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*Dramatic Publishing*



# Walking Across Egypt



*Adapted by Catherine Bush*  
*from the novel by*  
*Clyde Edgerton*

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“A crowd pleaser from start to end.”

—*Citizen-Times* (Asheville, N.C.)

## ***Walking Across Egypt***

***Comedy/Drama. Adapted by Catherine Bush from the novel by Clyde Edgerton. Cast: 5m., 2w.*** Upon discovering a stray dog on her back porch, Mattie Rigsbee decides she's too old to keep a pet and calls the dogcatcher. Little does she know that the dogcatcher, Lamar Benfield, will open her eyes to a whole world she never knew existed, a world that includes car theft, prison breaks and a juvenile delinquent named Wesley who is as desperate for a family as she is. Armed with only her mouthwatering corn bread and a deep abiding faith in the Almighty, Mattie is determined to woo Wesley to the side of God and good Southern manners ... if she can just manage to stay out of jail herself. *Unit set. Approximate running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Code: WH1.*

*Photo: Barter Theatre, Abingdon, Va., featuring*

*(l-r) Mary Lucy Bivins and Justin Tyler Lewis.*

*Photo: Nathan Wampler. Cover design: Susan Carle.*

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# **Walking Across Egypt**

Adapted by  
**CATHERINE BUSH**

From the novel by  
**CLYDE EDGERTON**



**Dramatic Publishing Company**  
Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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CATHERINE BUSH

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(WALKING ACROSS EGYPT)

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THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC., of Woodstock, Illinois.”

*Walking Across Egypt* received its premier production at Barter Theatre in Abingdon, Va.

CAST:

Mattie Rigsbee .....	Mary Lucy Bivins
Robert Rigsbee.....	Michael Poisson
Alora Swanson.....	Wendy Mitchell Piper
Finner Swanson.....	Nicholas Piper
Lamar Benfield.....	Justin Tyler Lewis
Wesley Benfield .....	Sean Michael Flattery
Reverend Bass.....	Rick McVey
Sheriff Tillman .....	David Alford
Choir Members .....	Paris Bradstreet, Parris Cromer, Andy Cumbow, Abbey C. Elliott, Adam Gambrel, David Large, Holly Williams

PRODUCTION:

Producing Artistic Director .....	Richard Rose
Director/Choral Arranger .....	Eugene Wolf
Dramaturg .....	Katy Brown
Pianist.....	Lee Harris
Set Designer .....	Derek Smith
Costume Designer .....	Megan Schuler
Lighting Designer .....	Camille Davis
Sound Designer .....	Miles Polaski
Properties Designer .....	Helen Stratakes
Stage Manager .....	Cindi A. Raebel

# Walking Across Egypt

## CHARACTERS

MATTIE RIGSBEE: a spunky 78-year-old Baptist with mad cooking skills.

ROBERT RIGSBEE: her 53-year-old son, single, collects lamps.

ALORA SWANSON: 50s, Mattie's soap-opera-loving neighbor.

FINNER SWANSON: 50s, Alora's gun-toting husband.

LAMAR BENFIELD: late 20s, a dogcatcher.

WESLEY BENFIELD: 16, Lamar's nephew and a car thief.

REVEREND BASS: 40s, the minister of Listre Baptist.

SHERIFF TILLMAN: 40s, the town sheriff.

SETTING: the small town of Listre, North Carolina. 1984.

SET: Mattie Rigsbee's kitchen and living room and a common area that represents the church, the Swanson's house and the prison yard, among other things.

The music for "Walking Across Egypt" can be found in the back of the book on page 97.



# Walking Across Egypt

## ACT I

SETTING: *Listre, N.C. March, 1984. Various locations in Mattie Rigsbee's world. The stage is divided into four playing areas: Mattie's House (C), the Church (on a raised platform directly upstage of Mattie's House), the Prison Yard (R) and the Swanson's Backyard (L). Mattie's House is divided into three areas as well. The Dining Room, represented by a small table with four chairs, is CR. The Living Room, represented by a rocking chair, is CL. Upstage of the two rooms, there is an archway and a pass-through window, through which we catch a glimpse of the Kitchen. Between the Kitchen and Dining Room, there is a wall-mounted, rotary-dial phone with an extra-long phone cord that allows the receiver to travel a great distance. In the Living Room, a small table holding a television remote and a small Tiffany lamp sits next to the rocking chair. A hallway off UL leads to the rest of the house. A screen door leading to Mattie's Backyard is off UR of the Dining Room.*

AT RISE: *The lights come up on the Church as the choir, including FINNER SWANSON and ALORA SWANSON, enters singing "Walking Across Egypt."*

CHOIR.

