

THE CHANCE OF A LIFETIME by JO HARDY

CHARACTERS

NARRATOR
THE WATCHER
RUTH
CLAIRE
JAMIE

NEWSREADER
RADIO ANNOUNCER
EYEWITNESS
MOTHER
CHILD

The play was originally played by a cast of four, doubling the roles of Narrator and Watcher. The Newsreader, Radio Announcer, Eyewitness, Mother and Child were divided up and played by the four.

However, there is enough to do for a cast of five still to be examinable: four girls and a boy perhaps, though both Narrator and Watcher, separate characters in this casting, could be boys, given more to do by doubling as Announcer, Newsreader, Eye Witness and Child.

Only Jamie needs to be male.

The play is about twenty minutes long.

The play is about a group of friends, one of whom, Ruth, is met by a shadowy figure and tempted by him to accept a copy of a newspaper which will give next Saturday's lottery numbers. Ruth uses the numbers to ensure a win but fails to look at the rest of the paper, which tells of a terrible tragedy at the school disco, killing a large number of students, including one of her best friends. When she realises that she could have warned people, she cannot enjoy her winnings and it is clear she will suffer from guilt for the rest of her life.

This is a kind of morality play about the dangers of greed - and perhaps of putting too much trust in the supernatural. Ruth, the character who is led astray by the 'Watcher', a shadowy figure who may represent Fate, the Devil - or just a personification of Temptation - is brutally punished for falling into the trap of greed. Yes, she gains more money than she could ever have dreamed of, but she cannot enjoy it, because of the loss of her friends and her own self-respect. This has the familiar ring of many medieval stories - showing that these work just as well in a modern context.

It is harder to pin down the role of the other characters, who are the unwitting victims of Fate and the means of punishing Ruth. Perhaps, as Jamie himself says near the end, there could have been no way of preventing the tragedy. Who would have believed Ruth if she had said beforehand there would be a terrible fire? Given this, it is clear that Ruth is being punished for what reason? To make her a better person perhaps. The Watcher sums it up in his last speech. Ruth has learned above all not to trust a gift without asking herself what was in it for the giver.

This idea of 'you don't get something for nothing' is a very modern moral - not a medieval one. It seems to suggest that if she had not been tempted by greed, the chain of events which leads to Jamie's death would not have been activated. In this case it was a punishment devised by the Watcher, and saying 'no' would have saved lives.

Whatever the answer, it is one of those plays that would need discussion by the group undertaking it, to decide on the 'meaning' for them.

EXTRACT ONE

NARRATOR *walking slowly onto the stage and looking round*

This is where it happened. This very spot. And it was on just such a night as this. Just this kind of misty dusk when travellers pull their coats tighter around themselves as they hurry home. It was an evening for hot drinks, warm fires and good company ... It was a time for honest people to stay indoors and tell tales of witches and goblins It was on just such a night as this ...

Enter Jamie, Ruth and Claire, obviously in a hurry. Claire is wearing a heavy coat but it is clear that she is 'dressed up.' Ruth is without a coat and obviously frozen. She looks glamorous.

RUTH

We'd better hurry or we'll be late. The gig starts at eight.

JAMIE

Well, it was you we all had to wait for. I thought you were wanting to make a fashionably late entrance. You must have tried on every outfit in your wardrobe.

CLAIRE

And your sister's. And you must be absolutely frozen. I don't know why you didn't bring a coat.

RUTH

Yeah, well. You wouldn't. Come on.

JAMIE

Anything you say, Ruth. Anything you say ...

They all leave. A shadowy figure crosses the stage and follows them.

NARRATOR

We will never know why these three were singled out. It must have been some vast eternal plan. But, for whatever reason, they were watched until they were out of sight and then the watcher waited patiently for their return.

The Narrator leaves as the Watcher re-enters, shadowed and furtive. The voices of Jamie, Ruth and Claire are heard in the distance and he retreats deeper into the gloom. Enter Ruth, alone.

RUTH *obviously nervous but trying hard not to show it*

Stop fooling about. I know you're trying to frighten me. Well, I'm not frightened so it isn't working ... so you might as well give up and come out. [*A beat.*] I know what you're doing, Claire, you're trying to play a trick on me because you're jealous ... over David. [*There is silence.*] It was obvious you were trying to get his attention but he was only interested in me. He likes his girls to be well dressed. [*It is clear she is losing confidence.*] He said he liked my gold ear-rings and perfume and he didn't like his girls to look cheap...

Her voice trails off uncertainly as she looks around for them. The Watcher comes out of the shadows.

THE WATCHER

So you like to wear gold, do you?

RUTH

Who are you? ... Well, yes, I do actually. David said ... But who are ...

THE WATCHER

Who am I? I too am a lover of gold ... see ... [*He holds out a heavily ringed hand.*]

RUTH

Wow! Are all those real gold? ... And is that a real diamond in that one? You must be worth a fortune!

THE WATCHER

Is that what you desire? A fortune?

RUTH

'Course I do. That's why I left school early to get a job. But it isn't very likely. Unless I win the lottery of course.

THE WATCHER

That can be arranged.

RUTH

Oh yeah! [*She laughs.*] I could wait a long time to get to be a millionaire that way!

