

PERUSAL SCRIPT

BILLY GOES TO WAR

ARE ALL WARS THIS WEIRD?

BY

Harley Marshall



Newport, Maine

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BILLY GOES TO WAR

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

5M 5W

Narrator	Doc Miner
Billy Bunders	Gladdy Prin
Adolphus Bunderswagen	Louise Bunderswagen
Ivo Prazzoli	Daisy Prazzoli
Ethelred Strathroy	Alta Mills

(some actors will also play two or three smaller roles)

SET NOTES

THE STAGE IS BARE EXCEPT FOR A TWO-STEP RISER, WHICH AT DIFFERENT TIMES BECOMES A TRENCH, AN AEROPLANE, A BUCKBOARD AND A BED. A TIGHT SPOT IS ON THE NARRATOR UPSTAGE LEFT WHO IS AT A LECTERN OR A MUSIC STAND. POOLS OF LIGHT ARE SCATTERED ABOUT THE STAGE.

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BILLY GOES TO WAR a play by Harley Marshall. 5m 5f. (*Perfect for Professional, College/University, Community and High School productions*) Billy Bunders is the luckiest or unluckiest boy who ever lived. From his birth, on the 4th of July 1900, in Kansas—the son of a German immigrant—Billy survives catastrophic event after catastrophic event: The War to End All Wars; World War II; even the presence of The Korean Conflict, horrifies him; as did the Spanish-American War that haunted his father and affected Billy second-hand. With pointed pathos and barbed politicism, “*Billy Goes To War*” becomes an intensely involving history lesson as seen through Billy’s eyes and lived through Billy’s actions and with his point of view: “War is ...weird!” Dark humor permeates this unsettling play for these darkening times. A small cast makes this a perfect play for any group. Designed as a minimalist play, little scenery is needed. Simple costumes and props, and the actors’ imaginations fill in the graphic visual fabric of the play. **ORDER #3048**

Harley Marshall has a long list of theater credits, stretching from the Midwest to Off-Broadway and Maine. He was nominated for Best Actor by the Kansas City theater critics, and was co-founder of a critically acclaimed avant-garde theater there. He created the Asner Showcase and directed its namesake, Ed Asner, in the first production; spearheaded the renovation of an abandoned stable in Kansas City into a performance center; and wrote and performed three one-man shows. In the past year, Marshall has written two comedies and a drama: *Murray and Juliet or All's Swell That Ends Swell*, and *Sammy's The Greatest College Bar in the History of Mankind*. His latest script, *Billy Goes to War* premiered in August of 2017. Marshall is a member of The Daytime Players, a troupe of senior actors, directors and playwrights.

ACT I

BILLY'S FOLKS

NARRATOR: *(All cast members enter as they are introduced)* Let me introduce myself. I am the historian of an awful war that was supposed to end all wars, the biographer of one Billy Bunders, known to friends and bullies as Pissing Billy, the luckiest or unluckiest boy who ever lived. Here are the other characters: *(All the actors hustle in smartly as they are introduced.)* Louise, his mother; his father, Adolphus; His best friend, Ethelred Strathroy; Doc Miner, who delivered Billy; Doc's nurse, Gladdy; Ivo Prazzoli, the world's greatest aviator; Daisy, Ivo's wife; town gossip Alta Mills, and the camp followers.

ALL: *(singing boisterously)* I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy, A Yankee Doodle, do or die; A real live nephew —
(Women shout)

“niece”

— of my Uncle Sam, Born on the Fourth of July. Yankee Doodle went to town, riding on a pony, stuck a feather in his hat and called it macaroni. I am a Yankee Doodle boy.

(Women shout)

“girl!”

(All cheer and run off stage.)

NARRATOR: When Adolphus Bunderswagen came to America from Germany, he found out there were no streets of gold.

ADOLPHUS: I was a fool. By then it was too late to go back to Germany.

NARRATOR: Adolphus made his way to Leavenworth, Kansas, to help build a railroad across the state. To get the job he said his name was Bunders.

ADOLPHUS: The railroad wasn't hiring Germans.

NARRATOR: He married a girl named Louise who was bright and cheery. It was said she was a mail-order bride. They bought farm land in western Kansas, just off the Santa Fe Railroad line, ten miles from the nearest town.

