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Family Plays

THE WALL: A PILGRIMAGE

One-act drama by

JAN STUCKEY

THE WALL: A PILGRIMAGE

"I went to the wall for the same reasons that the family in the play went to be released from the guilt of coming home when they did not. After seeing Jan Stuckey's wonderful play ... I realize that part of me must remain with those at the wall, lest I forget. I was glad that the final blackout was so long—I had time to dry my eyes before the house lights came on." (Letter to the editor, *Round Rock Leader*, Round Rock, Texas)

Drama. *By Jan Stuckey. Cast: 2m., 3w., 1 either gender, extras.* A family makes the long trek to Washington, D.C., to see the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall and touch the name of their loved one. As each family member goes to the wall, he or she is remembered through a powerful monologue, which may be presented as individual performances. The family members are the mother, who still bakes a cake every year on her dead son's birthday; the father, who tries desperately to conceal his grief; the younger brother, who tries to "hide his feelings behind an intellectual wall," as entertainment reporter John Bustin commented; the wife, who has remarried; and the daughter, who never knew her father and isn't sure how she should feel about him. The play doesn't sermonize, and it doesn't question whether or not Vietnam was a mistake. But the audience comes away from the play wondering why these 58,000 young Americans had to die, and why civilized human beings still make war. Perhaps it will remind you of Jerome McDonough's obvious but universally ignored observation that "The time to prevent war is when there is no war." *The Wall: A Pilgrimage* is, in Bustin's words, "compelling and freshly engrossing fare handled with intelligence and honesty." *Set: bare stage. Costumes: modern clothes. Approximate running time: 50 to 60 minutes. Code: WE3.*

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Family Plays

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098-3308

Phone: (800) 448-7469 / (815) 338-7170

Fax: (800) 334-5302 / (815) 338-8981

www.FamilyPlays.com

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(THE WALL: A PILGRIMAGE)

ISBN: 978-0-88680-321-6

THE WALL: A Pilgrimage

Cast of Characters

Fran Pearson: 60, Billy and J. D.'s mother, Bill Pearson's wife

J. D. Pearson: 38, Billy's younger brother

Janie: 39, Billy's widow and Lisa's mother

Lisa: 20, Billy and Janie's daughter

Bill Pearson: Late sixties, father of Billy and J. D., Fran's husband

Soldier: Early twenties (male or female)

Δ

Place

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D. C.

Time

Summer

• Δ •

First produced by the Sam Bass Theatre Association in the Capitol City Playhouse, Austin, Texas, Jan. 20-28, 1989, directed by Kathy Grisham with the following cast:

Mrs. Pearson.....	B. J. Machalicek
J. D.....	Jim Grisham
Janie.....	Diana Kuninger
Lisa	Caroline Yeager
Mr. Pearson	Phillip Robinson
Soldier.....	Steve Crumley

ABOUT THE PLAY

One of the reasons why political leaders find it easy to make war is because the men who have to do the fighting are too young to know the horrors of war. "Nations wage wars. Families lose them."—(Jerome McDonough, *Requiem*)

This play is about the long black wall with 58,132 names of Americans killed in Vietnam, and about a family that makes the long trek to Washington, D. C., to touch one of those names.

But it's not a play about the Vietnam War. Instead, as John Bustin pointed out in the Round Rock *Leader*, it's "a character study of universal relevance . . . a thoughtful little drama suggesting that a death in the family, even after 20 years, can still affect life within that family."

Bustin calls the play "provocative . . . remarkably affecting, even heart rending at times . . . I don't think Stuckey's script sounds a single false note . . . an absorbing and moving—and occasionally even amusing—experience in the theatre."

Diana Claitor, reviewing the play for the Austin *American-Statesman*: "*The Wall: A Pilgrimage* takes us on an odyssey through five memories, and the journey is a revelation, not only about these five individuals, but about humans and how we survive our tragedies." Claitor calls it "an effective and . . . exciting script," adding that "humor and unaffected dialogue temper the sadness."

The family members are the mother, who still bakes a cake every year on her dead son's birthday; the father, who tries desperately to conceal his grief; the younger brother, who tries, as Bustin points out, "to hide his feelings behind an intellectual wall"; the wife, who has re-married; and the daughter, who never knew her father and isn't sure how she should feel about him.

The play doesn't sermonize, and it doesn't question whether or not Vietnam was a mistake. But you come away from the play wondering why these 58,000 young Americans had to die . . . and why civilized human beings still make war. Perhaps it will remind you of Jerome McDonough's obvious but universally ignored observation that "The time to prevent war is when there is no war."

