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Dramatic Publishing

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Battledrum

Musical



Book and lyrics
by
Doug Cooney

Music
by
Lee Ahlin

Battledrum

Musical. Book and lyrics by Doug Cooney. Music by Lee Ahlin. Cast: 4m., 1w. with doubling. May be expanded to up to 10m., 3w. A 10-year-old Confederate boy named Rufus has been orphaned after his family's farm has been burned to the ground. With nowhere else to turn, he tags along with a Union troop as the "second drummer, on reserve." Jackson, the Union drummer boy in command, is none too pleased to have a Confederate charge underfoot—but, in time, the two boys develop a brotherly if quarrelsome regard. When Jackson offers Rufus a thick overcoat that he has reclaimed from a battlefield, the boys find a hand-written letter in the pocket and take small comfort in reading romantic excerpts at bedtime. Things change when a runaway slave boy stumbles into their midst and provides a more accurate and more disturbing reading of the letter. The boys learn a harsh truth about the fate that awaited Civil War drummer boys—and as the battlefield looms, the boys learn about the courage required when children are employed in battle. The drummer boys were the communication system relaying messages for the armies on both sides; if the enemy wanted to disrupt your army, they took aim at the drummer boys. With plentiful comic relief and an insightful message about the use of children in the military battles, *Battledrum* offers a compelling evocation of war. Energized with songs—stylistically varied but imparting a feel for the period—the production climaxes in a stirring drum line performed with bravura by the entire ensemble. *Unit set. Approximate running time: 55 minutes. Code: BC8.*

Cover photo: Eckerd Theater Company, Clearwater, Fla., featuring (l-r) Jack Holloway, Jackson Webb, Leonard C. Williams and Amanda Elend.
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DOUG COONEY

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LEE AHLIN



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Music by LEE AHLIN

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For Gideon

—DC

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“*Battledrum* was originally commissioned by Eckerd Theater Company, Ruth Eckerd Hall, Clearwater, Fla.”

Battledrum premiered at Eckerd Theater Company, Clearwater, Fla., in the Murray Studio Theater at Ruth Eckerd Hall on March 14, 2008, with the following actors and production team:

Rufus Jonathan Cho
Jackson Curtis Belz
George Washington Reginald Kent Robinson
Corporal Wilkes Jack Holloway
Annabelle Betty-Jane Parks

Director Julia Flood
Musical Director Lee Ahlin
Dramaturge Megan Alrutz
Drum Line Instructor Ron Lambert
Fight Choreographer Jeff Norton
Set Design Lino Toyos
Costume Design Amy J. Cianci
Lighting Design Glenn Grieves

Battledrum was previously workshopped by Eckerd Theater Company at Ruth Eckerd Hall on June 28-30, 2007, with the following actors:

Rufus Jackson Webb
Jackson Brent DiRoma
George Washington Leonard Williams
Corporal Wilkes Jack Holloway
Annabelle Amanda Elend

BATTLEDRUM

CHARACTERS

RUFUS 10, a white boy from Kentucky

JACKSON. 13, a white boy from Pennsylvania
LAUGHING SOLDIER ONE

GEORGE WASHINGTON. 12, an African-American

LAUGHING SOLDIER TWO
CRABBY SOLDIER

CORPORAL WILKES 30s, Union Army, educated
OLD SOLDIER 30s

MAMA. 20s, the spirit of Rufus's mother
ANNABELLE KEENE 18, a young lady of society

GENERAL CUTTER 30s, a nurse with the Union Army
NEW SOLDIER
FOOT SOLDIER

SETTING: The action occurs in 1863 during the Civil War across the southern states. Scenes occur at campsites, on back roads, battlefields and field hospitals. We should never have a sense that structures are permanent or that roots have been sunk.

CASTING: Roles can be subject to multiple-casting with a tight ensemble of 4m, 1w—or cast individually with a larger ensemble. Doubling works as suggested above.

MUSICAL NUMBERS

1. Fire. All
2. Like I Said Rufus
- 2A. Fire Exit All
3. Everybody Hates the Drummer Boy All
4. Waltz Annabelle
5. Sweet Mushy Stuff. Jackson, Rufus
6. We Move With the Moon . . . George Washington
7. Glory. All
8. Like I Said (Reprise) Mama, Rufus
9. Mama Mama
10. Make the Fear Disappear All

BATTLEDRUM

SCENE ONE

(Kentucky 1863.

The stage suggests the blackened remains of a burnt farmhouse.

