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Flying Crows

Comedy/Drama by James Glossman
Adapted from the novel by Jim Lehrer



Flying Crows

"Sticks close to Lehrer's compelling page-turner ... The play has a cinematic thrust." —Variety

Comedy/Drama. By James Glossman. Adapted from the novel by Jim Lehrer.

Cast: 3m., 1w. May be expanded to 24 or





more roles. In trouble with his captain, Kansas City Detective Lt. Randy Benton is given the thankless job of doing one final walkthrough inspection of the once grand, now derelict Union Station just prior to its massive renovation into a modern galleria. Then he discovers Birdie, an old homeless man who claims to be an escaped lunatic and who has been living in and under the railroad station since 1933. Birdie desperately begs Randy's help in finding the friend who saved his life long ago; but Benton begins to find far more questions about Birdie's past than answers. A constantly surprising tour de force for an ensemble of actors spanning nearly a century of adventure, crime, love and loss, Flying Crows is a moving, multilayered story about old friendships, broken minds, and some vital loose ends from a massacre everyone thought was solved long ago. Area staging. Approximate running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes. Code: FA5.

Front cover photo: Playwrights Theatre, Madison, N.J., featuring (I-r) Anthony Blaha, Dan Domingues and Reathel Bean. Back cover photos: (top) (I-r) Prentiss Benjamin, Reathel Bean, Anthony Blaha and Dan Domingues, (bottom) (I-r) Prentiss Benjamin, Anthony Blaha, Dan Domingues and Reathel Bean. *Photo: Carol Rosegg. Cover design: Jeanette Alig-Sergel.*



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FLYING CROWS

A Play by JAMES GLOSSMAN

Adapted from the novel by JIM LEHRER



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For the Wordsmith, Jim Lehrer: Onward, sir! Ever onward.

* * * *

And to Alex and Nicky: The same as above.

IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

All producers of the play *must* give credit to James Glossman as the dramatizer of the play and James Lehrer as the author of the book in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and in all instances in which the title of the play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the play and/or a production. The names of James Glossman and James Lehrer *must* also appear on a separate line, on which no other name appears, immediately following the title, and *must* appear in size of type not less than fifty percent (50%) the size of the title type. Biographical information on James Glossman and James Lehrer, if included in the playbook, may be used in all programs. *In all programs this notice must appear:*

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"Originally produced by Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, Madison, N.J., John Pietrowski, Artistic Director." FLYING CROWS was first presented in a fully staged workshop at Playwrights Theatre in Madison, N.J., in December 2006, directed by James Glossman with sound design by Jeff Knapp. The cast was:

OLDER MAN	Richard Currie
MIDDLE-AGED MAN	Dan Domingues
YOUNG MAN	Jake Speck
THE WOMAN	Prentiss Benjamin

A slightly re-worked version was later presented in an on-book staging at New Jersey Repertory Theatre, Long Branch, N.J., in June 2007, again directed by James Glossman with sound design by Jeff Knapp. The cast was:

OLDER MAN	John Astin
MIDDLE-AGED MAN	Dan Domingues
YOUNG MAN	Anthony Blaha
THE WOMAN	Prentiss Benjamin

The world premiere production of *FLYING CROWS* opened on March 2, 2008, at Playwrights Theatre in Madison, N.J. (artistic director, John Pietrowski), directed by James Glossman, with the following cast and designers:

OLDER MAN Reathel Bean
MIDDLE-AGED MAN Dan Domingues
YOUNG MAN Anthony Blaha
THE WOMAN Prentiss Benjamin
Sound and Multimedia Design Jeff Knapp
Costume Design Bettina Bierly
Lighting DesignJohn Wade
Set Design Drew Francis
Production Stage Manager Danielle Constance
Costume Assistant Marissa Marlborough

FLYING CROWS

CHARACTERS

- OLDER MAN (JOSH [1933, 1918, 1905]; LUKE [1997]; HARRY LEONARD [1998])
- MIDDLE-AGED MAN (LT. RANDY BENTON [1997]; AMOS [1933]; DR. WILL MITCHELL [1933, 1918]); various others
- YOUNG MAN (BIRDIE [1933, 1997]; MARSHAL LLOYD [1905]; JULES PERKINS [1997]; various others)
- THE WOMAN (MED TECH, AUNT MARY, NURSE, SHERIFF DIANE SAMS [1997]; LAWRENCE, HILDA, JANICE [1933]; DR. MAYFIELD [1918]; various others)

The action of the play takes place mainly in 1997, 1933 and 1918 in Union Station, Kansas City, Mo., and in the Missouri State Lunatic Asylum, with occasional Missouri side trips along the way.

