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Dramatic Publishing



Christmas Dreams

A Drama
By
Jon Robertson



The Dramatic Publishing Company

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CHRISTMAS DREAMS

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JON ROBERTSON

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(CHRISTMAS DREAMS)

To all the survivors of the Great Depression, and to the greatest survivor of them all, Ian R. Robertson, Sr. who left the struggle behind on December 5, 1988. Thanks, Dad, for giving me the father you never had.

CHRISTMAS DREAMS was commissioned in 1985 by The Footlight Players, Inc., Charleston, South Carolina, through a grant from the South Carolina Arts Commission and The National Endowment for the Arts. It was first produced on December 4, 1986 at The Footlight Players Theatre, and directed by Richard Futch.

CHRISTMAS DREAMS

A Miracle in Two Acts
For Five Men and Three Women and Extras*

CHARACTERS

ABBY McARTHUR62, Jackie's crusty grandma
HOLMES McARTHUR42, Abby's son
JACKIE McARTHUR 17, Holmes' son
LAURA NOVITSKY16, Jackie's friend
DORIS SLOVIK46, Holmes' sister
JOSHUA SLOVIK44, her husband
RAY RUSSELL 38, a neighbor
OMAHA RED35 and up (race open)
a spirit appearing as a hobo

*CAROLERS4 to 6 adult singers

TIME: Christmas Eve, 1933
PLACE: A middle-class Chicago home

ACT ONE
Late afternoon

ACT TWO
Later that evening

RUNNING TIME: 2 hours
including one 15-minute intermission

ACT ONE

SETTING: *Christmas Eve—1933—late afternoon. A middle-class Chicago house.*

AT RISE: *Enter ABBY L, crosses to kitchen. She wipes her hands on the towel as ANNOUNCER speaks. She opens oven and removes pan, placing it on top of stove.*

CURTAIN

“...but until then, this is your old friend Singing’ Sam, saying so long for now.” (*Theme fades.*)

ANNOUNCER. This is WMAQ Chicago. Washington was quiet on this Christmas Eve awaiting word from the special meeting of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors. Meanwhile, Speaker Rainey praised President Roosevelt’s decision to go off the gold standard, and purchase twenty-four-and-a-half million ounces of silver annually. In other news, two-thousand men rioted over two-hundred ninety-nine jobs in Dayton, Ohio yesterday—tune in for details at nine with Walter Winchell. (*Theme swells and fades.*) And now, from the beautiful Aragon Ballroom in Chicago, the NBC Blue Network brings you Christmas Eve with the danceable sounds of Don Redman and his Orchestra—(*Theme*

swells. ABBY crosses to plant on table. She picks it up, grimaces. Fusses with it.)

ABBY. Grow, doggone you, it's Christmas! (*Adds water at sink. Replaces plant on table. Crosses angrily to radio.*) How in the name of all that's holy can a living thing blossom with jazz blasting through the house all day long? (*Turns off radio. Phone rings.*) Now who can *that* be? Hello, who's this? Merry Christmas, Laura. Thank you—no he's not here—out—I don't know—I'll tell him you called. I can't help that, honey—I'll tell him—so long. (*Hangs up. Crosses to kitchen, taking dish and cup from table to put in sink. Exasperated.*) Perennial? Annual? I don't know anymore. (*Grimaces, looks toward window.*) Hmmph! Maybe the sunlight'll perk you up. Always does me when I don't feel like blooming. (*Looks out window, puts plant on sill.*) If it doesn't snow.

(*JACKIE enters back door with straggly Christmas tree.*)

ABBY. I said *grow*!

JACKIE. What's that, Grandma? (*Props tree in corner, knocking snowflakes to floor. Takes off shoes, hangs coat.*)

ABBY. There you are. Oh, this poinsettia thinks it's Fourth of July instead of Christmas Eve.

JACKIE (*laughs, crosses with tree to radio*). That thing's dead, Grandma. Anyone can see it's deader'n a door-nail. (*Turns on radio. Music plays.*)

ABBY. It's not dead. It's a poinsettia. They're dormant except in winter, you know.

