

Acting Edition

Decision Height

by Meredith Dayna Levy

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|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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DECISION HEIGHT was first produced by Hollins University and the Hollins Playwright’s Lab, and subsequently performed at Mill Mountain Theatre’s Trinkle Stage in Roanoke, Virginia on January 24, 2014. The performance was directed by Ernest Zulia and the cast was as follows:

EDITH “EDDIE” HARKNELL Susanna Young
NORMA JEAN HARRIS Emma Sperka
ROSALIE HARTSON Natalie Pendergast
VIRGINIA HASCALL Russell Wilson
ALICE HAWKINS Jeanette Florio
CAROL HENDERSON Aileen Buckland
MRS. DEATON Kate Dalton
ZIGGIE LEWIS Bonnie Branch
MILDRED SIMMONS Maggie Dwyer
ENSEMBLE Elizabeth Hedrick, Hallie Goldberg, Cheyenne Lee
Sara Peterson, Kara Wright

The production received multiple honors from the 2014 Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, including the Harold and Mimi Steinbeg National Student Playwriting Award, Outstanding Production of a New Work, Distinguished Achievement in Direction of a New Work, and Distinguished Ensemble Achievement. Additional honors from the 2013 Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival include the David Shelton Full-Length Play Award and the National Partners of the American Theatre Playwriting Award.

CHARACTERS

(all female cast; listed in order of appearance)

VIRGINIA HASCALL – early 20's. The empathetic observer.

EDITH "EDDIE" HARKNELL – mid 20's. The blunt and quick witted
"hot pilot."

NORMA JEAN HARRIS – late 20's. The confident teacher.

ROSALIE HARTSON – late teens/early 20's. The brave dreamer.

ALICE HAWKINS – late 20's. The cool intellect.

CAROL HENDERSON – late teens/early 20's. The brazen and earnest
runt of the litter.

MRS. DEATON – late 30's/early 40's. The government-employed den
mother.

ZIGGIE LEWIS – early to mid 40's. A rare woman indeed.

MILDRED SIMMONS – late 20's. A woman of few loyalties.

ENSEMBLE MEMBERS – (optional; see production notes)

SETTING

Various locations at Avenger Field, the Women Airforce Service Pilots training base, in Sweetwater, TX, including: the bay, the wishing well, the drill field, the hangar, the runway, ready room, and the class room.

TIME

November 1943 through May 1944

PRODUCTION NOTES

On "flight positions":

This script specifies that the women will occasionally "move to a flight position." This can be something as simple as a specifically lit spot on the floor. What's important is that the positions be decidedly different than other moments of standing.

On race:

Due to the climate of racism in America at this time, there was only one Chinese-American WASP. Each production should use their best judgement when colorblind casting.

On the deaths:

Mildred, Ziggie, and Norma Jean all die “in the air” so to speak. The playwright suggests a convention where the women cringe as lights flash or go out. But, there’s more than one way to skin a cat.

On the radio broadcasts:

There is a radio broadcast heard in scene fourteen, specific portions of which are written in the script; the places where the women begin their commentary are indicated by a “*”. They should finish their lines sequences before the next marked radio line. The link for the actual 26 March CBS World News Today broadcast (which the playwright hopes to be used in production) can be reached at this URL: (<http://ia701203.us.archive.org/16/items/1944RadioNews/1944-03-26-CBSWorld-News-Today.mp3>). It is part of an archive that the playwright recommends for other radio sound effects, and can be found at this URL: (<http://archive.org/details/1944RadioNews>).

On the optional “Ensemble”:

Past productions which have included an ensemble primarily used them to sing marching songs, aid in scene transitions, and participate in large group scenes. At the back of the script is an appendix which includes three “new” marching songs that should be used at specific transitions, should an ensemble be employed, as well as a list of recommended scenes that ensemble members might participate in.

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TIMELINE

November 1943

Week One – Scene 1, 2

Week Two – Scene 3

Week Three – Scene 4, 5

December 1943

Week Five – Scene 6

Week Seven/Eight – Scene 7

31 December – Scene 8

January – February 1944

1 January – Scene 9

Weeks Eleven–Thirteen – Scene 10

February 1944

Week Fifteen – Scene 11

March 1944

Week Seventeen – Scene 12, 13

26 March – Scene 14, 15

April 1944

Scene 16

May 1944

Last week before graduation – Scene 17, 18

Graduation Day – Scene 19, 20

You can read a lot of documents about history, but it really doesn't have the impact that the theater has because it is a vicarious experience. You are inviting the audience to experience it with you. You experience it with the spirit as well as the intellect...If a story gets told really good, it becomes your story, your experience.

