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Booth Tarkington's

The Gentleman From Indiana



*Adapted
by
James Still*



"This hopeful tale of small-town Hoosier life from the turn of the century ... is an upbeat, old-fashioned tale of virtue beating out greed and graft, and of the down-home integrity of small-town rural life."

—WTHR-NBC, Indianapolis

The Gentleman From Indiana

Drama. By James Still. From the novel by Booth Tarkington. Cast: 11m., 4w., 2 children. May be expanded. When John Harkless, a decent optimist and the new owner and editor of the local newspaper, arrives in Plattville, Indiana, in 1889, he discovers that the tiny, dying town has long been represented in Congress by a corrupt political machine. In spite of threats to his life, Harkless—who bears a resemblance to Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*—is determined to take on the bad guys and restore justice and pride to a community long in need of both. In the process he also discovers the true meaning of home in the unlikely of places. *The Gentleman From Indiana* is an ensemble play with a Thornton Wilder-like cast of eccentric characters who populate the town of fictional Plattville, including a brass band consisting of one lone tuba player. There is also a thoroughly modern young woman with a secret who not only gets the guy but saves his newspaper by becoming its editor in a most surprising way. Booth Tarkington's hugely successful novel was a celebration of compassion, decency, love, courage and integrity. More than a century later, James Still's fresh, vibrant, and lovingly crafted stage adaptation now makes it a compelling and relevant tale for contemporary theatre audiences. *Unit set. Approximate running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes. Code: G82.*

Jason Bradley and Emily Ristine in the Indiana Repertory Theatre, Indianapolis, Ind., premier production of Booth Tarkington's *The Gentleman From Indiana*.

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The Gentleman From Indiana

By
JAMES STILL

Based on the novel
by
BOOTH TARKINGTON



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(THE GENTLEMAN FROM INDIANA)

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“*The Gentleman From Indiana* was originally commissioned and produced by the Indiana Repertory Theatre, Indianapolis, Ind., Janet Allen, Artistic Director.”

The Gentleman From Indiana was commissioned by the Indiana Repertory Theatre, Janet Allen, artistic director, and premiered at the IRT on September 15, 2006. Direction was by Peter Amster. Scenic designer was Russell Metheny; costume designer was Mara Blumenfeld; lighting designer was Anne Wrightson; composer was Gregg Coffin; sound designer was Todd Mack Reischmann; dramaturge was Richard J Roberts. Stage manager was Nathan Garrison. The cast was:

Caleb Landis	Sawyer Harvey
Lum Landis	Daniel Scharbrough
Hazel Landis	Jessica Berns
Mrs. Landis	Catherine Lynn Davis
Old Tom Martin	Mark Goetzing
Miss Selina Tibbs	Jan Lucas
Judge Briscoe	Joseph Culliton
Sheriff Jim Bardlock	Adam O. Crowe
Homer Tibbs	Robert K. Johansen
John Harkless	Jason Bradley
Xenophon Gibbs	David Alan Anderson
Fisbee	Robert Elliott
Young William Todd	Tom Conner
Rodney McCune	Charles Goad
Kedge Halloway	Charles Goad
Helen Sherwood	Emily Ristine
Minnie Briscoe	PJ Maske
Bob Skillet	Charles Goad
Tom Meredith	Jason Marr
Martha Sherwood	Catherine Lynn Davis
Mr. Macauley	Charles Goad

The Gentleman From Indiana

A Play in Two Acts

CHARACTERS:

CALEB LANDIS
LUM LANDIS
HAZEL LANDIS
MRS. LANDIS
OLD TOM MARTIN
MISS SELINA TIBBS
JUDGE BRISCOE
SHERIFF JIM BARDLOCK
HOMER TIBBS
JOHN HARKLESS
ZEN (XENOPHON) GIBBS
FISBEE
YOUNG WILLIAM TODD
RODNEY MCCUNE
KEDGE HALLOWAY
HELEN SHERWOOD
MINNIE BRISCOE
BOB SKILLET
TOM MEREDITH
MARTHA SHERWOOD
MR. MACAULEY

TIME: 1889 and 1894.

