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Dramatic Publishing

Waiting for MacArthur

A Play in Two Acts
by
P. PAULLETTE MACDOUGAL



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(WAITING FOR MACARTHUR)

ISBN: 1-58342-183-1

“...a poignant look at love and war.” *Independent Press*

“This show is an example of theater at its best.”
The Daily Record, Morris County, New Jersey

“*Waiting for MacArthur* tells a gripping World War II story, which hasn’t been heard, about the courage and valor of the women who served in the Army nursing corps.” *San Antonio Express News*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 1942, six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, war was raging in the Pacific. General Douglas MacArthur's base of operations on Corregidor, an island fortress at the mouth of Manila Bay, was under daily bombardment. All non-fighting personnel, including the fort's hospital and operations room, were moved into a dank, crowded underground tunnel. When it became apparent that the Allies could no longer defend the island, General MacArthur and his family left. As he was departing, leaving more than ten thousand American and Allied troops stranded, he made famous these lines, "Keep the flag flying," and "I shall return."

When he returned several years later, all those who served our country on Corregidor had been killed, starved to death or taken prisoner. More than a hundred nurses were taken prisoner, and though conditions of their imprisonment were harsh, most survived.

Waiting for MacArthur was written after much research and interviewing of veterans by the playwright. The character of Annie Lou Holsom is a composite of the memories of many heroic WWII military service people. After seeing a performance in San Antonio, three of the surviving Corregidor nurses tearfully concurred, "That's just what it was like."

This play is dedicated to "The Greatest Generation," those men and women whose sacrifices saved the world for liberty and freedom, including, and especially, the playwright's mother and father.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Waiting for MacArthur was premiered by the New Jersey Women's Theater Cooperative (now Women's Repertory Theater) September 19, 1996. The production was directed by Barbara Krajkowski with the following cast:

Annie Lou KEATON DOUGLAS
Margaret JUDITH GANTLY
Rosalie DIANE NIEGHMOND
Mama MARY SCRUGGS

Other early professional productions were at the Steven Stoli Playhouse in San Antonio and the On The Spot Theatre in Phoenix.

Waiting for MacArthur underwent further development at Paradox Players, Austin, Texas, November 2002, directed by the playwright, with the following cast:

Annie Lou DENEEN FRAZIER
Margaret ANN EDWARDS
Rosalie. LISA SUTTON
Mama (Emma) ADRIENNE HARRELL

PRODUCTION NOTES

ONE SET, FLEXIBLE STAGING: This play works equally well with minimalist or abstract set, little blocking and entering/exiting, or with a full box set with active blocking and numerous costume changes. This version is geared toward the latter. This play is also effective as reader's theatre.

SET SUGGESTIONS

ANNIE LOU's center stage area has one or more army regulation footlockers. Behind and off side, a pile of U.S. Army medical crates, which create many playing levels. Behind, a three-layer backdrop: a white sheet with a Red Cross hospital emblem on top, attached by Velcro over a jungle scene, which can be removed, to reveal galvanized metal of a tunnel wall.

ROSALIE's area has a pretty make-up table, some movie photos and maybe an old radio or record player.

MAMA's kitchen contains a table covered with tablecloth, a chair or two, a shelf with utensils and maybe a stove.

MARGARET's area has a teacher's desk and a blackboard on the wall. There could also be a bookcase, a 1940s world map or a globe.

Note: Annie Lou uses the whole stage, moving into the other's spaces. Unless indicated that these moments are in flashback, they do not see her or address her. The author has indicated where actors can exit and enter in order to facilitate costume changes, if these are desired to show time lapses.

WAITING FOR MACARTHUR

A Play in Two Acts
For 4 Women

CHARACTERS

ANNIE LOU: Pretty young U.S. Army nurse, 22 years old.
At home and in the midst of battle.

ROSALIE: Best buddy/friend of Annie Lou's, 21 years old.
Sweet, naive, immature.

MAMA: Annie Lou's mother, loving in a Prussian sort of
way, 50-65 years old. She's second generation American.

MARGARET: Annie Lou's unmarried and unhappy high
school English teacher, who becomes her confidante.
She's Canadian, 35-50 years old.

