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Dramatic Publishing

THE TRIAL OF THE ARKANSAS BEAR

A Play in Two Acts

by

WILLIAM GLENNON

With characters suggested by those in
The Arkansaw Bear by Albert Bigelow Paine

Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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THE TRIAL OF THE ARKANSAS BEAR

A Play in Two Acts
For 7m., 2w., plus many extras

CHARACTERS

HORATIO

BO

JIMMY

ZACK

MA

MELODY

SHERIFF

JUDGE

OLSEN

COURT PERSONNEL, POLICE GUARDS

PLUS EXTRAS who change sets, manipulate puppets and serve as onlookers at the trial.

Approximate running time: 60 minutes.

ACT ONE

AT RISE: A woodland with bird songs, taped. HORATIO, the bear, is preparing to fish. From a small collection of possessions, hidden from view, he gets a fishing pole and (optional) a sportsman's hat, which he dons, humming happily and loudly all the while. Then he settles down on a stool or stump and "casts" his line. After a few relaxing moments he suddenly lifts his nose and sniffs the air several times. Immediately he drops the pole and is on the alert. He cautiously moves about, sniffing, checking his stashed personal items and finally finding a spot where he can hide and wait. It isn't long before BO, a teenage boy, wanders in seemingly looking for someone. BO stops dead in his tracks when HORATIO jumps out growling. BO backs up frightened and HORATIO crouches in a belligerent position, puzzled.

HORATIO. I thought you were the raccoon.

BO (*frightened*). Uh...no...

HORATIO. No. I can see that. Well, he's about your size. Imagine a raccoon that big.

BO. Uh...well, I...

HORATIO. Gross. And no wonder. All he does is eat. Your food, my food, we find it, he steals it. I must calm down. (*Breathes deeply and noisily.*) A little better. So what about you? What are you doing here?

BO (*hesitantly*). Oh...I heard some humming...so I decided to take a chance...

HORATIO (*with a growl*). A chance on what?

BO. Finding someone...to talk to...

HORATIO. And you found me, someone who can talk back! Just when I was trying to relax. In you barge and remind me of the raccoon. Probably scared the fish, too.

BO. I'm...sorry...

HORATIO. You know what I call this? Raccoon rage. Deep breathing helps. (*He does.*) Ever meet a talking bear? (*More breathing.*)

BO. No, sir...

HORATIO. No. We're very rare. You wouldn't believe how hard it was for me to learn to speak.

BO (*in awe*). A talking bear...

HORATIO. I must calm down. (*He starts to pace melodramatically, scaring BO all over again.*) I don't come here often, but when I do, guess who's waiting? The big one! I chase him, I growl, I wave my arms and what does he do? Just bides his time 'til I'm not looking and then he's off with my lunch. (*Stops to breathe.*) Well, now... (*A little calmer.*) are you going to stay here or move on?

BO. I don't know.

HORATIO (*sits on a log or stump and stares at BO for a moment*). Sit. (*BO sits.*) I'll tell you what. If you stay, I might let you do some of the talking. And you can be my guest.

BO. Your guest?

HORATIO. Yes, my guest. I've calmed down, see? I'm ready to act civilized again. Keep in mind that guests of

mine always get a fair share of the food supplies and they don't have to steal it.

BO (*a little pause*). Well...all right...I'll stay...for a while...

HORATIO. Good! I believe introductions are now in order. (*Clears his throat.*) I'm known far and wide as the Arkansas Bear. I'm all out of business cards. The raccoon probably ate them. Well, anyway, I am called Horatio, a name bestowed on me by my first human friends. Horatio.

BO (*nods*). Yes, sir. (*Stretching it out.*) Ho-ra-tio.

HORATIO (*all smiles*). Say it again.

BO. Horatio.

HORATIO. No, no, the long way.

BO. Ho-ra-tio.

HORATIO (*nods, pleased*). Your turn. You have my undivided attention.

BO (*clears throat*). My name's Bo-se-phas. But nobody's ever called me that. It's always been Bo. Just Bo.

HORATIO. And "Bo" it still is! There! Names are known! So what brings you here to the land of the raccoon? I had an errand in the neighborhood and decided to stay over and try my luck with the old fishing pole but they're not biting. They never are. You didn't come to fish, did you?

BO. No.

HORATIO. I'm still all ears.

BO. Well, uh, I was...sort of looking...uh...I mean on my way to...the...it's hard to explain... (*A little pause.*)

HORATIO. You ran away.

BO. Yes.

HORATIO. So did I.

BO. Day before yesterday.

HORATIO. A long time ago...I wanted to see the big, wide world for myself.