PLACE: Plattville and Rouen, Indiana.

For Janet Allen—a true Hoosier if ever there was one.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

IN THE DARK we hear a loud train whistle—long and sad—followed by the *SOUND* of a steam-powered train pulling out of a train depot.

LIGHTS UP: Mid-morning. September 7, 1894. Plattville, Indiana. The local depot is heavily decorated with red, white and blue bunting. *SEVERAL CITIZENS OF PLATTVILLE* silently look off toward the *SOUND* of the departed train disappearing in the distance. It's an iconic image of small-town Americana: a young boy sitting on his father's shoulders to get a better view, women dressed in their Sunday best and holding umbrellas to block the bright morning sun. Men wearing suits and smoking cigars. There's even a small brass band among the crowd—so small that it's only one tuba—and the tuba player (*YOUNG WILLIAM TODD*) breaks the crowd's disappointed silence with a loud musical *SPLAT* that perfectly captures the frustration of the moment. Everyone holds little American flags but no one waves them.

A young boy (*CALEB LANDIS*) sits impatiently on his father's shoulders. Caleb's big sister *HAZEL* holds onto her father's hand.

CALEB LANDIS (*from his father's shoulders*). Where is he, Pa? How can there be a homecoming if he doesn't come home?

LUM LANDIS. He's coming, he'll be here.

HAZEL LANDIS. When? You said he'd be on THAT train.

YOUNG WILLIAM TODD. Is he coming or not?

MRS. LANDIS. They said he's coming, he's coming.

(This quickly dissolves into everyone in the crowd arguing with one another. The growing disagreement is interrupted by an old man in his 60s [OLD TOM MARTIN] running on out of breath, waving a yellow telegram.)

OLD TOM MARTIN. He's coming, he's coming! By God, he's a-comin'! They missed the train! He's on the NEXT one, he's on the 12:55!

(The mood immediately erupts into celebration: flags are suddenly waving, folks are cheering, and the brass band starts to play an uptempo version of Stephen Foster's "Beautiful Dreamer." But the celebration only lasts for a few precious moments—just long enough for folks to realize they have more time on their hands. The brass band stops playing.)

HAZEL LANDIS. What are we going to do now, Pa?

LUM LANDIS. We're going to wait.

CALEB LANDIS. For how much longer?

LUM LANDIS. For as long as it takes him to get here.

CALEB LANDIS. But I'm tired of waiting.

MRS. LANDIS. Hush, Caleb. Don't talk back to your father.

CALEB LANDIS. Yes, ma'am. (*Muttering:*) But I don't see why we have to do all this waitin' just to see him come home.

(*OLD TOM goes to CALEB and helps him down from LUM's tired shoulders.*)

OLD TOM MARTIN (*chuckling*). Well, son. As always, there's a little more to the story.

(*MISS SELINA TIBBS steps up, a spinster and the town historian.*)

MISS SELINA TIBBS. There is a fertile stretch of flat lands in Indiana...where unagrarian Eastern travelers, glancing from train windows, shudder and return their eyes to interior upholstery, preferring even the swaying of a Pullman to the monotony beyond—

HAZEL LANDIS. What's "unagrarian" mean?

MRS. LANDIS. Shush, Hazel. Listen to the story.

OLD TOM MARTIN. The landscape in Indiana is a flat lonesomeness, miles and miles with not even one cool hill that slopes away from the sun.

MISS SELINA TIBBS. The persistent tourist who seeks for signs of man in this expanse perceives a reckless amount of fence-rail; at intervals a large barn; and here and there, Man himself.

OLD TOM MARTIN. Nobody ever came to Plattville, Indiana.

JUDGE BRISCOE. Except the occasional business traveler—

SHERIFF JIM BARDLOCK. —who got out of town the instant it was possible!

HOMER TIBBS. And said awful things if by the limitations of the railway timetable they were left in Plattville overnight!

(The CROWD laughs at this truth.)

The SOUND of a tired train whistle wails in the distance like memory and a blanket of steam/smoke begins to fill the space, covering the scene like fog.)