The action of the play is intended to be as fluid and theatrically "cinematic" as possible, on a bare stage with just a few rocking chairs, a rolling table, and a baseball bat as the major properties; with actors moving quickly and easily from era to era; and with a few projections hanging above the action to help keep the audience "located in time."

NOTE: Producing companies are invited either to investigate and discover their own period images and music, or to contact original Multi-media Designer Jeff Knapp, at jknapp@jephens.com.

ACT I

(As the audience enters, we see several simple wooden rocking chairs arranged across the stage. We hear folk music from the 1930s, with a slight taste of the Ozarks, about dust bowls and beautiful girls and gangsters. We see TWO MEN—one quite old, one young—sitting and rocking in two of the rocking chairs, center, side by side, dressed in nondescript gray institutional shirts and blue denim pants. The YOUNG MAN has his sleeves rolled up above the elbows; the OLDER MAN is buttoned up, both at collar and cuffs. They rock in a regular rhythm, as if they could keep this up for hours.

As the play begins, a corridor of light opens UC and a lovely young WOMAN enters toward us down this path, looking at the two rocking MEN. As she reaches their rocking chairs, she nods to the lighting booth, and the front light fades on the MEN, leaving them as rocking silhouettes.

When she speaks to the audience, the TWO SEATED MEN spring into action, building the setting out of the rocking chairs—almost all of the raw material that will be used to create the play's scenes. They are joined for the scene change by the final actor of the piece, a solid,

- MIDDLE-AGED MAN, who flips on a flashlight as the furniture shifts in the dimness. At the moment, he is dressed in a windbreaker, baseball cap and khakis, like an off-duty cop. At the same time, a large PROJECTION is seen hovering above: KANSAS CITY, 1997.)
- THE WOMAN. A private security firm had already done a search of the vast, mostly deserted Union Station building.
- MIDDLE-AGED MAN (flipping on a flashlight as the furniture shifts in the dimness). Hello! Anybody in here?
- OLDER MAN (speaking rapidly to WOMAN as he works, very helpful). But the contractor's insurance company—
- THE WOMAN (*still to audience*). in consultation with the city manager's office—
- MIDDLE-AGED MAN [RANDY]. HELLO?
- OLDER MAN. —insisted that there be one final, thorough inspection supervised by the Kansas City Police Department.
- RANDY (looking at something disgusting on his shoe). Aww...what is that?
- OLDER MAN [LUKE] (to RANDY, anxious about this). They wanted to make absolutely sure there was nothing on the premises—
- THE WOMAN. —particularly no person or animal, dead or alive—
- LUKE (overlapping, impatient of interruption). Dead or alive, that could, through legal or other means, impede the important restoration work that was about to begin.
- RANDY (now the crud has gotten on his hand). Aw, hell... What is that?

THE WOMAN (indicating RANDY, now wiping off hand). That was how Randy Benton—

RANDY (with tired irony). Lieutenant Randy Benton—

LUKE (eagerly shaking hands with RANDY). —and Luke Williams, a newly hired uniformed guard for the Union Station Rebirth Corporation!

THE WOMAN. —found a person.

(MUSIC, as LIGHTS snap to downward shaft illuminating a gap now created within a heap of stacked rocking chairs. From the shadowy gap we hear a faint quavering voice of YOUNG ACTOR now playing OLD BIRDIE:)

BIRDIE. Please...

RANDY (whispering). I hear something.

LUKE (edging away). Yeah. Maybe I should go and call this in—

RANDY (shouting). Is anyone in there?

THE WOMAN. They were in a storeroom under the old Harvey House Restaurant. The voice seemed like it was coming from behind a fancy full-length mirror against the far wall.

