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Dramatic Publishing

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963

By

REGINALD ANDRÉ JACKSON

Based upon the book by

CHRISTOPHER PAUL CURTIS



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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(THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM—1963)

“Mother to Son”
From *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*
by Langston Hughes
Edited by Arnold Rampersad with David Roessel, Associate Editor
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ISBN: 978-1-58342-647-0

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The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963

CHARACTERS

KENNY 10 years old.

BYRON . . His brother. A 13-year-old juvenile delinquent.

JOETTA His sister. 6 years old.

WILONA The mother. 30s.

DANIEL. The father. 30s.

BUPHEAD Friend to Byron. 14 years old.

GRANDMA SANDS . . . Mother to Wilona. Has suffered a
slight stroke. Late 50s.

MRS. DAVIDSON. A Sunday school teacher.

MR. ALUMS A school teacher.

LARRY DUNN. A bully. 12 years old.

RUFUS Friend to Kenny. 10 years old.

CODY Brother to Rufus. 8 years old.

MR. ROBERT Friend to Grandma Sands. 50s.

MR. MITCHELL A store owner.

WEATHERMAN / DJ (Voice only)

GIRL (Stylized) 6 years old.

WOOL POOH (Movement only)

SMOKE POOH (Movement only)

Breakdown with Possible Doublings

(If given a choice, I highly recommend using adult actors in all roles.)

Actors cast as members of immediate Watson family (Kenny, Byron, Wilona, Joetta and Daniel) should have no doubling assignments.

- 1) Grandma Sands / Mrs. Davidson
- 2) Mr. Alums / Mr. Robert / Weatherman (voice)
/ DJ (voice) / Mr. Mitchell

Wool Pooh and Smoke Pooh

There is much freedom of choice here as the performer's face is covered and the body obscured.

Buphead, Larry Dunn, Rufus and Cody are the obvious roles to double with either Pooh. One actor has time to easily tackle both haints, or each wraith may have a separate actor.

- Example:
- 3) Larry Dunn / Smoke Pooh
 - 4) Cody / Wool Pooh

Another option is to cast a dancer, could be female, to do both pieces. She could also play Cody. You can also use her to represent "Girl."

The Brown Bomber and the Scenic Elements

I believe it is best to approach the staging of this play in much the same way Shakespeare tackled his plays.

*“Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them,
Printing their proud hoofs I’th’receiving earth;
For ’tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there, jumping o’er times...”*

There is no car. There is no snow. Well before the Watsons head out for Birmingham we must visit several locations; many only once. A simplistic indication of place and time augmented by lights and sound is best. This allows scenes to dovetail on one another, eliminating cumbersome scene changes.

There are several opportunities for heightened theatricality. The more we can externalize Kenny’s imagination the better. This goes beyond the Wool Pooh sections to include him hearing Byron on the set of his WWII movie and discovering Rufus as his personal savior. If we are allowed to envision the girls on the way to the church, we will feel for them after the bombing. The scenes involving the Brown Bomber should have the same sense of magical realism, allowing each audience member to create his or her own Brown Bomber.

Note on Music

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ACT ONE

Scene One

(Soft lights. Morning sounds: early summer. Before us is a representation of the Watson family car: the Brown Bomber. We're introduced to DANIEL, who is leaning halfway out of the car, "Preparing for takeoff." WILONA, his wife, waits as their daughter, JOETTA, is climbing into the Bomber. KENNY, their son, sits patiently in the Great Brown One's back seat. DANIEL stands. WILONA consults her book. Their older son, BYRON, is slumped in the doorway of the family house.)

DANIEL. All right, Byron.

WILONA. Daniel—I've worked out all our bathroom breaks. At the second one we can each have a sandwich. Today is tuna fish. Tomorrow is peanut butter and jelly. Today we drive for three hundred miles.

JOETTA. Three hundred miles in one day?

WILONA. In Cincinnati we'll get a room in a motel. You kids will sleep on the floor. *(She faces BYRON.)* Get a move on, Daddy Cool. *(As she climbs into the car, JOETTA interrupts her by climbing out.)*

JOETTA. Wait. *(BYRON slouches toward the car. JOETTA runs into the house.)*

WILONA. Tomorrow: Day Two. Now your daddy and this car aren't as young as they used to be so we don't want

to push either one of them too hard. So we rise and shine real early and drive for five or six hours. That should put us right outside of Knoxville, Tennessee.