WALKING ACROSS EGYPT NO SHELTER FROM THE SUN  
MY JOURNEY HAS NO STOPPING PLACE  
MY JOURNEY'S FAR FROM DONE  
WALKING WITH JESUS I SHALL NOT STOP TO REST  
MY FAITH IS SET BEFORE ME  
AND MY JOURNEY SHALL BE BLEST ...

*(The choir continues to hum under as REVEREND BASS enters carrying a Bible. He begins to preach.)*

BASS. Bothers and sisters, when Moses led his people out of Egypt, they wandered 40 years in the desert, facing all sorts of trials and tribulations. They were lost. Worse than lost, they felt alone, disconnected from the Lord their God. You and I know this desert. We have all been lost, all had times when we felt alone, abandoned and disconnected ... But I promise you this—we are never alone. Jesus is with us always and if we trust Him to show us the way ... we will not be lost. We will be walking across Egypt straight to the eternal salvation of the promised land.

CHOIR.

I'M WALKING

BASS.

WALKING ...

CHOIR

I'M WALKING

BASS

WALKING ...

CHOIR & BASS

WALKING ACROSS EGYPT

WALKING ACROSS EGYPT

MY HEART SHALL SEE THE WAY ...

*(As BASS and the choir exit, singing as they go, lights fade on the Church and come up on Mattie's House. MATTIE RIGSBEE enters from the hallway, walking with a slight limp. She crosses into the Kitchen and pulls a pan of cornbread out of the oven.)*

CHOIR & BASS.

MY STRIDE WILL NOT BE BROKEN  
THERE WILL BE NO DELAY  
WALKING WITH JESUS  
TO THE BRIGHTEST DAY

*(Lights out on the Church. MATTIE carries the pan to the table in the Dining Room. ALORA appears at the backdoor and knocks.)*

ALORA. Mattie ... ?

MATTIE. Come on in, Alora.

*(ALORA enters.)*

ALORA. Mattie, I just got a call from Reverend Bass ...

MATTIE *(interrupting)*. Is that dog still out there? The little tan fice?

ALORA *(glances out the backdoor)*. He's laying right where he has been for the last two days.

*(MATTIE crosses to the door and looks for herself.)*

ALORA *(cont'd)*. Listen, Mattie, I just got off the phone with Reverend Bass. He's real worried about you.

MATTIE. I better give him a little something to eat, then. *(She grabs a knife off the counter and cuts a slice of cornbread.)*

ALORA. Reverend Bass?

MATTIE. The dog.

*(MATTIE exits out the door with a slice of cornbread. ALORA watches a moment then crosses to the table to nibble on some cornbread, then she cuts herself a slice and devours it.)*

MATTIE *(cont'd, offstage)*. There you go, fella. That's a boy.

*(We hear a dog whine. A moment later, MATTIE re-enters.)*

ALORA. I can't believe you waste the best cornbread in the South on a dog.

MATTIE. He's got to eat something. He's just skin and bones, poor little fella.

ALORA. What you gonna name him?

MATTIE. I ain't. I ain't keeping him.

ALORA. Then why are you feeding him?

MATTIE. Because he won't leave.

ALORA. He won't leave because you keep feeding him! *(She glances out the back door at the dog.)* Seems like a right nice little dog. Been here two days and hasn't barked once. Might be real good company for you.

MATTIE. I can't keep a dog, Alora—wouldn't be fair.

ALORA. Fair to who?

MATTIE. The dog.

*(ALORA starts to protest. MATTIE cuts her off.)*

MATTIE *(cont'd)*. Already put in a call to the dogcatcher—he'll be by sometime this afternoon. *(She crosses to the Kitchen and roots around in a drawer.)*

ALORA. Mattie, what's going on? I just talked to Reverend Bass on the phone. He said you called him this morning—told him you're giving up being vice president of your Sunday school class!

MATTIE. That's right.

*(MATTIE exits from the Kitchen holding a screwdriver and crosses into the Living Room, still limping. ALORA is too distracted to notice.)*

ALORA. And now you're saying you can't keep a dog—Matie Rigsbee, the woman who adopts every stray what sleeps on her porch. What's next? You giving up the Lottie Moon?

*(MATTIE doesn't answer. Instead, she tilts the rocking chair on its side, kneels next to it and begins unscrewing the seat.)*

ALORA *(cont'd)*. Mattie Rigsbee, do *not* tell me you're giving up being in charge of the Lottie Moon Missionary Fund! Think about those poor missionaries in China who are depending on you! Think about all those poor, heathen Chinese children!

MATTIE. I ain't giving up the Lottie Moon. I would *never* give up the Lottie Moon. I look forward to it all year long.

ALORA. Well, thank the Lord for that!

MATTIE. But I can't be in charge of the Lottie Moon *and* be vice president of my Sunday school class *and* keep a dog.