BIRDIE (still invisible within the awkward-looking construction). Please....

RANDY (pulling on the "mirror"—part of the chair construction). Heavy dark oak frame around the cracked and yellowed glass—

THE WOMAN. —Ornate, detailed etching of Roman soldiers on horses—

RANDY (*still pulling on unyielding mirror*). —elegantly dressed women in carriages—

RANDY & WOMAN. Why would an expensive piece like this be hanging in a restaurant storeroom?

BIRDIE (even more ghostly). Please...!

LUKE (trying to get away again). Maybe I c'n go find some antique dealer and ask about it maybe— (RANDY grabs LUKE's wrist without even looking, holding him in place.)

RANDY. Hold it. Hinges...

THE WOMAN (removing chair). And the mirror swung easily away from the wall, like a door. (MUSIC stops.)

RANDY (calling again, unholstering his gun). Is anyone in there? This is the police!

LUKE (ducking aside as he sees RANDY's gun). Oh shit...

RANDY. Kansas City PD!

BIRDIE (from within). Please...don't hurt me...please....

THE WOMAN. And that was how Lieutenant Randy Benton, a forty-five-year-old detective in the KCPD Violent Crimes Division, found a living person—a very old living person—named Birdie.

(MUSIC again, as BIRDIE, a tall, thin man at least well into his seventies, edges into the LIGHT. He wears a blue work shirt and old denim pants, under a long coat, filthy and unkempt. He is squinting into RANDY's flashlight beam, as RANDY puts away his gun and RANDY and LUKE almost lift and carry BIRDIE into the low seat of another rocker, which THE WOMAN has placed apart, in a separate low pool of LIGHT.)

RANDY (as they get him seated). What are you doing here—in Union Station?

(BIRDIE speaks as if he were just learning how, though with a rusty, cracking voice.)

BIRDIE. This...is...where...I...live.

LUKE. Nobody lives in a train station.

RANDY. What's your name?

BIRDIE. Birdie.

RANDY. What's your last name?

BIRDIE. Birdie...just Birdie...Carlucci...right, Carlucci... Name's Birdie Carlucci.

LUKE. OK, Carlucci. Where you from?

BIRDIE (now suddenly looking right at LUKE). I'm...an escaped... LUNATIC. (LUKE backs away quick.)

RANDY. Where did you escape from, Mr. Carlucci?

BIRDIE. The...Somerset...asylum.

RANDY. How did you get here?

BIRDIE. I came...with Josh...on The Flying Crow.

LUKE (*still backed off*). What's he saying? Rode here on a *crow*? Sure sounds like a looney, all right.

RANDY (annoyed at the interruption). I know all about The Flying Crow. (To BIRDIE:) Streamlined passenger train of the Kansas City Southern. "Luxury on the Line." (Aside to LUKE:) Went out of business at least thirty years ago.

BIRDIE. Where's Josh?

RANDY. Who's Josh? (BIRDIE is looking around with fear.) Who's Josh, Mr. Carlucci?

BIRDIE (looking around, breathing faster). He's my friend...from Centralia.

RANDY (leaning in, speaking gently). My aunt's a librarian in Langley, that's not far from Centralia. Where's Josh now?

BIRDIE. Josh...loves books. Spent all his time...in the library...at Somerset. He's...cured.

RANDY. Cured of what?

BIRDIE. Of...seeing something awful.

RANDY. When did you and Josh come here to Union Station, Mr. Carlucci?

BIRDIE. Sixty-four...years...ago.

(MUSIC returns, now with squawk of police radios and flashing lights of an unseen ambulance. THE WOMAN becomes MED TECH.)

RANDY. Where are you from originally, Mr. Carlucci?

BIRDIE. Here...Kansas City...really. (BIRDIE is still speaking in fragments, but seems far more deliberate about it now, as if choosing which words to say and which to hold back.)

LUKE. You didn't live in that little room down there for sixty-four years, did you, mister?

BIRDIE. No...no. At first, I moved around...staying different places...each night or two.

RANDY. Different places?

