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CONCORD
THEATRICALS

LIFEBOAT

by Nicola McCartney

SAMUEL FRENCH

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LIFEBOAT was first produced by the Catherine Wheels Theatre Company on 6th May 2002, Brunton Theatre Musselburgh, The performance was directed by Gill Robertson, Composer, David Trouton, Lighting Designer, Jeanine Davies, Designer, Karen Tennent, Costume Designer, Karen Tennent. The cast was as follows:

BESS WALDER. . . . . Suzanne Robertson
BETH CUMMINGS . . . . . Gemma Burns

CHARACTERS

BESS WALDER – from London, 15 years old
BETH CUMMINGS – from Liverpool, 14 years old
Various other parts played by the cast

SETTING

An upturned lifeboat in the North Atlantic

TIME

September 1940.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

In 2001, Gill Robertson, Artistic Director of Catherine Wheels Theatre Company, one of Europe's leading children's theatre companies, read an article in a newspaper about the sinking of the City of Benares, one of the biggest tragedies involving children of the Second World War. The article was an interview with Bess Cummings (née Walder) who was one of the last survivors of the sinking of the SS City of Benares, which was torpedoed by a U-Boat in 1940 with 400 passengers and crew onboard, including 90 children. She had set sail with her younger brother, Louis, and other child evacuees from cities all over war-torn Britain to safety in Canada as part of a Children's Overseas Reception Board mission. After being commissioned to write the script, Gill and I visited Bess at her home in Bishops Cleeve, Gloucestershire and spent a few days with her recording her extraordinary story. This was, for me, the beginning of a friendship with the formidable yet inspirational Bess, for which I am hugely grateful. This friendship lasted until her death in 2010. You can read all about Bess's life online in several obituaries and on The Imperial War Museum website.

Lifeboat, at this point in time, has been performed over 600 times across the world in its award-winning original production by Catherine Wheels, but also in a range of languages and other productions globally. Bess intended her story, and this play, to be an inspiration to young people of the power of friendship, of family, and of, simply hanging on even in the darkest of times.

Nicola McCartney, 2020

Dedicated to the memory of Bess Cummings (nee Walder) 1924-2010, her friend, Beth Cummings, and to the memory of all those children who died when The City of Benares sunk in September 1940.

1.

Night. The Lifeboat. The sea is rough and stormy. Both girls cling to the keel of the upturned lifeboat. **BETH** *is injured and starts moaning.*

BESS AND BETH There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home…

BESS Mustn't let go. Mustn't. Need to tell… mustn't… I need to get home. Need to tell them what happened… Hang on.

BETH Who's there?

BESS What happened…? We were asleep, in our cabins, safe and sound.

I was dreaming… about Canada… about Hollywood… about… Bang!

BETH A torpoedo… "Abandon ship!"

BESS Abandon ship! Running – run!

BETH Walk! Don't run…

BESS …To the lifeboats and…

BETH A man. A Sinbad the Sailor man, picked me up and threw me into a boat. Me and some other children, beside Mrs Jewelled Hands and Mr Dinner Jacket and two Sinbad the Sailors.

BESS I was looking all over. I couldn't find him. My brother, where's my brother? I couldn't see.

BETH Down down down too fast we're going too…

BESS Where's Lou? I lost Lou…

BETH The boat goes splash! Slop slop waves are slopping over the side of the lifeboat.

BESS Slopping onto my feet.

BETH My feet are wet.

BESS The lifeboat is filling up with water.

BETH We're sinking...

BESS We're not supposed to sink. We're supposed to be safe in the lifeboat.

BETH A huge wave picks us up, picks the lifeboat up up up and turns us upside down.

BESS Now.

BETH Now. We're hanging on.

BESS Hanging on to the downside of the lifeboat.

BETH I'm cold, wet...

BESS Scared.

BETH Freezing.

BESS Not scared... got to be brave. Got to tell mum and dad what happened to my little brother Lou.

BETH Bess!

BESS I said I'd look after him... I promised

BETH Bess... Bess Walder?

BESS Beth? Beth Cummings?

BETH Yes... Don't talk Bess. You're hurt.

BESS I need to tell them what happened.

BETH No. You need to hang on. We're going to be rescued. Look, Bess – a rope. Hang onto the rope.

BESS Yes.

BETH We will be rescued. Won't we Bess...? Bess?

BESS Of course we will. The Navy will rescue us. The ships are on their way. Hang on.

BETH We'll hang on.

BESS Yes... Got to tell. Tell Mum and Dad.

BETH Tell Mum.