Approximate running time: 105 minutes

ACT ONE: 1941-1942

Beaver Crossing, Wisconsin

Fort Dix, New Jersey

San Diego, California

On some island in the Pacific

Corregidor, The Philippines

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada

ACT TWO: 1942-47

Beaver Crossing

Corregidor

Saskatchewan

Australia

London

St. Malo, France

Ethiopia

Beaver Crossing

ACT ONE

PRE-CURTAIN: *1940s popular music.*

AT RISE: *MAMA enters singing the hymn, "Bringing in the Sheaves," and carrying a small bundle of mail. She finds one from her daughter.*

MAMA. There it is. *(Proudly reading return address.)* Annie Lou Holsom, Second Lieutenant, United States Army. *(Opening letter and reading.)* Fort Dix, July 20, 1941. Dear Mama, Papa, Petey, Tommy, Teddy, Georgie and Grandpa Hammerschmidt, Just a note to say I arrived safely and I'm getting on to the system here. If something moves, salute it. If not, clean it. We're gonna win this war! Soon as they let us get into it! Yes sir! No, sir! Hut-two-three-four, hut- two-three-four...

(MAMA reacts to the humor. ANNIE LOU, a pretty and energetic young nurse, enters in her nurses' white uniform, strutting mischievously, overlapping MAMA's words.)

ANNIE LOU. Hut-two-three-four, Hut-two-three-four *(Singing.)* "I'm in the army now. I'm in the army now. Ta-ta-ta ta. Ta-ta-ta ta. "I'm in the army now." *(To audience.)* You should see me "snap to," salute and bark out, "Anna Louise Holsom, Medical Corps, U.S. Army,

A4327654,” whenever I’m asked. Love, Your brave and ferocious daughter, Annie Lou.

(She sits on an army regulation trunk, reading letter. With almost all letters and commentary, unless otherwise indicated, ALL actors face the audience instead of other actors. New letter.)

Fort Dix, July 20, 1941. Dear Rosalie, You were away when I left, so I didn’t get a chance to tell you what Billy Nelson said when I told him I was joining up. *(Imitating Billy.)* “What do you want to be around all those men for? Who’s gonna want you when you’re all used up?”

(ROSALIE, 22, cute as a button in a 1940s kind of way, enters reading letter. She sits at her dressing table to continue reading.)

ROSALIE. “So I gave him his ring back. Congratulate me. I’m finally rid of that gorilla.”

ANNIE LOU. Speaking of animals I could do without, you should meet our platoon leader, Lieutenant Louise Sutter. We call her Attila the Hen because of the way she cackles when she orders us about: *(As Lt. Sutter.)* “Ten-hut! C-c-cluck. C-c-cluck. C-c-cluck. C-c-cluck.”

(As herself.) She’s our master, our housemother, our official spokesman, which means we’re at her mercy and trapped at her I.Q. level.

Remember the time you were sitting in our kitchen and a cracked dinner plate came flying through the air, crashing in a thousand pieces? I thought I’d die of em-

barrassment. You said, "What happened?" (*Sound: crash of china, startling ROSALIE.*)

ROSALIE (*overlapping*). What happened? Mrs. Holsom! Are you all right?

MAMA. It was cracked. Germs. Not fit to eat off of. (*Sings hymn as she cleans, then hums.*) "Work for the night is coming, Work through the morning hours. Work while the dew is sparkling, Work..."

ANNIE LOU. Then the empress of hygiene swept up the pieces and scrubbed the floor all over again, singing "Go, labor on," as though it was an ode to Christian cleanliness. Attila the Hen is just like her, but without the singing. Damn Attila's beady eyeballs. Damn her bony sacroiliac. Damn her knock-kneed patellas. Damn her corns and callouses. Damn her pointy elbows. Damn her stringy hair. Damn her regulation army shoes. Damn her neatly clipped fingernails. I damned the heartless gorgon all the way through *Gray's Anatomy* book.

MAMA (*happily innocent of above*). Dear Daughter, How nice you enjoyed your basic training. Your father and I are very proud of our little girl, the second lieutenant. Where will you be stationed? Camp McCoy over by Tomah is close to home. Perhaps you could ask for that assignment.

ANNIE LOU. Sure, Mama. Uncle Sam consults me daily about my travel preferences. "Anchors away, my boys, anchors away." (*ANNIE LOU sings or shouts over recorded music. Sound: ship's horn. She sits on footlocker. New letter.*) San Diego, California, September 10, 1941. Dear Petey, Tommy, Teddy and Georgie, Last mail call before we ship out. Yesterday we were issued dog tags. There were lots of jokes going around about how the

army doesn't want our corpses to get mixed up. We were told to only give our name, rank and serial number if we're captured...

MAMA. Captured! Ach du Lieber Augustin! Raising you was like harnessing a tornado. I congratulate myself that I succeeded in bringing you to adulthood without some terrible catastrophe.

