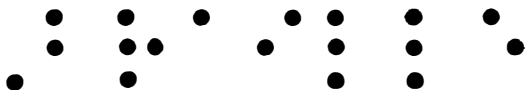


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THE EARLY
LIFE OF
**LOUISE
BRAILLE**

By Lola H. & Coleman A. Jennings



The story of a remarkable boy who opened the doors to reading for the blind.

The Dramatic Publishing Company
Woodstock, Illinois • Wilton, Connecticut • Melbourne, Australia

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(BRAILLE: THE EARLY LIFE OF LOUIS BRAILLE)

ISBN: 978-1-58342-426-1

NOTICE: The original production of this play premiered under the title of *Cells of Freedom: The Early Life of Louis Braille*. The revised title is *Braille: The Early Life of Louis Braille*. In this new title the word "Braille," spelled out in Braille cells, replaces *Cells of Freedom*.

Producers must use the new title and design as printed on the title page and cover of this script for all programs and publicity. On all programs this notice must appear: Produced by special arrangement with The Dramatic Publishing Company of Woodstock, Illinois.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For advice and encouragement on the script in its development, the playwrights gratefully thank June Moll, Rod Caspers, Trudy Poland and Aurand Harris. We thank the faculty and students of the Texas School for the Blind, whose special assistance helped make this production possible: William H. Miller, Superintendent; Bill Koehler, Principal; Maurine Pardee, Drama Instructor.

We would also like to thank all the members of the original company for their many contributions to the creation of *Cells of Freedom: The Early Life of Louis Braille*.

The premiere production of **CELLS OF FREEDOM: THE EARLY LIFE OF LOUIS BRAILLE** was performed at the The University of Texas at Austin by the Department of Drama, April 7-12, 1989 with the following cast:

Louis Braille,
as a young child Roberto Ainslie*, Julio Reyes*
as a youth, ages 10-15 Michael Spittler
Simon, his papa James McClure
Monique, his mamma Anne Whitaker
Catherine, his sister Heather LaChance
Herb Woman Minerva Garcia
Jacques] - boys in Coupvray — [David Sexton
Marcel] [Kevin McGraw
Pierre] [Martin Burke
Peasant Mother Minerva Garcia
Monsieur Becheret,
teacher in Coupvray Thomas King
Blind Beggar Bobby Bermea
Parisians .. Martin Burke, Minerva Garcia, Thomas King,
Heather LaChance, Kevin McGraw, David Sexton,
Anne Whitaker, Monsieur Guillie
Monsieur Guillie,
Headmaster Fursej Gotuaco
Monsieur Dufau,
teacher at the Institute Mark Flores
Jean] young students at the Institute [Kevin McGraw
Gabriel] [David Sexton
Rene] [Martin Burke
Mademoiselle Morrisot,
teacher at the Institute Anne Whitaker

Mademoiselle Colbert,
 teacher at the InstituteHeather LaChance
 Charles Moreau,
 older student at the InstituteThomas King
 Captain Barbier,
 inventor of sonography Bobby Bermea
 Monsieur Pignier,
 Second HeadmasterJames McClure

*Appeared at alternate performances

PRODUCTION STAFF

DirectorColeman A. Jennings
 Asst. DirectorRick Brayshaw
 Stage Manager Patricia Macklin
 Asst. Stage Manager Emma Ramos
 Costume Designer Lisa Hodde
 Asst. Costume DesignerAnn Abney
 Lighting Designer Allen Clark
 Asst. Lighting Designer Craig Wilson
 Scene Designer Buz Zoller
 Asst. Scene DesignerDavid Barber
 Sound Craig Wilson
 Properties Master James Cameron
 Design Supervisor Amarante Lucero
 Technical Director Steve Parks
 Asst. Technical DirectorKristin Johnson
 Production Manager John Robert Hood