KENNY. Momma, how come we don't just drive until Dad gets tired, then stop?

DANIEL (*with his best hillbilly impersonation*). 'Cuz, boy, this he-uh is the deep South you-all is gonna be drivin' thoo. What's the mattah wit' choo, you thank this he-uh is Uhmurica? Y'all colored folks can't be jes' pullin' up tuh any ol' way-uh an be expectin' to get no room uh no food.

(*The WATSONS laugh. JOETTA returns holding a stuffed doll, with a white face bearing wings and a halo.*)

WILONA. Quit playin', Daniel. If we sleep in the car outside Knoxville we can stop for hamburgers once on the way there. I'm sure Grandma Sands will have everything set for the way back.

JOETTA. OK.

DANIEL. Everyone gone to the bathroom...then we're off.

(*The Brown Bomber bursts to life.*)

KENNY. Wait! (*All action and sound stop. KENNY steps out of the car and into a shaft of light. He addresses the audience.*) It was one of those super-duper-cold Saturdays.

(*Lights and sound shift. DANIEL, WILONA and JOETTA slog their way to the front door of the Watson*

house, [pulling out gloves, scarves and coats, the while]. They enter. As they fight the wind, we hear its sound coupled with that of crunching snow. BUPHEAD enters joining BYRON. BUPHEAD's hair is shellacked. He may have earmuffs, but a hat will never grace a strand of his immaculately straightened, James Brown-styled, hairdo. He hands BYRON his winter gear.)

BYRON. Ahh, thanks, Buphead. Man, it's so cold out here that if you spit, I bet the slob would be an ice cube before it hit the ground.

KENNY (*to audience*). It could maybe have started before this, but it for sure started with my brother Byron, who was bad weather all by hisself.

BYRON. Say, kid, you wanna learn somethin' that might save your stupid life one day?

KENNY. What's that?

BYRON. We gonna teach you how to survive a blizzard. This is the most important thing to remember, OK? (*BYRON puts his hands in front of his face. KENNY mirrors him.*)

KENNY. OK.

BYRON. OK, first thing you gotta worry about is high winds. (*BYRON and BUPHEAD take KENNY by his arms and proceed to swing him about.*) Wooo, blizzard warnings!

BUPHEAD. Blizzard warnings!

BYRON. Wooo!

BUPHEAD. Take cover! (*The two spin KENNY around and throw him in the snowbank.*)

BYRON. Cool, baby bruh. What you think, Buphead? He kept his balance a good long time, I'm gonna give him a A-minus.

BUPHEAD. I ain't as hard a grader as you, I'ma give the little punk a double A-minus.

BYRON. OK, Kenny, you passed, but now we gotta see if you ready to graduate. Buphead, tell him about the final exam. (*Behind KENNY's back, BYRON begins to shove snow into his mouth.*)

BUPHEAD. OK, square, I wanna make sure you don't blow it at graduation time, You 'member what Byron said about puttin' your hands up?

KENNY (*raises his gloves to his face*). Like this?

BUPHEAD. Yeah, that's it! (*BYRON now ready, cues BUPHEAD, who says:*) *Wooo!* High winds, blowing snow! Look out. Blizzard a-comin'! *Wooo!* Death around the corner! Look out!

BYRON. Keh-ee! Keh-ee!

(KENNY turns to BYRON, whose hands are prepped to apply pressure to his now chipmunkish cheeks. As the great BYRON zit is popped, the stage is flooded in light. KENNY turns to the audience, his face now dripping wet.)

BUPHEAD. Awww, man, you flunked!

BYRON. Bruh! You done so good, then you go and flunk the Blowin' Snow section. You forgot to put your hands up! F!

BUPHEAD. Yeah, double F-minus!

(BUPHEAD and BYRON celebrate. DANIEL appears in the doorway. KENNY moves toward the house. BYRON and BUPHEAD part ways, BUPHEAD exiting while BYRON and KENNY enter the house.)

