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Family Plays

IN FLANDERS FIELDS

Drama adapted by
KIMBERLY K. ZACH

Based on the poem by John McCrae



IN FLANDERS FIELDS

Drama. By Kimberly K. Zach. Based on the poem by John McCrae. Cast: 10m., 10w., extras. In Flanders Fields tells the story of America's involvement in World War I and how it personally affected both the soldiers and those they left behind. Its message is as strong as ever in our tumultuous world that has never found peace. In Scene 2, we see five soldiers as they experience life in the trenches and their philosophies about fighting and surviving. The focus of Scene 3 switches to the women back in America, who are working for the first time in their lives. Through their conversation, we get a picture of life on the home front—lack of food, anti-German sentiment, the significance of women in the factories and their worries for the men in France. Scene 4 returns to France as the men are enjoying their last day of leave in a French cafe. In an ironic twist, one of the soldiers meets the woman he's been dreaming about. She is a Broadway singer who is in France to entertain the troops. The scene ends on a poignant note as the soldier must return to the trenches and the singer tells him to come see her on Broadway "if ... when ... he makes it out of there alive." The finale begins with the poem "In Flanders Fields" and gathers all the cast on the stage. Each main character says a line from his or her role, and the play ends with the final two lines of the poem, "In Flanders Fields the poppies blow/between the crosses row on row." Simple set arrangements on the apron and floor to the right and left of the stage allow the scenes to flow quickly to the final scene on stage. Costumes: from 1917 to 1918. Suggested music in the script. Approximate running time: 35 to 40 minutes. Code: IC5.

From the author: A few of the historical facts concerning the writing of the poem "In Flanders Fields" have been changed to fit the purposes of this play. While the poem was written by John McCrae in response to the horrors of war, he was in fact a British soldier, not an American and he wrote the poem in 1915, not 1917. However, I hope that the play is true to the spirit in which the poem was conceived and that the characters give voice to the feelings experienced by people who lived during the time of the Great War.

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In Flanders Fields

IN FLANDERS FIELDS

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

BY **KIMBERLY K. ZACH**

Family Plays

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098

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KIMBERLY K. ZACH

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(IN FLANDERS FIELDS)

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About the Play

In Flanders Fields tells the story of America's involvement in World War I and how it personally affected both the soldiers and those they left behind. The play opens with a note of patriotism as the soldier boys leave for France. In Scene Two, we see five soldiers as they experience life in the trenches and their philosophies about fighting and surviving. The focus of Scene Three switches to the women back in America, who are working for the first time in their lives. Through their conversation, we get a picture of life on the home front—lack of food, anti-German sentiment, the significance of women in the factories, and their worries for the men in France. Scene Four returns to France as the men are enjoying their last day of leave in a French café. In an ironic twist, one of the soldiers meets up with the woman he's been dreaming about. She is a Broadway singer who is in France to entertain the troops. The scene ends on a poignant note as the soldier must return to the trenches and the singer tells him to come see her on Broadway, "if...*when*...he makes it out of there alive." The finale begins with the poem "In Flanders Fields" and gathers all of the cast on the stage. Each main character says a line from his/her role and the play ends with the final two lines of the poem, "In Flanders Fields the poppies blow/between the crosses row on row."

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Scene One

Politician
Mother
Father
Son
Daughter
Schoolgirls
Boys
Women
Men

Scene Two

Jackson soldier, leader of the group
Hammer soldier, a lively jokester
O'Neill soldier, despises trench life
McCrae soldier, a quiet poet
Baptiste soldier, African-American, a practical fortune-teller;

Scene Three

Margaret wife/mother whose husband is fighting in France
Sophie loyal American of German heritage
Eleanor spoiled, self-centered girl
Lydia strong believer in women's rights
Rose brother is fighting in France

Scene Four

Albert Picard café owner
Yvette Picard's blonde daughter
Celine Picard's brown-haired daughter
Henri the accordion player
Lily Cantrell the American Broadway singer; red-headed
Soldiers same as in the trenches (scene two)
French patrons extras to round out the crowd in the café

Scene Five

Poem reader
All cast members

SYNOPSIS

Scene One A train station, in 1917
 Scene Two A trench, somewhere in France
 Scene Three A shipyard in America
 Scene Four An outdoor French café
 Scene Five The finale

First presented by Leigh High School, Leigh, Nebraska, on November 27, 2001, under the direction of Kim Zach with the following cast:

