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Dramatic Publishing

HOME FIRES

A Play in Two Acts

by

JACK HEIFNER



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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For Kathy Bates

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Home Fires was inspired by my grandmother, Ocie Jackson Norris. At one time, she could count six children, a husband, a father-in-law, two orphans, four full-time roomers, as well as another group of people from the rooming house across the street, sitting down at her table for every meal. I grew up hearing the warm, wonderful stories of a time when Americans were short on money but long on ingenious ways to stretch a dollar. Although my grandmother ran the Ironclad Boarding House in Corsicana, Texas, during the early part of the 20th Century, I have chosen to set this play during World War II. Shortages were again a way of life and women had to keep the home fires burning, since so many men were away at war. It was a time for patriotism; but, contrary to what the history books have led us to believe, there were also a few young men who chose to flee the country and resisted fighting in the war (as many more did during the Vietnam war later in the century). Because the country was so united in the war effort, draft dodging in World War II was the greatest shame one could bring upon oneself and a family. I was not alive during that time, but it is my hope that I have captured some of the spirit and courage it took to live through hard times in this country, as well as some of the controversy.

The first production of *HOME FIRES* opened at the Arkansas Repertory Theatre in Little Rock on May 2, 1991.

Director CLIFF FANNIN BAKER
Costume Design MARK HUGHES
Set Design JEFF THOMSON
Lighting Design DAVID NEVILLE
Sound Design DOUG HILL
Sound Consultant DAN SMITH, Sound Design Company
Stage Manager LISA L. ABBOTT

Maydene Erwin SALLY SOCKWELL
Nettie Morris FRANCES TUCKER KEMP
Sonny Morris SKIP LACKEY
Alice Blankenship JUDY BLUE
Susanna Morris KATIE BLACKERBY
Nola Morris LORRAINE MORGAN
June Clowe SALLY EDMUNDSON
Maggie Wortham KATHRYN NEWBROUGH

A revised version of *HOME FIRES* opened at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas, on March 4, 1997.

Director JACK HEIFNER
Set Design KERRO KNOX 3
Costume Design KEVIN J. McCLUSKEY
Costume Design TOMY MATTHYS
Sound Design JOHN TANNER
Original Music ALAN NIELSEN
Assistant Director DAVID PAIN
Stage Manager ERICKA R. WILCOX
Assistant Stage Managers MARTIN BAILIE, TERRY ROSA

Maydene Erwin MERI VIRTANEN
Nettie Morris MICHELLE READ
Sonny Morris PRESTON PLENTL
Alice Blankenship KELLEY WILLIAMS
Susanna Morris LESLIE PRIKRYL
Nola Morris WENDY WHILDEN
June Clowe CRYSTAL LINK
Maggie Wortham JENNIFER TEAGUE

HOME FIRES

A Play in Two Acts
For 7 Women and 1 Man

NETTIE MORRIS a woman in her late 30s
SONNY MORRIS her son, 18
SUSANNA MORRIS her daughter, 15
NOLA MORRIS another daughter, 14
MAYDENE ERWIN a well-dressed woman, mid-20s
JUNE CLOWE a large, cheerful woman, late 20s
ALICE BLANKENSHIP a tall, thin woman, late 20s
MAGGIE WORTHAM a woman in her early 20s

TIME: The 1940s.

PLACE: A modest home in a small Texas town.

Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes.

PRODUCTION NOTES

THE SET: UC, seen through a large arch, is the entry hall to the house. It is a step up from the main playing area. The front door is out of view and a stairway to the upper floor can be seen through the arch. In the living room, on the R wall, is a mirror over a small table. Next to that is a window with lace curtains. Far DR is an upright piano with an old radio on the top of it. C there's a sofa and a large chair with an ottoman. U, left of the entry arch, is a writing desk and a chair. Far left is the dining area with a swinging door to the kitchen. There is a wooden dining table with eight chairs and a long sideboard on the D wall. The house is cozy, with wallpaper and all the touches of a middle-class home of the time period. The action of the play requires that some people enter as others are exiting. These actions should flow and overlap so that there aren't any long pauses, unless indicated in the script.

THE MUSIC: Music for the production may be composed by the producing theatre. The music used in the production of *Home Fires* at Stephen F. Austin State University was composed by Dr. Alan Neilson. It is available by contacting Dr. Alan Neilson, P.O. Box 9090 SFA Station, Nacogdoches, Texas 75962. Arrangements should be made directly with him concerning the royalties for "Sonny's song," including the sheet music and a tape of Maggie's recording as heard on the radio.

