

WHEN WILLIE COMES MARCHING HOME

CAST LIST

HENRY RALLEY - middle age - father to Jimmy

JIMMY RALLEY - 17 years old, son to Henry

RALPH BROOKES, a young officer

GERALD FAULKNER, the Mayor

The play is very even in its distribution, making it an ideal examination script. The running-time is around forty minutes.

As the play opens, Henry Ralley learns that he has lost one son to the war. As the play progresses he becomes convinced that Little Jimmy, his younger son, should become a conscientious objector and remain safe at home. But Jimmy is determined to do his bit too...

Extract One: SCENE TWO

It is the morning of Willie's return from the war. Mr Ralley and Jimmy are getting ready to meet Willie at the station. Jimmy is offstage when Mr Ralley enters dressed in an overcoat, hat and gloves.

MR RALLEY Come on, Jimmy! We'll never make it on time at this rate. You're worse than a girl!

He looks through some papers on the table and rehearses a speech. Enter Jimmy.

JIMMY What on earth are you doing, Dad?

MR RALLEY I am practising my speech. The Mayor has said he wants me to say a few words at the luncheon they're laying on at the Bull. It's all very embarrassing but I could hardly say no, now could I?

JIMMY Give us a sample then.

MR RALLEY Oh no, no, I absolutely refuse. Now - get your coat on. [*He tries to put Jimmy's coat on him, but laughingly Jimmy steps aside.*]

JIMMY Oh come on, Dad - come on. It'll do you good. I promise not to laugh.

MR RALLEY No. I refuse to be made a figure of fun...

JIMMY I promise solemnly not to laugh. [*Pause.*] Come on - you always force me to read out my speeches for the school debating competitions.

The sound of the band starts up in the background.

MR RALLEY Yes, I appreciate that this is a fine moment of revenge for you, young man. [*Pause. He gives in.*] You promise - absolutely no laughing?

JIMMY Not a smirk, not a smile.

MR RALLEY I shall be very cross if there is. [*Pause. He gathers himself.*] Right - well then - here it is.

My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen [*Clears throat nervously.*] I don't wish to say very much this afternoon other than to thank you for this kind and warm reception of my soldiering son, who, God be thanked, has come home to us safe and sound. May God see fit to bring him and all our soldiering boys home to us, again and again, and may he bring a speedy end to our enemy and to this terrible war. [*Pause.*] Of course, you are, all of you, too kind and too generous - William doesn't really deserve all this. He has done nothing more than what every British soldier has to do. He has done no more than what every Englishman of fighting age must do. He has defended his King and country. In short, he has done his bit, no more no less. [*Pause. He looks to Jimmy for comment.*] Well, it's not the Gettysburg address but you might say something.

JIMMY I think it's fine, Dad. It's really very fine.

MR RALLEY Right. Well, then, let's be getting along. The train's due in fifteen minutes. *There is the sound of the doorbell.*

MR RALLEY There you see! You've made us late and the Mayor is probably standing outside our front door. Go and tell him we're on our way, will you?

Jimmy exits. Meanwhile, Mr Ralley continues to rehearse his little speech.

Jimmy slowly enters with a telegram in his hand. Pause. They both stare at one another. The band stops playing.

JIMMY It's a telegram, Father. [*An anxious pause.*] It can't be about Willie, can it? I mean, he's coming now, isn't he? They wouldn't have organised all this if ...

Pause. Mr Ralley crosses slowly to the boy and takes the telegram. Slowly, he opens it and unfolds the paper. He reads the telegram.

MR RALLEY Dear Mr Ralley. It is with great regret that I inform you of the death of William Magnus Ralley, who died on 14th May 1941.....

EXTRACT 2:

Ralph Brookes, a young soldier enters. He knocks on the open door. Without turning around, Mr Ralley answers, 'Come in.'

RALPH I'm sorry to barge in - front door was open.

Hearing the strange voice, Mr Ralley gets to his feet and turns around.

RALPH My name is Brookes, Corporal Ralph Brookes. I was under Lieutenant Ralley. Are you his father?