BO. Me, too.

HORATIO. Just the day before yesterday? (*BO nods.*) Which probably means you haven't had many adventures so far. (*BO shakes his head.*) According to my mama, when it comes to adventures, there are none better than the ones on down the road. (*A little pause.*) Well, so much for the philosophy of bears. Here. (*Gives him the pole.*) I'll see what the raccoon's left for us to eat, if anything. (*He moves away but turns back to look at BO who is bobbing the line up and down.*)

BO. My first time fishing.

HORATIO. Really? Calls for a poem! ... "Bo has the pole and the creek and the wish, All he needs now is a big school of fish."

BO. Gosh! A real poem. About me! And you made it up right here, just like that!

HORATIO (*shrugs*). Relax.

(BO goes back to fishing and HORATIO chuckles. Suddenly BO starts a song, first humming, then adds the lyrics. HORATIO joins in. Possible songs: "Yankee Doodle," "Oh, Susannah," etc. When they finish, there's a little laughter.)

BO. Did you hear the music yesterday?

HORATIO. No.

BO. Turned out to be a carnival.

HORATIO. A carnival? Well, well, well. Where?

BO. In a field on the other side of that little town. I tried to sneak in last night but they chased me away.

HORATIO. No money?

BO. Not much.

HORATIO. Never mind. Carnivals aren't really all that great. We'll find better things to do. *(He picks up an object carefully wrapped in a tattered blanket and ceremoniously removes the blanket, revealing a fiddle with bow attached.)* Look.

BO. A fiddle!

HORATIO. And a bow.

BO. Can you play it?

HORATIO. No. I've been trying and trying to find a teacher who'll show me how to capture the voice of the fiddle. No luck so far. It's the real reason I learned to speak. So I could ask. Know anyone?

BO. Afraid not. I never met a fiddler. May I hold it?

HORATIO *(gives him the fiddle)*. I don't think there's a single teacher in the state of Arkansas unafraid of a talking bear. What a life I'd have if I could only play the fiddle.

BO. Have you had it a long time?

HORATIO. Seems like forever.

BO. What's this? *(He's found a small blemish on the case.)*

HORATIO *(looks)*. That? I'd say it's the mark of the maker, wouldn't you?

BO. Looks like a circle, a real small carved circle.

HORATIO *(takes the fiddle)*. A fiddle-playing bear! Think of all that wonderful music! *(Pretends to have an audience.)* Thank you! Thank you! *(Bows.)* You've been a great audience. Spending all that money just to hear me play the fiddle. It warms my heart. And now for my first encore, I humbly offer one of my own compositions. The ever popular "Papa Bear Polka." *(He bows again)*

and pretends to play. Then he turns to BO, recites a little hesitantly, making it up at the moment.)

“Hey diddle diddle
The bear plays the fiddle ... uh ...
A lively and heartwarming tune ...
Bo listens with joy
He’s one happy boy
And the bear jumps over ... uh ...”

BO. The moon. *(Pause, BO shakes his head in wonder.)*
I’ll catch a fish for you. A big one!

HORATIO. Don’t worry. I’ve got lots of fruit and vegetables, fresh from those fields nearby. The errand I spoke of. *(Looks around.)* Hope the king of raccoons didn’t hear that.

BO. Don’t those fields belong to the farmer who lives in that old cabin?

HORATIO. So he thinks. But fortunately, my mama put me wise on that score. More bear philosophy, I guess.

BO. What’d she tell you?

HORATIO. The truth, Bo, in grunts that are difficult to translate. Why don’t you resume your fishing? It’s good for the soul. *(BO does.)*

BO. I’ve always heard that bears like to jump in the water and catch fish with their paws.

HORATIO. And get all wet? You heard wrong. *(Wraps the fiddle.)* Taking plunges like that is strictly for uncivilized bears. Give me a pole and a line any old time. Of course, they catch more fish than I do, but I could teach them a thing or two about living like civilized creatures. You know, out of the caves and into cozy little houses, drinking tea out of pretty china cups... *(BO bursts out laughing.)* What’s so funny?

BO. I can just see a big, hungry bear with a pretty china cup. *(More laughter as he imitates a bear drinking tea.)* Before you'd know it, he'd drink the tea, cup and all! *(More laughter.)*

HORATIO. Well... *(Trying not to be amused.)* I'll think of something else. Ah! Suppose, I taught them how to make friends with the bees? Very civilized, eh?

BO. The bees?

HORATIO. Sure. Then they'd get their honey without any stings.

BO. Do you really know how to do that?

