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Silent Night

A play

Colin and Mary Crowther

Samuel French — London
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CHARACTERS

Rose, 45, brusque, fretful

Wilfred, 50, worn, thoughtful

Lily, 20, fiery, spirited

Jack, 16, impressionable, confused

Peter, 50-plus, affable, firm

The action takes place in an Anderson shelter in a suburban garden

Time— Winter, 1940

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(See also page ii)

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PRODUCTION NOTES

The events in the play actually happened in the garden of a house which we once owned and were narrated to us by the man who lived next door to the family involved. Only the characters and dialogue have been invented.

The playing time is just 45 minutes, which shows how fast-moving it should be.

Despite being set in the war, it is easy to dress and stage. We believe its theme will speak to everyone's experience of the minor irritations and major niggles of living with one's family and its comic tone stops the whole thing getting too serious, whilst at the same time giving the audience something to think about on the way home.

Setting

UL we see an Anderson shelter, occupying about one third of the stage area. This can be presented as simply or elaborately as you wish. All that is necessary is that we see the back wall and a small side wall with a doorway in it, hung with blackout curtains.

There is a gap, C, allowing movement from one garden to the next, then a small section of picket fence to DR separating the two gardens. Just by the gap is a tin dustbin, its lid on the ground. The fence and bin lid are covered in snow. Inside the bin is a granite paving sett. (These days you can get them from any garden centre, for decorating your borders. In those days, they were still being used to cobble most road surfaces). At the back of the stage another length of decrepit fencing masks the base of the cyc, if necessary.

Inside the shelter, along the back wall, is a small bookcase, with a few games and books, an old cake tin, a tea caddy and a lantern or oil lamp. Next to this is a narrow bed. Bookcase and bed should look homemade, rough and old. Gasmasks in square cardboard boxes hang from a hook. There is an old gazunder beneath the bed.

Below the bookcase, to the front of the shelter, is an old striped deck-chair, with a footstool upstage of it. To the L end of the shelter, below

the bed, is a small armchair or perhaps a Lloyd loom chair. Between the chairs stands a candle on a tin saucer, resting on a wooden packing case. There should be a box of matches by each light source, but both should be battery-operated for safety.

The shelter, like so many by this time, would be ankle-deep in water by morning and everyone avoids the walls, which are glistening with damp in places. It is a cold, dank place to spend any night, let alone one in winter. (To suggest the water, you could use a 3" high length of black wood to lie across the downstage and L sides of the shelter, so the soles of their shoes are not visible. If the audience will be able to see into the shelter from above, cover the floor with thick black plastic).

Wardrobe

Three characters are dressed in their night clothes. Wilf and Jack are in striped pyjamas and woollen dressing gowns and Rose is in a long, plain cotton nightdress and a candlewick dressing gown, with an old mackintosh over that. All three wear Wellington boots. Their clothes look crumpled, the men's hair tousled, Rose's in a knitted hat. They have clearly been woken up in the middle of the night and were more concerned for their safety than their appearance. The exception, in this as in everything, is Lily. She is dressed up to the nines, having only just come back from a night out. She wears a warm overcoat over her best dress. She wears full make-up, including deep red lipstick. Unwisely, she is still wearing court shoes. Obviously, she cannot afford stockings. (For Peter, see p.35)

Lighting

Lighting can be as simple or complex as you wish. Clearly separate the cold, dark area outside from the warm glow inside. You can recreate the air-raid on the cyc, but all that is necessary is a dull red glow, with one almighty flash, the glow fading as the night goes on. It should get noticeably darker just before dawn. When the lamp fails, do not be afraid of a very low level of light inside the shelter. At the end of the carol, an overhead pin-spot is needed to create the effect of a strange bright light, shining through a hole in the shelter's roof, as dawn comes up on the cyc.

Colin and Mary Crowther

To Jim for the story,
to Frank for his help with research,
and to that whole brave generation for teaching
us to stand up to a bully, whatever the cost.

Other plays by Colin and Mary Crowther
published by Samuel French Ltd:

Calling

Footprints in the Sand (Colin Crowther)

Just Passing

Noah's Ark (for children)

Reflections

Till We Meet Again

Tryst (Colin Crowther)

An Untimely Frost (formerly The Lost Garden)

SILENT NIGHT

A garden. Christmas Eve, 1940

The House Lights dim. Through the silence moans the wail of an air-raid siren. The curtain rises swiftly to reveal the garden on a cold, clear, winter night. Snow clings to a stretch of ancient picket fence, running from C to DR and fills the lid of a tin dustbin standing next to the bin by a narrow gap between the fence and an Anderson shelter, which occupies the entire space from just R of C to UC to UL, to far LC. For full details of the set, see Production Notes. Distant fires burn fiercely on the horizon

Wilf, Rose and Jack huddle, DLC, frozen like rabbits in head lights, on their way to the shelter

Wilf Wait. Wait for it.

Rose Jack, hold my hand.

Jack I'm not a child!

Wilf Steady. Run!

Wilf sets off at a run, crouched double, for the shelter

Jack Where's Lil'?

Rose Run, your dad said.

Jack She's not in her room.

