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Dramatic Publishing



THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM—1963

(70-minute version)

An adaptation of the novel by Christopher Paul Curtis

REGINALD ANDRÉ JACKSON



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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(THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM—1963 -
70-minute version)

“Mother to Son”
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by Langston Hughes
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THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM—1963

CHARACTERS

KENNY: 10 years old.

BYRON: His brother. A 13-year-old juvenile delinquent.

JOETTA: His sister. 6 years old.

WILONA: The mother. 30s.

DANIEL: The father. 30s.

BUPHEAD: Friend to Byron. 14 years old.

GRANDMA SANDS: Mother to Wilona. Has suffered a slight stroke. Late 50s.

MRS. DAVIDSON: A Sunday school teacher.

MR. ALUMS: A school teacher.

LARRY DUNN: A bully. 12 years old.

RUFUS: Friend to Kenny. 10 years old.

CODY: Brother to Rufus. 8 years old.

MR. ROBERT: Friend to Grandma Sands. 50s.

WEATHERMAN / DJ: (Voice only)

WOOL POOH: (Movement only)

SMOKE POOH: (Movement only)

GIRL: 6 years old (Stylized)

Breakdown with Possible Doublings

(Leave open the option to use adult actors in all roles.)

Some possible doublings.

- 1) Grandma Sands / Mrs. Davidson
- 2) Mr. Alums / Mr. Robert / Weatherman (voice) / DJ (voice)

Wool Pooh and Smoke Pooh

There is much freedom of choice here as the performer's face is covered and the body obscured.

Buphead, Larry Dunn, Rufus and Cody are the obvious roles to double with either Pooh. One actor has time to easily tackle both haints, or each wraith may have a separate actor.

- Example:
- 3) Larry Dunn / Smoke Pooh
 - 4) Cody / Wool Pooh

Another option is to cast a dancer, could be female, to do both pieces. She could also play Cody. You can also use her to represent "Girl."

The Brown Bomber and the Scenic Elements

I believe it is best to approach the staging of this play in much the same way Shakespeare tackled his plays.

*"Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them,
Printing their proud hoofs I'th'receiving earth;
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times..."*

There is no car. There is no snow. Well before the Watsons head out for Birmingham we must visit several locations; many only once. A simplistic indication of place and time augmented by lights and sound is best. This allows scenes to dovetail on one another, eliminating cumbersome scene changes.

There are several opportunities for heightened theatricality. The more we can externalize Kenny's imagination the better. This goes beyond the Wool Pooh sections to include him hearing Byron on the set of his WWII movie and discovering Rufus as his personal saver. If we are allowed to envision the girls on the way to the church, we

will feel for them after the bombing. The scenes involving the Brown Bomber should have the same sense of magical realism, allowing each audience member to create his or her own Brown Bomber.

Byron's Hair

Casting an actor who would be willing to shave his head would be ideal. Wiggling would prove easier and the reveal of “Yule Watson” would be most effective.

Language

Milder language may be substituted in places if this becomes an issue.

Running Time

If length is a problem, Scene 9 may be cut in its entirety.

Note on Music

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THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM—1963

Scene 1

(Winter. Flint, Michigan. Weather, brutal. It is after school. BYRON and BUPHEAD enter. BUPHEAD is a fourteen-year-old with shellacked hair. He may have earmuffs, but a hat will never grace a strand of his immaculately straightened, James Brown-styled, hairdo.)

BYRON. I think my eyeballs are freezin' up, Bup.

BUPHEAD. Yeah? I bet it's so cold that if you spit, the slob would be an ice cube before it hit the ground.

(BYRON and BUPHEAD look at each other a second. They start spitting and spitting. Enter KENNY and JOETTA, fighting the wind, while struggling toward the front door of the Watson home. We hear heavy wind and the sound of crunching snow. KENNY addresses the audience.)

KENNY. It was one of those super-duper-cold Saturdays. How cold is it again, Joey?

JOETTA. About a zillion degrees below zero.

BYRON. Say, kid, you wanna learn somethin' that might save your stupid life one day?

KENNY *(to audience)*. It could maybe have started before this, but it for sure started with my brother Byron, who was bad weather all by hisself.

BYRON. Well, punk.

KENNY. What?

BYRON. Go on inside, Joetta. *(JOETTA runs into the house.)* We gonna teach you how to survive a blizzard. This is the most important thing to remember, OK? *(He puts his hands in front of his face. KENNY mirrors him.)*

KENNY. OK.

BYRON. OK, first thing you gotta worry about is high winds. *(BYRON and BUPHEAD take KENNY by his arms and proceed to swing him.)* Wooo, blizzard warnings!

BUPHEAD. Blizzard warnings!

BYRON. Wooo!

