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Dramatic Publishing

HEARTS

A Play

by

WILLY HOLTZMAN



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(HEARTS)

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for Don and Ev

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It must be a shock to learn about the contours of your life from the pages of *Time* magazine. But when my father read the cover story about the 50th anniversary of D-Day, he immediately called me. “There are guys in here who suffer insomnia, mood swings, substance abuse—that’s me!” Of course, his substance of choice was always food. Still, the sleeplessness, the bouts of depression, the flashbacks were all too familiar. The article even gave it a name: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

Naming something doesn’t necessarily explain it. The truth about the “Greatest Generation” is that it has invisible wounds, terrible secrets, untold stories. And what obligation does that create for the “Me Generation”? Do we ignore those stories, or do we tell them, even if it means opening old wounds? The question had added urgency for me since I’m a playwright and playwrights are compulsive storytellers. When I asked my father’s permission to write this play, he thoughtfully answered, “Absolutely not! I was like a million other guys. I don’t want you glorifying what I did.” But that’s the point, I told him. How the ones who came back alive were told to resume their lives, raise families, live the American Dream and put the nightmares behind them; how the nightmares have come back in old age to haunt so many of them. I told him the process might even be healing, which elicited his favorite warning, “Don’t bullshit a bullshitter.” It takes a storyteller to know a storyteller. He thought about it some more and said, “You’re going to tell it no matter what I say, aren’t you?” He gave me a grudging “yes” on the condition that I keep his identity anonymous beyond the rough outline of his life. So here goes.

My father grew up in St. Louis and graduated high school in June of 1944. He saw his first combat that December in the Battle of the Bulge and remained in the front lines as a forward observer for the artillery through the end of the war. In the spring of 1945, he witnessed something so horrific that it changed his life forever. He couldn't tell me what that was because, like the worst traumas, it had become a lost memory. His attempt to recover that memory became the mission of his later life. It is the story of *Hearts*, and you won't find it in the pages of *Time*. This is not a war story, except that each member of that generation is a kind of warrior. This is not a heroic story, because true humility rejects heroism. In the end, as my own father instinctively knew, this is not just the story of one father. This is the story of every father.

And that's all I can divulge while keeping my word to maintain anonymity. There is, however, one last detail I should share. The father in the play is named "Donald Waldman." My father's name is "Donald Holtzman." Any similarity between the two is completely intentional.

Willy Holtzman

Hearts received a workshop production at the Festival of New Works (Frank Gagliano, artistic director), on June 2, 1999. Direction was by Michael Montel. Scenic design by Richard W. Lindsay Jr., lighting design by Mark Allen Berg. The stage manager was Nancy Uffner, the festival managing director was Mary Lou Chlipala. The cast was:

Donald Waldman	WILLIAM WISE
Babe	PETER RINI
Herbie	BRUCE FAULK
Ruby	TARA GREENWAY

Hearts premiered at the People's Light and Theatre Company (Abigail Adams, artistic director), on September 13, 2000. Direction was by Melia Bensussen. Scenic design by James F. Pyne Jr., costume design by Marla J. Jurglanis, lighting design by Thomas C. Hase, dramaturgy by Lee Devin. The sound designer and stage manager was Charles T. Brastow. The cast was:

Donald Waldman	WILLIAM WISE
Babe	STEPHEN NOVELLI
Herbie	MARK LAZAR
Ruby	PAUL MESHEJIAN

HEARTS

A Full-length Play
For 4 Men and 1 Woman
(Performed in multiple roles by an ensemble of actors)

CHARACTERS

DONALD WALDMAN
BABE
HERB
RUBY

PLACE: St. Louis, Missouri, and the Western European
Front of World War II.

TIME: From 1944 to the present.

MUSIC NOTE: The specific music choices indicated in the script are the playwright's preference. Should you wish to use these musical pieces, you must gain permission from the music publishers. Other musical pieces of the period may be substituted.

HEARTS

PROLOGUE

(Frank Sinatra sings "I'll Be Seeing You." A large MAN in an ill-fitting army Ike jacket stands at "parade rest." A computer sits on a desk. The MAN snaps to attention.)