BRAILLE: THE EARLY LIFE OF LOUIS BRAILLE

A Drama for Ten Males and Three Females*

CHARACTERS

CHILD LOUIS	as a young child
LOUIS BRAILLE	age ten to fifteen
PAPPA	Louis' father
MAMMA	Louis' mother
CATHERINE	Louis' sister
MONSIEUR DUFAU	schoolmaster at the Institute
HEADMASTER GULLIE	director of the Institute for the Blind
GABRIEL	student at the Institute
RENE	student at the Institute
JEAN	student at the Institute
CHARLES MOREAU	older student at the Institute
HEADMASTER PIGNIER	second director of the Institute
CAPTAIN BARBIER	inventor of sonography
MLES. MORRISOT and COLBERT ...	teachers at the Institute
JACQUES, MARCEL, PIERRE,	
HERB WOMAN, M. BECHERET, PARISIANS,	
PEASANT MOTHER, BLIND BEGGAR	

*Flexible casting. See Production Notes for doubling suggestions.

TIME: 1812

**PLACE: Coupvray, a small town near Paris, France, and
later in the Institute for Young Blind in Paris.**

BRILLE: THE EARLY LIFE OF LOUIS BRILLE

SCENE: *The curtain is up when the AUDIENCE enters the auditorium. MUSIC CUE begins as the house lights fade to half. PAPPA enters, crosses to his shop area and sings softly as he works at this leather bench. CHILD LOUIS can be seen skipping, playing outside. He kneels down, picks up a piece of broken glass and holds it up to the sun. After a few seconds he happily runs to his PAPPA.*

CHILD LOUIS. Pappa. Pappa! *(End MUSIC CUE.)*

PAPPA. Good morning, Louis! *(They embrace and then PAPPA lifts CHILD LOUIS high above his head amid great laughter.)*

CHILD LOUIS. I want to help you.

PAPPA *(heartily).* Good, good. Here are some leather pieces I saved for you. You may work right here at my side.

CHILD LOUIS. These are just scraps! *(As he takes an awl from the work bench.)* I want to make a real harness.

PAPPA. No, the leather tools are very sharp and very dangerous for little hands. *(PAPPA stares at CHILD LOUIS as he, PAPPA, holds out his hand. Pause. Slowly CHILD LOUIS places the awl in his PAPPA's hand.)* Now, see what kind of a picture you can make with your scraps. *(As CHILD LOUIS begins arranging the*

pieces.) I have a surprise for you—an apron just like mine. Here, let's see if it fits. (Helping CHILD LOUIS put on leather apron.) I made it.

CHILD LOUIS. Oh, thank you, Pappa! *(Showing off the apron.) I like it. Someday...I will make things just like you do.*

PAPPA. I will teach you everything I know. Before you know it, your hands will be as big as mine. *(PAPPA starts to work.) You'll make the best harnesses in France!*

MAMMA *(off).* Simon.

(MAMMA enters.)

MAMMA. Simon. A customer is out front.

PAPPA. Come along, Louis. *(CHILD LOUIS follows his PAPPA a short way, then stops. After his PAPPA is out of sight he moves toward the work block. He hesitates. He spots the awl and is once again fascinated by it. He is drawn to the work block and begins imitating the work of his PAPPA.)*

CHILD LOUIS *(defiantly).* I can make a harness now. I'm not too little. *(After two unsuccessful attempts to penetrate the leather with the awl CHILD LOUIS lifts the awl high above his head. His face is close to the leather. His aim is off, and as he stabs the awl down into the leather, he accidentally jabs his right eye with the awl. He screams in pain and terror and continues to cry throughout the following scene. Upon hearing the scream PAPPA runs to CHILD LOUIS, holds him and attempts to comfort him.)*

PAPPA. Monique! Help! Louis has hurt himself with one of my tools! (*As he sees CHILD LOUIS' face.*) Oh my God, it's his eye. Louis, my boy.

MAMMA. Oh no, it can't be. (*Taking the bleeding, crying CHILD LOUIS from PAPPA.*) How did it happen?

(*MAMMA covers CHILD LOUIS' eye with her shawl as CATHERINE enters.*)

CATHERINE. What happened?

PAPPA (*to CATHERINE*). Your brother has hurt his eye.

CATHERINE. Oh, no.

