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The Storm in the Barn

Adapted by
ERIC COBLE

From the graphic novel by
MATT PHELAN

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(THE STORM IN THE BARN)

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“Produced by special arrangement with
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC., of Woodstock, Illinois.”

“Originally commissioned and produced by
Oregon Children’s Theatre in 2012.”

The Storm in the Barn premiered at Oregon Children’s Theatre (Stan Foote, Artistic Director; Ross McKeen, Managing Director) on April 28, 2012.

CAST:

Jack Jack Clevenger
Mabel Steele Clevenger
Frank Michael Cline
Ray Connor Delaplane
Ernie/Doc Daniel East
Ma Melanie Joy Hall
Pa/The Storm King Damon Kupper
Dorothy Ashlee Waldbauer

MUSICIANS:

Violin..... Meghan Coil
Bass Fletcher Nemeth
Accordion..... Anton Van Oosbree

PRODUCTION:

Director/Co-Scenic Design Marcella Crowson
Music Composition Black Prairie
Music Director Melanie Joy Hall
Choreography..... Sara Mishear Martins
Co-Scenic Design..... Christopher Rousseau
Lighting..... Don Crossley
Costumes..... Jeff Cone
Sound and Projections..... Cameron McFee
Props Drew Dannhorn
Fight Choreography John Armour
Mask Design Tony Fuemmeler

The Storm in the Barn

CHARACTERS

JACK: A boy who needs to be bigger, 11.

RAY: A boy who knows how to make a fist, teens.

FRANK: A boy who follows, teens.

ERNIE: A keeper of wisdom, 50s.

MA: A woman who remembers, 40s.

PA: A man who has forgotten, 40s.

DOC: A man with answers, 50s.

DOROTHY: A girl who lives in both worlds, 14.

MABEL: A girl who dances with the wind, 6.

THE STORM KING: A creature who dreams.

PLACE: Kansas.

TIME: 1937.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The Storm in the Barn was written to be performed by as few as 7 musicians/actors, or as many as desired.

If desired, the entire cast can be present onstage at all times, observing and participating, to give a sense of communal storytelling.

Sets should be suggested and kept to a minimum for maximum flow between scenes.

Rampant theatricality is encouraged in staging, if not in performance.

For original music, please reach out to Black Prairie via their website at <http://blackprairie.com/contact/>.

The Storm in the Barn

(The stage is bare with several pieces of hulking wood scaffolding rising from the dirt floor toward the rear of the stage. Sections of splintered wooden fence dot the landscape as well.

Kansas. 1937. Dust Bowl.

Silence. Darkness.

Then we hear wind. Growing in intensity. All around us.

Onstage, a swirl of dust rises from the earth, roiling over the stage as the wind howls, a billowing wall of grit and force ...

Then it rolls away. From the echoes of the wind rolls a beaten flatbed truck, 1930s, loaded with the last remnants of a human life.

From the truck steps a woman, walking C, facing us. She's in simple farm clothes, 1930s. She pauses. She summons herself, opens her mouth and sings. Earthy, simple, haunting. Her song may or may not have words we can make out, but it's solemn and incantational, a summoning forth of something far greater than herself.

Several men and women climb from the truck, slowly, reverently collecting musical instruments from the possessions on the truck—fiddles, guitars, etc. One by one, they begin accompanying the woman's song, moving across the space—creating a space—a sacred space—to conjure the story.

The song grows in intensity.

BANG. One of the men slams something—perhaps the back gate of the truck or a toolbox. The woman's song stops. The others stare at him.

One of them, holding a can and spoon clanks on it in response to the bang—CLANK, CLANK.

The man responds with another percussive beat on the truck—they repeat in a call-and-response.

Other men and women join in with whatever utensils they have at hand—focused, serious, this is not joyous, it's still incantational. They move into the space to create room for what's to come.

It's now a pounding, ringing, jangling, all for inspiration in this dry desert ... it builds ... and builds ...

Then sudden silence.

One of the men steps forward.)

MAN #1. Once upon a time, there was a forest thick with trees, higher than high, thicker than thick—

(CLANK, CLANK, CLANK, CLANK! One of the women bangs her pan in disapproval. The man scowls at her. Clearly this is not the story the woman wants to hear. The man steps back.

Perhaps a shorter, simpler version of the drumming begins again—hypnotic—then a WOMAN steps into the space.)

WOMAN #1. Once upon a time, there was a world of snow, where mighty icicles reached down into blankets of white—

(CLANK, CLANK, CLANK. Another man rejects the story. The woman stalks back to the edge.

The group watches one another ... no one else steps forward.

There will be no story.

They start to move back to the truck, to the desert, despairing.

Then, from the back of the truck, a boy speaks, 11-years-old, overalls, simple shirt and shoes. Very, very small in the world.)

BOY. Once upon a time ... the world was turning to dust.

(Pause.

The others turn and look at him. He's never done this before. He steps tentatively off the truck and into the space.)

BOY *(cont'd)*. Once upon a time ... the world was turning to dust.

