Acting Edition

Dorothy's Dictionary

by E. M. Lewis

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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www.concordtheatricals.com
www.concordtheatricals.co.uk

FOR PRODUCTION INQUIRIES

United States and Canada
info@concordtheatricals.com
1-866-979-0447

United Kingdom and Europe
licensing@concordtheatricals.co.uk
020-7054-7298

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DOROTHY'S DICTIONARY had its world premiere at Theatre Lab (Matt Stabile, Producing Artistic Director; Louis Tyrrell, Founding Director) in Boca Raton, Florida, in 2022. The production was directed by Matt Stabile, with scenic design by Michael McClain, costume design by Dawn C. Shamburger, lighting design by Thomas Shorrock, and sound design by Matt Corey. The properties designer was John Shamburger, the charge artist was Michael McClain, the board operator was Harmon Casey, the electrician was Ashely Hyde, the wardrobe head was Tim Bowman, the stage manager was Rose Figueroa, and the assistant stage manager was Jacob Altman. The cast was as follows:

DOROTHY ROSS . . . . . Karen Stephens
LYZANDER "ZAN" HARDT . . . . . Elijah Moseley

DOROTHY'S DICTIONARY was developed with the support of LineStorm Playwrights, the Fertile Ground Festival, The Public Theater of San Antonio, and Theatre 33 at Willamette University. The play had a developmental workshop at Palm Beach Dramaworks in January 2021, (William Hayes, Producing Artistic Director; Sue Ellen Beryl, Managing Director) and received the Portland Civic Theater Guild New Play Award in 2022.

After regional productions in Colorado, Washington, D.C., Florida, and Oregon, *DOROTHY'S DICTIONARY* made its New York City premiere at A.R.T./New York Theatres on June 13, 2025 as part of the Women in Theater Festival.

CHARACTERS

DOROTHY ROSS – 45, female. A librarian. Smart, tough, big-hearted. Loves books, and helping people find them. She wears thick glasses that no longer help very much in the seeing department.

LYZANDER "ZAN" HARDT – 15, male. A high school student. Smart, angry, headstrong. He was suspended and arrested two weeks ago, after a violent incident.

SETTING

Two spaces – one well-defined and specific, and one soft and amorphous.

The larger space is room 407 at Birchwood Convalescent Home, where Dorothy has been for the last seventeen days. There's a well-worn, handmade quilt on the bed, a flowering plant in the window, and a surprising number of books stacked and scattered around the room. But it's outfitted with a hospital bed with adjustable railings, a rolling bed table, a call button, and a slot at the end of the bed which holds Dorothy's medical chart. The doorway into the room is visible. There's a chair beside the bed. The doorway and window might be free-standing… this isn't a play that needs walls, necessarily.

The other space is defined only by space and light. It contains everything that is outside the time and space of Dorothy's room. Sometimes, it is a place from which Zan speaks to the present and remembers the past. It also becomes the edge of the ocean.

TIME

Present day. Each scene should slide directly into the next.

Like *The Glass Menagerie*, there is a sense that this is a story being told from a certain vantage point, where the narrator is trying to make sense of things, but a feeling during the scenes themselves of it all being present tense.

Chapter One

*(**DOROTHY** sits up in her hospital bed, leaning against the pillows. Voices on the radio beside her bed drone on, maybe from the local jazz station, but she isn't paying attention to them.*)*

(From another place and time, **ZAN** *speaks to the audience.)*

ZAN. This story doesn't start when I get suspended from school for hitting Brandon Beckman seventeen times.

This story doesn't start when I'm arrested right there in the school hallway, and taken down to the police station, and put in a jail cell.

This story doesn't start when I stand in front of a judge – beside my dad, who is really, really angry – and choose community service over juvenile detention.

(Beat.)

This story starts when I step into the doorway of Mrs. Dorothy Ross' room at Birchwood Convalescent Home. She's my community service assignment. The paperwork she's supposed to sign is shoved into my back pocket. I'm angry and scared and I don't want to be there. The whole place smells like bleach and sick people. But I don't have any choice.

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(Beat.)

ZAN. Not everybody can point to the moment their life changed. But I can. This is a story about that.

It has twelve chapters.

(Beat.)

Chapter one.