ACT ONE

SCENE: *A late afternoon in September. MAYDENE, an attractive woman, enters through the front door. She looks into the living room. NETTIE, wearing a housedress and apron, enters from the kitchen. MAYDENE quickly ducks back into the hallway. NETTIE goes to the sideboard and gets a tablecloth out of the drawer. During the following she will set the table for supper, putting out dishes and folding napkins. MAYDENE looks back into the living room again.*

MAYDENE. Are you busy?

NETTIE. Oh, I didn't know anybody was here.

MAYDENE. I just got in a minute ago.

NETTIE. I'm only setting the table for supper.

MAYDENE. I won't bother you.

NETTIE. No, come on in.

MAYDENE. But you're so busy.

NETTIE. Yes, I'm busy...but you're not bothering me, Maydene. *(MAYDENE comes into the room and crosses to the dining area. She starts to sit at the table.)*

MAYDENE. I don't want to get in the way.

NETTIE. You're not in the way, but you will be if you sit there.

MAYDENE *(standing and stepping back from the table)*.
So where should I sit?

NETTIE. Anyplace but where I'm trying to work.

MAYDENE. Well, I don't know where to sit.

NETTIE (*pointing to an overstuffed chair by the living room sofa*). Sit over there, Maydene. Nobody ever sits there.

MAYDENE. Why is that? Why does nobody ever sit there?

NETTIE. Seems like when I got that chair, I warned the children that it was new and to please not sit in it. So they never did and now it's ten years later.

MAYDENE. And the new hasn't even been worn off! Well, I'd be happy to sit right here.

NETTIE. You just do that. (*She laughs to herself and continues to get plates and napkins from the sideboard. MAYDENE sits.*)

MAYDENE. So...how many are you fixing for?

NETTIE. However many show up.

MAYDENE. So how do you know how much to cook?

NETTIE. I cook the same amount. If a few show, they get a lot. If the whole gang appears, the portions get pretty small.

MAYDENE. Every meal I've had of yours tasted fine. I mean, Nettie, you are what I'd call an excellent cook.

NETTIE. Does that mean you want to join us tonight? (*She crosses to the piano to turn the radio off.*)

MAYDENE. Me? Oh, no...I just couldn't.

NETTIE. You're my only roomer who isn't also a boarder.

MAYDENE. Nettie, I can't afford to eat and sleep here, too.

NETTIE. I wonder sometimes what you usually do for supper.

MAYDENE. Oh, I can exist on almost anything...bird seed and such. I only eat to stay alive.

NETTIE. The majority of folks around here only live for the next meal.

MAYDENE. So what are you cooking? Let me guess! (*She sniffs the air.*) I think it's either stew or pot roast.

NETTIE. It's not stew.

MAYDENE. Pot roast!

NETTIE. New potatoes, baby carrots, green beans, corn-bread and a new cake recipe I'm trying.

MAYDENE. Oh, Nettie, I don't know how you do it, with rationing and all. Pot roasts are as scarce as hen's teeth.

NETTIE. I grow plenty of vegetables in my Victory Garden and trade things with the shopkeepers around town. So should I set another place?

MAYDENE (*opening her purse and counting her money*). Now, you know I shouldn't.

NETTIE. I know.

MAYDENE. But I guess I'll just splurge!

NETTIE. Nothing wrong with giving yourself a treat now and then.

MAYDENE. I sure need one. But I hope only a few show. If I'm going to spend, I'd like to feel I got my money's worth.

NETTIE. I'll tell you what...you help the girls with the dishes afterwards and the meal's on me.

MAYDENE. Help with the dishes? With these hands? Most of the time I'm forced to model the gloves before the lady gets interested in buying them. So, just let me pay for the meal and I'll skip the dishes.

NETTIE. Suit yourself. (*She has finished with the table and goes to straighten up some of the living room area.*)

MAYDENE. Nettie, this chair is most comfortable.

NETTIE. Good. Use the ottoman.

MAYDENE. Could I? What a lovely ottoman. (*NETTIE moves it over and MAYDENE puts her feet up.*)

NETTIE. How's that?

MAYDENE. It's bliss! I get so tired standing on my feet all day.