(The others look at one another and nod. They begin to circle him, creating music around him as he speaks.)

BOY *(cont'd, gaining confidence as he goes)*. Once upon a time ... the earth grew hard and dry and would grow no food ... and families would gather all they had and flee the land in search of life.

(Lights begin to shift.)

BOY *(cont'd)*. Because once upon a time ... the Rain refused to fall.

Once upon a time the Rain refused to serve.

And the Rain ... became powerful.

Once upon a time, the Rain hid its essence in a small traveling bag and walked among men ...

And the Rain ... became a King.

But also once upon that time ...

There was a boy ... named Jack.

(He pulls on his cap and becomes JACK.

Lights shift, and the story begins.

Music shifts dangerously as two of the musicians become two older boys—RAY and FRANK—coming up behind JACK. From here on, all musicians will step in to create characters as needed, perhaps continuing to play their instruments even as they do so.)

RAY. Hey, Jack Rabbit!

(JACK turns to see he's surrounded. He tries to run—they laugh, shove him—he turns, there must be a way out—the bigger kid, RAY, punches him in the stomach.

JACK goes down.

They loom over him, smiling. The music gets darker.)

FRANK. He didn't puke.

RAY. Looks like you can take a punch, Jack Rabbit.

FRANK. Can you take two?

(They move for him—he covers his head—a low rumble—it's wind, but dragging the world with it. The boys look up.)

RAY. Dust storm!

(They flee as the musicians create a huge wall of dust rising to life from the rear of the stage—bearing down on the cowering JACK like a slow-motion tsunami.

Another man yells in the distance.)

MAN #1. DUST STORM!!

(JACK runs to one corner of the stage—trapped. To the far corner—trapped. The dust cloud rolling after him, almost alive, he falls to his knees and crawls toward the wooden scaffolding. Two musicians pull large sideboards off the

truck and SLAM them down in front of JACK. They're closed barn doors. He bangs on the doors—pulls on them—terrified. They're locked tight. The wind and music grow louder—the cloud moves closer. JACK breaks for it, over the fence, tumbles to the ground—he's as good as dead.

Then suddenly in front of him are three figures. Their faces aren't human—but it's three adults in simple suits, wearing goggles and paper dust masks. They grab him up and pull him into a lit area.

Wind stops. Music stops. Instantly. It's shocking.

JACK is home. He blinks.

The woman who sang the incantation at the top of the show becomes MA. She kneels to check JACK over, pulling off her mask and goggles. Another man becomes PA, stern, in overalls, taking off his gear and wiping his face. Another man in a brown suit continues hovering, still hidden behind his mask and goggles.)

MA. Jack, are you all right??

PA. What were you doing out there??

JACK. I was in town ... but—

MA. Why didn't you take shelter at the general store?

(The masked figure steps forward, DOC.)

DOC. Very interesting. You chose to run *into* the dust storm. That's not a rational decision.

JACK. I was running *away* from the dust, not into it.

DOC. Sometimes we think things—maybe we even hear voices in our heads—that *seem* to make sense. Isn't that right, Jack?

JACK. I ... don't follow you, sir?

PA. Abe, will you take off that mask?

DOC (*pulls off his gear*). Sorry, Tom.

JACK. I tried to wait it out in Mr. Talbot's barn, but it was locked—

MA. The Talbots left town last night, Jack. California.

JACK. But I—

(His father grabs him.)

PA. Next time, you take shelter! Next time, *think!* We don't want to lose you like ...

(He catches himself. Looks at MA. Beat.)

MA. We're not losing Dorothy. We're not losing anyone.

DOC. Your, ah, your daughter's condition, Mrs. Clark—which, ah, by the way, this is interesting, our colleagues in the Red Cross headquarters in Wichita are calling it Dust Pneumonia—but it, ah ... I'm afraid it hasn't improved. In fact, she—

MA. Jack. See to your sisters.

(JACK nods and steps away as DOC turns to PA.)

DOC. You might want to keep an eye on your boy there, Tom. I've begun to notice a new condition out here. All this dust. It gets to some people on a whole different level ... I'm thinking of calling it "Dust Dementia."

(Lights shift as JACK turns. The musicians pull a mattress from the truck, and two young girls sit on it, becoming JACK's sisters MABEL, 6, in a simple dress, and DOROTHY, 14, in her nightgown, holding a book. They're lovely.)

DOROTHY. Did you really outrun the storm? You must be the fastest kid in town.

(He climbs onto the bed beside them.)

JACK. I wouldn't say that.

DOROTHY. I mean, now that I'm stuck in bed, that is. If Ma and Pa would let me out of here, I could still outrun you something awful.

JACK. Not anymore. I'm getting bigger.

DOROTHY. Pff. Does Ma still have that mirror—'cause you might want to take a look at yourself.

(JACK turns away, starts out.)

DOROTHY *(cont'd)*. I'm sorry! Jack.

(She coughs. JACK stops.)

