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Tennessee Wet Rub

By
KIM E. RUYLE

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(TENNESSEE WET RUB)

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Tennessee Wet Rub was premiered by the Cottage Theatre (Cottage Grove, Ore.) in August 2024.

CAST:

HANK DUNWIDDIE..... Mark Allen
BERTHA DUNWIDDIE..... Kim Fairbairn
ARLETA EASTER..... Alana Merz
DUNK FREEMAN Clarence Miller
VERN Lucas Wieckowski

PRODUCTION:

Director Stanley Coleman
Stage Manager Randall Brous
Set Design Tony Rust
Costume Design Kali McDonald
Lighting Design Amanda Ferguson
Sound Design Jeffery Egbert
Dialect Coach..... Lynn Nelson
Dramaturg David Van Cleave

In addition to the information on the Important Billing and Credit Requirements page (p. 3), all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“*Tennessee Wet Rub* was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by the Cottage Theatre in Cottage Grove, Ore.”

Tennessee Wet Rub

CHARACTERS

HANK DUNWIDDIE: White male, 60s. Speaks with a Tennessee mountain dialect, Appalachian English.

BERTHA DUNWIDDIE: White female, 60s. Hank's wife.

DUNK FREEMAN: Black male, early 20s. Highly intelligent and well-spoken. Confident, almost cocky, but very politically savvy and polite.

ARLETA EASTER: White female, teens. Demure. Wide-eyed naivety.

VERN: White male, 20.

TIME: January 30 – 31, 1951.

PLACE: While a snow and ice storm rages outside, we're safely inside Bertha's BBQ, a quaint establishment in the hills of northern Tennessee not far from the Kentucky border.

SETTING: A rustic BBQ restaurant. Better than a shack, but not by much. More of a solid cabin—the floor and walls are rough wood. Simple electric bulbs hang from the ceiling. A potbelly wood stove to one side. A couple of dining tables ringed by chairs. A counter with stools. A hand-lettered menu on the wall. Opposite the stove, a door leads upstairs to the proprietors' apartment. Another behind the counter leads to the kitchen. A back door near the stove opens to a path that leads offstage, presumably to the smokehouse in one direction and, in the other direction, to the privy, a sturdy outhouse shitter. Ideally, there's a faint aroma of barbecue in the theatre that grows in intensity through the third scene.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

Please love and respect these characters. They are not caricatures.

If desired to produce without an intermission, the act transition can be seamless.

The Appalachian dialogue is written with an eye dialect, a spelling to approximate pronunciation. Nevertheless, it is important to have dialect coaching for both Appalachian and Scottish dialects. To aid in interpretation of the Appalachian dialect, a brief glossary is provided at the end of the play

“We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.”

—Maya Angelou

Tennessee Wet Rub

ACT I

Scene 1

(Darkness. We hear wind whistling. A moment, then overhead light bulbs flicker a few times before burning steady to illuminate BERTHA's BBQ. As the whistle of the wind rises and falls, BERTHA DUNWIDDIE wraps her sweater tightly as she shivers and hugs herself. She's a sturdy woman. Sturdy build. Sturdy character. Sturdy as her shoes. For nearly five decades, her fortitude has sustained her as she's labored over a wood-fired barbecue pit, pitched platters slathered with meat and slaw, and scrubbed grease from stacks of plates.)

BERTHA stands downstage looking out front, steeling herself against the weather she sees through an apparent window in the fourth wall. But it's more than weather she sees. Her expression spells impending doom.

The back door bursts open admitting HANK DUNWIDDIE with a gust of chill wind. He wears his age well, no less sturdy than his wife, but he's no tree stump. More of a vigorous willow branch, tough, wiry, resilient. In one hand, HANK carries a meat hook that he hangs on a peg by the door.

HANK stomps his feet and hangs his cap over the meat hook before removing deerskin gloves. He shakes out his jacket and hangs it on another peg. HANK wears heavy boots, jeans held up by suspenders over a flannel shirt. On his belt hangs a custom holster holding a large meat cleaver.)