DANIEL. Boys, come in; help us generate some heat.

Scene Two

(Inside the Watson home. DANIEL, WILONA and JOETTA huddle on the couch. BYRON and KENNY enter.)

(KENNY joins the huddled family as they sit and shiver. BYRON primps in front of a mirror, patting his hair.)

WILONA. I'll never know why I let you drag me from Alabama to this giant icebox.

BYRON. Dad, can I get a process?

DANIEL/WILONA. No!

DANIEL. You can see what's on Channel 12.

(BYRON grudgingly moves to the TV and turns it on. Light from a local Flint station splashes across the family's freezing faces. The WATSONS huddle together for warmth, except BYRON who sits on the farthest end of the couch. He will not be touched. A weather report is heard.)

WEATHERMAN. If you think it's cold now, wait until tonight. In fact, we won't be seeing anything above zero

for the next four to five days! Yet, here's a little something to brighten our spirits: The temperature in Atlanta, Georgia, is forecast to reach— (*DANIEL begins coughing over the WEATHERMAN. He rushes to the set and pushes the power button*) the mid-seventies.

WILONA. Atlanta! That's a hundred and fifty miles from home.

DANIEL. Wilona—

WILONA. "I'm all the home you need: Just come away with me." Humph. All the places you could have brought me. I know I should have listened to Moses.

DANIEL. Oh Lord, not that sorry story. Let me tell it.

WILONA. There's not a lot to tell, just a young girl who made a bad choice.

DANIEL. Kids, you guys came real close to having a clown for a daddy named Hambone Henderson.

WILONA. Daniel Watson, you stop right there. You're the one that started that "Hambone" nonsense. Moses was a respectable boy.

DANIEL. I can't help the boy had a head shaped just like a hambone, head had more knots and bumps than a dinosaur. Kids, Hambone proposed to your mother around the same time I did. Fought dirty, too, told your momma a pack of lies about me and Flint— (*DANIEL imitates Hambone. Hambone has a thick Southern accent.*) "Wilona, I heard tell about the weather up in Flint, Mitch-again, folks there live in these things called igloos. Don't believe I seen nan one colored person in the whole dang city. You a 'Bama gal, don't believe you'd like no whale meat. Don't taste a lick like chicken."

WILONA. Daniel Watson, you are one lying man! Only thing you said was true was Flint is like living in an ig-

loo. Maybe these babies mighta been born with lumpy heads, but at least they'da had warm lumpy heads! You know Birmingham is a good place, and I don't just mean the weather. The life is slower, the people are friendlier—

DANIEL. Oh yeah, they're a laugh a minute down there. Where was that "Coloreds only" bathroom downtown?

WILONA. Things aren't perfect, Daniel, but people there are more honest about how they feel. (*WILONA trains her focus on BYRON. DANIEL goes to the phone and dials a number.*) And folks there know how to respect their parents.

DANIEL. Cydney just had that new furnace put in; maybe we can spend the night there. Boys, get out there and knock those windows out.

(BYRON and KENNY move outside to the car. KENNY starts to scrape ice off the windows.)

KENNY. I'm not going to do your part, Byron, and I'm not playing either.

BYRON. Shut up, punk.

KENNY. I'm serious, Byron, I'm not doing that side, too. I don't care what you do to me.

BYRON. You know what, square? I must be adopted, there just ain't no way two folks as ugly as your momma and daddy coulda give birth to someone as sharp as me.

KENNY. Forget you!

BYRON. Keh-ee, Keh-ee.

KENNY. You think I'm stupid?

BYRON. Hel', Keh-

KENNY. It's not going to work this time, By.

BYRON. Keh-ee, hel' me! Hel' me! Go geh Momma! Geh Momma! Huwwy uh!

KENNY. I'm not playing, Byron! You'd better start doing your side or I'll tear you up with this iceball.

BYRON. Oh, please, Keh-ee, go geh Momma!

KENNY (*starts as he sees BYRON's lips frozen to the Brown Bomber's mirror*). By! What's wrong?

BYRON. Keh-ee! Go geh hel'!