BESS What happened.

BETH What happened.

BESS The Germans.

BETH The Jerries got us. Sunk our beautiful ship.

BESS They got Lou.

BETH There's no place like home.

BESS There's no place like home.

BETH AND BESS *(together)* There's no place like home...

*Music plays on the radio**.

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2.

Home 1939.

BETH Nineteen thirty nine – four months before the Second World War will start.

BESS Home. My home. Number forty four Rhyl Street, Kentish Town, London.

BETH Home. My home. Orrell Park, the City of Liverpool.

BESS It's a high, high, high, high house. Up the stairs – up past the parlour where Dad's not-allowed-to-touch radio is – past the inside-not-outside bathroom past mine, my very own room, my Lou's-not-allowed-to-touch room because I'm fourteen and I'm the eldest.

BETH And since I'm thirteen and the youngest, I have to share a room with Mum. A lot of people live in my house. There's my Grandma and Grandad, my big brother Geoff who's kind of the leader of the gang and my brother Doug.

BESS I go up and up right to the top... You can see for miles and miles... You can see all over London... I sit up here and wait for the postman. One day that letter's gonna come, "Dear Miss Walder, the Warner Brothers are proud to invite you to appear in their new motion picture..."

DAD Bess! Bess!

BESS My Dad...

BETH Come downstairs this minute!

BESS Dad says I'm "melodramatic" – that means I always exaggerate. But I love my Dad. He lost his finger when a German shot it off in the First World War. He's very brave. Sometimes he sings us songs from the war, from when he was a solider – they're a bit rude!

BESS *joins in with the song.*

DAD *(sings to the tune of What a Friend We have in Jesus)*

WHEN THIS LOUSY WAR IS OVER NO MORE SOLDIERING FOR ME,
WHEN I GET MY CIVVY CLOTHES ON, OH HOW HAPPY I SHALL BE.
NO MORE CHURCH PARADES ON SUNDAY, NO MORE BEGGING FOR A PASS.
YOU CAN TELL THE SERGEANT-MAJOR TO STICK HIS PASSES UP HIS ...

BESS *stops* **DAD.**

BESS *joins in.*

PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES IN YOUR OLD KIT BAG AND SMILE SMILE SMILE
IF YOU'VE A LUCIFER TO LIGHT YOUR FAG
SMILE BOYS THAT'S THE STYLE!
WHAT'S THE USE OF WORRYING
IT NEVER WAS WORTHWHILE
SO!
PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES IN YOUR OLD KIT BAG
AND SMILE SMILE SMILE!

BESS My Dad is a lot of fun.

BETH Yes he is. I don't have a Dad. He died when I was four.

BESS I'm sorry.

BETH But my Mum is lots of fun. She's my best friend my mum.

BETH'S MUM Right, girl. Get your coat on.

BETH Where are we going Mum?

BETH'S MUM Pictures.

BETH Yes!

BETH'S MUM Just you and me, eh?

BETH *and her* **MUM** *skip like Dorothy towards the cinema.*

BETH I love being alone with Mum because most times she's working or looking after Gran and Grandad and all her brothers and sisters. My mum works hard. She says:

BETH'S MUM You're not going to suffer just cos you've got no father. I'll see to that. Want an ice cream, darling?

BESS Yes please. I love my mum... The film is... amazing... It starts all grey and black and white – Dorothy – that's the hero – goes to save her little dog from the wicked schoolteacher.

BETH'S MUM Beth. Where's your hankie? You've got ice cream all around your mouth.

BETH I forgot it.

BETH'S MUM A real lady, should always carry a handkerchief.

BETH Yes Mum.

BETH'S MUM A real lady, should always carry her lipstick in her handbag... Hey, maybe we'll get fish and chips on the way home, eh?

BETH And then a big twister of a storm picks up her house and spins it way up in to the air with her inside it and it lands in the merry old land of Oz.

BETH'S MUM Sssh!

BETH And suddenly the film goes all technicolor... And Dorothy's walking through the scary forest with her friends, the Tin Man and the Scarecrow... lions and tigers and bears, oh my!

BETH'S MUM Beth, it's starting.

BETH Sorry, Mum... *(whispers)* And I'm skipping a bit, but then she gets these ruby slippers and has to click the heels together three times and say "There's no place like home."

Dorothy, the heroine is played by Judy Garland – boy, can she sing. I want to be a singer one day.

BESS I want to be an actress one day. And one day – one day I'll be in a technicolour movie. One day... And I can tell you something, I'm a far better actress than Judy Garland...