MR RALLEY *remembering his manners* Yes, I am. Do come in. Have a seat. Can I offer you something?

RALPH No thanks. It's very kind of you. I'm afraid I've got some rather bad news...

MR RALLEY It's quite all right, Corporal. We've received the War Office's telegram.

RALPH Oh, I see. [Pause,] I just came to give you this. [***He hands over a small box. Mr Ralley takes it and holds it during the following.***] It's his medal. The Colonel 'imself asked me to give it to you. I'm not the world's best corporal, sir, don't get me wrong, but I happen to live fairly close by and I was a special favourite of the Lieutenant's, though I say it myself.

MR RALLEY I'm extremely grateful, Corporal. I'm sorry this unhappy task has taken up your leave time.

RALPH That's all right, sir. [***Pause.***] Well sir, if you don't mind, I'll be getting along.

MR RALLEY Are you sure you won't have a whisky or something. I'm afraid I haven't got any beer.

RALPH That's all right, sir. Wife's at home, waiting to see me. I shouldn't stay long.

MR RALLEY Of course, of course. [***They shake hands.***] Good bye. And do please call in again. I should like to talk more ... but now's not quite the time.

RALPH Goodbye, sir. [***He goes to leave.***]

MR RALLEY I say, Corporal?

RALPH Yes, sir.

MR RALLEY Sorry to bother you further but you know, sometimes in war things get mixed up and we've all heard stories of soldiers being reported 'missing', and then they turn up in prison camps. I know of course, it's not likely but did you actually see my son ... I mean ... ?

RALPH I watched 'im die, sir.

Pause. Mr Ralley absorbs this.

MR RALLEY I see. Thank you. [***Pause.***] I don't suppose there's a grave anywhere?

RALPH The Lieutenant was buried at sea, sir. We done it proper, sir. Right proper.

MR RALLEY Buried at sea? What d'you mean, buried at sea?

RALPH The Lieutenant passed away on the troop ship what brought us 'ome, sir.

MR RALLEY Oh, I see. From his battle wounds, I suppose. Could you tell me how he was wounded? I'm awfully sorry to go on about all this but, you see, well, it would make a great deal of difference to know.

RALPH *hesitant* Begging your pardon, sir, but sometimes in war, well, some things is better left unsaid.

MR RALLEY What on earth do you mean, man? The boy was killed - I'm not a child. I think I can take it, you know. Please tell me how my son died.

RALPH *after a pause* The Lieutenant didn't die of battle wounds, sir. He never saw action, sir. After several months of training in England - I can't tell you where, sir - we was shipped out. Long, hot journey. We carried out more manoeuvres for four weeks. Then the Lieutenant was taken sick. Malaria. Then we was called back. On the boat, conditions was pretty bad. A lot of the wounded didn't make it. The Lieutenant tried to hold on - he fought like a good 'un. ... The medal ... well, it's just a campaign medal. He was a fine lieutenant, sir.....

Extract from: PRODUCTION NOTES + TECHNICAL CUES, ETC.

INTRODUCTION: THEMES, THE PLAY'S INTENTIONS

The play focuses on one father who, having lost his wife, is bringing up his boys on his own. We never meet Willie, but the play begins with the small town excited and wanting to boost morale by welcoming the boy home on leave. He had been one of the first to sign up. Unfortunately, on the way home for leave Willie died of malaria. He had never fired a shot. Ralph Brookes, serving with him, was with him when he died and tells Willie's father about his last hours. Mr Ralley, Willie's father, finds it difficult to accept the pointlessness of this death. From this moment begins his disenchantment with the war effort.

Jimmy's journey is somewhat different. As the younger son, he had hero-worshipped his elder brother and is determined to do his bit as soon as he is eighteen. Initially knocked sideways by the news of his brother's death, he becomes more determined than ever to redeem his brother's memory by fighting, as it were, for him. It is not for nothing that he is called Little Jimmy by everyone and this nickname is dropped as we see the boy grow up.