LOUISE: Unfortunately, we bought it sight unseen. To put it mildly, our farm was not as advertised in the brochure. The trees weren't any taller than I am. But I loved the farm. I had a home I could call my own.

ADOLPHUS: Haskell County was hotter than Hades in the summertime and life-threatening in winter. It couldn't support a pismire. Even our stud bull Elmer was skinny. Nothing, and I mean nothing, reached full maturity.

NARRATOR: Adolphus left his wife and new baby to fight in the Spanish-American War. He must have figured it was his last chance to be a hero. He came back a changed man.

LOUISE: Adolphus and I got along. Trying to fend off starvation every day of our lives forced us to become a team. When Billy came along we became a family.

END OF SCENE

A REAL PISSER!

DOC MINER: (*brings on a stool and sits*) It was a most unusual Fourth of July. I delivered two babies that day. Our county had far too few fertile women for that to occur.

NARRATOR: Doc Miner had been in Haskell County for some time. As far as anyone could tell, she was the only woman doctor west of the Mississippi River.

(Two town ladies enter.)

LADY 1: That Doc Miner is a strange one. Take her name, Rexina.

LADY 2: She goes by Rex, a man's name.

LADY 1: She never wears a dress. Doesn't come to church.

LADY 2: Doesn't even come to the Fourth of July picnic.

LADY 1: This 20th century sure is a strange world all right.

LADY 2: I'm telling you, Bucky. I'm telling you.

DOC MINER: First to arrive that was the Strathroy boy. He was 14 pounds. I had to weigh him on the scale at the feed store.

NARRATOR: His folks named him Ethelred. It seems there was an English king back in the dark ages named Ethelred the Unready. Like his namesake, Ethel, as he was quickly called, was unready for the vicissitudes of life.

ETHEL: (*enters*) I was born with a middle-aged body and was ill-equipped to handle the taunts of my classmates.

CHORUS: (*chanting*) Ethel is girl's name, Ethel is a girl's name. A girlie, girlie, girl's name.

(Ethel slumps off.)

DOC MINER: I no sooner got back to my office when I was called on to deliver the Bunderswagen baby, Billy. When I saw Billy Bunderswagen pop out of his mother's womb without me tugging away, I laughed and said, "This boy is a real pisser!" I was sure he would grab the world by the ass and shake it for all it's worth.

(Adolphus and Louise enter.)

LOUISE: (*carrying a swaddled baby*) Remind me to never do this again.

ADOLPHUS: (*peeking at Billy's privates and saying proudly*) Whoa! That boy's got a real big pisser on him!

DOC MINER: Well, sir, I picked him up to spank his backside and get him breathing real good when he peed on me. His little fountain just kept going and going. I was greatly impressed. I said again with even more emphasis, "Yes sir, this boy's a real pisser!" Billy wasn't fully formed. The shutoff valve that would have made him continent wasn't strong enough.

LOUISE: (*crying*) I love him just the same.

NARRATOR: It took a few years for Billy to get the hang of continence. Even then, he sometimes failed in tense situations.

(The two ladies return.)

LADY 1: My son says the boys at school taunt Billy Bunders and chant, "I see London, I see France. I see Billy pee his pants."

LADY 2: Boys will be boys.

LADY 1: Amen to that. You've got to be tough out here to survive.

LADY 2: (*noticing Mrs. Bunders*) Morning, Mrs Bunders.

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LOUISE: *(foists the baby on to Adolphus, crosses to the ladies and stomps her foot)* That's Mrs. Bunderswagen.

LADY 2: Yes, ma'am.

LADY 1: Yes, ma'am.

(The ladies sing as they exit.)

Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war.

(Louise grabs Adolphus and the baby and stomps off.)

DOC MINER: One day, when Billy was old enough to understand, his father announced that sometime back he had gelded himself. He said, "We can barely keep from starving as it is. We can't afford more mouths to feed." There would be no more children. When Billy got to be seven or eight, Adolphus couldn't take Billy's bedwetting anymore and banished him to the cow barn for a while. Billy roomed with Elmer the bashful gentle bull. Billy and Elmer got along just fine, but Elmer did give Billy wide berth at night lest Billy soil his side of the stall.

