMA. Dead?

JAMES. Yes. Just before I enlisted. *(He looks at her.)* You'll tell her. When you get back, you'll tell her I loved her?

EMMA *(kneels down beside him again)*. I'll tell her. I promise she'll know of your love.

(He coughs, very weak.)

EMMA *(cont'd)*. James. She left because her father promised her in marriage to a man twice her age. If she had known of your love ...

JAMES. Tell her.

(She nods. He passes out, near death. EMMA sits next to him, stricken, overwhelmed. BRADY re-enters and stands over her.)

BRADY. Frank.

EMMA *(looks up at BRADY)*. He had news from home, Chaplain. My father is dead.

BRADY. I'm sorry. We'll pray for him at services tonight.