MISS SELINA TIBBS. But one afternoon five years ago a young man from the East alighted on the platform of this very railway station...

(A loud train whistle.)

SCENE TWO

When the train's steam begins to clear—all of the people and decorations have gone. We're at the same train station five years earlier, 1889. But it looks rundown, sad, on its way out. It's a gray spring day.

JOHN HARKLESS—a tall young man of 24—steps off the train, looking around, a stranger in a strange land. He calls to the only other person at the station—An ancient black man (ZEN) —who sits on an old crate whittling a piece of wood.

HARKLESS. Excuse me, sir? I wonder if you might tell me where one could find the office of the Carlow County Herald.

ZEN. The newspaper?

HARKLESS. That's right.

ZEN. Well I don't reckon why anyone would want to find the office of the Carlow County Herald. That unlucky newspaper is a thorn in the side of every patriot of Carlow County. Yes, sir, it's a poor paper, everybody knows it's a poor paper, it's such a poor paper that everybody ADMITS that it's a poor paper. What business might you have with such a poor, poor paper?

HARKLESS. I'm the new OWNER of that poor, poor paper! (*ZEN looks at HARKLESS, unsure what will happen. But HARKLESS busts out laughing, extends a hand.*) Name's Harkless. John Harkless.

(ZEN looks around, surprised at the white man's friendliness, then shakes his hand.)

ZEN. Xenophon Gibbs. Folks just call me Zen.

(HARKLESS is already moving, bags in hand.)

HARKLESS. That's fine. Give me a hand with my things, won't you, Zen?

(HARKLESS and ZEN exit the train station and begin their "tour" of Plattville. As they walk, the set changes, the facades of buildings appear. Citizens of Plattville fill out the picture—like a painting, a typical day in the life of small-town Indiana, 1889. OLD TOM and MISS

TIBBS continue telling the story to CALEB and HAZEL as HARKLESS and ZEN walk by...

MISS SELINA TIBBS. And so our Mr. John Harkless had arrived in Plattville, Indiana.

HARKLESS. And this is the main street, is it?

ZEN (*nodding*). In the winter, it's just frozen gullies; in fall and spring, a river of mud; and in the summer it's a never-ending dust-heap. It's the best street in Plattville.

(Folks look up and stare at HARKLESS as he walks along Main Street with ZEN.)

OLD TOM MARTIN. Folks looked up from their conversations with that pity an American feels for a fellow who does not live in their town.

(HARKLESS stops and looks around at the citizens of Plattville looking back at him. He addresses them all:)

HARKLESS. Name is Harkless. I'm the new owner of the Carlow County Herald.

HOMER TIBBS. How much you pay for it?

HARKLESS. Just about all the money I had in the world.

LUM LANDIS. Well, you vastly overpaid.

HARKLESS. Then I have no choice but to stay.

OLD TOM MARTIN (*to HARKLESS*). People don't come to Plattville to STAY, son, except through the misfortune of being born here. (*Extends a warm hand.*) Tom Martin, postmaster here in Plattville.

HARKLESS. Good to make your acquaintance.

(The ice has been broken, folks crowd around HARKLESS and introduce themselves.)

LUM LANDIS. Columbus Landis—folks here call me “Lum.” I own the Palace Hotel.

(CALEB LANDIS runs through the crowd, pretending to shoot a gun.)

LUM LANDIS *(cont’d)*. That’s my boy, Caleb. His big sister, Hazel. And this here’s my wife, Mrs. Landis.

MRS. LANDIS. I make the best peach cobbler in Carlow County, Mr. Harkless. You’ll come by the Palace dining room often, I hope.

HOMER TIBBS. Homer Tibbs, Tibbs Dry Goods Emporium. And this is my sister Miss Selina Tibbs. She’s even younger than she looks.

JIM BARDLOCK. Jim Bardlock, town marshall.

JUDGE BRISCOE. Judge Briscoe. That’s the courthouse there with the fence where farmers can hitch their teams.

OLD TOM MARTIN. That fence is low so that even the most matronly hen can fly over it with propriety.