DOROTHY *(cont'd)*. I didn't mean that. It's just, to me, you're always going to be my baby brother, and there's nothing you can do about that.

MABEL. Nothing you can do about that.

JACK. I am getting bigger. I measured myself against the fence post out the roadside, and it only comes up to here now.

MABEL. Maybe they're sinking.

JACK. They're not sinking.

(MABEL shrugs.)

DOROTHY laughs, starts coughing—dry—unstoppable. Awful. JACK flinches, but holds his ground. She catches her breath and wipes her eyes.)

DOROTHY. Did you see anyone in town? Any of the other kids?

JACK. ... No.

DOROTHY. Were Manion or Mildred at the store?

JACK. I said I didn't see anyone.

DOROTHY. Does the Arnett's cat still look like she swallowed a pumpkin?

JACK. I didn't see the cat.

DOROTHY. Well, what did you see? Tell me. You have to be my ears and eyes now, Jack. What's going on out there?

JACK. I saw the Talbot's barn. It was all locked up.

(Pause.)

MABEL. That's 'cause Mama said they up and moved in the middle of the night.

DOROTHY. That makes, what, five families now? That's a lot of empty barns and houses.

(JACK nods. Pause.)

DOROTHY *(cont'd)*. I'm going to miss Lois something awful.

JACK *(nods)*. And Curtis.

(DOROTHY nods. Pause.)

MABEL. Is the Talbot's barn really haunted?

JACK. It's not haunted, it's just empty.

MABEL. Not even the grasshoppers will live in there.

DOROTHY. Shh!

MABEL. I'm just saying the hoppers—

DOROTHY *(covers MABEL's mouth)*. Don't. Don't you call their name.

MABEL. Uncle Carl said it.

DOROTHY. Do you want to call them back?

MABEL. No!

DOROTHY. Then hush.

JACK. It's the rabbits we've got to worry about now. That's what Ernie says. The hoppers went back into the ground and as they dug down, the rabbits dug up, and now they're finishing off anything that's left.

DOROTHY. Don't. Stop it. Talk about good things. Tell me about something good that happened in town, Jack.

(JACK pauses ... points to her book.)

JACK. How's the other Dorothy?

DOROTHY. I 'spect she's going to get back to Oz, but she's in another scrape. This time—

(She coughs, pauses. JACK runs to the truck, gets her a metal cup of water. She drinks and smiles at him. Gentle music begins as he quietly takes her book and begins to read.)

JACK. "At the time the wind began to blow, a ship was sailing far out upon the waters. When the waves began to tumble and toss and to grow bigger and bigger, the ship rolled up and down, and tipped sidewise—first one way and then the other—and was jostled 'round so roughly that even the sailor-men had to hold fast to the ropes and railings to keep themselves from being swept away by the wind or pitched headlong into the sea. And the clouds were so thick in the sky that the sunlight couldn't get through them; so that the day grew dark as night, which added to the terrors of the storm ... "

(DOROTHY and MABEL have drifted asleep. Music fades away. JACK sets the book beside them and steps away as lights come up on MA and PA talking. JACK listens from the shadows.)

MA. Don't shut me out, Tom.

(PA sits, looking away.)

MA *(cont'd)*. If we're gonna get through this, it's gotta be together.

(Pause.)

MA *(cont'd)*. We promised, didn't we?

(Pause.)

MA *(cont'd)*. Look at me, Tom.

(He does.)

MA *(cont'd)*. I've seen how you tried. I seen you out there before the sun come up, cracking the hard earth open with nothing but lantern light to see. You think I don't see your fingers scraped raw from trying to get seed, *any* seed, just to take hold? It's too big for us. Any of us. We're getting swallowed and no one's even noticing. Buried in dust.

(She kneels beside him.)

MA *(cont'd)*. My roots are in this ground as deep as yours. I watered it with my tears and blood as much as anyone. This is *home*, Tom, but—

PA. It's cursed.

(She pauses, watching him.)

PA *(cont'd)*. No rain, no crops, the animals dying, their bellies full of dust—

MA. It's not your fault.

PA. There's only so much I can do alone.

(MA watches him.)

PA *(cont'd)*. Jack's no help.

(JACK watches them, unseen.)

PA *(cont'd)*. I still have to fix the truck before we can ... last thing we want is to break down on the road in the middle of a storm. That's what got the Jones boys. They never had a chance—

MA. Tom.

PA. I'll get us ready as soon as I can.

We'll get Dorothy out of here.

We'll just ... ah.

We'll ...

(He can't finish. Can't look at her. MA nods, holds him.)

JACK turns away as lights go down on his parents. He stands listening to the faint wind outside ... looks up at the barn structure in the darkness.

It flashes. Like lightning but no sound.

He steps back, startled. He rubs his eyes and watches it again.

Nothing.

Sound of wind.

Lights shift. Harsh sunlight.

The musicians circle the space, playing a lonely song, creating another dawn, another blazing day. The musician who becomes PA collects some worn tools, engine pieces and a greasy rag from the truck, lies down and starts to