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Dramatic Publishing

THE MIDDLETON ZEPHYR

by

PAT COOK



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(THE MIDDLETON ZEPHYR)

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THE MIDDLETON ZEPHYR

A Play in Two Acts
For Six Men and Six Women, Extras possible*

CHARACTERS

- CONNER MURPHY a high school senior, a bit worried
about his future and nostalgic about his past
- NEIL GARNER a very intelligent senior,
one of Conner's best friends
- TATER TAGGERT a senior, something of a class clown
- PRINCIPAL WALLACE a stern man in his late 40s,
always in a suit
- MRS. FRIEDEK Conner's homeroom teacher,
a long-suffering woman in her 40s
- WILEY LINDEN . . . the senior who's the all-around athlete,
not above a few practical jokes
- ROSE BAINES the radical of the senior class
- SUSIE MONTROSE the "cute" senior,
head cheerleader
- SANDRA JEFFERS a serious-minded senior,
seems to come in second a lot
- CARL HUMPHRIES . . the high school custodian, in his 50s,
wiser than he lets on
- MISS SHERWOOD a 35-year-old drama teacher,
very flamboyant
- MOM Conner's mother, a kind and diligent woman,
in her late 40s

*Extras may be used in the graduation and class scenes.

TIME: Senior year of 1964-65.
PLACE: Middleton High School.

ACT ONE

SETTING: *This reminiscence is a representation of a Middleton High School homeroom. A large part of the stage contains seven school desks facing a teacher's desk all from twenty-five years ago. The bulk of the room takes up L. Behind the desks, the walls contain one large blackboard, an American flag and one practical door, which leads out into the hallway. For the second part of the set, on the other half of the stage, there hangs an auditorium curtain, in front of which rests a podium.*

AT RISE: *Graduating SENIORS sit behind the podium, R, with the chairs leading offstage, giving the impression that the scene continues off. At the podium is PRINCIPAL WALLACE. All are frozen. Then, the second SENIOR from the end waves his hand at the audience, while the rest remain a still life.*

CONNER. Hey! Yeah, over here! That's me, Conner Murphy. Second from the end. *(He gets up and sits on the back of the chair, putting his feet in the seat.)* This is our graduation picture. It's the first and last photograph in the Middleton Zephyr, our high school annual, the year we graduated. They always do that. And that's Principal Wallace. *(He re-seats himself.)* I can still remember this. Old Man Wallace giving out with his "Bright Stars in Tomorrow's

Firmament” speech. *(Suddenly, everyone begins to move as WALLACE speaks to the audience.)*

WALLACE. ...So, it is up to you, the graduating seniors. The challenge is yours to become the bright stars in tomorrow’s firmament. And you will test your knowledge, your will and your strength as you leave these halls of learning and journey through life. And, as I look at these eager young faces, I can only wonder just how much of Middleton High School you are taking with you. *(He freezes again as do the rest. CONNER rises and moves L. LIGHTS come up on him and fade out R.)*

CONNER. How much we’re taking with us, he says. Well, Wiley Linden got six notebooks, three basketballs and a lot of almost-new school books. I mean, you’d think he never opened them. I love looking at this old yearbook, at some of the pictures. You ever do that? And try to recall what you can about them? Oh, I don’t even TRY to remember everything but some things stick out, some of the guys I graduated with, some of the adventures, I guess you would call them. Most from that last year at Old Middleton High. Or, as Tater Taggert called it, “Muddy Town High.”

(LIGHTS come up on homeroom. TATER is sitting at the teacher’s desk and making a broad expression as he points to one of the drawers.)

CONNER. That’s Tater there. This picture was taken right before he put a snake in Mrs. Friedek’s desk. Oh, he had a variety of wildlife he liked to donate to the school. *(LIGHT on TATER blacks out.)* Yeah, that was taken the first day of our senior year. There was another one taken right after that one.

(LIGHT comes up on TATER, who is now holding his hand in his mouth as if he was just bitten.)

CONNER. Tater didn't know much about snakes. *(LIGHT blacks out on TATER.)* Actually, it wadn't nothing but a grass snake but Tater let on it was real on account'a he had bet me and Neil five dollars that he could have Principal Wallace sucking on his finger before the day was out. That's why Wallace wouldn't let that last picture in the yearbook. Let's see. Oh, yeah. The first day of that year began like they always began, with Old Man Wallace giving his "First Step To Tomorrow" speech at assembly.