JACKIE. Well, that plant's as dormant as it can be.

ABBY. I'll not hear another malicious word about my poinsettia, Jackie McArthur. (*Puts plates and glass into cupboard.*) She changed last year, and by God, she'll change this year too. I can feel it in my bones.

JACKIE (*crosses with tree to stand*). Whatever you say, Grandma.

ABBY. *What?*

JACKIE. I said —

ABBY. NEVER MIND—I can't hear a thing with that radio blasting—PLEASE TURN IT OFF—

JACKIE. *Grandma—*

ABBY. Turn it off *now!* Have some heart for an old woman. I've heard all the jazz I can bear for one day. (*He turns it off.*) Ah, peace and quiet. Laura Novitsky just called. (*Begins cutting and plating gingerbread.*)

JACKIE (*feigns disinterest*). She did?

ABBY. No, I made it up.

JACKIE. Well, what did she want?

ABBY. Wants you to call her, what else?

JACKIE. I will—I'll call her—

ABBY. Sure you will, like every time she calls.

JACKIE. I'll call her later.

ABBY. And I'll grow wings. Did you get a Christmas tree or didn't you?

JACKIE (*stands before tree*). I got *something*—but I'm not sure *what* it is.

ABBY (*takes towel, wipes hands crossing UC*). I guess it's—it's not really so bad—

JACKIE. Come on, Grandma. That's the worst Christmas tree I ever saw.

ABBY. Have it your way. I didn't want to hurt your feelings, that's all. Where'd you find it?

JACKIE. In—uh—a field.

ABBY. I'm afraid to ask *whose* field.

JACKIE (*crosses nervously DL to radiator*). They're tearing down a building on Western, and I found it in the lot next door.

ABBY. *Found it?*

JACKIE. People are using park benches for firewood, Grandma. Ain't no trees around. (*Pleads.*) You know what good Christmas trees cost.

ABBY. It'll do, Jackie. It'll do. (*Wipes hands.*) You weren't home, so I ate. Sit, now, I'll fix you a plate.

JACKIE (*tries to prop tree in stand DR apron*). I'm not hungry, Grandma. I ate some Mulligan down at Bugsie's—

ABBY. MULLIGAN! You've been hanging around those bums again.

JACKIE. Me and my big mouth—Grandma, it was good—besides, they'd rather you call them tramps.

ABBY (*crosses to him*). I don't care what they'd rather be called. They eat out of ash cans—*Mulligan*—they make that stuff out of garbage, you know.

JACKIE. They boiled it all night—made with real chickens and greens they found out behind the—

ABBY (*feeling his head*). Oh my Lord—!

JACKIE (*recoils*). Grandma—!

ABBY. I only want to make sure you're not sick.

JACKIE (*looks in icebox*). I ain't sick, and none of them jungle buzzards are sick either. Sometimes they eat better than we do.

ABBY. I don't want you hanging around them, Jackie.

JACKIE. I can't hardly avoid them. They live near the rail siding that runs by Bugsie's—it's a camp.

ABBY. They're dangerous, Jackie.

JACKIE. They're swell, really. Illinois Ike used to build Ford cars. There's a guy named Coal Mine Scully—been all over the country ridin' the rails—boy, does he have stories.

ABBY. Socrates in rags.

JACKIE. Grandma—

ABBY. Jackie, please don't make me worry. Mind what I say, now. (*Crosses to kitchen to finish gingerbread.*)

JACKIE. Yes'm. I didn't do very well today. I found an old truck radiator near the viaduct, but I only got a dollar for it. (*Crosses to radiator, warms hands.*)

ABBY (*tries to be positive*). A dollar's not so bad. It's better than nothing.

JACKIE. Bugs gave me fifty cents for helping him around the junkyard, but I'm lucky I made it home in one piece—uh, oh—

ABBY. What do you mean by *that*?

JACKIE. Nothing, Grandma, really.

ABBY. I heard it plain as day, Jackie—you'd better tell me, if you know what's good for you.

JACKIE. Some men—they tried to take it from me.