BIRDIE. Waiting room...baggage rooms...down at the train shed...offices, stores, all over. This is a big, big building. (Fiercely, as MED TECH shines a light in each of his eyes:) I was here. I saw it...don't ask me anything. You won't get nothing outa me.

RANDY. What?

BIRDIE. I know you want to hear about...Pretty Boy...and Righetti. But I won't talk. Don't you worry.

RANDY (overlapping). "Pretty Boy"? What are you—are you talking about Pretty Boy Floyd?

BIRDIE. I was here. I saw it.

RANDY. Is that who you're talking about, Mr. Carlucci? Pretty Boy Floyd, the gangster? Did you see the...what wa...back in the thirties, what—the, the, the Union Station Massac—did you see the Union Station massacre, Mr. Carlucci? All those lawmen and their prisoner shot and killed right here, right in front of this train station. Gunned down right in the middle of the day? Is that what you're saying?

BIRDIE. It was...a great life. (He is being strapped onto the stretcher.)

RANDY. I don't understand—back then, did you tell anybody what you saw, Mr. Carlucci?

(BIRDIE is looking around, now panicking, grabs RANDY's jacket to keep from being rolled away up a pathway now created by columns of rocking chairs.)

BIRDIE. Don't want...to go...back. Not now. (Getting breathless again.)

LUKE. Back where?

BIRDIE (whispering fiercely). To Somerset...the asylum. They'll kill me. Josh said—

RANDY. Somerset's been closed down for years, Mr. Carlucci. They don't even have places like that anymore. These officers will take you to a hospital to get checked out, and then you'll be turned over to somebody in Social Services. You'll be fine.

BIRDIE (not letting go). Tell Josh... Tell Josh...where I am.

RANDY. Certainly, Mr. Carlucci, I'll try. What's his last name? Josh what?

- BIRDIE. Don't...know. He saw.
- MED TECH. Excuse me, Detective. This old guy is seriously dehydrated, with an irregular heartbeat and Lord knows what else. We're getting him to the ER right now. So unless this massacre thing is some kind of breaking case...?
- RANDY. The Union Station massacre was in 1933. A bunch of cops and FBI men and their prisoner got gunned down by gangsters just right about here, right where we're standing.
- MED TECH. So no immediate threat to national security, then. You can talk to him in the hospital.
- BIRDIE (still holding onto RANDY's jacket, keeping stretcher from moving). Tell Josh. He saw!
- RANDY. Saw what, Mr. Carlucci? Did Josh see the Union Station massacre too?
- BIRDIE. Don't be...stupid. What, your, your ears...filled with nickels? Josh saw the *Centralia* massacre.
- RANDY. Centralia?
- MED TECH (stopping to unclasp BIRDIE's fist from RANDY's jacket). Come on, Mister Man. I gotta get you to the hospital. Enough massacres, OK, Mister?
- RANDY (got the name connected now). Centralia? But wasn't...that was back during the Civil War, Mr. Carlucci. The Centralia Massacre was more than a hundred...a hundred and thirty years ago.
- BIRDIE (holding on, trying to get up into RANDY's face). Will you tell Josh...where I am?

(MED TECH gives RANDY a look.)

RANDY. Yessir, Mr. Carlucci. I'll tell him. I'll tell Josh.

(BIRDIE lets go and is rapidly wheeled away up the line of chairs, continuing to mutter: "Tell Josh...Tell Josh...!" RANDY watches, then turns toward the audience and rubs a tired hand over his face.)

RANDY (cont'd). I'll just...tell Josh. (He almost laughs.)
Sure I will.

(MUSIC, as chairs shift into the geometric rows we first saw. JOSH takes his place in one of the chairs in the front row, starts rocking with steady regularity.

LIGHTS gradually shift to very late afternoon. We are now in the large, screened-porch common room at Somerset. Birdsong and other rural outdoor sounds as AMOS appears—a burly attendant, dressed in soiled whites, played by the same actor who played RANDY—pushing YOUNG BIRDIE before him. BIRDIE is something of a mess, like he's been roughed up.

As AMOS speaks—loudly, jarringly—MUSIC cuts off sharply:)

AMOS. Hey, Josh, here's a new one!