HANK. Jes ice. Pure ice comin' down. But I got 'er stoked. Good till ta'marr least. *(Pauses waiting for a response.)* Hear me? She's stoked till ta'marr.

BERTHA *(continuing to stare outside)*. Waste a wood. Nobody comin' out in this weather.

HANK. But still. Gotta keep ice out'n the stovepipe. Keep 'er warm.

(The lights flicker again. HANK takes notice and exits to the kitchen. He returns momentarily carrying two kerosene lanterns and places one on each of the dining tables but doesn't light them.)

HANK *(cont'd)*. All that ice. 'Bout fell on my ass comin' in ... lines gonna be down 'fore long.

BERTHA *(without turning)*. Language. *(Pause.)* We're in the end times, Hank. I feel it.

HANK. Aah, sugar. Ya said same thang last year we's havin' that cyclone. It's jes a lil ice.

BERTHA. This is diff'rent. I feel it. Don' you feel it? It ain't jes ice. It's a darkness descendin'.

HANK. We got wood. Food. Blankets. 'N we got kerosene. Darkness ain't no problem.

BERTHA. This ain't no reg'lar darkness. It's a *mean* darkness descendin'.

HANK. Threw a couple a racks in there. Smokehouse a cookin' now. Lessen three hours, ribs be ready. No cus'mers. Be perfect time t' spearmint.

BERTHA. No wet rub gonna stop what's comin'.

(HANK approaches and, from behind, wraps his arms around BERTHA, gives a lascivious smile.)

HANK. Could use a little darkness. Ya know? Not for spearmintin' with no recipe. But spearmintin' with you.

(BERTHA breaks free and moves behind the counter. From under the counter, she pulls out a large cast iron skillet and places it on the counter. From the skillet, BERTHA pulls an equally large black Bible and begins paging through.)

BERTHA. No time t' be playin' the devil! *(Reading, a sense of dread.)* "For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled."

HANK. Aah, sugar.

BERTHA. I tell ya, mister, they's a mean darkness comin'.

HANK. Keep on. Jes keep on. Maybe ya git yer wish.

(HANK sighs, begins stoking the wood stove. The electric lights suddenly extinguish leaving the room in near darkness, only illuminated by the glow from the wood stove. BERTHA gasps.)

BERTHA. Dear Lord Jesus, no! It ain't my wish!

(HANK straightens with a smile and goes to light the kerosene lanterns.)

HANK. Like I tol' ya. Lines comin' down. It's jes the ice.

(The room now lit in the soft glow of kerosene lamps, BERTHA brings the skillet and Bible to a table, sits near a lantern and begins flipping again through the Bible.)

BERTHA *(reading, a sense of urgency)*. "For in those days shall be affliction such as was not from the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, neither shall be."

(HANK gives a heavy sigh and moves downstage to look out front.)

HANK. Blowin' white now. Changin' over t' snow.

(BERTHA rises, joins HANK. He puts an arm around her. And they stare outside at the blowing snow.)

BERTHA. Ain't white. It's a mean darkness what it is.

HANK *(chuckling)*. Looks white t' me, sugar. Blowin' sideways it is ... why y'all gotta be so—

BERTHA. Ya don' never take thangs serious! 'Cep yer recipes. Forty years dry rub's been good 'nough. Why y'all gotta be so obsessed?

HANK. Don' worry yer purty head 'bout it. Once I git the right recipe, wet rub's gonna put us on the map. I tell ya, my wet rub's gonna light up this place. *(On exiting to kitchen.)* Git some coffee. Want some?

(BERTHA gasps, terrified by something outside.)

BERTHA. Hank! They's sumpin out there!

(HANK enters with a coffee pot and two cups and chuckles as he places them on the counter.)

HANK. Whatchu see, sugar? A booger? Polar bear? Maybe one a them *abdominal* snowmen?

BERTHA. Sumpin dark! Right outside the window! I saw it movin'!