DAD Bess! Lou! Now, I've got a challenge for you two today. To make you more independent. Bess, you listening?

BESS Yes, Dad.

DAD You see where we are – Piccadilly Circus? You saw the way we got here. Now I want you to find your own way home. Lou, you behave yourself... Bess, I want you to look after that young man.

BESS Yes, Dad.

Are you sure you'll be all right?

BESS Of course, Dad.

DAD Good girl You're an adventurer, Bess!

BESS I'm an adventurer... I've travelled through London single-handed and now – the world! I want to go to Canada. My teacher says there are prairies and lakes and mountains and horses in Canada –

A song in the style of Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters' **["DON'T FENCE ME IN"]** *plays.*[*]

I want to gallop along the prairie on a big black stallion. *(Writes)* Dear Canadian Travel and Tourism Department, Piccadilly Circus, London.

Bess's mum starts hanging out the laundry.

MUM What are you doing, darling?

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BESS Nothing, Mum... My mum. The thing about my mum is, she always knows if you're telling fibs... *(To* **MUM***)* Writing a letter.

MUM To who?

BESS I'm going to Canada.

MUM Really? How will you get there?

BESS By ship, of course.

MUM And leave me and dad and Louis behind?

BESS It's just a holiday.

MUM No one goes that far away just for a holiday.

BESS Well, I am. I'm going to get a job singing. In a night club. In London. And I'll save up the money I earn and buy my ticket.

MUM You have it all worked out haven't you?

BESS It's a good plan, isn't it, Mum?

MUM Yes, I suppose it is. Only one problem, though.

BESS What?

MUM You're staying in school! Goodness me, Bess you are a dreamer.

BESS I'm not a dreamer. I will get to Canada – one day, I will!

BETH I'm not a dreamer. I don't want to go anywhere. I want to stay right here with my mum and my two big brothers Geoff and Doug. My brother Geoff is the oldest. He's very handsome.

GEOFF Hey, kid.

BETH Hey Geoff... All the girls fancy Geoff. He is the leader of the gang. Him and his mates all have bicycles and they cycle all over the country.

GEOFF Hey, Kid. You going down the shop?

BETH Yeah.

GEOFF Here you are. Get yourself some pop and a bag of crisps, eh?

He flips her a coin.

BETH Thanks Geoff. *(To audience)* My brother Geoff looks after me. He works so he always has plenty of money for pop and crisps. My mum says he'll make a good catch for a woman one day. But my brother Doug, he's—

DOUG *jumps out at* **BETH**, *pretending to be a ghost.*

DOUG Whoo-ooh!

BETH Doug! You scared me half to death!

DOUG Your face! You want to have seen it.

BETH My brother Doug is very annoying!!

BESS *switches on the radio – popular music plays**.

BESS Mum and Dad are out. When Mum and Dad go out, I listen to the not-allowed-to-touch-it radio. The top twenty – Al Bowly, Geraldo and his Orchestra, Vera Lynn. I have to listen in secret. My Dad hates popular music... *(Fantasy)* Ladies and Gentlemen... Tonight, live from Carnegie Hall, we are proud to present, the delectable, the delightful...

LOUIS, *dressed as a cowboy, and shooting his guns.*

LOUIS Yee-hah! *(Coughs)*

BESS Lou – my little brother. He's very annoying. And he's *always* sick.

To **LOUIS**.

Shut up and go back to bed!

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LOUIS Are you talkin' to me, boy?

BESS You're supposed to be resting.

LOUIS "Said, no low down dirty varmint's gonna look at me that way, Boy... Bang!" ...Awhhh! You touched the radio. I'm telling Dad! *(Coughs)*

BESS I'm allowed.

LOUIS No you're not.

BESS Go away!

LOUIS Bossy boots!

BESS Mummy's boy!

LOUIS Well, I'm telling Dad!

BESS *(to* **LOU***)* Well, I'll tell Mum you got out of bed.

LOUIS Well, I'll tell Dad that you slapped me!

BESS I did not!

LOUIS I know... but I'll tell him that you did.

BESS You little...!

LOUIS Leave me alone! I'm sick. *(Coughs)*

LOUIS *has a real coughing fit.*

BESS Lou...? Take deep breaths. Deep like this... See? All better now.

LOUIS *nods. She puts her arm around him.*

My brother Lou is very annoying... but I love him. *(To* **LOUIS***)*

(fantasy) Star of over fifty best-selling movies, voice of over twenty top ten hits... Please welcome, the delectable, the delightful, the sensational Bess Walder!

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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