(PROJECTION appears over their heads: <u>SOMERSET</u> <u>ASYLUM</u>, 1933.)

THE WOMAN. Josh had been rocking in the common room for nearly ninety minutes when they hustled somebody in—

- JOSH (finishing her thought). —somebody who smelled like bad meat.
- THE WOMAN. Kid couldn't be more than sixteen, seventeen years old...

(As JOSH says this, he opens his eyes and speaks directly to THE WOMAN. He is the only character who does so—to everyone else, her words, when she is not specifically playing a character, are making clear to them something inside their own head. JOSH has been living inside his own head for a very long while now, and can thus see THE WOMAN clearly. AMOS sits YOUNG BIRDIE down forcefully in the chair on JOSH's left, shoving him into place with a padded baseball bat.)

- AMOS. Here's a new one for ya called Birdie!
- JOSH (to WOMAN). It was Amos, the bushwhacker who smelled like Ivory,
- THE WOMAN & JOSH. "The Soap That Floats!" (This makes both of them smile.)
- AMOS (patting BIRDIE, now in place on a rocker). Teach him, Josh. Teach this little Birdie how to rock the loonies away. Rock, rock, rock, Birdie. Rock, rock, rock. (AMOS strolls off, laughing.)
- JOSH (closing his eyes again). Bushwhacker.
- THE WOMAN. "Bushwhacker" was what everyone here at the Missouri State Asylum for the Insane called the attendants.
- JOSH. Somebody had used the name several years ago as a kind of pejorative joke, but it had caught on—
- THE WOMAN. —and was now part of the accepted language. Josh knew about the original bushwhackers—

JOSH (his eyes still closed). —barbaric bands of Confederate guerillas who preyed on Union soldiers and sympathizers during the Civil War. Their worst crime, of course, was committed at Centralia.

THE WOMAN. Josh was an expert on that.

(Through all this, YOUNG BIRDIE has been sitting rigid, his eyes wide open. As she speaks, THE WOMAN begins to walk around, setting each of the empty rocking chairs to rocking, one after another.)

THE WOMAN (*cont'd*). Most of the other inmates in the room were rocking. Josh could hear the low sounds on the wooden floor.

JOSH. All us lunatics, lined up in straight rows eight across like soldiers.

THE WOMAN. Or schoolchildren.

JOSH. Or sticks.

THE WOMAN. Lawrence of Sedalia, three rows down and to the left, was one of the few who never rocked. Lawrence just sat there during rocking time—

JOSH. —still as one of those Civil War statues on a courthouse square.

THE WOMAN. The only time Lawrence moved...

JOSH. ...was when he took off his clothes—

THE WOMAN. —which, he said, drove him crazy.

(We hear a distant horrible weeping, as if coming from one of the empty chairs behind them.)

- JOSH. The bushwhackers used to make him put his clothes back on, but lately they'd begun to just leave him mostly naked.
- THE WOMAN. Sometimes even when he was dripping wet from one of the hydrotherapy tubs where they'd just been hosing him down, they'd just leave him to sit, and not rock—
- JOSH (thoughtful). —mostly naked.

(He turns and looks a moment at BIRDIE, still and straight beside him, eyes wide. THE WOMAN comes around beside JOSH, on the opposite side.)

- THE WOMAN (*imploring JOSH*). That's the way Josh's own eyes used to be—
- JOSH. —before Dr. Will Mitchell helped me start my Centralia performances.
- THE WOMAN. Maybe this kid Birdie could perform something that could help him too.
- JOSH (hard). Maybe he'd end up with the incurables—
- THE WOMAN (*still "pushing" JOSH*). —mostly old soldiers who saw something in the war that made them crazy.

(They look each other in the eye a long moment. Then JOSH sighs and turns back to YOUNG BIRDIE.)