Politician Grant Janousek
 Mother Jamie Leirmann
 Father Matt Wiese
 Daughter Kristina Kingsley
 Son Ryan Hillen
 Schoolgirls Christa Hake, Tiffany Mullenhoff
 Boys Adam Jacot, Nate Wietfeld
 Women ... Melissa Machacek, Beth Davis, Erica Ehlers, Soshia Hollatz,
 Jennifer Maguire, Lisa Kempf
 Men . Cody Engel, Reed Settje, Josh Maneely, Drew Machmueller, Jake
 Kucera
 Jackson Keenan Leger
 Hammer Josh Gall
 O'Neill Nick Hollatz
 McCrae Joe Janousek
 Baptiste Darwin Ortez
 Margaret Erin Hake
 Sophie Tiffany Luedtke
 Eleanor Rachel Kuester
 Lydia Marci Wiemer
 Rose Brittany Maneely
 Yvette Amanda Weyers
 Celine Kristin Welsch
 Albert Picard Jeff Powell
 Henri Grant Janousek
 Lily Cantrell Elise Korte
 French patrons Cody Engel, Reed Settje
 Stage Crew: Amber Gall, Allison Hillen, Carrie Anderson, Angela Fuhr,
 Scott Kurpoweit, Aaron Schaad, Sean Malena, Justin Cech

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A few of the historical facts concerning the writing of the poem “In Flanders Fields” have been changed to fit the purposes of this play. While the poem was written by a man named McCrae in response to the horrors of war, the real John McCrae was a British soldier, not an American, and he wrote the poem in 1915, not 1917. However, I hope that the play is true to the spirit in which the poem was conceived and that the characters give voice to the feelings experienced by people who lived during the time of the Great War.

–Kim Zach

PRODUCTION NOTES

PROPERTIES

Scene One

American flags of different sizes on sticks
 Wooden box draped with bunting
 Handkerchief for Mother

Scene Two

Trench representation made of old lumber and sheets of corrugated tin
 Crates of various sizes and shapes
 Sandbags
 Socks for O'Neill (1 wet, 1 dry)
 2 or 3 books for McCrae
 Black notebook and pen for McCrae
 Wooden signs to hang on wire in the trench. The signs can say "Home Sweet Home", "To the Front" with an arrow, and "U.S.A. 4,078 mi." with an arrow.

Scene Three

Dock represented by two simple wooden benches
 Crates of various sizes
 Tin lunch pails
 Letters for Margaret and Rose

Scene Four

Three tables with flowered tablecloths
 Ten chairs
 Brown beer bottles
 Accordion for Henri
 Wine glasses and carafe
 Variety of flower pots with greenery and bright colored flowers
 Artificial potted trees or other tall plants
 Two panels 8' x 5' to represent café walls—covered in gray stucco and with window panes, shutters painted aqua blue

Scene Five

White crosses with poppies in the center
 Tall white candle for Poem Reader

SETTING

The time period is 1917-1918 when America joined the fighting in World War I.

Scene One takes place at a railroad station. It can be performed in front of the closed stage curtains. At center is a small platform decorated with red, white, and blue bunting.

Scene Two takes place in a trench in France. The trench is located below the stage, off to the audience's right. It is represented by a wall 14ft. long by 8 ft. tall. The wall is supported by two wing pieces extending out at a slight angle, each about 3ft. long. Wooden crates of different sizes and several sandbags are arranged on the floor of the trench.

Scene Three takes place at an American shipyard. The dock is located below the stage, off to the audience's left. It is represented by two simple benches placed at right angles to each other. Several wooden crates are arranged in front and to the side.

Scene Four takes place in an outdoor café. The café is located on the stage. There are three tables and several chairs at each. Two flats with a shuttered window in each represent the café walls. Plants and pots of flowers are scattered about to give an outdoor feel and there are flower indow boxes beneath each window.

MUSIC

“Goodbye Broadway, Hello France.” Words by Raymond B. Egan.
Music by Richard Whiting. Published by Jerome H. Remick & Co.,
Detroit, 1918

“Till We Meet Again.” Words by Francis Reisner and Benny Davis.
Music by Billy Baskette. Published by Leo Feist, Inc., New York, 1917

“Hinky Dinky Parlez Vous.” The origin of this song is uncertain and several versions exist. Tradition holds that it was written in 1915 by soldiers.

(The above music can be found on the Internet or at your local library.)