ANNIE LOU (*continuing*). ...But we're not going to be captured. Anyway, everybody knows nothing seriously terrible, or even very exciting, ever happens to nurses. Love, Annie Lou. Special P.S. to Georgie: Next time one of those Scandahoovian kids tries to beat you up because Papa's Greek or Mama's German, use that judo move I showed you. (*Frozen in martial-arts kick.*) AaKaii!

MAMA. Annie Lou, couldn't you settle for a more ladylike way to express your patriotism, like rolling bandages with me at the Red Cross or gathering milkweed pods with Georgie?

ANNIE LOU (*continuing her P.S. to Georgie*). Listen, Georgie, you little squirrel, remember when we used to sit on top of the henhouse to watch the trains chugging by? Union Pacific. Southern Pacific. Canadian Pacific. We used to think, What a wonderful ocean the Pacific must be, to have so many boxcars named after it! Well, I've sure seen it now. I don't want you to think I'm homesick, but it's a very big lake.

ROSALIE. Dear Mugsy, Have you heard this new song? (*Sings.*) "Mairzy Doats and Dozy Doats and Little Lambsy Divy"? Or are you too busy with your swell social life to know what's going on? Your buddy, Rosalie.

ANNIE LOU. What's this ackamoracka about my swell social life? We're not supposed to socialize with enlisted men and most of the officers and all of the doctors are old enough to be our fathers. The rest are Brill Creme geeks or they're married. One married doctor started talking sweet applesauce and pawing me. So I stomped on his toe and called him an abbreviated form of used chicken feed. (*To the "doctor."*) If you think I'd go out with a married man, you need a check-up—from the neck up. (*Saluting.*) Sir. (*Removes hospital backdrop to reveal jungle backdrop. New letter.*) On some island, September 26, 1941. Dear Miss Greer, Mama said she saw you at the Red Cross blood drive and that you asked about me, so I am taking the liberty of writing to you in care of the high school. It's hot here, but I couldn't tell you where this island is. (*ANNIE LOU moves into MARGARET's space as though remembering being there; MARGARET does not see her.*) I was better at English than geography. Actually, I was better at English—

(MARGARET enters reading ANNIE LOU's letter. She's pleased and flattered.)

MARGARET. “—English than almost anything. Must have been your terrific teaching, although I still contract my negative verbs (*disappointed*) and split my infinitives.”

ANNIE LOU. I was happy when you were promoted to the high school so I could have you for four more years. Yours truly, Annie Lou Holsom.

MARGARET. Beaver Crossing, Wisconsin, October 4, 1941. Dear Annie Lou, What a lovely surprise! One of

the frustrations of teaching is that the students flow through like a river and you rarely hear from them again. I hope you will write again soon and tell me all about army life. Sincerely, Margaret Greer. P.S. You may call me Margaret.

(ANNIE LOU in own space, swatting mosquitos. Sounds: jungle birds.)

ANNIE LOU. October 12, 1941. Dear Miss Greer, I mean, Margaret, I'll try, but I fear you will always be Miss Greer to me. What do you want to know about army life? It's wonderful! If you like living in open-sided straw tents and if you don't mind monster mosquitoes transfusing your blood. And the lizards— *(Sounds of jungle out.)*

MARGARET. "And the lizards are so big you could put a saddle on them and ride." My goodness! "One could bite your arm off and not half try. The malaria medicine has turned me yellow, but—"

ANNIE LOU. —but other than the above complaints, things are okay. At first I got a lot of dumb jokes from my tent mates over our family name. *(Imitating an older, more sarcastic tent mate.)* "Don't ask Holsom with an "H." She's too wholesome with a "W" to know much about that." *(Lascivious laugh, then, as herself.)* I should have told them we were English, like my brother's wife Cecilia does. Instead, I naively explained how Papa's name got changed at Ellis Island to the name on his sandwich wrapper and how we're the only Greek family in Beaver Crossing.

MARGARET. But you look as WASP-ish as anyone in this town—

MAMA (*aside, as a flashback, not a letter*). —My daughter got her looks from me, thank you. “The Deutschland look,” as Papa used to say, when you could say things like that. Before Hitler gave a good country a bad name.

ANNIE LOU. No one even mentions Germany anymore, even Grandpa Hammerschmidt, and he’s from there. Margaret, do you think it’s a sin to deny the nationality of one of your parents, when fifty percent of your heritage has declared war on the other fifty percent? I don’t know how I feel about this.