MAMMA. Get the herb woman next door—run for her, Catherine. (*CATHERINE leaves.*) What happened, Simon?

PAPPA (*clearing the workbench*). The awl—he was playing with the tool and my harness leather. He jabbed his eye with the awl. Has the bleeding stopped?

MAMMA (*carrying CHILD LOUIS to the workbench*). Not yet. What if the herb woman is not at her house?

PAPPA. She will be Monique. She has to be! Wait—I see them.

(*HERB WOMAN and CATHERINE enter.*)

PAPPA. Thank God, you are here. He injured his eye with the awl—it's still bleeding.

HERB WOMAN (*to CATHERINE*). I need water and a cloth.

(*CATHERINE exits and returns immediately with bowl and cloth. With mysterious ritual and great urgency, HERB WOMAN adds herbs to the bowl. Dips cloth in*

water and treats eye. As she works she tries to comfort CHILD LOUIS.)

HERB WOMAN. You are a good boy, Louis, and very brave. Shh, shh. (*CHILD LOUIS gradually becomes quiet.*) I have done all that can be done. The bleeding has stopped, but there may be an infection. We can only wait.

MAMMA. My dear Louis.

CATHERINE. Will he be all right, Mamma?

MAMMA (*to HERB WOMAN*). Will he see again?

HERB WOMAN. (*moving away*). The wound is very deep. If fever starts tomorrow, that will mean an infection. If it spreads to the other eye, that one could be destroyed, too. It's in God's hands now.

MAMMA (*softly crying*). No, no, no. (*Picking up CHILD LOUIS and carrying him away from bench. Sits to hold him.*)

CATHERINE. Look, Mamma. Don't cry. Louis is quiet now.

PAPPA. What can we do?

HERB WOMAN. Wait—and pray! Madame Braille. Madame Braille, come. I must give you instructions.

MAMMA. Simon. (*Hands CHILD LOUIS to PAPPA who holds him until the OTHERS exit.*) You listen, too, Catherine, to help me remember. (*HERB WOMAN instructs MAMMA and CATHERINE quietly as they exit. Lights and MUSIC CUE indicate a passage of time. After PAPPA removes their aprons, they walk together hand in hand. They stop, face front.*)

CHILD LOUIS. Pappa?

PAPPA. Yes, Louis.

CHILD LOUIS. Is there light in the sky yet?

PAPPA. The sun is just coming up.

CHILD LOUIS. When will I see a sunrise?

PAPPA (*hesitant*). My boy... (*Pause.*) You won't ever see a sunrise again, Louis.

CHILD LOUIS. Never? I will never see again? Oh Pappa, what will I do? (*Begins to cry as he hugs PAPPA. PAPPA kneels in front of CHILD LOUIS.*)

PAPPA. Your Mamma, Catherine and I will help you. The herb woman did all she could.

CHILD LOUIS. Oh, Pappa...

PAPPA. It is God's will, but He will guide you, Louis.

(PAPPA stands. The ADULT ACTOR who will henceforth play TEEN-AGED LOUIS enters, tapping his home-made cane to find his way to the CHILD LOUIS. Facing front LOUIS stands with his hand on CHILD LOUIS' shoulders.)

LOUIS. I was never to see again. I was blind. At first I cried a lot. But gradually I forgot what it was like to see. It was as though I'd always been blind.

(PAPPA exits with CHILD LOUIS. With his cane LOUIS returns to the past as a child, as three other CHILDREN run on calling:)

JACQUES. Let's play here. Throw me the ball.

MARCEL. Catch. (*Throws small ball.*)

PIERRE. Over here. (*JACQUES throws to PIERRE.*)

LOUIS. Can I play, too? (*Holding stuffed, cloth ball with jingle bells sewn to it.*) I have my own special ball that Mamma made for me.

JACQUES. We're only playing with my ball.

PIERRE. Wait, we could play "Keep Away." Louis could be in the middle.

LOUIS (*Hopefully.*) Can we use my ball?