IN FLANDERS FIELDS

by Kimberly K. Zach

Scene One

[Right before the lights come up, we hear PATRIOTIC BAND MUSIC. Then we see the actors arranged in groups in front of the curtain. They are a large crowd which has gathered to hear a patriotic speech and say farewell to the departing soldiers. Some are holding and waving small American flags. The crowd cheers at appropriate moments during the speech. BAND MUSIC fades as the POLITICIAN enters, Center Stage, stepping up on a bunting-covered platform.]

POLITICIAN. *[Delivered with enthusiasm and rousing patriotism]* Today we say farewell to the brave boys of our town who have volunteered to join the Allied forces in Europe. These strong, healthy, and confident young men will offer hope to the war-weary people of France. Their fight will make the world safer for democracy. Many Americans first believed there was no good reason to get involved in a European conflict. But the United States can no longer ignore this war. The Germans torpedoed our ships and submarines when we were still neutral. Can we forget the *Lusitania*? All American civilians aboard that ship—128 of them—were killed. Germany's cruel and unjust actions are a threat to all of Western civilization. In the words of our great president, Woodrow Wilson, we will not simply be fighting *against* the enemy, we will be fighting *for* a better world. We have the chance to rescue Europe with the American ideals of democracy, self-government, and freedom. Our soldiers enter the battle as a supreme test of their manly virtue and their true patriotism. They are about to embark on an adventure that is both exhilarating and honorable. God bless their beautiful sacrifice which we pray will ensure a lasting and just peace, in what will surely be the war to end all future wars.

[The BAND MUSIC fades in as the POLITICIAN shakes hands of the crowd. A SCHOOLGIRL points to the train as the sound of TRAIN WHISTLE comes up. PEOPLE begin saying good-by, good-luck, God bless you. They are cheering and waving their flags]

MOTHER. Oh, I do hope Jimmy has his extra socks. *[Calling]* Son, don't let your feet get wet or you'll get chilled and catch a cold...*[She*

puts her handkerchief to her mouth and then turns her head into her husband's shoulder

[The WHISTLE fades as the LIGHTS go dim and then out. As the stage darkens we hear MUSIC from "Good-bye Broadway, Hello France." All CHARACTERS exit to Stage Right and Left. POLITICIAN leaves the stage through the middle of the curtains, taking the platform with him]

Scene Two

[The MUSIC transitions into Scene Two and then stops as the LIGHTS come up on the trench, situated below the stage to the right. The SOLDIERS are sitting on crates and sandbags]

O'NEILL. How in the hell's a man supposed to keep his socks dry when he has to live in two feet of mud? *[One boot and sock are off. He wrings out the wet sock and puts on a dry sock]*

JACKSON. At least it's stopped raining.

HAMMER. Yeah, twelve hours and no rain. Must be some kind of record.

JACKSON. Hey, McCrae. What's it say in that little black book of yours?

MCCRAE. *[Looking up from another book he has been intently reading]* Huh?

HAMMER. *[He speaks each word slowly and distinctly, as if trying to make McCrae understand]* How much rain? Your little black book.

JACKSON. You've been keeping score for us. What's it say?

MCCRAE. Oh. *[Finally coming to life, he puts the book he's been reading aside and pulls out a small black notebook]*

O'NEILL. *[Disgusted]* Criminetly! How many books does a guy need in a war, anyway?

MCCRAE. Let's see. *[Checking the date]* Today is April 9th...Since last October, only eighteen days when it hasn't rained. That means roughly...

JACKSON. ...we've spent more time being wet than dry.

O'NEILL. Geez! I coulda told you that and I didn't have to write it down in no book!

BAPTISTE. You know he writes everything down in there. Why do you give him trouble about that?

HAMMER. But he doesn't write normal stuff. He writes poetry for Pete's sake. Poetry! When any minute now, a Kaiser shell is going to whistle its way over here, land smack in the middle of this mudhole and splatter our parts out there in No Man's Land!

JACKSON. Maybe it's his way of dealing with our situation.

HAMMER. What are you? A philosopher?

JACKSON. Hammer, it's true. Look at us. Each of us has created for himself an escape. You make jokes about everthing, McCrae loses himself in his reading, and O'Neill...

O'NEILL. *[Interrupting]* Our "situation"? Cripes, this ain't a situation. This is a...a...a...

JACKSON. *[Resignedly]* ...complains a lot.

BAPTISTE. Perhaps you would have a larger vocabulary if you would have more respect for books.