NETTIE. You ought to buy yourself something other than high heels.

MAYDENE. With what they pay me, I'm lucky to have any shoes at all.

NETTIE. Things are bad all over.

MAYDENE. It's the war. I can't keep up, from one minute to the next, who we're bombing and who's our friend or our enemy ... but then, some things cannot be understood. Except this chair! It's too wonderful. I'd better hop up before I pass out. (*She gets up.*) Supper's when?

NETTIE. Thirty minutes or so.

MAYDENE. Then I'll just run upstairs to my room and freshen up! I might even put on something special. My mama sent me a new dress she made me—organdy with lots of ruffles.

NETTIE. Sounds more like a dancing dress.

MAYDENE. Nobody's having a dance. Not in this town.

NETTIE. Oh, they used to. I went to many a party around here in my time.

MAYDENE. Well, I guess I got here about the time the fun stopped.

NETTIE. Honestly, this town was quite a place. Oil derricks as far as the eye could see. A real boomtown. Then the oil ran out and the boom sort of went kaput.

MAYDENE. Isn't that always the way? Nice things don't last, do they?

NETTIE. Oh, some things do.

MAYDENE. Not for me.

NETTIE. I don't think you're talking about boomtowns.

MAYDENE. No, I guess not. Did you know, Nettie, I was considered the most attractive girl in my high school class?

NETTIE. No.

MAYDENE. Yes. I was ever so much more attractive than Etta May Hooper. She was the second most attractive ... by default. She was the only other girl in my class.

NETTIE. Heaven, you do come from a small town.

MAYDENE. Poor Etta May ... she stayed there, but I decided to go off and see the world! Of course, it's been years and I've only gotten as far as this; and if this is what the rest of the world is like, I might as well go on home. Anyway ... I won't disturb you anymore. I'll just be about my business. *(She starts toward the stairs.)*

NETTIE. Don't wake anybody.

MAYDENE. I'm always quiet.

NETTIE. You know, Maydene, your rent wouldn't be so much if you'd let me rent your room out to a day sleeper. They're up and gone to work at the factory all night ... so they wouldn't bother you.

MAYDENE *(defensive)*. I just couldn't share my bed with another person.

NETTIE. But they don't sleep in it when you're there, and we change the sheets. That private room is costing you plenty.

MAYDENE. I know, but I've always had my own things in my own place. I've never shared a room in my life, so I guess I'll just have to sell more gloves to pay for it.

NETTIE. But you're still having supper?

MAYDENE. Well, I can't sit in my private room and starve, can I?

NETTIE. I guess not.

MAYDENE. One of these days, Nettie, I'm not going to have to live like this.

NETTIE. That's what we're all praying for, honey.

MAYDENE. But until our prayers get answered, I guess I'll just eat supper and try not to worry about it.

NETTIE. Good idea.

MAYDENE. I sure hope only a handful shows up.

NETTIE. I'll put out another place setting, but first I'd better check on the roast.

(NETTIE exits into the kitchen. MAYDENE goes to the window and peeks out. She sees something, then quickly runs to look in the mirror. She checks her appearance, then tries to act casual and surprised as SONNY, a very good-looking young man, enters through the front door. He comes into the hallway and rounds the corner into the living room, running right into MAYDENE.)

SONNY. Oh, sorry, Maydene! I didn't see you.

MAYDENE. Oh, that's quite all right, Sonny. And how are you feeling today?

SONNY. Better, thank you.

MAYDENE. You sure had us worried, but we're all glad you're up and about.

SONNY. Me, too.

MAYDENE. Well, I'll see you at supper.

SONNY. You're going to eat?

MAYDENE. I sure am...and you can sit right next to me. That is, if you don't mind?

SONNY. I don't mind.

MAYDENE. Good! Then it's a date! *(She heads toward the stairs.)*

SONNY. A date?

MAYDENE. Come knock on my door when supper's ready.

SONNY. But I didn't... oh, what the hell. *(MAYDENE hurries upstairs. SONNY crosses to the piano, sits and plays the first few bars of a song. Then he plays it again, changing it a bit.)*

NETTIE *(from the kitchen)*. Sonny? Is that you?

SONNY. Yes, Mama. Was I too loud?

(NETTIE enters and gives him a little hug.)

NETTIE. Alice and June are still upstairs, but they sleep like logs. Are your sisters with you?