THE WATCHER

Until Saturday. [*He produces a folded newspaper from under his clothing.*] Tomorrow is Friday. If you knew the winning numbers today...

RUTH

I could buy a ticket tomorrow and fill in all the right numbers. But I can't do that because ...

THE WATCHER

Here are your numbers.

RUTH

A Sunday paper. Last Sunday's? [*Pause while she looks at the date.*] You ... You can't mean next Sunday's ...?

The Watcher nods and then walks silently away while Ruth turns to the back of the newspaper where she knows the lottery results will be. She reads quickly.

RUTH

Sunday 16th! Next Sunday! [*She bends the newspaper in half and looks closely at the numbers.*] And here are all the numbers.

Enter Claire and Jamie.

RUTH

Nice trick, except that it didn't work. Did you see him when you were hiding?

JAMIE

Who?

RUTH

The person in grey. You must have passed him.

CLAIRE

We haven't seen anybody. We were just looking for you.

RUTH

Hiding you mean. Trying to scare me. Well, it didn't work. [*To Claire.*] You're just jealous because David ...

JAMIE

What's she talking about?

RUTH

I'm talking about the fact that David did nothing but flirt with me all night. It was obvious he wasn't interested in anybody else. He made certain remarks about my clothes which upset her ... [*Indicating Claire.*] ... so you two decided to be childish. But I don't care because...

CLAIRE

Don't be silly, Ruth. We weren't trying to do anything. You rushed off but we soon caught up. We definitely weren't hiding and we definitely didn't see anybody. And I wasn't upset about anything David said. It doesn't matter to me whether he liked your dress or not...

EXTRACT TWO

NEWSREADER

The fire which started this afternoon in the Layton Comprehensive School is said now to have claimed at least fifty lives.....

....RUTH

Claire, I'm so sorry. [*A beat.*] It must have been awful. Tracey told me about all the screaming and the smoke, and the bodies and things. [*A beat.*] I'm glad you're O.K.

CLAIRE

Jamie's dead.

RUTH

Yeah. Tracey said so. It's horrible. Poor Jamie. [*She looks closely at Claire.*] You really liked him, didn't you? [*Claire nods.*] And I know he fancied you. [*Claire looks up.*] He told me. [*A beat.*] Hey. Don't cry. [*She clumsily puts her arm around Claire and genuinely tries to distract her.*] I can cheer you up, you know. In a few days time, when you're feeling a bit better, we'll go out, me and you. [*She is so gentle that Claire smiles gratefully.*] We'll go shopping. [*A beat.*] I'll buy you something fantastic to wear. [*No response.*] Anything you want. Spare no expense. [*Still no response.*] I know it must be awful and I'm really sorry. I really am. And I can't enjoy my big win ... you know ...

CLAIRE *with an effort*

Oh ... it worked, did it? ... The newspaper ... I'd forgotten ...

RUTH

Yeah. I did everything just right; the numbers were what it said they would be. I'm going to be rich but of course, I'm not thinking about that right now. [*She takes the newspaper out of her bag and throws it onto the bed.*] I don't expect I'll ever get my news early again.

Claire can't really smile, but as she looks at the newspaper, something makes her turn to the front page. For the first time, the headline is revealed. It screams SCHOOL FIRE and carries a picture of a burnt out building with ambulances outside. She holds it out to Ruth, whose shocked reaction makes it clear that she has not seen it before. There is a long silence as they both try to absorb the enormity of the discovery. It might be possible to project the front page onto a wall or screen so that it can be seen by the audience.

RUTH

I never ... you see, I ... I just looked at the lottery numbers. It didn't seem ... [*She gives up.*]

They freeze and Jamie walks forward, stopping to look at the two girls before sitting on the arm of Claire's chair.

JAMIE

We were late for school and Claire and me were both late for Science. Mr Reynolds gave us the evil eye, but we thought we'd got away with it because he was starting an experiment. Claire went to the other side of the lab to join her group and, I remember, she turned round and grinned at me as if to say 'We got away with it.' I sat down on a stool and looked at her again. She was still grinning ... I was thinking what I would say to her at lunchtime. I was wondering how I would ask her out. You see, we'd always gone out together, Ruth, Claire and me. I wanted this to be different - a different sort of 'going out.' Without Ruth. Definitely without Ruth. I never got to ask her. There was a noise, and smoke, and screaming and ... [*He shrugs.*] ... it was all over. ... I was worried about that newspaper, you know. With reason, as it turned out.

He looks at the two girls again, then walks slowly to the back of the stage. Claire and Ruth unfreeze.

CLAIRE

You wouldn't let us look. You were only interested in the money and - all the time - this was on the front page. We could have warned them. We could have made them listen. Jamie wouldn't ...

She cannot carry on. Ruth can only stare at her in horror as they freeze again. Jamie walks forward and addresses the audience.

JAMIE

Claire thinks it would all have been different if we had known about that front page. She thinks we could have told everybody and that they would have done something to stop it. But would they? Would they have listened if we'd told them? I'm trying to think what the Head would have said if we'd gone to him and said the school was going to be burned down. He wouldn't have believed us. Come to that, I wouldn't have believed it myself. And can you imagine standing at a police station counter trying to tell them you'd seen Sunday's paper and you wanted them to try to prevent a disaster ... ? Perhaps there are things that simply have to happen. Who can tell?..