(LIGHTS come up on WALLACE, now alone, R, at the podium.)

CONNER. Yeah, I know. He only had one suit. *(LIGHTS fade on CONNER.)*

WALLACE. So, now we begin another year at Middleton High. And with each new school year, we say hello to a new class and good-bye to an old one. You, the students, begin your schooling learning the three R's, reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic. And before you graduate, I'd like to think you learn three other R's, research, respect and reward. It is only through research that you learn and know of what you speak. It is only through respect that you find that dignity and honor in what you learn and from who you learn it. And it is what will be honestly rewarded to you for your hard work and effort that means the most. For anything cheaply won will be cheaply regarded and held. The flame of knowledge is stoked with the fuel of energy, enthusiasm and the will to succeed. For without these tools we are only workmen with no aim in life and no vocation to build

upon. (*He freezes for a moment, another picture in the yearbook. LIGHTS fade on WALLACE and...*)

(*LIGHTS come up on CONNER, now in a regular shirt and blue jeans.*)

CONNER. That picture was always the second one in the yearbook. You could always tell because Old Man Wallace was always smiling at the beginning of the book and scowling at the end. He had a scowl that could scare off a rabid dog. Don't ask me how I know that.

(*LIGHTS come up L in homeroom.*)

CONNER. This was homeroom. (*He moves into the room and sits at a desk.*) I sat here. Oh, there were more desks in the room but the camera that took the pictures didn't have one of those what they used to call a panorama lens so this is all that ever showed up. Mrs. Friedek usually sat there. (*He points to the teacher's desk.*) Oh, Mrs. Friedek. She was our English teacher and sat homeroom with us. This was her picture.

(*LIGHTS come up R. MRS. FRIEDEK is frozen in a very sad, very haggard pose.*)

CONNER. And I think that was taken right after they told her she HAD to sit homeroom with us. (*LIGHTS fade on FRIEDEK.*) Ever notice that the teachers all looked older than they actually were? Especially toward the end of the year. Now, homeroom was where we always did everything. But it was mainly for English.

(A bell rings. FRIEDEK enters, a bit reluctantly, and holds the door. SANDRA, ROSE and SUSIE enter, holding school books.)

SANDRA. I'm telling you they caught some of the guys gambling in the boys restroom!

SUSIE. Already? Who?

SANDRA. I don't know, I just heard it in the hall!

FRIEDEK *(memorized)*. Please, take your seats.

ROSE. I heard it, too. I wonder who they caught?

SANDRA. I bet I can guess. *(They turn and see CONNER.)*

Nope, I was wrong.

ROSE. What did they do with them?

SANDRA. Took them to the office, wha'd you think?

FRIEDEK. Please, take your seats.

SUSIE. Well, we'll find out, I guess. Good morning, Mrs. Friedek.

SANDRA and ROSE. Good morning, Mrs. Friedek.

FRIEDEK. Good morning, please take your seats. *(ROSE, SANDRA and SUSIE sit near each other.)*

(NEIL enters.)

NEIL. Good morning, Mrs. Friedek. I hope you're feeling better this morning.

FRIEDEK *(brightens)*. Why, thank you, Neil.

CONNER *(to audience)*. That's Neil, one of my best friends. He was probably the smartest guy to ever come out of Middleton High.

FRIEDEK. What're you going to give your book report on?

NEIL. "Einstein's Theory of Relativity." I did a little extra research and I think I can prove he was wrong.

CONNER. What did I tell you?

FRIEDEK. I'll be looking forward to that. Please, take your seat. (*NEIL sits next to CONNER.*)

NEIL. Conner-co! Got your book report ready?

CONNER. 'Course not.

NEIL. Ah, it's wonderful to find something steadfast in these ever-changing times. You have read a book, haven't you?

CONNER. No, but I got one checked out.

NEIL. Let me guess. "The Three Musketeers."

CONNER. How'd you know that?

NEIL. Simple. They just ran the movie down at the Strand last weekend. Hey, Rose, I just heard that John Lennon is a communist!

ROSE. Shut up!

SUSIE. He IS not!

NEIL. With a last name like Lennon, think about it.

SANDRA. Hey, that's right!

ROSE. Shut up, anyway.

(*WILEY enters hurriedly.*)

WILEY. Sorry I'm late, Mrs. Friedek. I missed the bus and my brother had to drive me to school and his motor action was missing so we had to stop and check the oil and it was two quarts low so we had to drive real slow until we got to Humble station and they didn't have the right weight oil so he had to send out to another station and the truck bringing it had a flat so we had to go get the oil on foot and then on the way back...