END OF SCENE

THE YEAR IT RAINED

NARRATOR: Billy and Ethel didn't hang out much as kids. No kids did. The farms were too far apart. But something happened to bring them as close together as twins. That was the year it rained. Even the old timers couldn't remember such rains. Everything born that spring reached full maturity. A declivity, about a half mile from school, suddenly became a pond. It was wide enough and deep enough for paddling around in. One day ...

ETHEL: (enters) Billy, a bunch of us are going for a swim in the pond to celebrate the last day of school. Think Gladdy'll go? I'd sure like to see her in a bathing suit.

(He growls.)

BILLY: (enters) Come on, Ethel.

ETHEL: (picks up Billy and carries him to stage center) Billy, what do you mean come on? I've seen you look at her and how she looks at you. I'd just once like to have a girl look at me like that.

BILLY: I just wish she'd hold up her end of the conversation once in a while. I keep running out of things to say.

NARRATOR: Ethel forgot his books and ran back to fetch them. Some of the school bullies were given a rare exemption from detention and decided to celebrate their good fortune with a dip in the new pond where they encountered Billy. They started razzing him, trying to make him pee his pants. That seemed to be their favorite sport. Billy always obliged them quickly just to get it over with. This time, he was determined to stay dry.

CHORUS: (Offstage chanting) I see London. I see France. I see Billy pee his pants.

NARRATOR: This time the taunts weren't working. The boys began to get desperate.

CHORUS: (faster) I see London. I see France. I see Billy pee his pants.

NARRATOR: Billy was staying dry. Billy saluted them and jumped into the pond. It wasn't deep enough that Billy was in any danger of drowning – that is if he didn't want to.

BILLY: I was worn down by the constant harassments, the embarrassments. To make it quit, all I had to do was take a big swallow of water. So I sat there at the bottom of the pond, weighted down by my clothes, trying to decide – live or die. Then Ethel showed up.

(Ethel enters jumps down beside Billy.)

He saw me sitting there, jumped in next to me and sat down, too. He knew what I was contemplating. He'd been bullied, too. We sat there looking at each other for the longest while, trying to decide: live or die.

ETHEL: (pondering) Live or die.

BILLY: Live.

ETHEL: Live.

(They climb out of the pond.)

NARRATOR: Later that summer, Billy and Ethel went back to the pond and stood in the middle of where it had been. By then it had dried up. Billy realized the bullies had done him a big favor.

BILLY: Pissing Billy is dead.

ETHEL: (runs off and yells as if announcing great news to the world) Pissing Billy is dead! Pissing Billy is dead!

NARRATOR: In high school, Billy started hanging around the telegraph office. He was fascinated by the idea that it brought people hundreds of miles apart into the same room.

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BILLY: *(runs in)* I begged one of the telegraphers to teach me the dots and dashes that made up the Morse Code. When I got real good at it, they let me work weekends when things were slow. My boss would sneak home while I worked. He got paid for doing nothing and I learned a trade. We were both happy. To get to the telegraph office from our farm I hitched rides on the eastbound train. Passengers must have thought I was a big wheel what with the train stopping in the middle of nowhere just for me. I thought so, too. When my shift was over, I rode the westbound home.

NARRATOR: *(crosses to Billy)* “Morning, Billy,” the conductor would often say as Billy climbed onboard. “Any important news come over the wire?”

BILLY: No sir, not last night.

NARRATOR: Tell your folks howdy for me, will you?
(crosses back to lectern.)

BILLY: I was working when the telegraph started dashing and dotting like mad. The important news coming over the wire was that we had entered the war against the Germans. I ran up and down Main Street yelling.

NARRATOR: *(crossing back to Billy)* Evening, Billy, hop aboard. Any important news today

BILLY: We just went to war with the Germans, sir.

NARRATOR: Well, I’ll be! Tell your folks how-do.

BILLY: I will, sir.

NARRATOR: *(back to stand)* And watch out for the critters, Billy. They’re hungry and sickly with famine.

BILLY: I will, sir. I was also working the telegraph when the message came in that Ivo Prazzoli was coming to town. Ivo was the greatest pilot in the world. Some kids worshipped ball players or cowboys or the silent movie stars, but I worshipped Ivo. I was so excited I ran down Main Street yelling again. Truth to be told, there weren’t any other streets to run down. *(runs into Doc Miner.)*

DOC MINER: *(entering)* I was taking my morning constitutional when Billy ran into me.
(Billy’s runs all over the stage.)