So Mr Ralley's journey is an increasing disillusion with the war and a sinking into a hermit-like existence as he loses, in the end, both boys to death. Jimmy's journey is through a youthful idealism to an adult acceptance that Hitler will not be beaten by ducking out.

Mr Ralley's friend, the Mayor, helps finally the grieving father to reach acceptance and pride in both his sons' good intentions.

The style is naturalistic. It focuses on characters rather than larger themes. Acceptance of the necessity of the war appears to be the message, played out through the character of Mr Ralley.

There is light relief in the middle of the play with a drunken scene in which Jimmy is introduced to strong drink for the first time. The mayhem of the scene serves to balance the play, as well as giving a contrasting mood for actors to develop their characterisations further.

CHARACTERS

MR RALLEY: Early fifties. He is the old-fashioned stiff upper-lip father. He has brought his boys up to do the right thing and is proud that Willie has gone to war. The cracks in this veneer spread from the needlessness of Willie's death, of malaria without even firing a shot against the enemy. He becomes fixated with the idea of protecting his one remaining son, Jimmy, encouraging him to work on a farm rather than sign up. Jimmy disobeys him and joins up anyway. He is killed. Mr Ralley retreats further into his bitterness, even losing the ability to walk so that he does not have to face a world he has rejected.

There is emotional depth to the character and a good range of different emotions from anger to grief. Long speeches will have to be carefully paced and handled.

JIMMY: seventeen years old. Grows up in front of us from the eager youngster of the first scene to the responsible young man who defies his father - kindly but firmly near the end.

Again, there is a wide range of emotions to cope with. The drunken scene adds another skill for the actor. The scene must be handled carefully and not overplayed by becoming over-the-top.

RALPH BROOKES: early twenties, a young Corporal. He has the sensitivity to respect Mr Ralley's wish to know the real story of his son's death. However, drink appears to give him a licence to show another side to his character. He makes free with Mr Ralley's whisky, with the encouragement of the Mayor. Perhaps this is the clue. It is hard to see the respectful young man of the early scenes as the drunk lad of the middle scene - probably the most challenging thing for the actor to cope with. He could be played in this scene as fizzing with the relief at having survived the bombing and the war so far, or he could be played as irresponsible, the drink losing the respectfulness of the earlier scenes.

Ralph needs an accent of some kind, to contrast with the middle class voices of the other characters.

THE MAYOR: early fifties - the same kind of age as Mr Ralley, his friend. He is a bluff, hearty man, full of enthusiasm. However, he has the sensitivity to cope well with Willie's death and to understand Mr Ralley's grief at the end, though he sets himself to try and jolt him out of it.

He should act as a good contrast to the others, since he can be played as a larger than life kind of character with a booming voice and expansive, energetic movements.

SETTING

A single set is required. It is a naturalistic play and I am sure that the writer saw a complete room in his mind, with all the furnishings indicated in the script. This may not be possible, however, if you have many groups performing and using different scripts and settings. For this reason, I have indicated in the Page by Page notes at the end, how the drunken scene can be altered to exclude such as the piano [and the dog!].

The scene could then be performed with the following minimal furnishings, indicating a middle-class room in the second-world war period. If possible, it would help to have a door leading off, adding reality - though even this could be eliminated, to use simply a delineated exit which the audience will understand leads to the hallway [and the dining-room on the other side of the hall.]

Desk [small table type] and chair

Couple of comfortable chairs - armchairs ideal [leather even more ideal - to suggest a comfortable but masculine study.]

A window [this could be hung as a single item, for instance, against the back tabs] with blackout - a blind of black material to pull down over the window and curtains to draw across. Just curtains would do.

A low cupboard as drinks cabinet - glasses and whisky inside it - keyhole on the door. The cupboard needs to be easily altered, so that the door is either completely off, or hangs loose, clearly broken after the explosion

large old-fashioned [WW2] wireless, perhaps on top of drinks cabinet.

piano [optional - see page by page notes]

The room would be given warmth if a coloured old-fashioned style rug covered much of the forestage.....