FRIEDEK. Wiley, you're not late.

WILEY. I ain't?

FRIEDEK. You really know how to warm an English teacher's heart. Please, take your seat. (*WILEY sits near CONNER and NEIL.*)

WILEY. Did you hear that? I ain't even late and I done wasted seven of my best excuses.

NEIL. Thank goodness you got charm.

WILEY. Yeah. *(He laughs and snorts.)*

FRIEDEK. Has anyone seen Terry Lee? *(Everyone looks at her curiously.)* Tater? *(WILEY raises his hand.)* Yes, Wiley?

WILEY. He's in the principal's office.

FRIEDEK *(closes the door)*. Ask a silly question. *(She moves to her desk.)* Now, today I get to hear your first book reports. And, not to betray any trusts, I did check with the librarian to see which books had been checked out. *(NEIL gives CONNER an "Okay" sign.)*

CONNER *(to audience)*. I was yards ahead of her by this time.

FRIEDEK *(looks at her notes)*. And according to my notes, someone is reporting on *Les Misérables*. *(SANDRA raises her hand.)* Sandra, that's yours? Fine. *The Catcher In The Rye?* *(ROSE raises her hand.)* Rose? Good. I hope you overlooked the bad words. Neil, you already told me yours. Uhm...*Lifeguarding as a Career?* *(WILEY raises his hand.)* Wiley, you were supposed to read a novel.

WILEY. Wull, what's that?

FRIEDEK. Well, it's not a novel.

WILEY. But I thought a novel is a book.

FRIEDEK. Well, it is.

WILEY *("So?")*. Hey?

FRIEDEK. But a book is not necessarily a novel.

WILEY. What's the difference?

FRIEDEK. Well, a novel is a work of fiction. *(WILEY stares at her dumbfounded.)* You know, made up.

WILEY. Wull, somebody made this up, didn't they?

FRIEDEK. Yes, but...

WILEY. And all those people they showed how to rescue, all those names, they made those up.

FRIEDEK. I suppose so but...

WILEY. And all those ways to squeeze water out of them, somebody had to think of that, didn't they?

FRIEDEK. At one time, I'm sure, but...

WILEY. And all those pictures of people blue in the face with their tongues hanging out and their stomachs big as...

FRIEDEK (*interrupting him*). We're looking forward to your report, forget it!

WILEY. I was going to do a report on *Hypnotism For Fun And Profit* but I started reading it and kept falling asleep.

NEIL. Hypnotism? I didn't see that one. (*He thinks.*) Hmm.

FRIEDEK (*resumes her notes*). And that brings us to, let's see...*The Three Musketeers*.

(*Before CONNER can raise his hand, TATER bursts in the room and gives a note to FRIEDEK. She looks at the note and then back at TATER.*)

FRIEDEK. Gambling in the restroom?

TATER. I wadn't gambling, I went in there 'cause I had to...

FRIEDEK (*jumps in*). It's okay. Since you're already up here, Terry Lee, let's start with your book report.

TATER. Huh? Oh, okay, Mrs. Friedek. (*He strikes a pose.*) The book I read, *The Three Musketeers*. (*CONNER jumps to his feet and the group freezes in a pose. LIGHTS fade on homeroom.*)

WALLACE'S VOICE. This is Principal Wallace. Does anybody belong to a black and white spotted spaniel? If you do, please come to my office immediately and claim said animal. Also, will McDonald, Linden and Taggart please come to my office. We will now have our morning prayer.

(LIGHTS comes up R. CARL, dressed in a suit, is frozen in a pose. CONNER's LIGHT comes up DL. He walks into it.)

CONNER. Oh, this shot. This is Carl Humphries. The annual was dedicated to him. He was probably the most important person at Middleton High. Other than myself, of course. Carl was always there when you needed him, always ready for any situation and never idle for a moment that I can remember. He was the custodian. I remember thinking about him when I graduated, go figure. Oh, he had many sage words of advice for us students and he gave of himself freely. I can still hear his voice.

CARL *(emotionless, rapid-fire)*. You gonna stand around in the hall all day, I gotta clean up here! *(He freezes again as LIGHTS fade out on him.)*

CONNER. He was a great guy. Oh, also, there was always a shot or two in the yearbook that should've been self-explanatory.

