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Dramatic Publishing

What'd Ya Do Today, Billy Joe?

By
ELEANOR HARDER



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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What'd Ya Do Today, Billy Joe? was first produced at FirstStage, Hollywood, California, and was directed by Bill White.

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What'd Ya Do Today, Billy Joe? was recently a prize winner in four national play contests:

- The Little Theatre of Alexandria (Va.)
- The Juneteenth Festival in Louisville (Ky.)
- The Pittsburgh New Plays Festival (Pa.)
- FirstStage in Hollywood (Calif.)

What'd Ya Do Today, Billy Joe?

A One-act Play
For 2 Men, 2 Women, 1 Boy

CHARACTERS

GRANDMA TYLER an old black woman

BILLY JOE TYLER a black boy, about nine years old

PEARL TYLER Billy Joe's mother

BIG FRED TYLER Billy Joe's father

REVEREND WATSON a white minister

OFFSTAGE VOICES - Several neighborhood children, a few angry men and a school bus driver.

What'd Ya Do Today, Billy Joe?

SCENE 1

SCENE: *Late September 1966. A black neighborhood on the outskirts of a small Southern town. Simple set pieces indicating an unpainted frame house, its downstage wall open to the audience, sits slightly UL. There are a couple of scruffy plants and shrubs in the small dirt front yard. In the tidy main room of the house, which serves as the living room and dining room, we see a table and several chairs DC. A small kitchen area is UR, a couple of stairs leading “upstairs” are ULC. A small bedroom area, now dark, is far DL. A patched screen door leads to the front porch, R, which has a wooden rocker with a worn throw pillow in it. A crude cage made of chicken wire rests on the end of the porch step, and there is a chicken in it.*

AT RISE: *It is early evening. Light is fading outside. The house inside is dark. Sounds of children playing are heard offstage R. In the wooden rocker on the porch sits GRANDMA TYLER. She stares into space, rocking and occasionally humming some indistinguishable tune to herself, seemingly oblivious to all around her.*

BOY 1 (*offstage*). Come on, Billy Joe—

BOY 2 (*offstage*). Hey, come and play ball with us, man!

BILLY JOE (*offstage*). Don't want to.

BOY 1 (*offstage*). Why not?

BILLY JOE (*offstage*). Just don't want to.

BOY 2 (*offstage*). Let ya pitch.

BILLY JOE (*offstage*). It's gettin' dark. I gotta go home now.

BOY 1 (*offstage*). Come on—

BOY 2 (*offstage*). Aw, let him go. He's stuck-up.

GIRL (*offstage*). He's goin' to a white school tomorrow, that's why.

BILLY JOE (*offstage*). Ain't neither.

GIRL (*offstage*). Yes you are! And my daddy says it's gonna be bad 'count of him goin' to that school.

(BILLY JOE enters DR.)

BOY 2 (*offstage*). We don't wanta play with him no more!
(BILLY JOE shrugs at offstage remarks and kicks rock in yard.)

GIRL (*starts chanting offstage, then others join in*). Billy Joe's a stuck-up! Billy Joe's a stuck-up! Billy Joe's a stuck-up! (*Laughter, and CHILDREN's voices fade. BILLY JOE walks to the cage of his pet chicken. He makes a soft clicking sound with his tongue at the chicken, then reaches into his pocket for some kernels of corn and gives them to the chicken. He walks up porch step.*)

BILLY JOE. Grandma—look what I found. *(BILLY JOE takes a broken piece of transparent blue glass from his pocket and holds it up to the fading sunlight to show her the color. GRANDMA looks through it and smiles broadly.)* You can have it. I brought it for you.

(She holds it up to the fading light and resumes her rocking and humming as BILLY JOE goes back to his chicken. BIG FRED enters from house, stands on porch a few moments, nervously looking around.)

BIG FRED. Billy Joe, ain't you got somethin' you're supposed to be doin'?

BILLY. Nope.

BIG FRED. What that fool chicken doin' here? Didn't I tell you to take it out back?

BILLY JOE *(shrugs)*. I dunno.

BIG FRED. Well take it out there! *(Calls in to PEARL.)*
What time is it, Pearl?

(As outdoor light fades, lights come up in house. PEARL hurries into kitchen area, buttoning her blouse in back as she does.)

PEARL. It's early, Big Fred. He ain't comin' yet. *(BILLY JOE exits UR with chicken. BIG FRED looks off with a worried look.)*

GRANDMA *(forcefully, but to no one in particular)*. Pee in your pants and the devil take ya!

BIG FRED. Mama, I told you not to say that!

GRANDMA *(ignoring him)*. Pee in your pants and the devil take ya!

BIG FRED *(calling)*. Pearl?! PEARL!

PEARL. What?!

BIG FRED. We gotta keep Mama quiet when he gets here.

PEARL. Why?

BIG FRED. 'Cuz she's sayin' it again!

PEARL. Oh no! (*Quickly wiping hands on towel, she comes to screen door and looks out.*) She ain't done that for over two weeks now!

BIG FRED. Well she's doin' it now!

PEARL. Wonder why?

BIG FRED. How should I know?

PEARL. Well she's your mama, Big Fred. You take care of her. I got my hands full. (*PEARL walks back into kitchen area.*)

BIG FRED (*quietly but firmly to GRANDMA*). Mama, now you gotta be quiet. You understand me? We got somebody comin' over here tonight and it's real important, see?

GRANDMA (*defiantly*). Devil take ya, devil take ya!

BIG FRED (*beat, as he looks at her, puzzled*). Why you say that, Mama? You never said nothin' like that 'fore you took sick. You woulda washed my mouth out with lye soap if you'd heard me sayin' anything like that.

GRANDMA (*sing-song*). Devil take ya, devil take ya!

BIG FRED (*shakes head*). Life is sure funny. You went to church every Sunday, and never once sayin' things like that. And now—I don't know. Maybe you always wanted to say those things and never did—till now. That it?

GRANDMA. Pee in your pants—

BIG FRED. Why'd you choose tonight to start in again? Huh? Just plain orneryness. That's it, ain't it? (*GRANDMA rocks and stares defiantly up at him.*) Well, you kin be as ornery as ya like to me and Pearl—that make no difference to us. But I know you love Billy Joe. And tonight is for Billy Joe! So if you want to show him you love him, you'll be quiet. Hear? —Mama, you hear me?!