ALORA. Why not?

MATTIE. Because I'm too old.

ALORA. You are not!

MATTIE. I'm 78 years old, Alora. I'm slowing down.

ALORA. Since when? Just three days ago you was outside digging up your flower bed and when Finner asked if he could help you, you said no thank you.

MATTIE. That was three days ago. *(She continues unscrewing the seat bottom.)*

ALORA. Mattie, what on earth are you doing down there?

MATTIE. Taking off the seat bottom to this rocking chair.

ALORA. Why?

MATTIE. Because it's broke. I don't want folks sitting in it and hurting themselves. Here ...

*(MATTIE hands ALORA the seat from the rocking chair. We can see the cane weaving has broken through. ALORA takes it. MATTIE gets to her feet and rights the rocking chair.)*

ALORA. Lordy! That's a big ol' hole. How did it break?

*(MATTIE takes the seat bottom from ALORA, crosses into the Dining Room and leans it against a table leg.)*

ALORA (*cont'd*). Mattie, why are you limping?

MATTIE. I twisted my foot a bit.

ALORA. When did that happen?

MATTIE. When I stepped through the rocking chair.

ALORA. You were *standing* on your rocking chair?

MATTIE. The light bulb in the hallway needed changing.

ALORA. Why didn't you use your stepladder?

MATTIE. You want another piece of cornbread?

ALORA. Mattie.

MATTIE. My stepladder got too heavy for me to carry. So I stood on my rocking chair. And now it's broke.

*(MATTIE crosses back to the rocking chair and pushes it gently. It sadly rocks to and fro. Beat.)*

ALORA. Is that why you say you're slowing down, because your seat bottom's broke? It's just a rocking chair, Mattie.

MATTIE. No, it ain't. This rocking chair's been in my family over a hundred years. My grandma rocked my mama in this chair, my mama rocked me in this chair, and I rocked my Robert in this chair.

ALORA. Still ...

MATTIE. Alora, you recall that sermon Reverend Bass preached a few weeks back about Moses and all them crossing the desert?

ALORA. Sure do. We sang "Walking Across Egypt" and Finner kept going flat on the harmony.

MATTIE. Do you recall what Reverend Bass said about feeling all alone in the desert?

ALORA. Mattie, you ain't alone! Me and Finner live right next door!

MATTIE. That ain't what I'm talking about ... Ever since I was 9 years old and my daddy died of the typhoid, I've had somebody to cook for, to tend to. First it was my brothers and sisters, then when I got married, it was my husband, then Robert come along and I had him too. And all that time, I cooked and tended, I felt a river of love pouring out of me and up to heaven, pouring out of the top of my head like an upside-down waterfall. Even after Robert grew up, even after my husband died, I still felt it. My waterfall to God. My connection. All I had to do was sit in this chair and imagine rocking my grandchild ... *(She gives the chair another gentle push.)* Soon as I put my foot through that seat bottom, I felt that waterfall dry up, felt myself slowing down.

ALORA. You might still have grandchildren some day.

MATTIE. Robert's 53 years old.

ALORA. Men can father children at 53.

MATTIE. Not if they spend all their time collecting antique lamps.

ALORA. Well, if it's any consolation, Mona is having the same problem with Erica.

MATTIE. Who?

ALORA. Erica Kane, on *All My Children*. She doesn't have any children either and her mother Mona is fit to be tied. And now Erica is fixing to marry that Adam Chandler who's 20 years older than her which means his sperm can't be trusted ...

MATTIE. Oh, Alora—you and your stories.

ALORA. Make fun of me all you want but the things that happen on that show happen in real life too. Rapes, murders, birth control ... *All My Children* is the reason Finner makes me carry a gun on my daily walk.

MATTIE. Listen, Alora—I don't want you calling Robert and telling him I stepped through my rocker.

ALORA. I won't ...

MATTIE. I don't want him worrying.

ALORA. OK ...

MATTIE. I mean it, now. You know how you like to interfere sometimes.

ALORA. Mattie Rigsbee, I do not! You name me one time when I put my nose in other folks' business.

MATTIE. Last week you went through Finner's billfold when he won't looking.

ALORA. Finner don't count. He's my husband. Besides, every woman knows if you really want to know a man, you got to go through this billfold. Be a fool not to.

MATTIE. I never went through my husband's.

ALORA. Maybe you should of.

MATTIE. All I'm saying is don't call Robert.

ALORA. I ain't gonna call Robert. I ain't gonna call Robert. I promise I ain't gonna call Robert!

*(ROBERT RIGSBEE opens the back door.)*

ROBERT. Mama?

MATTIE. Hey, Robert.

ROBERT. Mama, you know you got a dog sitting on your back step?