The actors emit a low whistle like the howl of wind through the charred posts that have replaced a home. The crackle of burning embers. The sudden pop of snapping wood.

The immediate danger has been muted by the horrible consequences. We witness the aftermath—even as the last dreadful hours linger over the scene.

The ENSEMBLE sings a march.)

SONG #1: FIRE

ALL

FIRE.

FIRE.

(Two FOOT SOLDIERS lunge forward, laughing inappropriately. This ragtag platoon of the Union army is months on the road, relying on wits.)

LAUGHING SOLDIER ONE.

Y' SHOULD HAVE SEEN
THAT BARN COME DOWN!

LAUGHING SOLDIER TWO.

A WHOOSH OF FLAMES!
AN AWFUL SOUND!

LAUGHING SOLDIER ONE.

DIDJA SEE THAT COW
WITH A BURNING TAIL?
WE MADE IT SCREAM
AND RUN LIKE HELL!

BOTH.

NOTHING LIKE HAY
TO MAKE THE FLAMES
HIGHER!

NOTHING BUT SMOKE!
NOTHING CAN STOP—!

ALL.

FIRE.
FIRE.

(A cellar door opens. RUFUS appears, blackened with soot.)

RUFUS.

THE FLAMES DIE DOWN
THERE'S NOTHING LEFT
BUT SMOKE AND SOOT
AND AN ACHE IN YOUR CHEST.

I HELD MY BREATH
AND I HELD MY FEAR.
CAN IT BE?
THERE'S NOTHING HERE.

ALL.

NOTHING LIKE FEAR
TO MAKE THE FLAMES
CLIMB HIGHER.

NOTHING TO DO.
NOTHING CAN STOP—
FIRE.

*(As RUFUS crawls out of the cellar, his MAMA appears
IN A FLASHBACK, wrapped in a ragged shawl, like a
pillar of smoke. Frantic, firm, she urges her son into the
cellar.)*

MAMA. Little man.

ALL.

FIRE.

MAMA. Little man! Little man!

STAY, MY SON, NO TIME FOR TEARS.
HIDE BELOW. I'LL MEET YOU HERE.

IN THE CELLAR. NOT A SOUND.
SAFER THERE. BELOW THE GROUND.

ALL.
NOTHING LIKE RAGE
TO MAKE THE FLAMES
CLIMB HIGHER.

NOWHERE TO RUN.
NOTHING CAN STOP
FIRE.

MAMA. Stay low, little man. Don't breathe the smoke.

ALL.
FIRE.

MAMA.
I'LL COME ANE FIND YOU WHEN I CAN.

ALL.
FIRE.

MAMA.
I'LL COME AND FIND YOU WHEN I CAN.

(MAMA seems to vanish as—CORPORAL WILKES steps forward, beleaguered, jaded, responsible.)

CORPORAL WILKES. Is this the boy?
LAUGHING SOLDIER TWO. He's the one all right.
LAUGHING SOLDIER ONE. We got ourselves a prisoner!

CORPORAL WILKES. Leave him alone. Where's your ma and pa, boy?

RUFUS. Pa's been in the war. Ma went to free the cow.

CORPORAL WILKES. Wait. What?

RUFUS. She put me in the cellar and ran to the barn to free the cow. That's our last cow.

SOLDIER ONE. Must be that cow we saw running for the woods.

SOLDIER TWO. That cow's not gonna last much longer.

SOLDIER ONE. Hoo-eeey! That barn came down like nobody's business!

SOLDIER TWO. Nothing burns like hay!

CORPORAL WILKES (*to the SOLDIERS*). You two. See if you can find that cow and hitch him up. We're heading out. (*The SOLDIERS salute and exit. The CORPORAL turns to the boy.*) Boy—what's your name?

RUFUS. Rufus. Rufus Sykes.

CORPORAL WILKES. Rufus Sykes, you don't got many options. I'll list 'em like you got a choice—but you don't. You understand me? Now you can head out with us—and you're gonna be on foot so I hope you got boots—or you can stay here and probably starve. Your crops are ruined. We took care of that. Don't seem to be animals.

RUFUS. We got a cow.

CORPORAL WILKES. Cow's already decided she's coming with us. So you can stay here and starve—or tie your boots.

RUFUS. My ma told me to stay.

CORPORAL WILKES. Double-knot your boots, boy. You're heading out with us. (*Calling out.*) Jackson!

(JACKSON appears in a Union uniform. He carries a large drum. The drum has been named Obadiah.)