(A moment passes as HANK pours coffee and BERTHA continues to stare out the window with concern. The back door suddenly swings open, and a shivering ARLETA EASTER timidly enters. She's a wisp, not much more than a girl, pale as a ghost and shabbily dressed, no coat, only a light sweater and shoes ill-suited for snow and ice. She clutches a bundle wrapped in a blanket to her breast. HANK and BERTHA straighten, startled. A moment to take it in.)

BERTHA (*cont'd*). Whatchu doin', chile? Get on in here out'n the cold.

HANK. And shut that damn door!

BERTHA. Language.

(BERTHA scoots to shut the door with one hand and grabs a coat from a coat rack with her other. She wraps ARLETA with the coat and moves her to a table.)

BERTHA (*cont'd*). Git 'er some coffee. Dear Lord. You got a baby there?

ARLETA. Oh, no ... not really.

BERTHA. Whatchu mean, *not really*? Whatchu got there? In yer poke.

(ARLETA opens her blanket-wrapped bundle to reveal a heavy porcelain doll wearing a frilly dress with a small purse on a dainty chain. Carefully, she places the doll on a chair, positions her just so, and hangs the purse around her neck.)

BERTHA looks on with wide eyes a moment before pulling out a chair for ARLETA and taking a seat beside her. BERTHA takes ARLETA's hands and begins rubbing.)

BERTHA (*cont'd*). Yorn hands be freezin'. Whatchu doin' out in that cold?

ARLETA. I's sorry ... uh ... the front door was locked.

BERTHA. Ah, chile. With this wind, we dint een hear ya. (*Turning to HANK.*) Tol' ya I saw sumpin.

(*HANK joins them at the table with a cup of coffee for ARLETA. He looks at the doll, confusion clouding his face, then studies ARLETA.*)

ARLETA. Uh ... our car went in a ditch.

BERTHA. Are you / hurt?

HANK. Where? Whatchu / mean *our* car?

BERTHA. *They's somebody / else?*

HANK. Y'all dint leave a chile out there, didja? (*Nodding to the doll.*) I mean a real chile?

ARLETA. It's my ... uh ... my fiancé.

(*HANK jumps up and throws on his coat.*)

HANK. He hurt? Where is he?

ARLETA. No, sir. You don' gotta go outside. He's here ... there. Sir. He's out there.

(*HANK opens the back door to reveal DUNK FREEMAN standing on the threshold, no coat, wrapping and slapping his arms. He's tall, lean—and Black. HANK stares, then slams the door.*)

HANK. Sweet Jesus! *That be yer fiancé? A negro?* Gurl, whatchu thankin'?

(*ARLETA whimpers, and BERTHA leaps to her feet.*)

BERTHA. Mister, you open that door. Don't leave the boy standin' out there!

(*HANK hesitates, but BERTHA wins the stare down, and he opens the door. DUNK just stands there shivering. A beat as they regard each other.*)

HANK. Don' jes stan' there. Git on in here.

(DUNK slowly steps in, and HANK slams the door. An awkward pause as HANK and BERTHA suspiciously regard DUNK. ARLETA softly weeps.)

BERTHA. Don' stan' there, son. We're Christian people. Come on in. Git warm.

HANK. Now jes a minute. *(Hand to the holstered meat cleaver, shifts gaze from DUNK to ARLETA.)* Look at me, gurl. Has this boy hurt ya? You tell the truth now.

(ARLETA, tears streaming, shakes her head. She jumps up, runs to DUNK and embraces him. DUNK doesn't return the embrace. Instead, he stands there awkwardly and warily watches HANK.)

BERTHA. No! No, no. None a that in here.

(ARLETA releases the embrace but takes DUNK's hand.)

BERTHA *(cont'd)*. No touchin' now. You. Come have a seat. And you. Stay yonder by the stove.

HANK. Whatchu thankin', woman. We can't allow—

BERTHA. Hank! Grab 'nuther cup. Cain't ya see he's freezin'.