MARGARET. Dear Annie Lou, The principal asked me to be a chaperone at the Homecoming Dance. Your friend Rosalie was there with Billy— Oops. Mustn’t say that. (*She crumples paper, starts over.*) Dear Annie Lou, The principal asked me to be a chaperone at the homecoming dance. I suppose that means I have been elevated to the status of Senior Elder, since the dubious honor of being a chaperone usually falls to a faculty member who is to be somewhere between seventy and death. Oh, that is rude to say, is it not?

ANNIE LOU (*laughing*). I didn’t think you were capable of rudeness, Miss Greer! (*New letter.*) Dear Margaret, I hope you’ve forgiven me for all the rotten things I did in your classes.

MARGARET. Nothing to forgive, my dear. I believe my students’ behavior reflects my skill as a teacher, or lack of it. Anyway, I’ve learned from all my students, (*pointedly*) the difficult ones the most. While we’re on the subject, I hope you have forgiven me for the time I had to send you to the office for tapping out coded messages

with your pencil on the desktop. If I had been a more experienced teacher then, I may have asked you to teach Morse code to the whole class.

ANNIE LOU (*reading*). “At the time I didn’t know how to keep order in a classroom full of sixth-graders tapping on their desktops.” (*New letter.*) Dear Margaret, About the Morse code incident. I did try to teach it to them, but most of them couldn’t get past dot-dot-dot-dash-dash-dash-dot-dot-dot—S.O.S. Wouldn’t it have been more fair if you had sent Charlie Benson to the office instead of me?

MARGARET (*reading Annie Lou’s letter*). He was drumming out— Oh, my!— (*startled*) —dirty words and I didn’t teach them to him.” (*Exits, laughing.*)

ANNIE LOU. Dear Folks, Greetings from bedpan alley and thanks for the package. The cookie crumbs were delicious. (*New letter.*) Dear Rosalie, Do you have your right arm in a sling? Did the post office ration stamps, too? Mama writes faithfully, but her vision is limited, if you know what I mean.

I won first prize in the Lieutenant Sutter Sound-alike Contest. (*As Lt. Sutter.*) Cluck! Cluck! The prize was a real egg. Hen fruit, they call it here. I’m eating it right now, soft-boiled. Please write, Angel-Puss. I need someone to talk to. Your Pal, Mugsy.

ROSALIE. Happy Halloween! You’re missing the party again. I wanted to dress as a hula dancer, but it’s below freezing already, so I’m going to go as a mummy. Howie and Billy Nelson are going to carry me in a coffin and I’m going to slo-o-o-wly open the lid with my green fingernails and make my grand entrance.

ANNIE LOU (*aside*). Very nice, Rosalie, but couldn't you find someone else to carry your coffin other than Billy Nelson?

ROSALIE (*cont'd*). It's going to be swell, don't you think?

ANNIE LOU. November 15, 1941. Dear Margaret, We've moved again. This island has fewer flies but peskier lizards. Last time I heard from Mama, she was fussing because our cat Daffy had kittens again.

MAMA. If Georgie can't find homes for them all, Grandpa Hammerschmidt will have to drown them in a bucket like last time. (*MAMA goes to stove, stirs pot.*)

ANNIE LOU. He's the only one who can stand to do it. Papa said Grandpa holds his heart in as tight as his in-grown toenails. Ooops! Mama wouldn't like me to repeat that.

MARGARET (*entering*). Thanksgiving Break 1941. Dear Annie Lou, I'm visiting my sister in Saskatoon so this is just a quick note. You hinted that you have more to say than you dare write. (*To herself, a private embarrassment.*) Don't we all? (*Back to letter.*) You can be sure, my dear, that your thoughts expressed to me will be held in absolute confidence. Sincerely, Margaret. Oh! P.S. I adopted one of Daffy's kittens. (*She exits.*)

ANNIE LOU. Dear Margaret, Our letters crossed in the mail again. You asked how it happened that it's me and not one of my brothers who joined up. We were at the dinner table: (*She indicates each around a circular table. Sound: dinner dishes.*) Teddy and his wife Cecilia, then Tommy, Petey, Georgie, Mama, Papa and me. And, of course, deaf old Grandpa Hammerschmidt, who was silent, except for an occasional, "Vas dat you say?" We talked about the war in Europe. Would we get into it,