BUPHEAD. Take cover! *(The two spin KENNY around and throw him in the snowbank.)*

BYRON. Cool, baby bruh. What you think, Buphead? He kept his balance a good long time, I'm gonna give him a A-minus.

BUPHEAD. I ain't as hard a grader as you, I'ma give the little punk a double A-minus.

BYRON. OK, Kenny, you passed, but now we gotta see if you ready to graduate.

Buphead tell him about the final exam. *(Behind KENNY's back, BYRON begins to shove snow into his mouth.)*

BUPHEAD. OK, square, I wanna make sure you don't blow it at graduation time, You 'member what Byron said about puttin' your hands up?

KENNY *(raises his gloves to his face)*. Like this?

BUPHEAD. Yeah, that's it! *(BYRON now ready, cues BUPHEAD, who says:)* Wooo! High winds, blowing snow! Look out. Blizzard a-comin'! Wooo! Death around the corner! Look out!

BYRON. Keh-ee! Keh-ee!

(KENNY turns to BYRON. Lights shift. KENNY faces downstage. His face now slick and wet.)

BYRON. Awww, man, you flunked! You done so good, then you go and flunk the Blowin' Snow section. You forgot to put your hands up! F!

BUPHEAD. Yeah, double F-minus.

(BUPHEAD and BYRON celebrate. The front door opens. It is DANIEL Watson. The father. BUPHEAD departs quickly. DANIEL stares off after him.)

DANIEL. Boys, get in here and help us generate some heat.

Scene 2

(Shift. DANIEL returns to the family's couch where his wife is huddled underneath a blanket with JOETTA. The boys follow suit, with BYRON sliding as far from his family as possible.)

BYRON. Can I get a process?

DANIEL/WILONA. No!

(The family sits and shivers.)

WILONA. I'll never know why I let you drag me from Alabama to this giant icebox.

DANIEL. Let's see what's on Channel 12.

(DANIEL moves to the television. Turns it on. Light from a local Flint television station splashes across the family's freezing faces.)

WEATHERMAN. If you think it's cold now, wait until tonight. In fact, we won't be seeing anything above zero for the next four to five days! Yet, here's a little something to brighten our spirits: The temperature in Atlanta, Georgia, is forecast to reach— *(DANIEL begins coughing over the WEATHERMAN, unsuccessfully.)* the mid-seventies.

WILONA. Atlanta! That's a hundred and fifty miles from home.

DANIEL. Wilona—

WILONA. I know I should have listened to Moses.

DANIEL. Oh Lord, not that sorry story. Let me tell it. Kids, you guys came real close to having a clown for a daddy named Hambone Henderson.

WILONA. Daniel Watson, you stop right there. You're the one that started that "Hambone" nonsense.

DANIEL. The boy had a head shaped just like a hambone, had more knots and bumps on his head than a dinosaur. Kids, Hambone proposed to your mother around the same time I did. Fought dirty, too, told your momma a pack of lies about me and Flint— *(DANIEL imitates Hambone. Hambone has a southern accent.)* "Wilona, folks there live in these things called igloos. You a 'Bama gal, don't believe you'd like no whale meat. Don't taste a lick like chicken."

WILONA. Flint is like living in an igloo. And maybe these babies mighta been born with lumpy heads, but at least they'da had warm lumpy heads! You know Birmingham is a good place.

DANIEL. Oh yeah, they're a laugh a minute down there. Where was that "Coloreds only" restroom downtown?

WILONA. Things aren't perfect, Daniel, but people are more honest about how they feel. *(She trains her focus on BYRON. DANIEL goes to the phone and dials a number.)* And folks there know how to respect their parents.

DANIEL. Boys, get out there and knock those windows out. Cydney just had that new furnace put in; maybe we can spend the night there.

(BYRON and KENNY move outside to the car. KENNY starts to scrape ice off the windows.)

KENNY. I'm not going to do your part Byron, and I'm not playing either.

BYRON. Shut up, punk.

KENNY. I'm serious, Byron, I don't care what you do to me.

BYRON. You know what, square? I must be adopted, there just ain't no way two folks as ugly as your momma and daddy coulda give birth to someone as sharp as me.

KENNY. Forget you!

BYRON. Keh-ee, Keh-ee.

KENNY. You think I'm stupid?

BYRON. Hel', Keh-

KENNY. It's not going to work this time, By.

BYRON. Keh-ee, hel' me! Hel' me! Go geh Momma! Geh Momma! Huwwy uh!

KENNY. I'm not playing, Byron! You'd better start doing your side or I'll tear you up with this iceball.

BYRON. Oh, please, Keh-ee, go geh Momma!

KENNY (*starts as he sees BYRON's lips frozen to the Brown Bomber's mirror*). By! What's wrong?