The Wall: A Pilgrimage is, in John Bustin's words, "compelling and freshly engrossing fare . . . handled with intelligence and honesty."



In addition to the Capitol City Playhouse premiere, the play was produced prior to publication at the Old Depot Theatre in Round Rock, Texas, from where it was to be the Sam Bass Theatre's entry in the 1989 Texas Non-Profit Theatre Association's one-act play festival. Bustin predicted, "It is an entry that will represent Round Rock with pride and style."

Playing time is 55-60 minutes.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Properties

Purse, containing a Kleenex—Mrs. Pearson

Tote bag, containing: old, partially deflated football; old, worn stuffed teddy bear—Mrs. Pearson

Bouquet of flowers—Janie

Letter (worn from numerous foldings)—J. D.

Billfold—Mr. Pearson's back pants pocket

Picture of Billy—inside Mr. Pearson's billfold

Costumes

Costumes in the premiere production were a polyester short-sleeve suit and sensible low-heeled shoes for **Mrs. Pearson**; khaki slacks, a short-sleeve Izod-type shirt, and loafers for **J. D.**; casually fashionable summer skirt and blouse with, perhaps, a coordinated blazer for **Janie**; cotton sundress and flats or sandals for **Lisa**; summer seersucker suit with a white shirt, string tie, and a western straw hat for **Mr. Pearson**; and a Marine corporal uniform for the **Soldier** (the uniform of any branch of the military may be used, and the Soldier may be male or female).

Lights

Area lighting was used in the premiere production to shift focus from the upstage and bench areas to the downstage (Wall) area. Light cues were as follows:

Cue #1—page 1

warning: ready to begin play

cue: curtain opens

general to full

Cue #2—page 3

warning: J. D.—“Okay, Mother, okay. Janie. Lisa. We’ll sit it out over there.”

cue: Mrs. Pearson—“You’ll be glad you came, J. D.!”

slow X-fade to the wall

Cue #3—page 5

warning: Mrs. Pearson—“Sleep in peace, Billy . . .”

cue: J. D. crosses downstage to Mrs. Pearson

medium X-fade to general

Cue #4—page 5

warning: J. D.—“I know, Mama. I know.”

cue: J. D. sees the name on the Wall

slow X-fade to the Wall

Cue #5—page 9

warning: Janie—“So I did my best. I worked hard . . .”

cue: Lisa—“Mom? Am I interrupting, Mom?”

medium X-fade to general

Cue #6—page 10

warning: Lisa—“Great. Just great.”

cue: Lisa—“She makes it sound like HER opinions . . .”

slow X-fade to the Wall

Cue #7—page 11

warning: Lisa—"I'm sorry, Mom. I guess . . ."

cue: Mrs. Pearson—"This has been a real experience . . ."

X-fade to general

Cue #8—page 12

warning: J. D.—"Not disloyal, Janie. Just irreverent."

cue: Mr. Pearson appears Stage Left

slow X-fade to the Wall

Cue #9—page 14

warning: Mr. Pearson—"And nobody knows how much this old man . . ."

cue: Soldier bends to pick up mementoes

fade to black

The Set

A park bench Up Left was the only set prop used in the premiere production. A backdrop, sky drop, flats, or stage curtains may outline the acting area. The set for the Sam Bass Theatre's production, designed by Jim Grisham, was very simple: flats painted in shades of black, white, and gray to give an impression of the park trees that surround the memorial. The faint outline of the Washington Monument rising up behind the trees was painted on a flat on the Upstage Right side. The set was impressionistic rather than realistic. The unseen wall runs along the downstage plane—the "fourth wall" of the stage separating actors from audience.

In the premiere, tape on the floor marked the location of Billy's name. In rehearsal, the director had the actors practice focusing on the spot where Billy's name was supposedly located. The director placed this point at just right of Down Center and approximately five feet above the stage floor. During rehearsals the director used a marker on a pedestal to condition each actor's focus.

About the Monument

The Wall was erected on two acres of land in Washington's Constitution Gardens in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial. The Potomac River is a stone's throw away. Near the Wall is a flagpole with an American flag and an eight-foot bronze statue of three infantrymen staring roughly off in the Wall's direction. As one faces the Wall, the Washington Monument rises up past the trees on the right.