DONALD (*gruffly*). Ten-hut. Staff Sergeant Donald L. Waldman, 3rd Army, 71st Infantry Light Division, 608 Field Artillery Battalion, "HQ" Battery, Forward Observer. Service in two armies and seven corps. Advanced over eight hundred combat miles from the Ardennes in the Battle of the Bulge to Linz, Austria, on the Czech border—the farthest point east of any U.S. fighting unit in the war. (*Grins.*) Thought I was Patton for a second there, didn't you? All that regular army "spit and polish" bullshit. I'll tell you about Patton—he would have made a helluva Nazi. What made him a hero? He was our Nazi. You can have Patton. I'll take Doberman. (*Bulges his stomach, juts his jaw in a comical underbite.*) Doberman. You know, the sad-sack go-fer on the old Sergeant Bilko show? "Hey-up-hah! At ease, soldier." "Okay, Sarge." My best impression. My only impression. You don't remember Doberman? Patton, you remember. The point is that somewhere between Patton and Doberman is Waldman. Come to think of it, I do a terrific impression of me. Here's me under fire for the first time in Belgium. (*Cowering, abject terror.*) Here's

me crossing the Rhine. (*Daintily tiptoes.*) Here's me if the war went on another six months. (*Prone, dead.*) No joking matter? Go where I've gone, see what I've seen—joking's about the only thing that still makes sense. This is the Ike jacket I wore the day I came home. Hail the conquering hero! (*Tries to button the jacket over his stomach.*) Inhale. (*It's no use. He exhales.*) Forget it. So why'd I pull the damn thing out of mothballs in the first place? Here's why. (*He presses a button on the computer. The message is projected on a large screen.*) "You are cordially invited to a reunion of the 71st Infantry Division." Now there's a great idea. Let's have a bunch of old men with aluminum walkers get together and trade war stories. "The Greatest Generation Goes Senile." You want war stories? How about a chronic weight problem, which goes very nicely with my blood pressure problem, which wouldn't be caught dead without my heart problem? You think I'm afraid of dying? There are worse things, believe me. Like outliving your secrets. That's the real war story. The big secret. That you put on a uniform and killed people. I killed innocent people. And dressing up like some fucking overgrown Boy Scout won't make it go away. (*He peels off the jacket and throws it down.*) I should've thrown the damn thing out years ago.

Hearts #1 (1950)

(DONALD sits down to cards with three MEN. One of them plays in his boxer shorts.)

BABE. Is the fashion show over?

DONALD. Ev is sending a pile of clothes to Goodwill.

BABE. You're not getting rid of your parade jacket?

DONALD. I'm not planning to re-enlist. It's nothing. Rags.

(To HERBIE.) Speaking of which, would it kill you to wear a different pair of shorts occasionally?

HERBIE. Th-these are g-good luck.

RUBY. I've got a lucky horseshoe, but I don't wear it places!

HERBIE. W-we're in a b-basement.

DONALD/BABE/RUBY. Rathskeller!

DONALD. Not that you helped nail up a single piece of paneling.

HERBIE. I was m-mowing the l-lawn.

BABE. Whose idea was "lawns," anyway?

DONALD. Probably the same guy who came up with mortgages.

RUBY. And in-laws.

BABE. And three a.m. feedings.

HERBIE. And r-rathskellers!

RUBY. Any chance we might play some hearts here?

DONALD. Okay, okay. Diamonds were led? Whose jack?

HERBIE. N-n-n-no table talk.

DONALD. No t-t-table stutter.

HERBIE. F-f-fuck you.

DONALD. Second lead of diamonds, I'm trying to determine ...

RUBY. You gonna play a card, or what?

DONALD. Okay, okay—king. (*HERBIE plays the queen.*)

Queen? Damn snake.

BABE. Tough break.

DONALD. Tough break, my ass. How can he drop the queen on the second lead of diamonds?

HERBIE. Like so.

DONALD. You asshole. You reneged.

HERBIE. H-h-hell I did.

BABE. I'm pretty sure he followed suit.

DONALD. Somebody reneged. Let me see the first lead.

RUBY. No looking at dead tricks.

DONALD. Who's looking? I'm investigating. (*Turns over the cards.*) There, first lead of diamonds—three diamonds and a club. You dropped a club.

HERBIE. Th-there's some rule against that?

DONALD. You don't drop points, I think you're shooting. You're shooting me in the head, is what.

RUBY. How about you play your cards, we play ours?

DONALD. Cards is exactly what I'm trying to play. So maybe you can explain why on Babe you hold off the queen of spades when on me, it's right between the eyes?