– Daystar/Rosalie Jones

To fly...permanently changed one's sense of space and one's concept of what the world looks like-not only an aesthetic experience, flight was an expression of independence and free will, a triumph over the eternal static hold of Gravity

– Sally VanWagenen Keil

ACT ONE

Scene One

(We are at the wishing well, at the center of Avenger Field's campus, in Sweetwater, Texas. In history, the "wishing well" was a fountain, twenty feet in diameter and three feet tall; the walls were made of field stone.)

(Lights reveal the incoming class of 44-W-4, including VIRGINIA, EDDIE, NORMA JEAN, ROSALIE, ALICE, and CAROL, in a tableau of arrival. VIRGINIA stands separate.)

(With the entrance of MRS. DEATON, the scene comes to life, and MRS. DEATON must fight to be heard over their excited chatter.)

MRS. DEATON. Excuse me? Quiet please. May we have some quiet, please! Ladies, if you want to see the inside of a run room, and not the inside of a train car bound for home, you'll have to zip your lips!

VIRGINIA. *(addressing the audience)*

My Dearest William,

Please, do not be angry with me. When we last talked you said you would accept my leaving, if my father did, and you knew as well as I he never would. He is a pacifist.

MRS. DEATON. Since there is only one foot locker per girl in each bay, you will be allowed to store surplus baggage here in the office until arrangements are made to ship it home.

VIRGINIA. But darnning socks does nothing to stop Hitler, nor will sewing patchwork quilts prevent Pearl Harbor from happening somewhere else.

MRS. DEATON. Large musical instruments and golf clubs might not be appropriate, under the circumstances.

VIRGINIA. I am capable of doing more because Jackie Cochran, the most famous woman pilot in the world, sent *me* a letter, saying a student's pilot license is all they need now.

MRS. DEATON. Welcome to Avenger Fields, home of the Women Airforce Service Pilot training program.

VIRGINIA. I can ferry planes to bases, I can test engines and tow gunning targets; I can take the place of a man, which makes him free to be over there. And the more men we have fighting, the sooner the war will end.

MRS. DEATON. The mess hall is that large building over there, the classrooms are in that direction, the flight line, ready rooms and hangars are that way. All of your bays are behind me.

VIRGINIA. I know you would join up, if they would let you.

MRS. DEATON. You'll never be lost if you can find your way back here: this fountain sits in the center of campus.

VIRGINIA. But it is not your fault that your eyes cannot see colors right.

MRS. DEATON. Most of the girls refer to it as "the wishing well" and will toss coins in before their check rides from time-to-time.

VIRGINIA. Do not give any mind to those who taunt you. I know their words sting, but they cannot know that the work you do every day is keeping their sons and husbands fed.

MRS. DEATON. I feel it is my duty to warn you now that it will take a lot more than a wish and a few pennies to graduate a WASP.

VIRGINIA. You have your work, and now I have mine. We must remain strong.

MRS. DEATON. Bays are assigned in alphabetical order...

VIRGINIA. Because I love you, madly, but we have the rest of our lives to play house, right?

MRS. DEATON. ...so listen for your bay number *please!*

VIRGINIA. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.

MRS. DEATON. Edith Harknell...

EDDIE. Eddie! Eddie Harknell! Edith is my grandmother.

VIRGINIA. I cannot imagine a future without you in it.

MRS. DEATON. Norma Jean Harris...

NORMA JEAN. (*in a high-class Carolinian drawl*) Present and accounted for.

VIRGINIA. Love you always...

MRS. DEATON. Rosalie Hartson

ROSALIE. Did she say Hartson? Oh Lord, that's me!

VIRGINIA. Your Virginia.

MRS. DEATON. Virginia Hascall...

VIRGINIA. (*joining the scene*) Here!

MRS. DEATON. Alice Hawkins...

ALICE. Present, ma'am.

MRS. DEATON. Carol Henderson.

CAROL. That's me! That's me!

MRS. DEATON. All of you, bay seventeen!

(Lights. The WOMEN search for their bay: six cots, and six foot lookers.)

EDDIE. Bay ten, bay eleven...dang it, how'd we get to bay five?!

NORMA JEAN. How you got to be a pilot, I only can guess.

CAROL. I see it! I see it! We're all the way at the end.

ALICE. That says twenty-seven, not seventeen. I think you need glasses, hon.

CAROL. They're packed. I was afraid they wouldn't let me in if they knew I had them.

EDDIE. (*to NORMA JEAN*) See, and you think I'm bad pilot material...

ALICE. You should wear them. We don't want you to trip over a rattlesnake because you couldn't see it.

ROSALIE & VIRGINIA. There are rattlesnakes here?

CAROL. Every poisonous species that lives in the US you can find in Texas.

NORMA JEAN. Good Lord.

ALICE. It's the "Rattlesnake Capitol of the World."

EDDIE. And how do you know that?

ROSALIE. Here it is! Bay seventeen.

NORMA JEAN. Thank God. I could go for a nice hot shower...

VIRGINIA. Or a bath.