Objects left at the wall are gathered in daily by National Park Service Rangers. The memorial is under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. The playwright explains: "In my manuscript, I have a soldier (rather than Park Service Rangers) remove the Pearson family's mementoes after they leave. This is a symbolically dramatic gesture on my part and not specifically factual. The Pearson family's visit to the Wall is my attempt to intimately focus on one family's attitude, feelings, expressions, etc. Hopefully, they represent us all. To physically place items onstage supposedly left by other invisible families would, in my opinion, lessen the overall impact and intimacy of this play."

THE WALL: A Pilgrimage

[The setting is part of the grounds surrounding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D. C. The long wall which is the Memorial is represented by the illusionary wall between the actors and the audience, the "fourth wall." The stage is bare except for a painted backdrop or flats and a park bench Upstage Left.]

AT RISE: It is late afternoon. The family has just arrived in town. After checking into their hotel, all except Bill Pearson have come to see Billy's name on the Wall. FRAN PEARSON and a SOLDIER enter from Stage Right followed by J. D., LISA, and JANIE. MRS. PEARSON, as usual, is talking non-stop to the Soldier with her arm linked through his. She is oblivious to any impropriety. She carries a tote bag and purse. JANIE is carrying a bouquet of flowers]

MRS. PEARSON. We sure do appreciate this, young man. You look so handsome in that uniform. Where are you from? We're from Texas. We just arrived this afternoon. I've only been to Washington once, but J. D., here, is an attorney in Austin and he's come to Washington on business many times! Haven't you, J. D.? *[The FAMILY is spread out somewhat as they see all the names. Each one reluctant at this point to move closer downstage to the Wall]* Oh, J. D., look at all the names! I've got goose bumps all over my body! Don't y'all have goose bumps? I sure do!

J. D. Mother. This gentleman may have other things to do.

MRS. PEARSON. I know, J. D. *[MRS. PEARSON begins to address the poor Soldier again. J. D., knowing it's useless trying to stop his mother once she gets started, has joined the others in looking for Billy's name]* You can't imagine the time I had getting everybody together to come here! I finally told the family that never in my life had I asked for much, but I was asking now. Billy loved all of us. The least we could do is pay our respects to his memorial. You see, young man, my older son was killed August 15, 1968, over there in Vietnam. Of course, we know the soul never dies. Billy is just . . . Billy is what we call him—actually, his name is William J. Pearson, Jr. But we've always called him Billy. And this is Billy's younger brother, J. D., and Billy's daughter, Lisa, and this is Janie, Billy's . . . well . . . Lisa's mother. I'm Billy's mother. Fran. Fran Pearson.

J. D. Mother.

MRS. PEARSON. I talk to Billy all the time. Keep him informed, up to date on family activities, and . . .

J. D. Mother, please!

MRS. PEARSON. Oh, oh. I do rattle on, don't I? I'm just so excited! Thank you, young man, for showing us here. So nice of you! We'll be fine now.

J. D. Yes. Thank you. *[The SOLDIER exits Stage Right]*

MRS. PEARSON. Let's see . . . where is Billy's name? Goodness, there are so many names!

LISA. Uncle J. D., if you've been to Washington so often . . . why haven't you come to see the memorial before?

JANIE. Lisa. It's none of your business whether J. D. has been here before or not.

J. D. That's okay, Janie. Nothing wrong with that question . . .

MRS. PEARSON. Look at all the flowers and notes and things families have left! It's like a cemetery, isn't it? Janie! Janie, come here, honey. No reason to feel awkward just because you've remarried. I'm so pleased you decided to come! I know Billy is too!

JANIE. Thank you, Fran, but I wasn't feeling awkward.

LISA. You don't have to worry about Mom, Grandma. She never feels awkward. Do you, Mom?

MRS. PEARSON. Reverent. That's what I feel. Reverent. Now where is Billy's name? Have you found it yet, J. D.?

J. D. *[He points to Billy's name]* It's right here, Mother.

MRS. PEARSON. *[She slowly crosses to J. D. as she looks in awe at where he is pointing to Billy's name]* Oh, look at that! There he is! Lisa, honey, come look at your daddy's name! Doesn't it make you proud?

LISA. I guess so, Grandma.

MRS. PEARSON. Well, of course it does! I wish they could have put "Billy" in parentheses. We never did call him William. He was so young. The same age as you, Lisa. Oh, gosh, I can't cry now! Let's get ourselves organized. What I thought was, each one of us could spend a few minutes alone. Everyone should have time alone, here, with their thoughts and memories.

J. D. Whatever you say, Mother. It's your show.

MRS. PEARSON. Oh, J. D., for Heaven's sakes, don't be such a sour puss! Why, this is a family affair. Except for your father. At least

he came with us to Washington. Just awful he didn't come with us to the memorial. Lord knows, I tried. That's all a body can do. It was important for us to come. Billy would . . .