YOUNG WILLIAM TODD *(introducing self to HARKLESS)*. William Todd—proud member of the Plattville brass band.

ZEN *(to HARKLESS)*. The ONLY member of the Plattville brass band.

HARKLESS. So what IS the population of Plattville?

JIM BARDLOCK. Oh, folks say that our city has a population of five to six thousand souls.

JUDGE BRISCOE *(dry)*. It’s easy to forgive them for such false statements: civic pride is a virtue.

(Laughter is drowned out by the drunken singing of an old man [FISBEE] who stumbles up the street singing Stephen Foster's "Hard Times Come Again No More.")

FISBEE *(singing)*.

*"'Tis the sigh, the sigh of the weary,
Hard times, hard times, come again no more.
Many days you have lingered around my cabin door
Oh hard times, come again no more."*

(Continues singing under:)

ZEN. That's the professor—

OLD TOM MARTIN. —also known as the town's professional drunkard.

HOMER TIBBS. His God-given name is Fisbee—

MRS. LANDIS. —the one soul in town with an unknown past.

MISS SELINA TIBBS. There's a dark secret hiding in his life, that much we know for sure.

OLD TOM MARTIN. Looky here, Mr. Fisbee. It's the new editor of the Herald.

(FISBEE suddenly stops singing and looks at HARKLESS for the first time.)

FISBEE. *Habemus Papam!* (Latin: "We have a pope!")

HARKLESS. My Latin's a little rusty, but I believe he just called me the pope.

(FISBEE starts to stumble away.)

HARKLESS *(cont'd., calling after him)*. *Absit invidia.*
(Latin: "No offense intended.")

FISBEE (*stops and looks at HARKLESS, surprised*). None taken. (*FISBEE tips his hat, raising a bottle to the town.*) *In vino veritas!* (Latin: “In wine is truth!”)

(*FISBEE stumbles away singing. HARKLESS stops when he sees the most rundown, unwelcoming building on Main Street.*)

HARKLESS. Zen? What’s that poor, poor building there?

ZEN. Good sir, that poor poor building belongs to your poor poor newspaper.

(*HARKLESS looks at it, crosses to the front door where a handwritten note has been posted.*)

HARKLESS (*reading*). It says: “Be Back in One Hour.” (*HARKLESS takes the note from the door and holds it closer to his eyes.*)

ZEN. What is it, sir?

HARKLESS. Someone has added the word, “Why????”

ZEN. I told you, sir. It’s a poor poor paper.

HARKLESS. Do you have a job, Zen?

ZEN. Well, sir, not presently. I do work here and there, little bit of this, little bit of that.

HARKLESS. How would you like to come work for the Herald?

ZEN. What kind of work would I do?

HARKLESS. Little bit of this, little bit of that. (*HARKLESS and ZEN shake hands.*) Come on, we’ve got a newspaper to get out.

(HARKLESS and ZEN begin cleaning up the Herald building inside and out. They continue activity as:)

HOMER TIBBS *(reading newspaper)*. “Mr. Bill Snoddy bought a colt at public sale, and the animal kicked him to death shortly after reaching home.”

MRS. LANDIS. “Cynthy Tipworthy swallowed a needle six years ago and it has just worked itself out at her knee.”

LUM LANDIS. “From Around Our State: Pinkeye is killing large numbers of cattle in Hamilton County.”

YOUNG WILLIAM TODD. “Fort Wayne has furnished the latest ghost story.”

SELINA TIBBS. “A Valparaiso boy has gone insane from smoking too many cigarettes.”

FISBEE. “Grapevines in Jeffersonville are producing a second crop.”

JUDGE BRISCOE. “DePauw College will have theological lectures.”

JIM BARDLOCK. “Burglars are annoying Terre Haute.”

OLD TOM MARTIN. “The Seymour Fair was a failure.”

HARKLESS. “And a reminder that elections in Carlow County will occur later this year as scheduled. The Herald implores you to vote. Voting is not only a man’s privilege, but his duty.”

SCENE THREE

Afternoon. The Herald office. HARKLESS sits at his desk and writes longhand. ZEN putters in the background.