BYRON. Keh-hee! Go geh hel'!

KENNY. Momma, quick! It's By! He's froze up! Help! He's froze to the car!

(The WATSONS rush out to the Brown Bomber; lead by WILONA.)

WILONA. Kenneth Bernard Watson, what on earth are you talking about?

KENNY. He's shootin' out boogers and droppin' big juicy crybaby tears. Momma, please hurry up!

BYRON. Oh, Momma! Hel' me! Geh me offa 'ere!

WILONA. Oh, my Lord! Byron, it's OK, sweetheart. How'd this happen?

DANIEL. Can't you tell, Wilona? This little knucklehead was kissing his reflection in the mirror and got his lips stuck! Is your tongue stuck, too?

BYRON. No! Quit teasin', Da-ee! Hel'! Hel'!

DANIEL. Well, at least the boy hadn't gotten too passionate with himself!

KENNY. Pull him off, Dad.

BYRON. No! No! Momma, doe leh him!

JOETTA. This is just like that horrible story Kenny read me about that guy Nar-sissy who stared at himself so long he forgot to eat and starved to death. Mommy, please save him!

WILONA. What about hot water?

DANIEL. I don't know, pouring water on him might be the worst thing to do.

(WILONA looks to him, again, needing help.) Get some hot tap water. *(WILONA runs into the house.)* I guess this means no one can call you Hot Lips.

(WILONA returns with a glass of hot water. She attempts to free BYRON. Her hands shake.)

WILONA. You do it, Daniel.

(DANIEL trembling with laughter takes the glass. He laughs on. This builds. He can't keep the cup even.)

DANIEL. I ca-I ca—...Kenny.

(KENNY takes the cup and begins to pour the water onto the mirror. There is a loud cracking sound.)

KENNY *(to audience)*. Dad was right.

WILONA. You gotta get this boy to the hospital!

DANIEL. Wilona, how far do you think I'd get driving down the street with this little clown attached to the mirror?

WILONA. Call the hospital and see what they say we should do...Joey and Kenny, go with your daddy.

(DANIEL exits, followed by JOETTA. KENNY takes a step, looks back at WILONA, and decides to stay. WILONA wraps a scarf around BYRON's face and speaks to him in a deliberately sweet and overly comforting tone.)

WILONA. Sweetheart, you know we gotta do something. I'ma try to warm your face up a little. Just relax. You know I love you and wouldn't do anything to hurt you, right? *(She removes the scarf.)*

BYRON. No! Doe hur' me! Keh-ee, hel'! Hel' me, Keh-ee!

(WILONA grabs BYRON by the head and gives a sharp tug. BYRON is freed; his freedom is accompanied by the sound of the worlds largest rubber band snapping.)

KENNY. Yeeeowwww.

(BYRON flies into the house, his hands over his mouth. WILONA looks at KENNY, points to the car and rushes into the house.)

KENNY *(to audience)*. Awww, man! The dirty dogs let Byron get away with not doing his share of the windows.

(KENNY scrapes the windows. The scene shifts as a school bell rings.)

Scene 3

(MR. ALUMS stands before his classroom. KENNY places himself behind MR. ALUMS.)

MR. ALUMS. All right, I've often told you that as Negroes the world is many times a hostile place. I've pointed out how vital it is that one be able to read well. Carefully note how advanced this young—

(KENNY drops his book; the classroom erupts in laughter. MR. ALUMS' focus and address shifts from the entire class to one student: Byron Watson. BYRON is trying to melt KENNY with his eyes.)

MR. ALUMS. Byron Watson, perhaps you'd like to finish the introduction. If instead of trying to intimidate your young brother, you would emulate him, perhaps you wouldn't be making yet another appearance in the same grade next year, hmmm?

*(KENNY begins to read at an alarmingly fast pace and catches himself, then slows. Part of the way through * he is buoyed by the sound of a ripe, mahogany-voiced, female. We do not see the owner of the voice, but her shadow is long and she carries a cane.)*

KENNY. Langston Hughes.

*Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
*So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.*

(As KENNY and the voice finish, MR. ALUMS begins to applaud.)

MR. ALUMS. Bravo, Mr. Watson! Your future is unlimited.

(The bell rings, all disperse save KENNY, BUPHEAD and BYRON. BUPHEAD races to cut off KENNY.)

BUPHEAD. Let's get that little egghead punk.

BYRON. Leave the little clown alone. It's a crying shame, takin' him around like a circus freak... Grandma mail you that book? *(KENNY nods.)* Yeah, sound like somethin' she'd send. I could almost hear her; evil old witch. Be lucky you ain't never met her. *(BYRON punches KENNY lightly on the arm.)* At least make 'em pay you for doin' that mess, Poindexter. If it was me they'd be comin' out they pockets

with some foldin' money. Oh, and I'd burn that book if I was you. Crazy bat pro'ly put a curse on it. Later, bruh. I'ma let you pick up Joey from Bible school.