J. D. Okay, Mother, okay. Janie. Lisa. We'll sit it out over there.
[J. D., JANIE, and LISA cross to the park bench and sit down]

MRS. PEARSON. You'll be glad you came, J. D.! Maybe more than all the rest of us. I just wish your father could have been persuaded . . . *[She pulls out a worn football from her tote as she faces Billy's name at the Wall]* Billy, I brought a couple of things with me. I started to bring your National Honor Society pin, but decided to give that to Lisa. So, I brought your old football. Your sophomore year! Honor Society and the varsity football team! We were so proud of you! Hard work, that's what it took, hard work! *[She puts the football down at the foot of the Wall]* Look at that! "William J. Pearson, Jr." Billy, this is an auspicious occasion! I'm so thrilled to be here! I think all of us who came will appreciate the auspiciousness of this occasion. *[Looking to her right and left]* There are so many people! Lot of them crying. Some praying. Bless their hearts. This is a very special place, Billy. I can feel it! I knew it would be.

I brought your brother and daughter and Janie. 'Course you know Janie's remarried. But I wanted her to come and we're certainly glad to have her. Janie has really been pretty good about keeping in touch since they moved to Austin. She's had problems with Lisa, though. Lisa's grades fell in high school and she didn't seem to get along that well with her step-dad. But you know how teenagers are. She was twenty in April so she's coming out of all that. It just takes time. Time and patience. Besides, Lisa takes after her father. She's a smart one, that girl is.

Now, Billy, your dad . . . well. We are to meet your father back at the hotel at 6:30. He refused to come with us. Said it was nonsense to come all the way from Texas just to stare at a wall. In fact, Bill pays no attention to anything about it. It's been a real bone between us. Such a shame. Such a shame and a pity he won't see his son's name. He just never has come to grips with your death. He can't talk about you like the rest of us do. Bill always was a quiet man. Maybe that's why he married me—because I'm seldom quiet. Except during church or when I'm asleep! But I think I talk a lot because he talks so little. Naturally, he says I've got it backwards.

And your brother! I was afraid he wouldn't come either. Knowing

how he feels about the war. ANY war! “Man’s ultimate stupidity,” J. D. calls it. He says war is like spanking a small child: “It leaves them bruised and teaches them nothing and the practice continues from one generation to another.”

And when did I ever spank you boys anyway? Not that there weren’t plenty of opportunities! Two boys, sixteen months apart! Lord knows, I had my work cut out for me! Like the time you and J. D. dug that three-foot deep hole right smack in the middle of my garden? Said you had heard if you dug deep enough you’d wind up in China! No telling how big that hole would have been if y’all hadn’t become afraid of digging yourselves into hell first!

Or how about the time you two boys unravelled a jumbo roll of toilet paper all over the house so you could see how long it was. I was in the garage washing clothes and, of course, Reverend Mitchell picked that very moment to pay a visit. I had to invite him into a living room covered with wall-to-wall toilet paper! I was mortified, absolutely mortified! Reverend Mitchell’s only comment was: “Well, Fran, when the ROLL is called up yonder, we know YOUR boys will be there.”

Gosh, it seems like yesterday. Didn’t know how wonderful those days were at the time.

Remember Mr. and Mrs. Horn? Well, they were coming home from the grocery store day before yesterday—Homer was driving—and BAM! A pickup truck ran a stop sign and hit them broadside! Eloise said they were shook up but not really hurt because both vehicles were going pretty slow. But then that truck backed up, spun around, and was fixin’ to peel out of there and his engine died! The maniac got it goin’ again and zoomed off! Eloise didn’t get a license number but she did read a bumper sticker on his fender. It said: “I don’t have to be born again, I was born in Texas”! Isn’t that tacky? Life’s kind of like that, isn’t it? You go along, never expecting the worst, and BAM!

Hit us hard when the lieutenant came. It was after our Sunday meal. I can recall what I was wearing, and the fried chicken we had for dinner—but I can’t tell you much about the funeral. What the preacher said. What anybody said, for that matter. You were twenty years old.

I was pregnant with you when I was twenty. The day you were born, I was lying in that hospital bed and the nurse brought you in to me for your first feeding. Right off, I counted your fingers and toes. They were all there and perfect, thank the Lord! Pink, healthy, and perfect! And then I just looked at you, wondering what kind of person

you'd be . . . and I thought about my Uncle Ralph. He was on an aircraft carrier in World War II when it was hit by Kamikazes. Lost a leg. It used to be just fascinating to you that your great Uncle Ralph had a wooden leg. You were always wanting to thump it. Well, that day in the hospital, I looked down at my beautiful baby boy . . . and I thought about Uncle Ralph.