(BERTHA wins another stare down. HANK reluctantly removes, hangs his coat and shuffles to the kitchen.

ARLETA takes a seat at the table. DUNK relaxes a bit and warms his hands by the stove. BERTHA sits next to ARLETA as HANK returns, hands coffee to DUNK and stands aside, suspiciously eyeing DUNK.)

DUNK. Thank you, sir.

HANK. Y'all know yer breaking the law, and we cain't—

BERTHA. Hank! *(Turning to ARLETA.)* Who are you, gurl? Where y'all come from?

ARLETA. We're on our way to Detroit. Dunk's got uncles up there.

HANK. Dunk? Who's Dunk?

DUNK. That's me, sir.

HANK. What kinda name's *Dunk*?

DUNK. Jefferson Jasper Freeman. My family calls me JJ, but my friends call me Dunk. (*Allowing a slight smile.*) I don't play basketball, sir.

HANK. The hell that mean? (*Considering.*) Jasper? *Jasper*? Ya mean like, what? Y'all some kinda *colored* peckerwood? Who on God's earth gives a young'un a name like Jasper?

DUNK (*chuckling*). Colored peckerwood? Well, that's a new one. (*Then, quickly losing the smile.*) No, sir. It's Dunk. Dunk, just because I like donuts.

HANK. Good God.

BERTHA. Hank. (*Turning to ARLETA.*) And you?

ARLETA. My daddy's preacher at Jesus Name Pentecostal in Spartie.

BERTHA. So, y'all know the Lord Jesus.

ARLETA. Oh, yes, ma'am.

BERTHA. Look at me, chile. Straight on in my eyes. Don' be tellin' no stories now.

ARLETA. No, ma'am. I'm spirit-filled and warshed in the blood.

HANK. Then y'all know better than be runnin' with a colored.

DUNK. We're in love, sir. In Michigan we can—

HANK. It's a matter a right 'n' wrong!

DUNK. My daddy's a preacher, too, sir. I know right and wrong.

BERTHA. Yer daddy's OK with this?

DUNK. Ma'am, my daddy's fine with it.

BERTHA. I ast *her*.

ARLETA. My daddy's ... he's a good man.

BERTHA. But he knowed you're runnin' away?

ARLETA. He knowed ... we's in love.

(*HANK returns to the table and drops into a chair.*)

HANK. God almighty. What kinda gaumed-up sichiation we got here? A negro travelin' with a white gurl. She ain't nuthin but a chile.

BERTHA (*laying a calming hand on HANK's*). What's yer name?

ARLETA. Arleta.

DUNK. A person can't see a thing out there right now, but when it clears up, maybe I can get a push out of the ditch. If we can just wait out the storm, we'd be obliged.

HANK. I don't see how—

BERTHA. Course y'all can stay, least till the storm's over. We're Christian people. Dunwiddies. Hank and Bertha Dunwiddie.

DUNK. Pleased to meet you. And thank you for your hospitality.

ARLETA. We smelled the barbecue we got out'n the car. Wind carried that smell right to us. Then we thought we saw lights.

DUNK. My grandma makes the best barbecue in the world.

HANK. Says the jasper.

DUNK (*parrying with a warm grin*). Course, I haven't tasted yours, sir.

HANK. I got a couple a racks in the smokehouse now. Best dry rub in the state.

DUNK. I believe you, sir. And I believe my grandma does the best wet rub.

HANK. *Wet rub*? Hell, you say!

BERTHA. Language, mister.

DUNK. Thinking about grandma's wet rub barbecue and cornbread ... well, it sure does make a fellow hungry.

(HANK slowly rises from his chair and walks to the wood stove near DUNK, places a hand on his holstered meat cleaver and gives a suspicious stare that morphs to a stink eye. DUNK stares at the meat cleaver and considers his position.)

DUNK (*cont'd*). But any barbecue's good. It's all good.

(HANK folds his arms, continues to glare. DUNK shifts on his feet nervously.)