ABBY. Lord, Jackie, my heart can't take this—

JACKIE. It's all right—

ABBY. And so was the Lindbergh's baby—

JACKIE (*makes light of it*). There were some men hanging around the junkyard—their hands by the fire. They saw Bugs pay me the money, and some of them waited. They chased me all the way to 63rd Street before I lost them.

ABBY. Those *damnable* bums. See? See what you've gotten yourself into?

JACKIE. *Tramps*, Grandma, but it wasn't them. The tramps wouldn't even let these guys eat their Mulligan.

These guys are from the neighborhood. I even know one of them.

ABBY. Who?

JACKIE. Mr. Davenport from two blocks down.

ABBY (*sits on sofa*). Davenport. The Davenport had the filling station?

JACKIE. I barely recognized him, Grandma.

ABBY. Lord, I wonder what became of Ethel.

JACKIE. The house is boarded up. It gets worse every day on the street. I've never seen so many men before.

ABBY. Jackie, you have to be more careful.

JACKIE. I will, Grandma.

ABBY. Sure you will, until something happens. Then it'll be too late. There you'll lay with your head busted open over fifty cents. I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you. (*Dons spectacles.*) Jackie, *please* wash your hands.

JACKIE. Yes'm. (*Crosses to sink.*) Grandma?

ABBY (*picks up needlework*). Yes, Jackie.

JACKIE. Grandma, I sure wish it could be the way it was before.

ABBY. You and everybody else.

JACKIE (*dries hands*). It's Christmas, Grandma, and look at this place. This stupid tree. What do we have? *Nothing.*

ABBY. Jackie, that's *not* so.

JACKIE (*puts dollar in cookie jar, crosses to tree*). Before Momma died, we had everything. Everything we ever wanted. At least *I* did. Now I got no mother *or* father. There's no money, and all I got is — (*Pause.*)

ABBY. —is me?

JACKIE. Grandma, I didn't mean it that way. (*Crosses to her.*) Just *compared*, that's all.

ABBY. You've got a roof over your head and you eat regular meals, Jackie McArthur. And we've got the only telephone on the block.

JACKIE. Thanks to crotchety Aunt Doris.

ABBY. I'll thank you not to call Doris crotchety. She's the flesh of my flesh and she watches out for us. Oh how I wish she could have come for Christmas this year.

JACKIE. She only pays for that phone so she can keep an eye on us. It ain't because she's generous.

ABBY. "Isn't." And besides, between my knitting and the money you bring in, we have what we need, and you'd do well to remember that.

JACKIE. I miss Momma most around Christmas.

ABBY. We all miss your mother, Jackie—but whether you want to admit it or not, you still have a father.

JACKIE. My mother is dead—and as far as I'm concerned, my father's dead too. (*Crosses back to tree, fusses with it.*)

ABBY. *Ohh*—you're just *like* him. Stubborn to the end, and thick-skinned as a snake. You're seventeen, Jackie. In my book, that makes you a man—so when will you start acting like it? How old must you be before you understand *his* side?

JACKIE. He's nothing but a lousy drunk. No better than the phony crips who come limping into the hobo jungle.

ABBY. *Crips?*

JACKIE. Cripples.

ABBY. Jackie, I won't have hobo jargon in this house.

JACKIE. A phony crip fakes being crippled, and gets hand-outs that way. These guys have lost everything, Grandma, so they fake their way.

ABBY. Your father has lost everything too—his wife *and* his business in two years' time.

JACKIE. The way you defend him, it's like you don't care about *us*, Grandma.

ABBY. If I allowed myself to think about it, I'd weep for us Jackie, don't mistake me. But I cry for him too. He's *your* father, but he's *my* son. He's losing his will to live—leastways without a bottle in his hand. At least I can forgive him—make him feel welcome in his own home.

JACKIE. If he wanted to change, it would be different.

ABBY. You have to give a man reason to change.

JACKIE. He's probably curled up in a hole someplace with a bottle of Green River. He only visits us when he needs money.

ABBY. Well, maybe he's looking for more than money when he comes home.