I'm not the intellectual type like your brother, nor am I a brooder like your father has become . . . but I certainly have asked myself: "Was it worth it?" My answer is the same one I would, sometimes, give when y'all were boys: "Mama doesn't know everything. If I did, I'd be God." Look at me! I'm rattling away again! Where's my Kleenex? *[She digs in her purse for a tissue and takes Billy's old teddy bear out of her tote]* Months after your funeral, Billy, I finally made myself go through your things. Now, Janie kept your medals—for Lisa, you know—and your car and things like that. But what does a mother do with her dead son's model airplanes, books, sweaters, underwear? The collections of a boy's life? I forced myself to give away those items that could be put to good use by people. Most of it went to the Goodwill. I worked alone . . . no one else to do it. *[She has been stroking the bear but now cradles it in her arms as she continues]*

This teddy bear, I kept. You couldn't sleep without it when you were little. You would hold him in your sweet arms many a night while I read bedtime stories . . . and we said our prayers. *[She kneels to lay the bear down at the foot of the Wall. J. D. has come up silently behind his mother]* Sleep in peace, Billy . . . with all these other children. *[J. D. helps his mother to rise]* J. D. J. D., I'm tired of standing. Getting old, I suppose. You need to "air your soul," as my grandmother used to say. He was your only brother, J. D. I should have had more children. I wanted to, you know, but Doctor Williams said . . .

J. D. I know, Mama. I know. Go sit down with Janie and Lisa. Get off your feet for awhile. *[MRS. PEARSON clutches her son for a moment; nods in agreement and crosses upstage to the park bench. J. D. stands quietly for a moment, then begins to chuckle . . .]*

Guess I'm as irreverent as hell, but you know what's come to my mind? That night we siphoned gas out of Old Man Dewitt's car. You had just turned sixteen and I was fourteen and man, we must have had rocks in our brains! We didn't like Old Man Dewitt much anyway. Reported you once for disturbing the peace because you didn't have a muffler on that '51 Chevy. Hell, the car didn't even have a hood over

the engine, much less a muffler! Called him Dewitt the Shit, remember? Well, that particular night the Chevy was running on fumes and we had exactly a nickel between us. You had the brilliant idea of borrowing a couple of gallons of gas from Dewitt's Buick. "No problem," you said, "Dewitt's out of town." BIG problem! Dewitt was out of town, all right, but the police weren't! A patrol car spotted us and hauled our adolescent asses to the police station.

You made the call to Dad. He was NOT sympathetic. *[Imitating his dad's voice:]* "I'm real sorry to hear that, son. I'll bring you boys some clean clothes in the morning and your mother sends her love." CLICK!

I cried and you puked. It was one miserable night. Dad picked us up early the next morning. Man, were we ever glad to see him! Had to mow Dewitt's yard the whole summer free of charge and Dad sold the Chevy to our Cousin Stuart. You said if you ever did commit another crime it would be the slow, slow strangulation of Cousin Stuart.

You should see me now, big brother. I wear three-piece suits. Jog four times a week. I eat very little red meat and I have a thriving law practice. But my name isn't up here on this Wall. I wasn't blown apart in some jungle half way around the world before I was old enough to buy a beer! No sir. I didn't try to keep up with you on that one, Billy. Same as when we were kids. I never played football. Didn't care much for fishing. Not like you and Dad, anyway. But the big deal was football. Back then to be a high school male in a small Texas town who didn't play football . . . was like being a duck on the desert. Sometimes I'd stay and watch football practice so I could hang out with you and the guys afterwards. You always gave me one instruction: "Just don't act queer, J. D." One morning at a pep rally before school, one of your hot-shot football buddies was giving me a hard time about my Beatle haircut. Larry Daniels was his name. Larry started pushing me around, calling me a "pansy". . . UNTIL my big Jock brother stepped in and said: "Lay off, asshole!" "What's it to you?" old Larry wanted to know. And you growled, "He's my brother, that's what it is to me." Larry was real impressed. So was I.

Well, you impressed the hell out of the Viet Cong, didn't you?

Two days after my high school graduation, I joined the exodus to California. Berkeley. Summer of Love. You wrote me a letter. *[J. D. has pulled an old letter out of his pocket]* See, Billy? I still have it. *[He reads:]*