JACKSON. Sir!

CORPORAL WILKES. We got another drummer boy so you're not the only one. You understand me?

JACKSON. Sir!

CORPORAL WILKES *(plowing ahead, pure military)*. His name is Sykes. Rufus Sykes. Make sure we don't lose him. Do you understand me?

JACKSON. Sir!

LAUGHING SOLDIER TWO *(O.S.)*. Corporal Wilkes!

(CORPORAL WILKES exits. RUFUS and JACKSON are alone. JACKSON was subordinate before the CORPORAL—but asserts high status over the boy.)

RUFUS. My name is Rufus.

JACKSON. I don't care what your name is. We only got one drummer boy and I am it. You understand me? Do you understand?

RUFUS. Sir.

JACKSON. Tie your dang boots and grab what you need. We'll be gone before you know it. *(JACKSON exits, lugging his drum. He beats a fancy riff.)*

(RUFUS looks up to see his MAMA standing on a distant ridge. The platoon prepares to move out. The frenzy of activity around RUFUS freezes as he sings.)

SONG #2: LIKE I SAID

RUFUS.

MAMA, I STAYED PUT—LIKE YOU SAID.
I COVERED MY MOUTH, I LOWERED MY HEAD.
NO ONE WILL SAY IF YOU'RE ALIVE OR DEAD.
MAMA, I DID EVERYTHING LIKE YOU SAID.

LIKE YOU SAID, I'M A MAN NOW
LIKE YOU SAID, I'M ALL GROWN.
GOODBYE MA, GOODBYE HOME.
I GOTTA BE A MAN ON MY OWN.

MAYBE THIS IS DESTINY.
THIS IS WHO I'M SUPPOSED TO BE.
THE ONE WHO TAKES WHAT COMES TO ME.
THE ONE WITHOUT A FAMILY.

MAMA, TIED MY BOOTS—LIKE YOU SAID.
A SOLDIER'S GOTTA GO WHERE A SOLDIER IS
LED.
I'M NOT AFRAID OF WAR OR THE ROAD AHEAD.
'CAUSE MAMA, I REMEMBER EV'RYTHING YOU
SAID.

LIKE I SAID, I'M A MAN NOW
LIKE I SAID, I'M ALL GROWN.
GOODBYE MA, GOODBYE HOME.
I GOTTA BE A MAN ON MY OWN.

I GOTTA BE A MAN ON MY OWN.

SONG #2A: FIRE EXIT

(The ragtag group moves off together. The march music of FIRE resumes.)

CORPORAL WILKES. Boy! Got your boots!

RUFUS. Yessir!

CORPORAL WILKES. Jackson! Got the drum?!

JACKSON. Yessir!

CORPORAL WILKES. We're moving out.

ALL.

FIRE.

FIRE.

SCENE TWO

(A barren stretch of road.

The SOLDIERS march.

JACKSON and RUFUS trudge side by side. JACKSON lugs the drum, slung over his shoulder. A CRABBY FOOT SOLDIER trudges along beside them.)

JACKSON. Left advance.

RUFUS (*"speaks" a drum-beat pattern*). Rump-paaa-rump-pum.

JACKSON. Stand at arms.

RUFUS. Zhigga-digga-rump-pump-pum.

JACKSON. Breakfast.

RUFUS. *Brrrr-bump-bump. Brrrr— (Spoken.)* How'm I doing?

JACKSON. Keep drumming.

RUFUS. I'm not drumming! I'm making noises with my mouth! How'm I gonna make the right noises unless I make 'em on the drum?

JACKSON. We're marching! Beat the drum now and you'll have the regiment going "left advance" right into the woods and shooting at the dang trees!

RUFUS. You don't treat me with respect. A soldier treats a soldier with respect.

JACKSON. You're no soldier.

RUFUS. I'm wearing boots; I'm marching!

JACKSON. That don't make you a soldier. That makes you a prisoner. Some soldier. You don't even know which side you're on—

RUFUS. Whichever you're on? I'm on the other.

JACKSON. Which makes you my prisoner.

RUFUS. Corporal says I'm a drummer boy, same as you.

JACKSON. What you don't know—you see this drum? This drum has got history. This is Obadiah, see?

("Obadiah" is hand-carved on the drum.)

RUFUS. Obadiah?

JACKSON. Yessir, now that's a prophet.

RUFUS. I know my Old Testament.

JACKSON. Obadiah prophesied destruction. And so do we.