JACKIE. All I know is, I never want to see him again, Grandma. (*Lets tree fall to floor.*) Oh, *curse* it anyway. Why don't we just forget Christmas this year?

ABBY (*angrily*). Jackie, you can be as angry as you want, but don't you *dare* curse the name of Christmas. It's the only good left in this world. The only time of year people are civil to each other. It's a time of gladness and miracles, and you'll not say a word against it—do you understand me?

JACKIE (*remorsefully*). I'm sorry, Grandma. It's just that everyone is starving out there, and we're going to run around all day tomorrow saying "Merry Christmas," and in the back of our minds, we'll be thinking, "yeah, fat chance." It's just like you—trying to coax that dead plant back to life.

ABBY. Life is a miracle, Jackie—all life—even my pointsettia.

JACKIE. I won't curse Christmas, Grandma. But it just don't mean what it used to. (*Finally secures tree.*)

ABBY (*tenderly*). "Doesn't." Believe me, you don't know what it's like to have nothing, Jackie. Why, my brothers and I—

BOTH. —didn't even have shoes when we were kids—

ABBY. It's the truth. Your father's success was nice while it lasted, but I've lived a lot more years *without* than *with*. (*Smiles.*) This ole Depression—it doesn't bother me much. So smile, will ya? Or I'll knock your block off.

JACKIE. Whatever you say, Grandma.

ABBY. Well. Are you going to decorate it, or just stare at it?

JACKIE. I got the decorations down from the attic this morning. (*Crosses to bedroom.*) Do you like the tree there?

ABBY. That's where we had it last year. It's a right good enough place to me. (*Phone rings.*) I'll get it. (*Exit JACKIE, L.*) Hello—(*Severe whisper.*)—Holmes! Where are you? If you come here, you best *be sober*, you hear?—Well what do you expect?—Of course he's here. Got a chip on his shoulder as big as a—no! Don't bet on that. *Not if you're a-drinkin'*, Holmes. Holmes—

(*JACKIE enters L carrying a box of decorations.*)

ABBY. Why no, Elizabeth, I hadn't heard. (*JACKIE eyes her suspiciously.*) Don't bet on it dear. All right, Elizabeth. Okay. Suit yourself. Bye. (*Hangs up, sees JACKIE staring at her.*) Well, what are you staring at?

JACKIE. Who was that?

ABBY (*returning to sofa*). Elizabeth, are you deaf?
(*JACKIE begins stringing garland. Shrugs.*) Well suit yourself too. (*Knock on door.*) If it's not one thing it's another.

(*ABBY removes glasses. Opens right half of double door. Enter RAY RUSSELL. He is neither impoverished nor expensively dressed. He's a clever kidder, even something of a liar, but he is the family's best friend and neighbor. He wears a saxophone strap around his neck.*)

ABBY. Merry Christmas, Ray, come on in.

RAY (*waltzes ABBY and sings*). "I'm getting sentimental over you—"

ABBY. Ray—Ray stop it!

RAY. Aw, Abby, admit it, you're crazy about me—Merry Christmas, Jackie—

JACKIE. Merry Christmas, Ray.

ABBY (*crossing to kitchen*). I'm pouring coffee, you no good—

RAY. *Coffee!* Anytime, your majesty—Ah, coffee—bumper crop of Brazil—Jackie my boy, did I ever tell you about my days in the Brazilian jungles? Up to my neck in feathers and poisoned darts—say, that's quite a piece of shrubbery ya got there—

JACKIE. Not funny, Ray.

RAY (*crosses toward tree*). I just wanted to make sure it was dead—you can never tell until the-last-ounce-of-life-is—(*Takes snow from pocket and drops it down Jackie's neck.*)—GONE!

JACKIE. Hey! Ray knock it off, will you?

RAY (*laughs heartily*). You should have seen your face.

Abby—Abby, you should have seen the possum's face—(*JACKIE retrieves some of the snow and dunks it down Ray's neck.*) WHOA—!

ABBY (*brings three cups of coffee to table in kitchen*). If you children can stop playing now, the coffee's poured.

JACKIE (*glowers*). And DON'T call me possum. (*They cross to table, only ABBY sits.*)

RAY. Why? Ya look like one.