He looked like a crazy man. I said, “What in the world is the matter with you, son?”

(Billy is running circles around Doc, arms apart like he’s flying an airplane.)

BILLY: Ivo Prazzoli’s coming!

DOC MINER: Who’s he?

BILLY: *(miming Ivo’s stunts: loops, rolls, dives)* He’s the greatest aviator in the world! He has the fastest aeroplane and does the most dangerous stunts! I bet he could do 80 loop-di-loops in row if he wanted! He landed on a train once... then took off before the train got to a tunnel!

DOC MINER: Don’t you do any damn fool thing like get in that thing with him.

BILLY: I’d love that more than anything, ma’am.

DOC MINER: Tell your folks hello, Billy. Yes, sir, that boy’s a real pisser.

BILLY: *(exiting)* I was so excited. I forgot about the train and ran the whole 10 miles home to tell folks Ivo was coming. And he was going to recruit boys like me to join the Army.

END OF SCENE

IVO COMES TO TOWN

(Ivo, Billy and Ethel enter. Ivo sits on the two-step riser which becomes his aeroplane.)

BILLY: When Ivo Prazzoli flew into town with his newest bride, Daisy, I noticed the plane was missing a bit, not so anybody but me could tell. I told Ivo, "It's not running quite right." All the while Ivo was singing happily.

IVO: *(loudly)* Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do. I'm half crazy all for the love of you.

BILLY: He laughed at my audacity and said ...

IVO: Have at it, son.

BILLY: I guess he was up for some funning. I got to it and tuned The Mighty Muriel to perfection. Ivo was impressed.

IVO: Son, as a token of my gratitude, I'm going to take you for a ride. See how good your work is.

BILLY: I almost peed my pants.

IVO: We'll fly you right over your farm.

BILLY: How'd you know I live on a farm?

IVO: Son, everybody out here lives on a farm. Climb on up.

(Billy climbs behind Ivo)

I only have room for one.

(waves Ethel off)

I'm going to take you to the top of the world. You'll never be the same again after you fly with the greatest aviator *off* the face of the earth.

(they take off)

Which way do you live?

BILLY: That way. So we headed for the farm.

(They are a-whooping and a-hollering.)

As we closed in on the farm, the animals got wind of us. They couldn't see us, being four-legged creatures with heads that moved only from side to side and not up. But they heard the noise of The Mighty Muriel's powerful engine and scattered every which way. The noise also roused my folks.

(Louise and Adolphus enter.)

We buzzed them a couple of times.

(Billy's folks duck and look up at the sky.)

Mother was waving, father was as unimpressed as he always was with things he couldn't afford. On one of our passes, my lunch came back up and landed with a big splat at father's feet.

(Adolphus looks down at his feet, turns and exits, Louise follows.)

Barfing aside, it was the happiest I'd ever been. Ivo was right, my world was never the same. Then we flew back to town to get Daisy and do the show.

(Daisy enters and takes her place on the wing of the plane. A crowd enters to see the show.)

NARRATOR: Ivo started the show by buzzing the crowd. When he got close, the crowd scattered. Then Ivo did some loops.

(Crowd mimes the loops and oohs and aahs)

He flew upside down.

(they mime that)

BILLY: All the while Daisy, who was wing-walking, kept screaming ...

DAISY: Get me off this thing! Get me the hell off this damned thing!

BILLY: I laughed. I thought it was part of the show. So I started yelling too. Get me off this thing! Get me off this damned thing!

NARRATOR: Then Ivo finished with the Spiral of Death, corkscrewing the Mighty Muriel straight for hell. Just when Ivo was about to crash, he pulled at the last second and the crowd roared.

(Crowd lets out a big sigh, claps and exits. Ivo and Billy stretch out on the platform and fall asleep.)

That night, after the show, Daisy ran away.

(Daisy sneaks off.)

She was afraid of heights and wing-walked only because Ivo made her do it. Maybe the preceding Mrs. Ivo

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Prazzoli. Flora Mae Flagswipe, weighed heavily on Daisy's mind. Flora Mae, stumbled during a wingwalk and had been swept away high over the Mississippi River as it flowed by Keokuk, Iowa. Flora Mae had been a champion diver and took advantage of a bad situation with a final performance of full gainers, back flips and jackknives on the way down. Ivo saw her cannonball into the river. She was never found. Neither was the present Mrs. Ivo Prazzoli when she slipped away in the night as Ivo slept.