(*KENNY bolts for the house and through the front door.*)

DANIEL. Close that door!

KENNY. Momma, quick! It's By! He's froze up outside! (*Beat.*) Really! He's froze to the car! Help! (*No one responds.*) He's crying!

WILONA/DANIEL/JOETTA. Crying!

WILONA. Kenneth Bernard Watson, what on earth are you talking about?

KENNY. He's shootin' out boogers and droppin' big juicy crybaby tears. Momma, please hurry up!

(*The WATSONS rush out to the Brown Bomber.*)

BYRON. Oh, Momma! Hel' me! Geh me offa 'ere!

WILONA. Oh, my Lord! Byron, it's OK, sweetheart, how'd this happen?

DANIEL. Can't you tell, Wilona? This little knucklehead was kissing his reflection in the mirror and got his lips stuck! Is your tongue stuck, too?

BYRON. No! Quit teasin', Da-ee! Hel'! Hel'!

DANIEL. Well, at least the boy hadn't gotten too passionate with himself!

WILONA. Daniel Watson! What do y'all do when this happens up he-uh?

DANIEL. This is the first time I've ever seen anyone with their lips frozen to a mirror. Honey, I don't know. Wait till he thaws out.

KENNY. Pull him off, Dad.

BYRON. No! No! Momma, doe leh him!

JOETTA. This is just like that horrible story Kenny read me about that guy Nar-sissy who stared at himself so long he forgot to eat and starved to death. Mommy, please save him!

WILONA. What about hot water? Don't worry, baby, we gonna get you off of this.

DANIEL. I don't know, pouring water on him might be the worst thing to do...get some hot tap water. (*WILONA runs into the house.*) I guess this means no one can call you Hot Lips.

(DANIEL erupts. WILONA returns with a glass of hot water. She attempts to free BYRON. Her hands shake.)

WILONA. You do it, Daniel.

(DANIEL takes the glass. He is laughing too hard. His laughter continues to build. He can't keep the cup even.)

DANIEL. I ca-I ca—...Kenny.

(KENNY takes the cup and begins to pour the water onto the mirror. There is a cracking sound, followed by BYRON's muffled screams.)

KENNY *(to audience)*. Dad was right.

WILONA. You gotta get this boy to the hospital!

DANIEL. Wilona, how far do you think I'd get driving down the street with this little clown attached to the mirror?

WILONA. Call the hospital and see what they say we should do...Joey and Kenny, go with your daddy.

(DANIEL exits, followed by JOETTA. KENNY whispers to the audience.)

KENNY *(to audience)*. Momma's clearing everybody out for something.

(WILONA wraps a scarf around BYRON's face.)

WILONA. Sweetheart, you know we gotta do something. I'ma try to warm your face up a little. Just relax. You know I love you and wouldn't do anything to hurt you, right?

BYRON. No. Doe hur' me! Keh-ee, hel'! Hel' me, Keh-ee!

(WILONA grabs BYRON by the head and gives a sharp tug. BYRON is freed; his freedom is accompanied by the sound of a very large rubber band snapping.)

KENNY. Yeeeowwww.

(BYRON flies into the house, his hands over his mouth. WILONA looks at KENNY, points to the car and rushes after BYRON.)

KENNY (*to audience*). The dirty dogs are letting Byron get away with not doing his share of the windows. (*As KENNY scrapes the windows the rest of the Watson clan assembles along-side the car.*) Joetta, guess what. I'm thinking about writing my own comic book.

JOETTA. What about?

KENNY. Well, it's going to be about this real mean criminal who has a terrible accident that turns him into a superhero. You want to know what I'm going to call this new superhero?

JOETTA. What?

KENNY. I'm going to call him the Lipless Wonder. All he does is beat up superheroes smaller than him and the only thing he's afraid of is a cold mirror!— (*BYRON, while making sure his hand is unseen by both the family and the audience, gestures at KENNY. To audience.*) I was the only one who saw Byron flip me a dirty finger sign.

BYRON (*sotto voce*). You wait, I'm gonna kick your little behind. (*BYRON exits.*)

KENNY (*to audience*). I didn't care. I had won this time.