O'NEILL. Oh, yeah? Well here's a little poem I wrote myself that describes our "situation"... *[He stands, brushes himself off, clears his throat, etc., recites in a sarcastic manner, and then bows with a flourish]*

I've a stinking wet home in a trench
Where the rainstorms continually drench
I sleep in mud for a bed
My friends are all dead
And the Germans won't move an inch.

HAMMER. *[Laughing and clapping]* Bravo, bravo. Brilliant, O'Neill. You're a poet and we didn't know it.

JACKSON. Well, McCrae, can you top that? It won't be easy. *[Knowing full well McCrae's writing is literature, while O'Neill's is not]*

MCCRAE. Uh... *[Hesitates to share because he's wary of O'Neill]*

HAMMER. Come on. Tell us what you've been writing in there...besides counting raindrops.

O'NEILL. Probably love poetry or—ha!—flowers.

MCCRAE. Actually, I have written a poem with flower symbolism. It's called "In Flanders Fields".

O'NEILL. Oh, geez!

BAPTISTE. Ignore this idiot. Read it to us.

MCCRAE. "In Flanders fields the poppies blow/
Between the crosses
row on row/
That mark our place and in the sky...

HAMMER. [*Recognizing the description*] Hey, you're writing about the battle near that cemetery.

MCCRAE. Yes. I intend to record my war experiences through poetry.

O'NEILL. Why do you want to do a damn fool thing like that? The minute I get out of here I'm going to forget it all. This stinkin' uniform, the lice, the monkey meat in a can...which, by the way, the rats don't mind eating cold, but I do...the surprised look on a guy's face when he gets a bellyful of shrapnel...yep, when I get out of here...

HAMMER. *If you get out of here...*

JACKSON. Which is exactly why, gentlemen, that you should live until you die.

BAPTISTE. Ah ha! You *are* a philosopher!

JACKSON. Is there any better time for philosophy than when a man thinks there's a pretty good chance he won't be around tomorrow!

O'NEILL. Live until you die? That makes no sense.

HAMMER. He means "live it *up* until you die." Right, Jackson?

JACKSON. Well, that's where philosophy comes in. You apply the principle to your own situation. If living to you means simply "living it up," then by all means, do so.

O'NEILL. Living it up? Now *that* I understand! When I get home... [*He pauses, gestures at Hammer and says as a warning*] shut up!... I'm going to find me a soft little blonde, an all-night party, and a big bottle of bubbly...and that's when I start forgetting.

JACKSON. I don't think you're going to have to wait quite that long.

HAMMER. What do you mean?

MCCRAE. [*Checking a notation in his black notebook*] He means we will be going on leave in two days.

HAMMER. [*Rejoicing in disbelief*] On leave? On leave? Thank God for you and your little black book, McCrae, or we might have missed it.

JACKSON. Gentlemen, shall we take a jaunt into the village and see if we can recall what civilized living is? A little café there welcomes American soldiers. We're heroes. [*The others start to posture and admire themselves, etc.*] They cheered us when we paraded through Paris, fresh doughboys just off the boat from New York last summer. We were impressive—tall, healthy, unspoiled by life in the trenches. Now look at us...we're as pitiful as the French and British guys who've been fighting for three years. [*Pausing to smile*] But we're still handsome.

BAPTISTE. [*Teasing O'Neill*] I don't believe there will be any blonde French girls.

HAMMER. Do they have to be blonde? A girl's a girl.

JACKSON. My philosophy would force me to disagree with you there, Hammer. I myself am partial to redheads.

BAPTISTE. *[To O'Neill]* Besides, French girls speak French. You will not understand if they say "I love you."

O'NEILL. And I suppose you will?

BAPTISTE. Oui monsieur. Je parle francais. Je parle bien le francais. (Yes, sir. I speak French. I speak it very well)

O'NEILL. *[Doesn't know what it means, but can recognize it as French]* Oh, man!

HAMMER. All right! Baptiste, stick by me. I'm gonna need a translator for the uh...uh...uh...

BAPTISTE. La mademoiselles?

HAMMER. Yeah! *[He crudely pronounces the words]* La mademoiselles.

O'NEILL. *[To Baptiste]* How's a black guy like you know how to speak French?

BAPTISTE. I am from New Orleans. My mother was a Creole—half French, half black.

O'NEILL. So why would a black guy want to fight America's war?

BAPTISTE. I am an American. And I want to prove that I have the right to be your equal.

HAMMER. Back home, you and I can't even drink out of the same water fountain.