(Ivo wakes up.)

Ivo was devastated. He quit flying. Billy and his father towed Ivo's plane out to the farm, and Ivo moved into the barn with Elmer the Gentle Bull.

BILLY: To Ivo's credit he didn't take to drink. He just sat there in the cockpit of The Mighty Muriel, day after day, singing the same song, over and over, mournfully.

IVO: Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do. I'm half crazy all for the love of you.

END OF SCENE

CONDITIONS WERE HARSH

NARRATOR: Conditions were always harsh in southwest Kansas. There was never enough rain. Many homesteaders gave up and moved on. After a while, the only reason for the train to stop in Haskell County was to board people leaving, often with not much more than a bag or two of clothes. But the summer of 1916 was particularly bad. There was not enough feed to keep all the cattle alive. The weakest ones suffered horribly from diseases.

BILLY: One day, Elmer, our bashful bull, walked right into the barbed wire fence. He was sickly and blind by then. His head was bleeding pretty good. I tried to make sure he was all right, but he was panicked and knocked me down. He stuck me with his horns. He must have been crazy with pain. He even bit at me. His blood was all over me, mixed with the blood pouring from the wound in my shoulder. Father heard my screams and came running with the shotgun. It took two shots to bring Elmer down. Poor Elmer. Mother sewed me up.

(Louise and Adolphus enter and sit on riser. Billy lies on it as if in the back of the buckboard. He looks like he is in a coffin. Adolphus mimes holding the reins.)

DOC MINER: *(enters)* A week later, Billy was hauled into my office in the back of their buckboard wagon. He was violently ill by the time his folks got here, vomited non-stop, coughed blood and had diarrhea and the chills. Fluids were coming from everywhere. By then his lips had turned a deep navy blue, almost black. I was horrified. I had not seen anything like this before and could not find anything about it in my medical journals, which I read religiously. I tended Billy as best I could but believed he would die before the night was over.

(The ladies enter.)

LADY 1: They say Doc Miner's bleeding Billy with leeches.

BOTH: Eww!

LADY 2: The mortician's measured him for a coffin.

BOTH: Eww!

LADY 1: His folks've been quarantined.

BOTH: Eww!

LADY 2: I'm telling you, Bucky. I'm telling you.

BOTH: *(singing)* Nearer my god to thee / nearer to thee!

(The ladies exit. Louise and Adolphus rise. Billy remains lying down.)

DOC MINER: I kept copious notes of his symptoms and my treatments and concluded that Billy had a virus, a new, perhaps deadly, form. It probably came from a sick animal. At the end of the week, he was not better, but more importantly he was not worse.

(Gladdy enters and kneels by Billy and cradles him in her arms. Adolphus and Louise exit.)

My young nurse, Gladdy, Gladdy Brin, stayed by the young man's side through it all. She slept by his bed, read him the bible, held him in her arms and rocked him and sang hymns.

GLADDY: *(sings sweetly)* Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound. I once was lost, but now I'm found.

(She hums under Doc Miner's lines.)

DOC MINER: Gladdy, a variation of Gladys, a name she detested, was orphaned when her mother died.

GLADDY: My mother was always sickly, and I had to take care of her. I couldn't go to school except when she wasn't in pain, which was rare. I learned reading and numbers at home but longed to play with other kids.

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When mother died, father walked out onto the prairie, stripped off all his clothes and solemnly walked away. He had gone to die like an old, useless Indian warrior. I didn't try to get the neighbors to look for him. I thought about joining him.

DOC MINER: I was alone, so I took Gladdy in. She was exceptionally bright. Over the years, she became more than my nurse, she became my assistant. She mixed medicines and set bones. I hoped she would take over my practice when I stepped down.

BILLY: (stands) While I was dying, I dreamt a lot. I dreamt a beautiful woman was whispering in my ear, reassuring me that I was going to make it. I got so I believed her. She sang to me. I fell in love with a dream. I saw myself marrying her. It seemed real. I also had nightmares that water was washing over me and I couldn't stop it. There were people around me who were drowning, too. Even though they were drowning, they were trying to kill each other. The water was blood red. I tried to claw back to the surface, but I was like a lead weight at the end of a fishing line. I started breathing the water, the blood-red water. It was rushing down my throat. The water was hot. Blood always is. I was burning up. The dream went on for days, maybe weeks or years. I thought why struggle? Why not just drift away?