RUFUS. Who named the drum Obadiah?

JACKSON. That happened long before me. A whole mess of drums came outta the same outfit that had a whole mess of drummer boys; I hear the same drums are still out there—Jeremiah, Elijah, Ezekial—Old Testament prophets pounding out the prophesy. So this is not a toy

you get to play on, see? This here drum is more like the thunder before the storm.

(An order to “halt” passes down the regiment. RUFUS, JACKSON and the FOOT SOLDIER stop marching.)

This is not an orderly military drill. We’re miles beyond that.

The CORPORAL walks into their midst.)

CORPORAL WILKES. Set up camp. Wildcat Mountain is over yonder. That’s a battle we won so this clearing is safe.

JACKSON. Corporal Wilkes. We’re ready for the test.

RUFUS. What test?

CORPORAL WILKES. What test?

JACKSON. Drummer boy test. Same as you gave me.

RUFUS. Right now?

CORPORAL WILKES. Right now?

JACKSON. You said it shouldn’t wait, sir.

CORPORAL WILKES. Drum. Sticks. *(CORPORAL perches on a rock. He pulls a knife from his pocket and whittles a scrap of wood.)*

RUFUS *(to JACKSON)*. You never said there was a test. You never even let me hold the drum.

JACKSON. You been crying for it. Here you go. Go easy on Obadiah.

RUFUS. I’ll go easy.

JACKSON. Bust a hole in that drum ’n I’ll bust a hole in your head.

RUFUS *(re: CORPORAL)*. Is he just gonna sit there and whittle?

CRABBY FOOT SOLDIER. He always whittles. Better than the last one. He did needlepoint.

JACKSON. Corporal gives the orders; Corporal calls the shots.

(RUFUS stands awkwardly before the CORPORAL—with Obadiah and sticks.)

CORPORAL WILKES *(to RUFUS)*. Let's see. Left flank to arms.

RUFUS. *Brrrum-pum-pum.*

CORPORAL WILKES. Very nice. Now with the sticks. *(RUFUS beats at the drum, rather badly.)* Retreat.

RUFUS. *Brrrum-pum-pum-pum-tigga-pum.*

CORPORAL WILKES. Yes, but—with the sticks. *(RUFUS beats at the drum, badly.)* Sounds like you've never hit a drum before. *(RUFUS glances shamefully at his sticks. CORPORAL looks at JACKSON.)*

JACKSON. Same way I learned, sir.

CORPORAL WILKES. You need to give the boy time at the drum. Left advance.

RUFUS. *Rump-paa-rum-pum.*

CORPORAL WILKES. Not from you! I want to hear it from the drum. *(RUFUS drums badly.)* Forward to rear. *(RUFUS drums badly.)* Mail call. *(RUFUS drums badly. CORPORAL looks to JACKSON.)*

JACKSON. I told you he wouldn't work out, sir.

CORPORAL WILKES. He'll work out fine. He needs time with the sticks.

JACKSON. Not my sticks, sir.

CORPORAL WILKES. He doesn't need your sticks. He's got his own. *(CORPORAL hands over two drumsticks*

that he has whittled from wood.) We only got the one drum—so practice when you can but get 'em right. Fifth Division, Fourth Platoon, Third Regiment, Second Drummer, on reserve.

RUFUS. Yes sir!

CORPORAL WILKES (*plowing ahead, military*). You understand how this works? This regiment is infantry. That means we're on foot. No horses, no cannons, no heavy artillery. We walk side by side into battle with our rifles ready.

RUFUS. Yessir.

CORPORAL WILKES. I deliver my commands to the drummer boy and the drummer boy delivers them to the regiment. So no fooling around. You gotta get 'em right.

JACKSON. But sir—he's not for the North. He's for the South.

CORPORAL WILKES. Is that right? Have we got a little traitor? I'm thinking you'll fight for the side that feeds you, am I right? And which side is that?

RUFUS. You, sir!

CORPORAL WILKES. You're not a Rebel, are ya? Like to switch sides?

RUFUS. Fifth Division, Fourth Platoon, Third Regiment, Second Drummer, on reserve, sir! Jumping Jehosophat! If that don't beat all!

JACKSON. Begging permission, Corporal. The drummer boy is not a mascot. This is not a game.

CORPORAL WILKES. You are correct, sir. It is not a game.

JACKSON. You have to do a job nobody wants you to do. Begging permission to speak freely, sir. (*The CORPORAL nods.*)