(LIGHTS come up in homeroom. TATER is wearing a swimming mask and snorkel and holding a spear on WILEY, who is holding a bow and arrow on TATER and is wearing a pith helmet.)

CONNER. But they weren't. To this day, I have no idea what they were doing and they never did tell anybody. *(LIGHTS fade on TATER and WILEY.)* They DID say that they wished we'd have told them we were going to take their picture and they would've dressed up. You know, as you look over your annual you think back and try to relive some old memories. What was it somebody said? "You can't go home again." No, really, somebody said that. It wasn't me. And I don't think it was Tater. *(He remem-*

bers.) No. He said "Home is where your house is." But that was Tater, you have to understand his viewpoint. He was also the one who didn't see any point in taking English on account'a he figured he never get over to England anyhow. He was fun to hang around with but quoting him always got you in trouble.

(TATER, now dressed in his regular basketball jacket and blue jeans, enters the LIGHT.)

TATER. Hey, wait a minute, Conner, I served a purpose.

CONNER. How you figure?

TATER *(trying to think)*. Wull...

CONNER. Yeah, come on, this ought to be good.

TATER. I became the model for future underachievers.

CONNER. Underachievers? *(To audience.)* In those days, he was just plain dense. Underachieving was not thought of. Lazy? Slow? Sure! Underachieving?

TATER. In generations to come, it was prototypes like me that set the scale, that provided the data for further investigation. I was a symptom of a greater lack of knowledge.

CONNER. Further investigation? *(To audience.)* He NEVER talked like this. What he actually said at the time was...

TATER. My dog ate my homework.

CONNER. You didn't have a dog!

TATER. I didn't have my homework, either! Your turn.

CONNER. You really had it easy then, admit it.

TATER. Me?

CONNER. You. Nobody expected anything outta you so when you actually DID something, it was a surprise.

TATER. I never thought about it like that. But, hey, I still had a hard time keeping up. I tell you who had it easy. Neil is who had it easy.

(NEIL enters the LIGHT.)

NEIL. I had it easy?

TATER. You did. You were the smartest guy in the whole school, probably to ever come outta Muddy Town High.

NEIL. That's true. I guess between the two of us, we presented both ends of the spectrum.

TATER. And the invention of the Bell curve, don't forget that. Also, I had a naive innocence.

CONNER (*amazed*). Where are you getting these phrases? I don't remember you talking like this.

NEIL. Oh, Conner, wise up. When you look at the yearbook now, you don't remember things as they actually happened.

You remember events and people in flashes, coupled with what you learned about us years later.

TATER. Wait. You mean I am a figment of his memory? Something of a conglomerate of past and present recollections?

CONNER (*to audience*). I don't know this guy.

NEIL. And besides, I'll tell you who had it easy. It was always the jocks.

(WILEY enters the LIGHT.)

WILEY. We did not.

NEIL (*counting*). You guys always got extra time for homework assignments. You got to take makeup tests. You got time out of homeroom to go practice.

WILEY. Yeah, but I got blisters on my feet.

TATER. He did. I used to watch him peel them during biology.

CONNER. I ain't listening to you anymore.

TATER. I was one of your best friends!

WILEY. We were always set up as an example to the rest of the school. Always had to keep our grades up. Couldn't be seen smoking or drinking or staying out late. And, hey, I had a curfew.

NEIL. EVERYBODY had a curfew. If you stayed out late, you were scum. That's the way it was.

TATER. Society dictates.

CONNER *(to TATER)*. Will you STOP?!

TATER. I'll tell you who had it easy. The girls.

NEIL, WILEY and CONNER. Oh yeah!

SANDRA *(from the darkness)*. We DID not!

(LIGHTS come up R. SANDRA, SUSIE and ROSE are standing and arguing with the boys.)

WILEY. Girls always had it easier.

TATER. Teacher's pets.

SUSIE. Our standards were much higher.

ROSE. Yeah, but we didn't set them.

SUSIE. It was understood then.

SANDRA. Yeah. You guys could get away with murder. We had to not only keep our grades up but always had to wear dresses.

TATER. Wull, that's true, we didn't have to do that.

SANDRA. We couldn't wear jeans. We had to put on makeup and have our hair done and sit just so.

ROSE. And never swear!

SUSIE. Oh! Oh, crime of crimes! I remember one time we were on a field trip out by the lake and I said that maybe we ought to take the dam road. Mrs. Koontz made me do extra homework for a week!

ROSE. We stood up for you.

SUSIE. Yeah, and you got extra homework, too, didn't you?