KENNY. Man!

(The lights shifts. BYRON and BUPHEAD are gone. MRS. DAVIDSON is revealed under a window of stained glass. Gospel music rises as she speaks to her young crowd. KENNY stands aside holding a small winter coat.)

MRS. DAVIDSON. So I want all of you to know there is someone who can come to you when you are feeling real, real bad and can take all of your problems away and make you feel better. This is your personal savior, sent by God to protect you and to help you out. See you next time.

(The youngsters depart. JOETTA rises and looks around; she wears a coat.)

KENNY. Over here, Joey. *(JOETTA sees the second jacket and balks.)* C'mon.

JOETTA. No!

KENNY. Joey! *(The two struggle.)* I'm not getting in trouble 'cause of you, Joetta.

Nu-uh. *(She climbs into the coat.)*

MRS. DAVIDSON. Oh, Joetta, sweetheart, I have something for you. *(She hands JOETTA a package dressed in wrapping paper. JOETTA unwraps her gift. Upon seeing her present the joy drops from JOETTA's face.)* Look! Is that your smile or what? In fact, do you know what I named this angel?

JOETTA. No, Mrs. Davidson.

MRS. DAVIDSON. I've named her after my favorite little girl; this angel's name is Joetta. Ooh, child, give me one more hug before you go. *(They embrace. KENNY hits JOETTA lightly with his hand.)*

JOETTA. Thank you, Mrs. Davidson.

MRS. DAVIDSON. You're welcome, precious.

KENNY. Lord knows she's gonna kidnap you if she gets the chance.

(Lights shift.)

Scene 4

(Watson home. WILONA soaks her feet. BYRON paces behind her.)

BYRON. Why not???

WILONA. I'm not debating this with you, Byron.

BYRON. So you're really doing this? This is my hair. My hair.

WILONA. You know where we stand on this, By. Now, I have forty-five minutes 'fore I need to get supper ready. This is my time; my private time. Now say somethin' else.

(BYRON storms to the bathroom and shuts the door. JOETTA enters with KENNY.)

WILONA. Baby, what's wrong?

JOETTA. This. *(She displays the angel.)*

WILONA. Oh.

JOETTA. Mrs. Davidson said it reminded her of me, but it doesn't look like me at all.

WILONA. Sweetheart, I could see how it reminds her of you. Look at this dimple?

JOETTA. But, Mommy, it's white.

WILONA. Well, honey, I can't say it isn't, but an angel's an angel.

JOETTA. Maybe, but I know this angel's name isn't Joetta Watson.

(KENNY begins to unpeel JOETTA. He ends by taking her boot and playing tug of war with her foot. WILONA sniffs heavily at the air.)

WILONA. What is that? *(She goes to the stove and sniffs. Nothing.)* Kids, you smell that?

(She follows her nose around the house. She stops at the bathroom door, which she proceeds to throw open. BYRON is on his knees lighting matches and throwing them into the toilet.)

WILONA. Boy, what did I tell you about lighting matches in this house! *(She grabs BYRON and pushes him into the living room.)* I told you what would happen, didn't I, Byron? Didn't I? You've left me no choice.

JOETTA *(crying)*. Momma, no! Don't do it, Momma! Please don't burn him!!!

WILONA. Next time, Byron. Go ahead; try me. I won't have you putting this family in danger. One more time and you're burned. *(She raises her right hand.)* I swear that with God as my witness!— Punishment: One month. Now, I want you to go up to Mitchell's and get some milk, a loaf of bread and a can of tomato paste for dinner. *(She hands him the list.)*

BYRON. How come Kenny can't go?

WILONA. Byron. I want a half a gallon of milk, a loaf of bread and a small can of tomato paste. *(She resumes her chopping, only she's slightly more intense about it.)*

BYRON. Gimme the money.

WILONA. Just sign for it.

BYRON. Just what?

WILONA. Just tell Mr. Mitchell you want to sign for it. *(She is now murdering the vegetables.)*

BYRON. What, just go in there and tell Mr. Mitchell I wanna sign for some food?

WILONA. Your daddy and me made the arrangements last weekend. Mr. Mitchell will let us sign for groceries until payday.

BYRON. Wait a minute! I know what this mean—we on welfare, ain't we?

WILONA. No. We're not on welfare.

BYRON. You really gonna start serving welfare food in this house?

WILONA. Listen here, Mr. High and Mighty, food is food. You've eaten welfare food in this house before and if need be you'll eat it again. I already told you, this is not welfare food. You've got about five seconds to have that door hit you in the back. Now move.

(BYRON opens the door. Shift.)