ALORA. He's been there two days now. Just showed up.

ROBERT. Oh—hey, Alora. Mama, you gonna keep that dog?

MATTIE. No. I can't keep a dog.

ROBERT. Why not? He'd be good company.

ALORA. He don't ever bark ...

MATTIE. I can't keep a dog because I'm slowing down.

ROBERT. That's ridiculous.

ALORA. That's what I said! If anybody's slowing down, it's Mona.

ROBERT. Who?



ALORA. Mona Tyler. She ain't looking so hot these days. But what can you expect with her daughter Erica marrying that no-good, snake-in-the-grass Adam Chandler?

ROBERT. Is this Mona a friend of yours, Mama?

ALORA. Mona Tyler is on *All My Children*, the first in ABC's "Lineup of Love." There's *All My Children* at one o'clock, *One Life to Live* at two and *General Hospital* at three.

ROBERT. Mama, don't tell me you started watching soap operas.

ALORA. Oh no! Mattie's way too high-falutin' for that.

MATTIE. What brings you by today, son?

ROBERT. Alora called me. Said I needed to get over here and check up on you. So here I am.

*(MATTIE shoots a look at ALORA. ALORA looks at her watch and starts for the door.)*

ALORA. Well, will you look at the time! I best get on—Finer ought to be getting home from the Army Navy Store any minute. He was shopping for a pair of field glasses and a new handgun. Bye now. *(She exits out the screen door.)*

ROBERT. What's going on, Mama? Why is Alora worried about you?

MATTIE. Because Alora likes to worry. It gives her something to do. Sit down and I'll fix you a piece of cornbread.

*(ROBERT sits. MATTIE fixes them both a piece of cornbread.)*

ROBERT. I can't stay long. Ever since I was promoted to day manger, my time's not as flexible as it once was.

MATTIE. They keep you real busy at that 7-Eleven, don't they?

ROBERT. It's the *Convenient*, Mama—not the 7-Eleven.

MATTIE. I still wish you'd been a preacher ... Here.

*(MATTIE hands ROBERT a piece of cornbread. He starts to take a bite.)*

MATTIE (*cont'd*). You want to say the blessing?

ROBERT. Over a piece of cornbread ... ?

MATTIE. Dear Lord, bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies. We pray in thy precious name. Amen.

*(ROBERT takes a bite. MATTIE watches him a moment.)*

MATTIE (*cont'd*). Son, I want to talk to you about your sperm.

*(ROBERT chokes on his cornbread.)*

MATTIE (*cont'd*). You ain't getting any younger and neither is your sperm. If you ever hope to get married and have children ...

ROBERT. Mama, I don't want to talk about this.

MATTIE. Robert, you can't wait much longer.

ROBERT. I'm not the least bit interested in getting married and having children.

MATTIE. Why not ... ? Son, what could be more important than having a family of your own?

*(Frustrated, ROBERT gets up from the table and crosses into the Living Room.)*

MATTIE (*cont'd*). It's them lamps, ain't it? I'll never understand why you collect those things.

ROBERT (*crosses to the Tiffany lamp*). I collect them because they're beautiful. Look at the craftsmanship on this one, Mama. The color, the texture of the glass, the way the shade compliments the shape of the base ... Exquisite. Do you know how lucky you are to own an honest-to-goodness Tiffany's original?

MATTIE. Your daddy's mama gave that to us as a wedding present.

ROBERT. I know.

MATTIE. If you got married, I could give it to you.

ROBERT. You're already leaving it to me in your will.

MATTIE. Why wait ... ? Look, son, I'm slowing down ...

ROBERT. You're not slowing down! Why do you keep saying that? Next thing I know you're gonna be talking about moving into a rest home ... *(He starts to sit in the rocking chair.)*

MATTIE. *Don't sit there!*

ROBERT *(springs out of the chair and looks back at it)*. What the ... ?! Where's the seat?

MATTIE. I took it off.

*(MATTIE holds up the broken seat. ROBERT takes it from her.)*

ROBERT. It's broken.

MATTIE. That's why I took it off.

ROBERT *(studying it)*. No wonder it broke. Looks how the cane's all dried out and brittle. That happens sometimes when a chair gets old.

MATTIE. This rocking chair's been in our family over a hundred years.

ROBERT. I know.

MATTIE. My grandma rocked my mama in this chair, my mama rocked—

ROBERT *(interrupting)*. I know, I know!

MATTIE. Three generations were rocked in this chair. I was hoping to make it four, but ...

ROBERT. Mama, listen. There's a man—a friend of mine—who deals in old cane chairs. I bet he could fix this seat bottom up for you good as new. I could drop it off on my way to work. It shouldn't take him more than a few days.

MATTIE. You'd do that?