HERBIE. I d-d-don't have to explain myself.

BABE. You stopped him from shooting the moon. You're the hero.

DONALD. Better a live coward than a dead hero.

RUBY. It's just cards. Don't personalize it.

DONALD. I don't personalize it. If I personalized it I'd fucking kill him!

RUBY. Here we go again. Can we once just finish one game of hearts?

DONALD. I'm finishing. Does anyone see me not finishing?

HERBIE. I'm g-g-going.

DONALD. Who's not finishing now? Let's play.

HERBIE. "Play" means f-fun, f-frolic.

DONALD. You wanna frolic? Go frolic till your putz falls off. We'll play three-handed.

RUBY. Three-handed is not even hearts.

DONALD. It's in Hoyle. Look it up!

RUBY. So is Old Maid. And I don't play that either.

BABE. It's late. Let's call it a game.

DONALD (*to the audience*). God, I love a good game of cards. Just you, fortune, and friends. Heaven. Unless your friends happen to be a bunch of conniving, backstabbing, queen-dropping cocksuckers.

Let me make proper introductions: that's Herbie, the one with the slight speech impediment, only plays cards in his boxers. As you can see, that is not a boxer's physique. Since the war, he's in the junker business with his brother, Saul.

HERBIE. Ut-tility Auto P-parts, t-turn right under the G-grand Avenue viaduct.

DONALD. Ruby's the wiseguy over there, operates a pawnshop down on Hodiament in the North End. Short a little cash before the end of the month?

RUBY. No problem. I'll fix you up four-bits on the dollar collateral. Burn the ticket, I keep your stuff. You don't like it, go get a better deal someplace else. You got merchandise to move, I move it, no questions asked.

DONALD. Call him a fence, he doesn't flinch. Call him a blood-sucking little kike, you'll be picking your teeth up off the sidewalk. Number one ...

RUBY. Nobody talks to me that way!

DONALD. Number two...

RUBY. I was christened Mario Minessi at Our Lady of Sorrows Roman Catholic Church, which I attend religiously every Sunday.

DONALD. One other piece of advice—don't ever call him "wop." He'll laugh. We'll wipe the sidewalk with you, every last one of us. Except maybe Babe. Babe is like a brother to me. He's also 145 pounds soaking wet holding a bowling ball. So we're more alike in spirit than body. Not that this was always my body, but more about that later. What Babe's got is heart. Like anytime the rest of us got into a fight, he's right in there with us. Never landed a punch that I saw. Caught quite a few.

BABE. Yeah, but I never lost a fight.

DONALD. How do you win when you lose, Babe?

BABE. You show heart.

DONALD. The game breaks up like it always does because Herbie's shuffling some cocktail waitress and cards is his ticket out of the house. Guess he doesn't stutter in the sack. Ruby makes it an early night and Babe helps me clean up. We're in the basement...

DONALD/BABE. "Rathskeller."

DONALD. ...of my two bedroom ranch on Acorn Lane in Oak Estates. I'm at the window with Babe looking up and down the street.

Stein, Levene, Wolfsfeld, Schwartz...

BABE. No: Stein, Levene, Wolfsfeld, Kelly.

DONALD. Kelly? How'd he get in there?

BABE. This isn't the old neighborhood, even if half of 'em were our neighbors.

DONALD. This is not a "neighborhood." This is a development. I've got a two bedroom with a carport for a mortgage I can almost afford. This is the American Dream, Babe!

BABE. If this is the American Dream, I'm going back to sleep. You have any trouble that way?

DONALD. Dreaming?

BABE. Sleeping.

DONALD. You kidding? Before my head even hits the pillow. Of course, I wake up three or four times every night—hungry. You?

BABE. First few years out of the service, I imagined I was sleeping pretty good.

DONALD. What does imagination have to do with it? You're sleeping or you're not. (*He devours a bowl of candy.*)

BABE. Hey, I don't have to tell you, one night in a foxhole your definition of sleep changes. Even after the shooting stops, the thinness of it all, the wakefulness... Now, with the new baby and all, I've become aware, I'm reminded of things not so long departed, memory things, Donnie. Things I meant to cast out, banish. Still there. The baby cries in the middle of the night, I'm already awake. The baby smiles, I cry. Some wires got crossed. Some gears, pedals. The brake is the gas, the gas is the clutch. It's hard to get from place to place in my mind, sometimes.