Rose Nearly midnight and still not home! Just wait till I see her!

Rose and Jack run at a crouch to follow him, loaded down with paraphernalia. Rose carries her knitting bag, stuffed with all sorts. In her hands she carries two old knitted blankets and two old cushions.

Jack struggles with an old school satchel over his shoulder and two blankets and a pillow in his arms. When Jack reaches the middle of the garden, he pulls back. Rose sees the dustbin, its lid lying on the ground and full of snow

Jack We can't go without her!

Wilf Hurry up, you two — and bring that torch!

Rose Will you look at this? What have I told you? When you take out the rubbish, put the lid back on.

Jack There was no rubbish.

Rose You could still have put the lid back. Look at it! Full of snow!

Wilf Where's that torch?

Rose Jack! Torch!

Jack retrieves a torch from his satchel and passes it to Rose who runs to Wilf. Jack looks back at the house, assumed to be out over the auditorium, scanning it up and down for any sign of Lily. Wilf is largely unseen behind the edge of the shelter

Rose What's wrong?

Wilf Stuck, that's all.

Jack (*whispering loudly*) Lil'! Lily!

Rose Why you fastened it I don't know. No one's going to steal it.

Wilf I didn't want your hens getting in.

Rose They've more sense. Oh, give it to me.

Wilf Got it. (*He peers into the shelter through the blackout curtains*)

Rose Jack! Jack, get in here, now!

Jack runs over and is immediately arrested by the sight of distant fires. He remains URC, watching the horizon

Jack Wow!

Rose What's that smell?

Wilf Your bloody chickens!

Jack Ka-pow!

Wilf pushes his way, gingerly, through the blackout curtains, then wades across to the bookshelf where he attempts to light the lamp

Rose How deep's the water?

Wilf Three inches.

Rose Oh, good. Soon be having a bath in it!

Rose enters the shelter gingerly

Jack City centre, Dad. It's on fire!

Rose Has been all day.

Wilf These matches are damp.

Rose Oh, let me.

Wilf Miracle if there's anything left standing.

Rose lights the lamp, but the inside of the shelter looks even worse now

Rose Home sweet home!

Rose immediately begins making the place more homely, spreading her knitted blankets over the armchair and the deckchair and placing a cushion on each

Wilf I've told you before. I'm no builder.

Rose No, you're an engineer. So you should have known better how to hammer in screws.

Wilf Bolts.

Rose Same thing.

Wilf Not a bit like. I cut the tools that cut the metal into caterpillar treads for tanks. Precision tools. I do not churn out bolts and I certainly don't hammer the beggars in!

Rose Language. Where's Jack?

Jack (*imagining he controls an anti-aircraft battery*) Yack-yack, yack-yack, yack!

Rose hangs her knitting bag on the downstage back of the armchair then leaves the shelter. Wilf takes this opportunity to crouch down and

open the cake tin. He takes a revolver, wrapped in a duster, out of his pocket and slips it into the tin

Rose That's next door's garden you're standing in!

Jack So are you!

Rose Can I help it if your father put the door on the wrong side?

Wilf I've told you —

Rose *(to Wilf)* Save it for the angels. *(To Jack)* Inside.

Jack *(pointing DR to the house next door)* But, Mum, what about Auntie Enid, Uncle Peter? Margaret?

Rose Under their kitchen table. More fool them. And for the last time, we're not related.

Jack They're neighbours.

Rose Neighbours, not family.

Jack Next door neighbours.

Rose Wilf!

Wilf emerges from the shelter

Wilf Do as your mother says.

Rose Where are you off to?

Wilf I need to go.

Rose Should have thought of that before. Use the gazunder.

Wilf Oh, Rose!

Wilf returns to the shelter. Rose takes the blankets and pillow from Jack and passes them to Wilf who makes up the bed. Rose lights the candle and pulls out her knitting. Jack starts to follow

Outside, there is a muffled curse and a dishevelled Lily staggers on, CR

Lily Damn! I swear I'm going to chop that holly bush down in the morning.

Jack runs towards her

Jack Lil'!

Lily I've told you — don't call me that!

Jack Sorry, Sis.

Lily Or that. If that damned bush has snagged my dress, I shall personally —

Jack Where've you been?

Lily If I told you, I'd have to kill you. In fact, I just might anyway.

The dull throb of low-flying enemy aircraft approaching

Jack (*laughing*) With that Billy? What d'you see in him?

Lily Wish I could remember ...

Jack Jerry's coming this way now! See that? *Messerchmidt!* They ride shotgun. Then come the *Junkers*, with all the bombs on board!

Wilf rises, selects a book from the shelves then returns to bed. He switches off the torch but keeps it with him

Lily Oy, Jerry! You're going the wrong way!

Wilf She's back!

Rose comes out into the garden

Rose Will you hush!

They all duck as the plane flies over. Lily is first to rise. Jack mimes drawing a gun, cowboy style and takes aim

Jack Bang, bang. You're dead!

Rose In — now!

Jack Ah, Mum!

Jack enters the shelter and puts his satchel on the bookshelves before crossing to sit in the armchair

Wilf Son.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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