JACQUES. All right, blindy. If you want to get out of the circle, you'll really have to listen. (*BOYS begin to play.*

LOUIS misses twice, ad libs. "Oh, I missed it. Throw it again." LOUIS catches it on third try.)

LOUIS. I have it! Now you go to the middle.

PIERRE (*sarcastically*). We can see you have it.

JACQUES. Hurry up, Louis. (*LOUIS moves to circle, throws ball right to a BOY in center.*)

PIERRE. Too bad. Back in the middle, Louis.

LOUIS. But I just got out.

MARCEL. This is no fun. He can't even throw the ball right once!

PIERRE. Yeah, let's go play by ourselves. (*Giving LOUIS the ball with bells and picking up his own.*) Here's your dumb ball, blindy. We don't like baby games.

(BOYS start to exit, leaving LOUIS dejected. PEASANT MOTHER enters, observes the CHILDREN leaving.)

PEASANT MOTHER. Come, children. It is time for your lessons.

THREE BOYS (*overlapping*). Now? We just started our game. Can't we do our work later?

PEASANT MOTHER. You must come now while there is light to study by.

(ALL exit except LOUIS. MAMMA enters.)

MAMMA. Louis, where have you been? (*Sees that LOUIS is sad.*) What's wrong?

LOUIS. I wish I could see. I hate being blind. The boys won't play with me and I can't even go to school.

MAMMA. The village school will not take you. (*Taking the ball from LOUIS.*) Your pappa asked, but the master said no.

LOUIS. What am I going to do? (*Crosses to bench and sits.*)

MAMMA. Don't get so upset, Louis. You know you can stay right here at home with your pappa and me. We'll protect you.

LOUIS. I don't *want* to be protected. I want to be treated like everyone else.

MAMMA. When you are blind you cannot have a life like others.

LOUIS. Why not? I'm not different. I just can't see. I want to go to school, *too*. I already know how to read the alphabet from the board Pappa made for me. See, Mamma, I'll show you. (*LOUIS feels for and finds the board on the bench. Quickly he begins to trace the alphabet created out of nail heads.*) A...B...C...

MAMMA. Tracing letters does not mean you can read.

LOUIS. But it's a start!

MAMMA. Ah Louis, you're never satisfied. (*Crosses away, picks up bucket and taps the side.*) Here, get me some water for supper.

(*LOUIS takes bucket and exits. PAPPA enters from work.*)

MAMMA. Simon, what can we do with Louis? All he can think about is going to school.

PAPPA. We could send him to the priest at the church. Last Sunday after Mass, he spoke to me again about

Louis. He still wants to teach him about the church and the saints.

MAMMA (*sighs*). Maybe that would satisfy him. I never saw a child so determined to learn. Why would God give us a child like that, and then let him be blind?!

PAPPA. We cannot question God's ways, Monique. Louis is a healthy child. We must be grateful for that.

MAMMA. If the priest told Louis more about the church, that would be like school in a way.

PAPPA. It's worth a try.

(Scene shifts to LOUIS who enters and moves forward, addressing the AUDIENCE.)

LOUIS. I did learn from the priest. The hours we spent together were filled with his wonderful stories of saints and martyrs who died rather than give up their faith. But I wanted to know more about other subjects, too.

(PAPPA and MAMMA re-entering scene.)

PAPPA. The priest says you learn quickly, Louis. And you remember everything he tells you.

LOUIS. Couldn't I do that in the village school with the others, Pappa? Ask the master again.

MAMMA. Your pappa and I have never been to school. *(Impatiently.)* Why do you think you must go—you who can never learn to read or write?

LOUIS *(defiant)*. All children go to school. I want to go, too, so I can be like everybody else.

PAPPA. He's right. He needs a chance to be like the other children. We must let him try if the schoolmaster will agree. I'll ask again.

LOUIS. Oh, yes, Pappa (*MAMMA shakes her head sadly.*)
Please!

(MAMMA exits. LOUIS moves U, out of scene, sits facing front. BECHERET enters, strolling and reading as if on the way home from school.)

PAPPA. (*crosses to BECHERET*). Excuse me, sir.