DONALD. It's in the past. Why're you tying yourself in knots? Life is good. We live in a clean, safe place. We're making healthy babies. We have houses, carports, rathskellers. This is what we fought for.

BABE. So why is this happening? I can't sleep like a normal person. You can't eat like a normal person.

DONALD. What are you talking about “eat”?

BABE. The way you put food into your body. It’s not even eating. It’s force-feeding. You barely chew. Your nose whistles. Do you even taste it?

DONALD. This is how I eat! You don’t like it, fuck you.

BABE. Hey, I know you since you drank your meals out of a bottle. It was never like this!

DONALD. You got something to say, Babe? Say it!

BABE. I can’t sleep! Not one night’s sleep. I count sheep. Take a hot bath. Nothing works. I read an article somewhere about a cure for insomnia. I think it has possibilities. Dancing.

DONALD. Dancing makes you sleep?

BABE. Not yet. I’m hopeful. Nancy signed us up for some lessons where they paint feet on the floor. I’m starting to get it. But when I’m thinking too hard about the steps, I’m thinking too hard to sleep. Someday I won’t have to think at all, and I’ll be Fred Astaire. Then, how far off can sleep be? *(He assumes dance position.)* They keep telling me it’s in the hips. One-two, one-two-three, one-two, one-two-three...it’s not so hard.

DONALD. What do you call that?

BABE. Mambo. Cha-cha. One or the other, I forget which. You could do it.

DONALD. I don’t see no taxi dancers.

BABE. With me.

DONALD. Get the fuck outta here.

BABE. We used to pee in the same toilet at the same time.

DONALD. If I knew then what I know now...

BABE. Hey, I start to date guys, I’m gonna find a better-looking guy than you. Okay, it was a stupid idea. *(BABE moves to the door.)*

DONALD. Come on. Just 'cause I said get the fuck outta here doesn't mean you gotta get the fuck outta here.

BABE. I'm tired, Donnie.

DONALD. I'm hungry. In the hips, you say? (*Beat.*) Let's dance.

(*Perez Prado mambo.*)

BABE. Nothing to it. One-two, one-two-three, one-two, one-two-three...

DONALD. Stop counting, for Christ's sake.

BABE (*whispers*). One-two, one-two-three, one-two, one-two-three...

DONALD. One-two, one-two-three, one-two, one-two-three... Hey, I think I'm getting the hang of this... (*He dances within reach of the candy and empties the rest into his mouth. He is about to toss out the Ike jacket, thinks better of it and keeps it.*)

Graduation (June 1944)

DONALD & THE GUYS.

Izzie, Abie, Ikie, Sam

We're the boys that don't eat ham.

We got moxie, we got class,

If you don't like it kiss our

S-S-S-O-L, D-D-D-A-N,

Soldan, Soldan, Soldan!

DONALD. Soldan High School class of '44, the four of us—Donnie, Ruby, Herbie, Babe—smart? I don't know. Smart-ass? Natch. It was the Jewish school back then.

They say Tennessee Williams went there back before that.

BABE. No shit, went right there.

RUBY. He went when we were there, we'd've dogged him for being a cookie.

HERBIE. All wr-wr-writers are c-cookies.

DONALD. On graduation day, my dad hugs me and tells me...

DADDY. You're the first Waldman to graduate high school!

DONALD. On graduation day, my mother cries because...

MOMMA. You're not my little boychik anymore. Why didn't you finish your eggs this morning, Donell, I didn't make them the way you like? I'll make them again.

DONALD. On graduation day, I get a headline in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch...

PROJECTION: D-day Invasion of Normandy Success. Ike Predicts War Over by Christmas.

DONALD. On graduation day, I get a dry hump from my girlfriend in the back seat of my dad's Oldsmobile, but that's as far as she'll go, being that...

JEWISH GIRLFRIEND. I'm a NICE JEWISH GIRL!

DONALD. On graduation day, me and Babe go looking for some not-so-nice shiksas to shed our embarrassing virginity, "What's knittin', kitten?"

BABE. Hi, sugar—you rationed?

DONALD. On graduation day I get a diploma and an induction letter from the U.S. Army. I can already see my headlines: "Donald Waldman—War Hero!" Bring on the Nazis!