ABBY. Ray, take your coat off and stay awhile.

RAY. No, I can't—really, I just came over to borrow an egg. Griselda's still doing her baking—(*JACKIE laughs.*)

ABBY. Quit calling your sister "Griselda" will you? Makes her sound like a witch. (*JACKIE tastes coffee and returns to tree decorating.*)

RAY (*sits at table*). All right, all right. She told me to hurry right back over because her batter's turning to cement or something.

ABBY. Cement. Hmmph. That's what endears you to us all, Ray, not a facetious bone in your body.

RAY. Aw, I'm a big fat liar and you know it, Abby—come on, marry me—(*On one knee a la Al Jolson.*)—Marry me right here, honey, right now. Jackie, fetch the Bible, I'm marryin' your grandmother this very night.

ABBY. Oh, Ray, get up, you look foolish. No wonder you're still single at forty-two.

RAY (*feigning heart attack*). She's done me in. Forty-two? You know I'm only thirty-eight. Why, you make me sound as old as Jackie here. (*ABBY gets egg from ice-box.*)

JACKIE. Old and worn out, Ray, that's me.

ABBY. I wish you'd come back and chat, Ray.

JACKIE. Yeah. I want to hear about your close call in the jungles of Brazil—*again*.

RAY. *I'll come back. You know me. I always come back, like an old mongrel dog, or a bounced check. (They laugh as RAY rises.)* Speaking of bounced checks, the radio says there's nearly fifteen million out of work. We're in quite a fix, eh? You don't know what you'll find come morning, anymore.

ABBY (*soberly, adjusting tree ornament*). I try not to think about it, Ray. (*JACKIE places paper star on top of tree, and stands away.*)

JACKIE. Well there it is. The Christmas tree of thirty-three. (*ABBY and RAY approach it. ABBY adjusts garland.*)

ABBY. I like Christmas. I like everything about it, always did.

RAY (*nudges JACKIE*). Hey, what I said before—about the tree—I was just kidding, okay kid?

JACKIE. It's okay. (*RAY tries to make JACKIE feel better.*)

RAY (*dreamily*). I still picture your mother walking around this place. She was like a child herself, your mother—a pretty woman.

JACKIE. She was worse about Christmas than any of us. She liked it too much.

RAY. No. Not too much.

ABBY. I dream of the days when the whole family was together on Christmas, just like before she—

JACKIE. —yeah, well those days are over, Grandma.

RAY. You know, you're just how she said you'd turn out. She used to look at you in the crib, and say, "That boy's as stubborn as his father," and you know what?

JACKIE. What?

ABBY/RAY. She was right! (*They laugh as RAY turns to go as JACKIE burns.*)

ABBY. Ray, you come back later, you hear?

RAY (*kisses her*). Sure I will—after all, I do have a surprise for you—

ABBY. And bring Helen—

RAY. Oh, I don't think she can come. She's on her way to Anna Greenward's, and then off to the church for the Nativity. Why don't you and Jackie go with her?

ABBY. Well—yes—I'd like that. I'd like that just fine. (*To JACKIE.*) How about it?

JACKIE. Nah!

ABBY. Well, I'll take you up on it.

RAY (*flips egg into the air*). WATCH OUT! (*Catches it, laughs.*) Kinda slow on your feet, ain't ya pardner?

JACKIE (*laughs*). Ray, you're missing half your marbles, you know that?

RAY (*with mock viciousness*). I'll pay you back for that later, you slothful possum you—I can carry a grudge to my grave—and don't you forget it.

JACKIE. I'm real scared, Ray.

ABBY. I'll be over in a few minutes.

RAY. I'll tell Griselda you're coming. (*Juggles egg once more, hedging.*) Any word from Holmes?

ABBY. No. No not really.

RAY. Well. He must be having a tough go of it. If you see him, tell him to drop over, will you? I have a new—project—(*Stops himself.*)

ABBY. Scheme, you mean.

JACKIE. What kind of project?

RAY. Well—just a little enterprise I've been working on uptown.