(He returns to the riser and lies back down.)

DOC MINER: Having exhausted all options, we piled covers on the boy and wheeled him outside in the sun. We thoroughly baked him.

GLADDY: After a week, Billy came out of it. By then, I was sure I loved him.

(Billy and Gladdy start to exit in opposite directions, stop, stare fondly at each other, wave shyly and leave the stage.)

DOC MINER: I wrote a report and mailed it to every health organization I could find. I wrote to medical journals, medical organizations, to Washington, to President Wilson. I said I had treated the first victim of a terrible virus.

(Stands to read)

“Dear Sir, you are about to face a disease that could kill millions. It could be worse than the Bubonic Plague. Get the soldiers out of the barracks. Clear the hospitals. Get them into the sunshine, for god's sake. Close confinement will only make things worse.” *(sits)* I was ignored, maybe because I was a woman doing men's work. In the next two years, people all over the world would be infected by the Spanish flu and up to 50 million would die.

END OF SCENE

OFF TO THE WAR

(Adolphus, Louise and the Narrator enter and sit on the riser. Billy is lying on it.)

BILLY: *(from L)* I was home by then – convalescing – when my mother bundled me up, put me in the buckboard and all of us took off for the train station. Father propped me up so I could to wave goodbye to Ethel and the rest of my friends heading off to war.

(The townspeople and Ethel and Gladdy enter quickly. They are waving and crying.)

NARRATOR: When the train started heading off, the young soldiers stuck their heads out the windows and hollered and waved.

CHORUS: Over there. Over there. The Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming. We'll be over. We're coming over. And we won't come back till it's over over there.

(As the townspeople exit their singing gets quieter and quieter.)

ETHEL: *(Ethel marches by, waving to Billy)* If the war isn't won by Christmas, Billy, I'll see you over there.

(Louise sleeps in the back of the buckboard.)

BILLY: Father, I want to go with Ethel and all the other boys more than anything in the world.

NARRATOR: On the way home as Louise slept, Adolphus told Billy about his war. He'd never talked of it before.

(He exits.)

ADOLPHUS: They say my war, the Spanish-American War, was trumped up by a newspaperman who thought he would sell more papers. And he did. But that didn't matter, we were young and full of vinegar. We marched our way up San Juan Hill behind Teddy Roosevelt. The bullets rained down on us from the hilltop. The ones that missed us set the dray, tall grass on fire. The flames started chasing us. The wounded couldn't get out of the way. They burned up. The screams were horrible. I figured if I got shot in battle, well that was my fate. That's what war is. But I couldn't abide with getting burned up. So I ran to the trees over on the side where there wasn't much grass. It also provided me protection from the gunfire. I could have advanced from there all the way to the top. But I didn't. I didn't fire a shot. I just cowered behind the tree. There was a wounded fellow who collapsed no more than 10 feet from me. The flames were licking at him, starting to burn his clothes. He begged me to help him. I was scared. I just watched him slowly burn up. Not even god forgives me.

BILLY: I still want to go more than anything.

(Family exits.)

ETHEL: *(enters)* Our sendoff wasn't what I imagined it would be. There was no band, no speeches. I should have known, there aren't enough people in Haskell County to have a band. And, luckily, we didn't have any politicians either. Our train stopped at every town along the way. In the bigger towns, people turned out, the bands played, the politicians orated. They quoted President Wilson, "The world must be made safe for democracy." And "It is a war to end all wars." Who won't fight for that? We felt like heroes though we had not fired a shot. But I must admit I'm scared, Billy. Everybody says this war will be over right away, but I have a feeling it isn't going to be a piece of cake. I'd feel a whole lot better if you were here with me, Billy. Maybe I'll have better luck with the French girls. It can't be worse than back at home.

DOC MINER: *(enters)* There were hundreds of new soldiers crammed into barracks at Camp Funston, about a hundred and fifty miles east of Haskell County. Not long after they got there some of them started falling sick. They were suffering the same symptoms Billy had only worse. Ethel must have got the flu from Billy,

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a small dose of it, not enough to kill him. Then Ethel passed it along. Each time it got passed around it got stronger. It was in that boot camp that the first deaths from Spanish flu were recorded. Before it was over 50,000 American soldiers would die of it, as many as died in combat.