EDDIE. Sorry to say ladies, but you're not gonna find either of those here.

CAROL. Cot by the window is mine!

NORMA JEAN. Now, just hold on –

EDDIE. (*threatening a punch*) Yeah, Shrimp, 'less you wanna wash out.

(*EDDIE claims the cot by the window. CAROL in turn, claims the cot that NORMA JEAN wanted.*)

NORMA JEAN. Now, wait just a moment! This is my cot.

EDDIE. Shrimp, why don't you take the bed over there, the one that's saggier than all the others.

CAROL. My name is Carol!

EDDIE. You're the smallest, seems to me you've got the best chances of not touching the floor when you sleep.

VIRGINIA. That is not a very nice thing to say.

EDDIE. Army didn't hire us to be nice, Kid.

ROSALIE. (*at the farthest cot from EDDIE*) I think I'll take this one.

NORMA JEAN. This is my cot!

CAROL. No it's not. No it's not.

ALICE. I really think that –

EDDIE. Who died and made you Mama?

ALICE. Hey! Draw cards. The highest card wins.

EDDIE. You see a deck of cards lying around?

(*ALICE pulls a deck out of her pocket or purse.*)

You and I are gonna get along. Aces are low, seem fair?

NORMA JEAN. Should we draw in order of who has the most flight hours?

EDDIE. That would be me.

CAROL. How do you know?

NORMA JEAN. Or should we go alphabetically?

EDDIE. Still me. Queen.

ROSALIE. Respectable.

EDDIE. You wanna draw next?

ROSALIE. Sure. Four. Oh dear, that's bad, isn't it?

CAROL. I'll draw next! I'll draw next! Two.

NORMA JEAN. Serves you right, for making all that noise.
Ace!

ALICE. Six.

VIRGINIA. King?!

EDDIE.

ALICE.

Dang it!

Nice draw, honey.

VIRGINIA. I have never won anything in my whole life.

EDDIE. Congratulations. Pick a cot.

(MRS. DEATON enters. THE SIX scramble to stand at attention.)

(She carries a box of uniforms – or perhaps MILDRED or an ensemble member is carrying them for her.)

MRS. DEATON. Hello girls.

(The WOMEN ad-lib greetings.)

I hope everything is to your liking. If not, tough. The latrine has two showers, two toilets, two sinks. You'll share it with Bay Eighteen next door. Now, all of you are in flight two so you'll go to school first and then fly in the afternoon –

CAROL. Excuse me, Mrs. Deaton, but did you say "school?"

MRS. DEATON. Yes, ground school. Physics, navigation and the like? Didn't think you'd just signed up to play with the planes, did you?

CAROL. No, no ma'am.

MRS. DEATON. I thought not. Curfew is at ten, on the dot.
You can wear any shoes as long as they're not heels
or...

(She eyes CAROL's cowboy boots.)

...cowboy boots. Here are your uniforms. I'm told
the women call the coveralls "zoot suits." Take note
of how the other girls have adjusted them to fit their
petit frames. The flight turbans are an idea by our
own General Urban: to prevent any problems arising
from "bad hair days." My office is in the administration
building down to the right and I live in Officer Barrack
One, if you need to find me.

(The WOMEN ad-lib good-byes as MRS. DEATON exits.)

ROSALIE. Oh dear. They're...

EDDIE. Big.

VIRGINIA. Really big.

CAROL. Way too big.

NORMA JEAN. They were men's suits.

EDDIE. You don't say.

ROSALIE. Ugh, still smells like them too.

NORMA JEAN. Since we've only got a half-an-hour for both
bays to use the latrine in the morning, I think half of
us should shower in the evenings...

(EDDIE stifles a laugh.)

Care to share with the class, Edith?

EDDIE. *(sizing her up)* It's Eddie, and I've got nothing to
say... Ace.

NORMA JEAN. *(exiting)* I'm going to see if the girls in Bay
Eighteen want to work out a time-chart.

ALICE. This will be a very long seven months if you keep
pushing her buttons like that.

EDDIE. That's if she doesn't wash.

ALICE. Or if you don't wash.

EDDIE. I'm not gonna wash.

ROSALIE. I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand...?

EDDIE. Wash out.

CAROL. You mean like, fail? Like...

EDDIE. Like you fail your check rides and they send you home that very minute on your own dime.

CAROL. Damn!

ALICE. (*exiting to latrine*) Carol, you're never going get your wings if you can't keep cool.

CAROL. Keep cool. Like you? I can do that.

EDDIE. Keep cool when it's eighty degrees in November? I'm gonna need some ice cream. Wanna head with me to the mess hall anyone?

ROSALIE. Are you sure? Rations –

EDDIE. Don't apply to the army. Fighting boys get butter, ice cream, and gravy, which means so do we. C'mon.

(**WOMEN** *exit.*)

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