SONNY. They stopped off at the drugstore.

NETTIE. I wish they'd hurry. I've got things for them to do.

SONNY. Want me to help?

NETTIE. No, the girls can do it. How was school?

SONNY. All right, I guess. I worry I'm not going to make it.

NETTIE. Oh, hush! You're going to do just fine.

SONNY. I'm real far behind.

NETTIE. You'll catch up. You were out a long time, but you can't give up just because you've got to work a little harder right now.

SONNY. I thought I might go down and see if the feed store needs some help. I could pick up a few dollars.

NETTIE. You need to study or else you'll never get out of high school. Now you go take a nap. That way your mind will be fresh. (*SONNY gets up from the piano, gives NETTIE a kiss on the cheek and goes to the stairs.*)

SONNY. Okay, Mama.

NETTIE. But be careful! Maydene's up there. You get into a conversation with her and you'll never learn a thing.

(SONNY laughs and exits upstairs. NETTIE goes back to the dining table. ALICE, a good-looking woman, comes dashing down the stairs. She's in her bathrobe and curlers. MAYDENE sneaks down after ALICE and stands on the stairway listening.)

ALICE. I heard Sonny playing the piano.

NETTIE. Did he wake you?

ALICE. Well, yes...but I like to get up before June and take a long hot bath before work. June's always rushing around at the last minute, doncha know?

NETTIE. How are things at the factory?

ALICE. Oh, I just do my job and don't pay much attention to what's going on elsewhere. Stick to my own business, doncha know? By the way, could I have a clean towel?

NETTIE. I gave you one yesterday.

ALICE. I know, but something got on it. You can't expect me to wash myself clean and then dry myself with something dirty, can you?

NETTIE. I'll get you another one.

ALICE. Thanks. And, not to be a nuisance, but the bathroom is not too clean.

NETTIE. Susanna scrubbed it this morning.

ALICE. Well, somebody must have messed it up. Nettie, there are things in the tub.

NETTIE. Things?

ALICE. They're not my hairs.

NETTIE. As soon as one of the girls gets home, I'll have her come pick them out.

ALICE. I sure would appreciate it, doncha know? So... what's for supper?

NETTIE. Pot roast.

ALICE. Seems like we just had that.

NETTIE. I'm going to have to get you a towel off the line. I just washed this morning, but that way you can be sure it's clean.

ALICE. Well, cleanliness is next to godliness, doncha know?

NETTIE. Yes, I know, Alice. Come with me.

(They exit to the kitchen. MAYDENE sneaks back upstairs. At the same time, SUSANNA and NOLA enter through the front door. SUSANNA has on bright red lipstick...too much of it. NOLA is a rather plain girl. They put their school books down as they speak.)

SUSANNA *(going to look in the mirror)*. So what do you really think?

NOLA. If Mama sees you've got lipstick on, she'll also want to know where you got it. So you'd better take it off.

SUSANNA. Don't I look mature?

NOLA. You're going to be in big trouble.

SUSANNA. Oh, calm down.

NOLA. I could have died! I didn't know when we went into the drugstore you were going to steal it.

SUSANNA. Neither did I. I just did. Don't you like it?

NOLA. What if someone saw us?

SUSANNA. I think it does wonders for me. Besides, I'm just gonna tell Mama, Maydene gave it to me.

NOLA. Cheap Maydene? She wouldn't give away a lipstick.

SUSANNA. I guess you're right. She'd give away her virginity before she'd part with a lipstick.

NOLA. Now stop it! She'll hear you! She could be anywhere, snooping around.

SUSANNA. I think I look very sophisticated.

NOLA. Just because of your lips?

SUSANNA. It's a start. Tomorrow I'll swipe some stuff to accent my eyes.

NOLA. Well, I won't be going to the drugstore with you. Steal from now on and you steal alone.

SUSANNA. You're no fun at all.

NOLA. Plus, you don't even have it on right.

SUSANNA. It takes a bit of practice to get it straight, I'm sure.

(ALICE, carrying a towel, enters from the kitchen.)

NOLA *(to SUSANNA)*. Oh, no...here comes old "doncha know." *(They giggle.)*

ALICE *(seeing them)*. Afternoon, girls.

NOLA. You're up early.

ALICE. Yes, I'm going to have myself a bath and your mama says one of you will clean the tub for me.