DUNK (*cont'd*). Sir ... do you ever use a mop sauce with your dry rub?

HANK. Hear that, Bertha? Jasper wants t' learn me all 'bout barbecue.

DUNK. No, sir. I didn't mean that. You're the expert. I only know about wet rub.

HANK (*suspicion giving way to intense curiosity*). Wet rub expert are ya? Mind. Don' be tellin' no stories now.

DUNK. Sir, it's not seemly to brag, and I give all the credit to my grandma. But speaking honestly and with all humility, I would say ... yes, sir. I am an expert when it comes to wet rub.

BERTHA. Don' go openin' that door, son, talkin' 'bout no wet rub.

(Too late. The door's open, and HANK can't hide his passion for barbecue and newfound interest in DUNK.)

HANK (*unable to contain enthusiasm in ensuing discussion*). They's in the smokehouse. Jes two racks. But I ain't rubbed 'em yet.

DUNK. Don't you have to rub before the heat?

HANK. Ain't gonna dry rub 'em.
Fixin' to spearmint with some
wet rub.

BERTHA. Tell me 'bout the doll.

DUNK. But still it's important too
... what's in your base?

ARLETA. Cinderella. That's her

HANK. Ketchup. Corn syrup. I'm
spearmintin' with my recipe. Ain't
saying no more ... it's a secret.

name.

BERTHA. She's special t' ya.

ARLETA. Yes, ma'am.

(BERTHA, annoyed, shifts in her seat and sighs.)

DUNK. How about mustard? Got the right kind of vinegar?

HANK. Boy, I got ever'thin'. Ever' spice. Ever'thin' I need fer my spearmints.

DUNK. When are they going to be ready? Shouldn't you be preparing the sauce now?

HANK. Don' go tellin' me how to sauce no ribs. I's jes fixin' t' mix up a batch when y'all showed up.

DUNK. Yes, sir. Would you like some help?

HANK. Don' need no hep.

DUNK. I used to help my grandma. Learned a lot from her.

HANK. Yer grandma, huh?

DUNK. Best wet rub in Tennessee. Recipe passed down from the plantation. Several generations.

HANK. What she use fer her sauce?

DUNK. Family secret. She kept it close to the vest, but I helped her out and know the formula by heart.

HANK. Do ya now? She use beer?

DUNK. Grandma? Oh, no sir. She said beer was ... *(Chuckling.)* She called it the devil's *piddle* ... but you shouldn't wait too long before basting. When will they be done?

BERTHA. Jes hadda open that door dint ya? Y'all got no idee what ya done stirred up gittin' the mister talkin' 'bout wet rub. *(Looking to ARLETA.)* Let's head on upstairs, chile. Let these boys talk their barbecue.

HANK *(lightly, slightly grinning)*. Naw. Y'all can stay here. I'll take the jasper into the kitchen. *(Turning to DUNK.)* Well, come on, then. Let's see whatchu really know 'bout wet rub.

(DUNK, catching HANK's enthusiasm, nods excitedly and follows HANK to the kitchen. When they're out of sight, BERTHA drills ARLETA.)

BERTHA. OK, chile. I want the story. The whole story.

ARLETA. I got her on my sixth birthday.

BERTHA. Not talkin' 'bout no doll. How'd ya meet *that* boy?

ARLETA. Oh. Well, they was a meetin' of all the county preachers. White folk. But fer this meetin', bein' all Christianly, they een 'vited the coloreds. The preachers. So, Dunk's daddy was there. My daddy, too, but he dint want t' leave me home, so he took me 'long, but I had t' wait outside. So, I's jes waitin'. But then, out yonder behind the church, I seen Dunk sittin' by hisself under a tree.

BERTHA. But ya knowed better than t' be talkin' to him, gettin' him in trouble.

ARLETA. Ast what he was readin'. They was *poyems* from some Scottish feller named Robert Burns.

BERTHA. *Poyems*? Have mercy. Our kinfolk come from Scotland, but I shore don' know 'bout no *poyems*. Mercy.