should we? Right before dessert Papa announced that someone in our family had to enlist, someone had to represent us. (*Flashback as Papa, Greek accent.*) “I want one of you to volunteer. We Holsoms don’t wait to be drafted. Well?” (*Beat. Looking around the table, as Papa.*) “So. Who’s it going to be?” I waited for one of my brothers to speak. (*Dinner sounds out.*) Teddy’s very pregnant wife shot a “don’t-you-dare” look at him that could have shattered Mama’s best crystal goblets. Silence. Papa’s gaze encircled the table. (*As Papa, accusingly.*) “Well? Did I raise a herd of cowards?” (*Continuing as herself, aside.*) Tommy stared at his pork chop bones as though there were worms in them. Pete sniffed loudly to remind us of his asthma. Teddy shifted painfully in his chair. He gets a lot of milage out of that seven-year-old football injury. Only Georgie spoke up. (*As weak little Georgie.*) “I’ll do it, Papa. I’ll sign up.” (*As herself.*) Georgie is, well, different.

MAMA (*flashback*). Georgie is a special blessing. I want all of you children to know that. A special blessing.

ANNIE LOU (*aside, continuing*). Papa wrinkled his bushy eyebrows at my older brothers. (*As Papa.*) “In ancient Sparta they would put the whole lot of you boys out to the vultures!... Being an American doesn’t come for free. Well. Do you think they take old man?” (*Beat. As herself.*) It was embarrassing like after the altar call at the revival meetings when nobody wants to come up to be saved. The silence was really heating up. (*Standing patriotically.*) I understand Uncle Sam needs nurses. I will represent us. (*As herself, in present.*) Papa sat back in his chair and looked like he’d just caught the biggest trout in Wisconsin. Sincerely, Annie Lou. (*Lights dim.*)

ANNIE LOU back to footlocker.) The real truth, why I'm here instead of my brothers, I just love being needed. Well, there's another reason, too. Since I graduated from nursing school, Mama has been sticking closer to me than a mustard plaster, as if I was still in high school.

MAMA (*flashback, with ANNIE LOU interacting*). ...And what did you do then, after you went ice skating?

ANNIE LOU (*to MAMA, flashback, interacting*). We were playing records, Mama, listening to the radio, just hanging around, Mama, just hanging around.

MAMA. Those boys, you know how those boys can take advantage—

ANNIE LOU. I'm twenty-one years old, Mama. A graduate nurse. I know how to take care of myself. (*New letter, in present.*) So, Margaret, here I am, on some island, collecting my pay of ninety dollars per month, waiting for the war to start.

ROSALIE. Dear Mugsy, It's not so boring here now. I have a new boyfriend. He's handsome and smart—a college guy.

ANNIE LOU. Dear Rosalie, I'm so happy for you. Is your new boyfriend anyone I know? (*Beat.*) I bet you're all glued to the radio today, listening to the Army-Navy game. It's on the shortwave here, too. Admiral Hart thinks Tojo will attack during the game. But MacArthur thinks he'll hold off till spring. My tentmate Gina and I decided to trust MacArthur's intuition instead of Admiral Hart's and...

ROSALIE (*excitedly reading Annie Lou's letter*). ...and do a little socializing with the noncoms around the short wave, even though fraternizing with underlings is strictly forbidden.

ANNIE LOU. But with six hundred men to every one of us I'll be doggoned if I'm going to let the army tell me who might be my last date on earth. Your pal, Mugsy.

ROSALIE. December 7, 1941. Dear Mugsy, Don't faint. I'm writing a letter. I went down to the railroad depot today to pick up some packages my dad thought would freeze sitting on the platform. But your father had already put the packages inside by the old pot-bellied stove. He was sitting in that old crooked swivel chair we used to spin around on, listening to the clickety-click of the telegraph machine. (*Sound: telegraph clicking.*) He had this terrible expression on his face, like he was going to cry. (*Telegraph out.*) When the clicking stopped, he took out his handkerchief, blew his nose and told me the Japanese had bombed our ships in the Pearl Harbor, which he said is in Hawaii. You aren't in Hawaii, are you, Mugsy? I'd hate to have to worry about you. Love, Rosalie. P.S. Don't expect lots of letters. I don't like to write. (*ROSALIE sits at her table.*)

ANNIE LOU. December 8, our time, the 7th for you back home. Dear Folks, We got the news of the attack from Gabriel Heatter on the shortwave radio telling about the wreckage and death and chaos in the Pearl Harbor. All of us nurses—the ones who weren't on night duty—just clung to each other and didn't want to let go. Even Attila the Hen was weeping. I'll never forget Roosevelt's words, crackling from halfway around the world:

(Sound: tape, excerpt of Roosevelt's December 1941 speech. [Available on Internet] Lights: fade to black.)