BECHERET (*looks up from book, turns to PAPPA*). Yes?

PAPPA. You may remember me. I talked with you before about my son, Louis.

BECHERET. Oh, yes. I do remember you. You're Braille, the harness-maker.

PAPPA. That's right. Well, sir. Louis still wants to come to school. He just wants to listen. He'd be very obedient and give you no trouble.

BECHERET. No, I don't think so... (*Crossing away from PAPPA. PAPPA follows.*)

PAPPA. It would mean so much to him and to his mamma and me. We were never able to go to school, ourselves.

BECHERET. Well, you *know* he can't ever read...or write. (*Starting to leave, stops.*)

PAPPA (*quickly*). I know that. But I think he'd remember what he heard. He can already do sums in his head.

BECHERET. I suppose we could let him try...

PAPPA. Oh, if only you would, sir. He could come with Catherine tomorrow.

BECHERET. Well – all right. I'll be expecting him. Good day, Braille. (*LIGHT CUE to indicate time change. PAPPA, moving to LOUIS.*)

PAPPA. Today is the day, Louis.

(MAMMA, CATHERINE enter.)

PAPPA. The master can't give you any special attention.

You will be on your own, so listen and remember.

LOUIS. I will, Pappa. You will be proud of me, Mamma.

MAMMA. I would be proud of you even if you chose to stay home. Be sure to keep up with your sister, so you will not get lost along the way.

CATHERINE. Come on, Louis. *(Taking his hand LOUIS pulls away.)*

LOUIS. You don't have to hold my hand. I'm not a baby.

I'm leaving. *(Rushes away, trips and falls. Slowly picks himself up. MAMMA starts to help him, but PAPPA stops her. CATHERINE follows, then looks at MAMMA and PAPPA as if asking what to do.)* I wish I could find the way on my own. *(Feeling for help. After a pause CATHERINE takes LOUIS' hand and helps him up.)*

MAMMA. Catherine, you stay near him.

(MAMMA and PAPPA exit. CATHERINE walks with LOUIS to the school as the BOYS enter noisily.)

PIERRE. Look, who's coming. *(Pointing toward LOUIS.)*

MARCEL. It's Louis Braille. Is he coming to school?

PIERRE. He can't do what we do, like read and write.

CATHERINE. Hello, Pierre. Louis is going to start school today.

LOUIS. Who's here?

CATHERINE. Pierre, Marcel and Jacques.

JACQUES. Monsieur Becheret won't let him stay. School is for people who see. *(Waves hand before LOUIS' face to show OTHERS he cannot see.)*

PIERRE. Yeah! (*Shoving LOUIS.*) You should stay home where you belong.

CATHERINE. He has as much right to be here as anyone.

MARCEL (*chanting, grabbing LOUIS' cane*). Louis Braille is a blindy.

MARCEL and **PIERRE.** Louis Braille is a blindy.

MARCEL, PIERRE and **JACQUES.** Blindy, Blindy.

CATHERINE (*snatching cane from MARCEL, returning it to LOUIS*). Leave him alone.

JACQUES. Blind beggar. The blind are always beggars!

PIERRE. Yeah, go live on the streets where you belong.

CATHERINE. He is not a beggar.

BECHERET (*sternly. Hitting the floor of a platform with his disciplining rod*). Quiet, children. No more of this. Take your places. Louis Braille will be joining us. Sit here, Louis. (*Indicating a place close to him. LOUIS sits.*) Today we will begin with history. The French Revolution began on July 14, 1789, when mobs in Paris stormed the Bastille.

CHILDREN (*repeating in unison*). "The French Revolution began on July 14, 1789, when mobs in Paris stormed the Bastille."

BECHERET. Before that date the king was the absolute authority in France.

CHILDREN. "Before that date the king was the absolute authority in France."

LOUIS. (*moving forward, addressing the AUDIENCE.*) Gradually the other children got used to my being in school with them. (*OTHERS exit.*) Since much of Monsieur Becheret's teaching was by repetition, I could learn, too. I didn't always know what the words meant, but I memorized them like the rest of the class did. I