(She exits.)

END OF SCENE

IVO GETS CAUGHT

(Narrator, Billy and Ivo enter.)

NARRATOR: When the Army found out, rather belatedly, that Ivo had quit flying and was no longer recruiting, they hotfooted it out to Haskell County. An Army officer told Ivo,

(Narrator puts on a cap and becomes the officer)

Mr. Prazzoli, you have deserted your post. Your choices are to fly again – this time at the front lines of the war – or wallow in the Army prison at Leavenworth.

BILLY: Ivo knew he was had, so he tried to strike the best deal he could.

IVO: I won't fly without Billy. He is my navigator.

BILLY: Which was untrue and the officer knew it. Maybe Ivo just wanted company. Well sir, just like that, Ivo resurrected The Mighty Muriel, I pledged my troth to Gladdy, told her goodbye, and Ivo and I were up in the clouds, heading for the war. *Sings* I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy, A Yankee Doodle, do or die; A real live nephew of my Uncle Sam.

NARRATOR: As part of their punishment, Ivo and Billy first had to perform in Europe in front of Allied leaders to boost morale.

IVO: We flew over the White House, flew over Buckingham Palace and the palace in Paris, a name I couldn't pronounce. I wanted to buzz Kaiser Wilhelm but figured the only way to do that would be to land on a train heading for Berlin. I deferred to my navigator's caution.

BILLY: Then we headed for the front lines. Our duty was reconnaissance, find out if the Germans were gearing up for attack. It was a piece of cake. We never fired a shot or dropped a hand grenade. But we polished off a lot of champagne. One time, we saw a train carrying German troops. Ivo couldn't resist. We landed on it and we flew off as the train entered a tunnel.

IVO: *(exits)* I kind of wished we had thrown grenades at it. Oh well.

NARRATOR: Billy was a crafty kid. In the evenings, when it was too late to fly, he volunteered to man the telegraph office at the war front. Then he set out to link transmitters from the front lines all the way back to his old telegraph office at home. Soon he could reach Gladdy in no time at all.

(The ladies enter and stand in a straight line, between Billy and Gladdy,)

BILLY: Hi, Gladdy.

(Ladies mime telegraphing while saying "Hi, Gladdy" along the line until Gladdy hears it.)

GLADDY: Hi, Billy. Oh, Billy, isn't it magical that I can sit here in Kansas and talk to you over this wire. You were right, it's as if we were in the same room. Ain't life grand? And one other thing, don't let Ivo talk you into wing-walking. You're a lot beefier than Daisy. Ha! Ha!

(She exits R)

(The telegraphers exit. Ivo reenters and Billy and Ivo are back miming the plane.)

BILLY: Just about every day we'd see this German soldier standing on their runway watching us. He wasn't brass or anything, just an ordinary soldier. He studied us like he was trying to find a better use of a plane than stunts. He wasn't afraid of us. So we started buzzing him, see how close we could get, make him run away. He never flinched. We admired his foolhardiness. I saw him so many times I knew I would never forget him. After a while, Ivo got tired of reconnaissance.

IVO: So I started doing my show at the end of each mission. We did everything, the whole deal. I made Billy wear a dress when he wing-walked.

BILLY: Our boys applauded us enthusiastically.

(Ethel waves.)

Theirs did, too. Everybody stopped shooting to watch the show. For a lot of the soldiers we were the only spot of happiness they had.

IVO: The only ones who didn't like our show were the German aviators. They must have thought we were making fun of them. Try as they might, their planes could not keep up with the The Mighty Muriel.

BILLY: *(cross to Ivo. They are face to face)* However, Ivo saw the handwriting on the wall.

IVO: I thought the aeroplane would bring peace to the world – that the world would be knit together by it. No village would be isolated, no town, no country. We would all be one. There would be peace. The aeroplane would end all wars. But I am wrong. The Germans will have guns on their planes and we will, too. The sky's the limit after that, Billy. We are embarking on a new way to kill each other: from the heavens.

(Ivo exits.)