BAPTISTE. *[Ironically]* But here we are, living together in the same six feet of mud.

[All sit in silence for a few moments as what Baptiste has said soaks in. MCCRAE starts writing, as if this has given him an idea]

O'NEILL. *[Breaking the silence]* Hey, Jackson. What'd you mean before when you said you was partial to redheads?

JACKSON. I mean that I find redheads more attractive than blondes. And there's one redhead in particular. Although my chances of ever courting her are about as good as, say, your chances of finding a blonde French girl, or Hammer's chances of finding *any* girl. *[They all laugh]*

HAMMER. *[Grudgingly takes the insult, but growls the question]* Who is she?

JACKSON. I saw her in a Broadway musical last year. O'Neill, Broadway is...

O'NEILL. I know what Broadway is. I'm not that ignorant.

JACKSON. Her name is Lily Cantrell. And she sings like an angel.

O'NEILL. A redheaded angel? Angels in pictures are always blonde.

JACKSON. Nevertheless, an angel she is.

BAPTISTE. Perhaps you will meet her face to face someday?

JACKSON. I doubt it. Besides, something tells me I'm not going to make it back to New York.

HAMMER. What? How can you say that? What happened to your philosophy?

BAPTISTE. Jackson, give me your hand. *[He doesn't want to, but Baptiste insists]* My grandmother had the gift of sight. She told the fortunes of many people in New Orleans, black and white. She taught me how to read palms, so...I read yours? *[JACKSON finally holds out his hand. BAPTISTE turns the palm up and studies it]* Look at your lifeline. See where it goes so long? You will live a long life.

O'NEILL. *[Thrusting his hand towards Baptiste]* Baptiste, what does mine say?

HAMMER. *[Does the same]* Yeah, read mine...am I gonna make it out of here in one piece?

BAPTISTE. *[Ignoring them and looking intently at Jackson's palm]* Ahhhh! Very interesting. It also tells me that you will see this redhead soon. *[Looks at Jackson and says convincingly]* ...Very soon.

JACKSON. *[Not believing him at all]* Right! She's going to put on a uniform and grab a gun and sail over here from New York. *[Looking up to the top of the trench]* Why, any minute now she'll be jumping into this trench singing, "Good-bye Broadway, Hello France!"

BAPTISTE. You don't believe me. *[JACKSON shakes his head]* You will see.

JACKSON. Thanks, Baptiste, but I'm not going to pin my hopes on something I don't believe. I'll dream about Lily. Dreams can help a guy over a rough spot. But I won't hope. That's not part of my philosophy. And you can put that down in your little black book, McCrae.

MCCRAE. I already have, Jackson.

JACKSON. OK, gentlemen, now that we've settled mine, let's talk about your future. In two days this trench is going to be a distant memory. Well, at least for a little while. How would you like me to teach you everything you need to know while we're out on leave? Especially when we get to that little French café.

[They all clamor in anticipation and agreement. JACKSON sings the

following verses and they gradually join in on the lines “parlez vous” and “hinky dinky parlez vous”]

Mademoiselle from Armentiers, parlez vous.
 Mademoiselle from Armentiers, parlez vous.
 Mademoiselle from Armentiers, she hasn't been kissed in
 forty years.
 Hinky dinky parlez vous.

Farmer, you have a daughter fair, parlez vous.
 Farmer, you have a daughter fair, parlez vous.
 Farmer, you have a daughter fair, to wash a poor soldier's
 underwear.
 Hinky dinky parlez vous.

You may forget the gas and shells, parlez vous.
 You may forget the gas and shells, parlez vous.
 You may forget the gas and shells, you'll never forget
 the mademoiselles.
 Hinky dinky parlez vous.

[The LIGHTS go out]

Scene Three

[The LIGHTS come up on the dock, situated below the stage to the left. The FIVE WOMEN WORKERS are having a lunch break from their jobs as welders. All, except Margaret, are sitting on the benches and crates. MARGARET stands to the center back and moves toward the bench to sit]

MARGARET. Well, girls, what's in the lunch pails today?
 SOPHIE. Same thing that's in there every day...bread and vegetables.
 ELEANOR. Ugh! And the bread's not even real bread. It's alfalfa bread...and it's green. Why should I have to eat green bread?
 LYDIA. You know that the wheat has to be saved for the soldiers overseas.
 ROSE. Better to eat green bread than no bread at all.
 ELEANOR. I don't know about that. And the vegetables! How many vegetables can a girl eat before she's absolutely sick of vegetables?