

The Boy on the Wall

By Dave Carley
dcarley@sympatico.ca

Synopsis:

The mother of a young soldier killed in the war is unveiling a plaque in her church, honouring the war dead. She has rehearsed her speech, but finds herself unable to stick to her prepared text.

Play history:

The Boy on the Wall was first presented in a staged reading by Women at Play, in Columbus Ohio, in May 2010. Ellen Nickles played MOTHER and Nick Lingnofski was WILL. Katherine Burkman directed.

In June 2011, *The Boy in the Wall* was named a Finalist in the Bloomington Playwrights Project AwareFest Competition, coming 5th out of 1000 entries.

Characters:

Mother – 45 max
Will – 19

Time:

Right after a war, any war.

Setting:

A church interior. Mother is well-dressed. There is a silver cross on her lapel. She is standing in front of a drawn curtain. When “unveiled” the plaque is not seen; WILL is standing in front of it.

The Boy on the Wall

MOTHER:

...I'm not as nervous as I expected. Considering this is only the second time I've spoken in public. The other time, I read the prayer at a War Bonds Rally. But those were someone else's words. Truth is, I didn't sleep last night but whether that's nerves or just the fact I don't sleep much anymore...

The boy with the trumpet - Will. Or as this (*indicates plaque*) will tell you: 'Will James Johnson'. He loved being in the silver band, that you played today means a lot to me, that you put his trumpet on the altar table...

When you raise a boy without a father, I always think it's harder, you spend a lot of time praying he doesn't fall in with a bad crowd, and the fact he played in the band here, well...

He was discovering jazz. And opinions, he really started to have opinions, though not in his letters, I mean you can't, they're censored aren't they. He wrote me every week, I guess their sergeants must make them, because he really wasn't much for that. Before I was married I was a teacher, and Lord, Will's grammar. And spelling. He never learned how to spell 'its' and 'theirs' and 'yours', he'd throw in apostrophes like they were going out of style. I'd say 'Will, there are rules that must be obeyed.' And he'd always say, "And there are rules that are made to be broken."

I think that's why he was loving jazz so much. Crown him with many crowns... Do you remember what he did to that the Sunday before he left? Afterwards I said, 'Will, would it hurt you to stick to the tune?' And he said, 'Tunes are made to be broken.'

He calls, called it riffing, what I think he meant was he was taking something we knew to be true, and he'd play with it.

I guess that's what I remember about him most. He took everything I ever knew to be true and worried it half to death. I came to see that as a good thing but it took me a while.

Um. (*Looks at curtain.*) Um so. So I'm making that all sound like it was just yesterday and in fact it was last year and now the war is done and you've ... you've got this made. It's good that we'll remember the boys' names. The committee asked me 'Will' or 'William' and we all knew him as 'Will' so that's what it is. Someday someone will look at this plaque and wonder why it's not 'William' and maybe for another fifty years there'll be someone here who can say, 'Oh, he was quite the lad. He'd get up there with this trumpet and do things to hymns until you hardly know what you were hearing but you liked it anyway.'

That's the thing about plaques: they're just lists...

But better than bare wall...

So.

So.

So. I guess I should pull the curtain. Is it time. Yes it is? OK.

(MOTHER pulls the curtain back. WILL is standing there, at attention. She sees him, and the other names. Throughout the following, WILL whispers to her – what he is saying is not audible to the audience – or to the unseen people gathered in that church to hear MOTHER. And she is not catching all his words either – but he’s definitely interfering with her concentration. It must be clear that WILL is, in fact, the plaque – and not an honour guard. So, for example, when MOTHER reads the other names, it’s as if they are printed on her son.)

It’s a lot of names isn’t it. And I can see, well – Mary and Bob Tuck’s boy, Irene Smythe’s Jack... Matthew Vance, he signed up with Will... *(Quick count.)* Eleven of them, just from this church.

(Fingers her lapel cross.)

They give us these for losing our sons. You go downtown to an office and show them the documentation, and they give you this. You have to go there. They won’t mail it and that makes it hard or, in my case, maybe it makes it ‘good’ because I wasn’t going out, I wasn’t going out of the house at all, and I certainly didn’t want to go some office downtown and say, ‘My son is dead, can you give me my consolation prize’. Oh it was hard. But I went, because I was hoping a silver cross would give me some kind of communion with Will I wasn’t having. It was, it was in an envelope, just a brown envelope, letter size. I pushed it in my purse. I didn’t look at it on the bus, I made myself wait, it’s the kind of thing that you take out and look at when you’re sitting on his bed, playing one of his records...wishing... stuff...

Then, you called me and said there was a plaque and today was the unveiling and would I speak, as a silver cross mother... because you all loved Will, and the band was playing, and of course I am grateful to you for that. I said, ‘I’ll be terrified, I’m not a speaker.’ And you said, ‘Read something he wrote you, if that’ll help.’

So, so, so this is the last paragraph, um, from his last letter. Did I tell you what an awful writer he was, I did.

(During this segment, WILL is slightly more audible, definitely agitated.)

“We’re doing this for Democracy Mom, for Freedom, no doubt about this Mom. For the right for you to worship, and the right of me to play my trumpet, for starters. And

everything else. I will see you soon and we can go to church, and I will play it there and you can get mad and tell me to keep to the damn tune.

I love you Mom.”

And then he signs it,

“Thy Will Be Done.”

That was a joke of ours. Doesn’t seem so funny now.

I wish I knew if he meant what he wrote or if he was told to write that, because I just can’t see him ever saying anything so official-sounding about Democracy. Freedom. Those aren’t Will words. Not that way. It sounds like a prelude to something he’d say, a prelude to him turning it upside down and saying, like ‘This *isn’t* about democracy and it *isn’t* about freedom.’

Or maybe it’s just me who thinks he should have written that stuff that because it’s me who’s having a tough time with it right now. And to be fair, he did end it with the part about coming back here to play, that part I know to be true.

I would give my life, to know just three things for sure.

I wish I could know if it was fast, the end. They say every dying boy, man, calls for his mother, but I know that is ridiculous and sentimental. I actually hope he thought of his trumpet. It would break my heart even more if he was thinking of me when he was hit because – I don’t know – I guess I’d feel like I was an accomplice.

I wish – I wish I knew what to think about that war. Because my heart breaks every time I hear people making speeches about it. It’s breaking now and it’s me who’s doing the talking.

I wish I could know if there is a heaven and if I’ll meet him again...

Well, I have a silver cross, and his name on a plaque.

And I look at it.

And I wish.

(Goes to Will)

(To God.) If this is in fact Thy Will being done - Then I don’t love Thee anymore. But that’s not to say I don’t wish I still could. I really wish I could. I’ll always wish that.

(To congregation/audience.) He was 19, for God’s sake.

That's not old enough to be on a wall.

(Reaches out to son's hand.)

Black.

The End.