JOSH. Hey. Birdie, is it? Ever sat in a rocking chair before? (Nothing. He turns back again, giving THE WOMAN a "You see?" sort of look. She nods toward YOUNG BIRDIE again, and JOSH reluctantly makes another attempt, demonstrating). All you have to do is

put your feet down on the floor in front of you and push back. Do it gently. Let the chair rock you forward, and then push your feet against the floor again. Do it over and over. Nothing to it, see? That's what we mostly do is rock—in the morning for two hours, in the afternoon for two hours, and after supper for an hour before we go to bed—so you'd better start doing it. Try it. You can do it. If you don't rock you won't have much to do here, just sweep the floor or go to the library. They've got big heavy push brooms for sweeping and polishing the floor, and you can do that all day, but it's not as good as rocking. And you can only go to the library in the morning. Amos said your name was Birdie, right? Birdie from where? Where in Missouri you from? (With sudden frustration:) Birdie as in tweet-tweet?

(YOUNG BIRDIE turns his head toward JOSH and speaks in a deep, rough voice:)

BIRDIE. Tweet-tweet. (And suddenly laughs...and just as suddenly stops again.) Kansas City.

JOSH (startled). What?

BIRDIE. I'm from Kansas City. You?

JOSH. Mostly from Centralia. I'm from Centralia.

BIRDIE. Never heard of it.

JOSH. OK, then, fine with me. But start rocking, Birdie of Kansas City. It's the only medicine they've got around here to calm you down besides a baseball bat and a lot of hot and cold water. So, for your own good, rock, Birdie of Kansas City. (BIRDIE does his quick laugh-and-stop-again, then sets himself and starts to rock.)

- That's great. (He matches his chair's rhythm to BIRDIE's.) You're a rocking natural.
- BIRDIE. That's me, I guess. A rocking natural. A rocking natural in the nuthouse, that's me. (*He laughs again, the laughter turning into a yawn.*) It's making me sleepy.
- JOSH. It's OK to sleep. I know about sleep because I couldn't do much of it for a long time when I came here.
- BIRDIE. Why not? (He has stopped rocking. JOSH's rocking continues steadily.)
- JOSH. Every time I closed my eyes, I'd see something awful that I'd seen before, and I'd start to scream and rant. That's why I'm here.
- BIRDIE. That's it? That's what you do to show you're crazy?
- JOSH. Don't worry. Not everybody's the same kind of crazy, of course.
- BIRDIE (starting to rock again, speaking very loudly now). Me too! That's my problem too! You bet. That's it. I close my eyes and scream! That's me too.
- THE WOMAN. Josh hoped Amos or one of the other bushwhackers didn't hear the kid.
- JOSH. Talking wasn't allowed during rocking time.
 - (YOUNG BIRDIE's eyelids drift closed, and then suddenly he throws his hands upward and begins to scream very loudly:)
- BIRDIE. NO! NOOOOO! STOP! DON'T SHOOT NO MORE! NO! NO! THE BLOOD! LOOK AT THE BLOOD! HELP! HELP ME! HEEEEEELP MEEEEE!

(AMOS reappears on the run, holding a baseball bat with a piece of old quilt wrapped around the fat part and held in place by large rubber bands. As he crosses to just downstage of the screaming BIRDIE, masking our view, he winds up and appears to hit BIRDIE precisely on the side of the head with the bat.

At the moment of impact, there is a bright, blinding flash of light, along with the over-amplified sound of...well, of a padded baseball bat hitting the side of a man's head.

When AMOS steps aside, BIRDIE's head is lolling down on his chest, unconscious.)

- AMOS. Damn little loudmouth Kansas City pain in the ass. I'd just filled out a queen-high flush! You're not doing your job, Josh. You get that boy all calmed down good or he'll be "stepping out" a lot more, yeah?
- JOSH (continuing to rock steadily). He'll calm down, Mr. Amos. Yessir, he'll calm right down all right.
- AMOS. All right. (As he leaves:) Damn, when am I ever gonna see cards like that again... (He is gone.)
- JOSH (continues to rock as he speaks quietly to the unconscious BIRDIE). They call 'em Somerset Sluggers around here. It's one of those Louisville Slugger baseball bats with a piece of old quilt wrapped around the fat part with rubber bands. Makes a sound like no other sound I ever heard. (He closes his eyes.) Well, go ahead and sleep for now, Birdie of Kansas City. I wonder what kind of bloody horrors you see when you close your eyes. But sleep for now. Sleep.