ARLETA. His voice is so ... don' ya jes love the way he talks? He read me some a them *poyems*. I mean, he can read 'em jes like he's from Scotland. Then he tells y'all what it all means cuz they got some gaumed-up speech in Scotland. Words gaumed-up. All

kinda si-gogglin ... but Dunk ... don' ya jes thank he's really sumpin'? (*Dreamy.*) I mean, don' ya thank he's really sumpin'? Really ... really ... sumpin'.

BERTHA. But 'cha knowed better.

ARLETA. Made me promise not to tell his daddy 'bout them poyems cuz he woun't approve.

BERTHA. So, *he lies to his daddy*? What / else that boy be lyin' 'bout?

ARLETA. Oh, no, ma'am. Dunk ain't no liar!

BERTHA. And don' be tellin' me yer daddy approves a y'all runnin' with a colored boy ... what 'bout yer mama?

ARLETA. I ain't got a mama. She died I's six. Jes after givin' me Cinderella.

BERTHA (*Pause, softening*). Aah, chile ... but you gotcha a sister t' hep ya?

ARLETA. Jes me 'n' my daddy.

BERTHA. I mean a sister in yer church family. A Christian woman t' give ya some guidance?

(*ARLETA shrugs, looks down. From the other table, BERTHA retrieves the Bible in the skillet, finds a reference.*)

BERTHA (*cont'd*). 'Fore y'all go gittin' married to a colored, ya gots t' consider what God's word says 'bout marriage.

ARLETA. Ya keep yer Bible in a skillet?

BERTHA. See what it says here in Ephesians?

(*ARLETA takes a moment, lips moving silently as she reads. She gives a nod.*)

BERTHA (*cont'd*). Is that colored boy gonna be able t' love ya like Christ loves the Church?

ARLETA. Dunk knows scripture 'bout as good as ary a preacher.

BERTHA. I don' know what t' thank 'bout it. They ain't nuthin agin marryin' a far'ner. Ruth and Boaz got married, and she became great grandma t' King David. I mean, they was far'ners but not colored. But I ain't really shore. Maybe that's why some the Jew people got kinky hair. But Jews gotta be white, cuz Jesus was

white. *(Pause, groaning.)* Tell truth, chile, I ain't shore what to thank 'bout what's right 'n' wrong. But I know the law. And, chile, y'all cain't be breakin' the law.

ARLETA. Why we're goin' to Michigan.

BERTHA. Sides, ain't y'all too young t' be gittin' married?

ARLETA. No ma'am. I'll be seventeen nex' cheer. Dunk says I'm a *bonnie wee thang*. That's from one a them poyems a that Robert Burns feller. But that don' mean I's too young t' marry.

BERTHA. Ah, chile.

(BERTHA rises, refills coffee cups and retakes a seat. She looks compassionately at ARLETA then pats her hand.)

BERTHA *(cont'd)*. Chile, chile, chile. That boy know he's gittin' sich a ... ? A *bonnie wee thang*, ya say?

ARLETA. I do thank y'all fer yer kindness. *(Pause.)* Why ya keep yer Bible in a skillet?

BERTHA. This here's my granny's Bible. And her skillet. I's a lil gurl, they's a far. A turble, turble far. All that was left of granny's house was this skillet and her Bible. It was shore 'nough a miracle. That far burned everthang in her house. But no far could touch God's word. And this here skillet.

(ARLETA solemnly takes the Bible, strokes its cover, gives a sniff.)

ARLETA. Don' een smell a smoke.

(She carefully returns the Bible to the skillet, gives a bit of a grin.)

ARLETA *(cont'd)*. Maybe got some barbecue smell, but shore 'nough a miracle.

(Silence as BERTHA studies ARLETA.)

BERTHA. Y'all gots money t' travel?

(ARLETA twitches, and her eyes dart to the purse hanging around the doll's neck. Then she catches herself.)

BERTHA *(cont'd)*. Y'all gots money in the purse, dontcha?