GLADDY: *(enters)* Dearest Billy, I have too many words to telegraph, so I'll send an old-fashioned letter. I hope it gets to you before the war's over. Ha. Ha. Besides I wouldn't want anybody reading my sappy thoughts about how much I miss you. Instead I will tell you about my kittens. Kittens make me happy. I have named one of the new kittens Billy because he looks just like you. He sits all day outside the kitchen door hoping to get in and sit on my lap, just like you. In the few times he has skirted around me as I come back from the garden, he doesn't know what to do. He runs around frantically, me right behind trying to catch him. I know Doctor Miner does not like cats in her office. But she never complains. When I sit outside with Billy, Billy, I scratch him all over. I scratch his left cheek, then his right, then under his chin and last the top of his head. He likes it best when I scratch him in the same order. He has a purr motor as loud as The Mighty Muriel and drools uncontrollably. Then he settles down in my lap and snoozes, just like you. Billy is lucky. One of the little girls down the street wants to take him home.

(She exits.)

BILLY: *(enters)* Dear Father, one day the Germans surprised us in mid-loop. They were waiting for us and had surrounded us. This time they had machine guns strapped to their fuselages. They formed a circular firing squad. Had Ivo been patient, the Germans might have shot each other down. But he dispensed with the rest of his performance and skipped right to the grand finale. He pointed his nose straight down toward the loving arms of Mother Earth, took his hands off the joystick, like he always did, and held his arms out like he was riding a bicycle and hollering, "Look, Ma, no hands." The trick to the nose dive was that Ivo controlled the plane with his knees. He aimed straight at the German who was always there on the runway. Maybe this time Ivo planned to kill the German. Or maybe Ivo was determined, once and for all, to break the German's nerve. I couldn't tell. As we were closing in on him, a cow, feeding on grass at the side of the airfield, must have heard us coming and got spooked. The German landing strip wasn't much more than a path through a farm field. Probably the old farmer forgot it was war day and not farm day and had let his cows out. The cow took off for the runway. Ivo was concentrating on the German so hard he never saw the cow. The Mighty Muriel hit the cow at top speed. BAM! The Germans couldn't catch Ivo, but a cow, traveling at about five miles an hour, did. We flipped upside down and were heading tail first, our momentum carrying us backward while the engine was pulling us the other way, a practical demonstration of the law of equal and opposite reactions. The plane slowed considerably. Ivo had inadvertently created his greatest stunt. We drifted straight for a pond. The only thing I could think to do was duck down under the cockpit. The plane, still upside down, settled softly in the mud. Some German soldiers rushed to the plane

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and pulled Ivo out. But he was dead. His neck snapped on impact. At least he didn't die horribly like the rest of us are destined to do. The German, we had been buzzing for weeks on end, pulled me out before I could drown. I was not hurt. The Germans carried Ivo on a makeshift gurney, formed a protective phalanx around me and escorted us back to our lines under a white flag to express their condolences. They said they had thoroughly enjoyed Ivo's performances. They wondered that if Ivo could not get out of the war alive how can any of us?

(End C)

NARRATOR: *(enters)* Ivo was buried behind the front lines without a tombstone, like all the other fatalities. The newspapers said one hundred thousand mourners passed by Ivo's empty casket, in his hometown of New York City. One report said his widow, Daisy, was in the crowd.

BILLY: The higher ups liked our shows so much they never tried to stop us. But when Ivo took his final dive they had to blame somebody lest they be judged.

LOUISE: *(enters)* Son, Gladly showed me how I can write you over this telegraph. Who says an old dog can't learn new tricks? I'm fine. Your father's cantankerous as ever. Will write more later. Your Mother.

(She exits.)

BILLY: I was the only one left to be blamed for Ivo's death. Off to the brig I went while they tried to figure out what to do with me. They decided to drum me out of the Air Corps and send me to the front lines – a sentence of death as sure as a firing squad.

(Salutes and exits)

NARRATOR: Word of Ivo's demise and Billy's dilemma traveled fast in the trenches, maybe not as fast as in the telegraph office back in Kansas but pretty fast.

ETHEL: When I found out about Billy, I put in a good word for him and got him assigned to my unit. Truth told, with all the boys getting killed, any soldier – as long as he aimed in the right direction – no matter his record, was welcomed at the front. We were together again, two boys from Haskell County, Kansas, born on the same day.

(He sings.)

We are Yankee Doodle Dandies, Yankee Doodle do or die. Real live nephews of our Uncle Sam, born on the Fourth of July.

(He exits.)

END OF ACT I

8 more pages in the second act