HORATIO. No. And the bees wouldn't listen to me if I did. *(Now they both chuckle.)*

BO. Last night I saw a big poster outside the carnival. Showed a bear wearing a silly hat and dancing. And I wondered if bears already know how to dance or if someone teaches them.

HORATIO. Bears would never dream up a stunt like dancing on their own. Not man-type dancing.

BO. Anybody ever teach you?

HORATIO *(short pause)*. A little. Let's consider something to eat. Shall we? You hungry?

(The conversation continues as JIMMY, the farmer's teenage son, sticks his head in view, unseen by HORATIO and BO. HORATIO sniffs the air. Once JIMMY has a good look, he vanishes.)

BO. Sure am. I picked a peach earlier but I had to drop it and hide double quick.

HORATIO. Why?

BO. I saw the farmer and his family come outside and I didn't want them to see me. On account of the peach. I figured the tree was on his property.

HORATIO. A girl and a boy.

BO. I just saw the boy.

HORATIO. Uncivilized, all of them, especially Zack, the father. No pretty china cups in his life. Did they see you?

BO. I don't think so. I was in back of a thick bush but they passed by real close and I heard the farmer mutter something about strangling ... a bear.

HORATIO. I'd love to see him try. Honestly, all because of a few peaches and a watermelon. Trifles!

JIMMY (*off*). This way, Poppy! Over here! I done seen him.

(BO is startled, HORATIO calm.)

HORATIO. That's the son, Jimmy.

BO. What about moving somewhere else?

HORATIO. Why? You don't think I'm afraid of them, do you? I can talk my way out of anything. Besides, old Zack is unarmed.

BO. You sure?

HORATIO. Sure I'm sure. I let myself into his cabin early this morning and hid his shotgun.

BO. You hid it?

HORATIO. Just like I did the last time.

BO. No! (*BO laughs, then hears a noise.*) Listen!

HORATIO. What?

BO. I think we're about to have company.

HORATIO. My sniffer's way off today. You expecting anyone?

(ZACK TODD, the farmer, bounds into the scene, followed by MA and son, JIMMY. ZACK is fuming, ready to explode. He carries a broom. HORATIO puts the fiddle back where he found it.)

ZACK. There he is!

JIMMY. Told you so!

MA. Who's that boy? *(MA and JIMMY gingerly gather in back of ZACK.)*

HORATIO *(bows and waves. BO gets behind him)*. Just in time for luncheon. Do join me and my good friend Bo.

JIMMY. Go on. Git him, Pa. *(Guffaws.)* Thinks he's smart just 'cause he knows how to talk. Git the kid, too.

ZACK. I'm gonna... git you... *(Shakes the broom at HORATIO.)*

HORATIO *(pleasantly)*. Do you realize how pathetic you look with that silly broom? Where in the world is the old shotgun? That's more your style.

MA. We don't know where it is but we know you know.

ZACK. Hid it again, didn'tcha? Well, this time I'll sweep you... clean out... out...

MA. Out of the state of Arkansas. So you've been sayin', Pa.

ZACK. You dirty... rotten...

MA. Bear.

ZACK. Thief. We seen you take my crops. Where'd you hide all that stuff?

HORATIO *(picks up the fishing pole and uses it like a dueling sword)*. En garde! *(HORATIO and ZACK circle around, eyeing each other, and the family and BO follow behind them. HORATIO frightens ZACK by using the*

pole for little lunges now and then, enjoying the mock fencing match.)

ZACK. Gonna getcha ... you ... varmint ...

MA. Pa, don't act foolish. Like I been telling you, wait!
Wait 'til Melody brings the sheriff back here.

JIMMY. I left a trail from the house. Stale bread crumbs.
Melly and the sheriff'll see 'em right off.

HORATIO. The sheriff?

JIMMY. Won't be long now. *(Laughs.)*

MA. He knows how to handle a critter like you!

HORATIO *(worried)*. Hear that, Bo? The sheriff ...

BO. Best we pack up and move on. Have luncheon elsewhere.

ZACK. You ain't goin' nowhere no how.

(The daughter, MELODY, runs in, stops to pick up a crumb and nibbles. We hear the SHERIFF coming.)

MA. Melody, that was real quick!

MELODY. Guess who's with me? The sheriff himself!
(Calls off.) Here they are!

(SHERIFF enters, panting, properly attired with a huge badge.)

SHERIFF. Someone's under arrest! *(They all greet the SHERIFF.)*

MELODY. We followed the trail. I ate all the bread crumbs. But I'm still hungry. Was that my lunch?

BO *(aside to HORATIO)*. What are we going to do?

HORATIO *(aside to BO)*. Don't worry. I'll handle this. I mean, with my big bear brain ...