*(**ZAN** steps into the doorway of Dorothy's room. Into the first moment they met.)*

(He pauses there, not sure if he's in the right place, not sure if he wants to go in. He takes a crumpled paper out of his back pocket, and double checks the room number that's written there in blue ink.)

*(**DOROTHY** looks over at the door.)*

DOROTHY. Who's there?

*(**ZAN** hesitates.)*

I can see that someone's there.

ZAN. Hi.

DOROTHY. Hello.

(A moment.)

Are you coming in?

ZAN. I don't know.

*(After a moment, **ZAN** takes one step into the room. He looks around.)*

DOROTHY. Are you a nurse?

ZAN. No.

DOROTHY. Are you someone's relative?

ZAN. No.

DOROTHY. Are you selling vacuum cleaners?

ZAN. No.

DOROTHY. I can do this all day.

ZAN. They told me I was supposed to come here.

DOROTHY. Who told you?

ZAN. The judge.

(Beat.)

Judge Neilsen.

DOROTHY. Ah.

*(***DOROTHY** *smacks the radio off.)*

ZAN. I'm not doing any medical stuff.

DOROTHY. That's not what you're here for.

(Beat.)

They have medical people to do the "medical stuff."

ZAN. What do you want me to do then?

DOROTHY. The judge didn't say?

*(***ZAN** *shakes his head.)*

You can sit down if you'd like.

ZAN. I don't want to sit down.

*(***ZAN***'s phone buzzes, indicating that he's received a text message, and he looks at it, types something, then puts it back in his pocket.)*

DOROTHY. What did Sal tell you?

ZAN. Sal?

DOROTHY. Judge Neilsen.

ZAN. That I have to do whatever you tell me to for an hour a day after school, three days a week, for three months, and you have to sign my paperwork every time.

DOROTHY. Why were you in Judge Neilsen's court?

ZAN. I don't want to talk about that.

(A moment.)

DOROTHY. You're very young.

ZAN. No, I'm not.

(Beat.)

I'm fifteen.

(Pause.)

You have lots of books.

DOROTHY. I'm a librarian.

(Beat.)

A temporarily displaced librarian.

*(**ZAN**'s phone buzzes in his pocket, and he takes it out and looks at the text message he's received.)*

Stop looking at your phone.

ZAN. I need my phone.

DOROTHY. Not every minute of the day. Do you want to be like Pavlov's dogs?

ZAN. Uh…no?

DOROTHY. Then leave it in your pocket.

ZAN. You want me to just, like, sit here? For an hour?

DOROTHY. I want you to read to me.

ZAN. You got anything else I could do?

DOROTHY. No! No, I do not have anything else you can do! What do you think this is?

ZAN. Slavery, basically.

DOROTHY. *(Sharply.)* You don't have to be here.

ZAN. This or juvie. Were my two choices. Which is, like, no choices.

DOROTHY. You can read, can't you?

ZAN. Yeah, I can read!

DOROTHY. All right.

ZAN. What kind of question is that?

DOROTHY. If you can't read, I'm sending you back.

ZAN. I can read fine.

(Beat.)

I can read okay.

(Beat.)

What do you want me to read?

DOROTHY. Pick something out. There's a stack of books by the window.

*(***ZAN** *goes over to the window, and looks through the books.)*

ZAN. You don't want to read to yourself?

DOROTHY. My eyes aren't very good right now.

*(***ZAN** *picks up a book, then sets it down. He picks up another one, then looks over at* **DOROTHY**.*)*

DOROTHY. What did you pick?

ZAN. *(Looking at the cover.) The Old Man and the Sea.*

DOROTHY. Why that one?

ZAN. It's short.

(Beat.)

It has a boat on the front.

DOROTHY. You like boats?

ZAN. I dunno.

(A moment.)

Should I set a timer on my phone?

DOROTHY. I can see the clock. We'll be done at 4:17.

(A moment.)

You didn't tell me your name.

(A moment.)

ZAN. Zan.

DOROTHY. Your full name.

ZAN. Zan Hardt. With a Z. And a D. Lyzander Hardt.

DOROTHY. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Hardt.

*(***DOROTHY** *extends her hand to shake. And after an awkward moment,* **ZAN** *shakes* **DOROTHY***'s hand.)*

Mrs. Dorothy Ross. You can call me Mrs. Ross.

ZAN. You're a funny lady. Mrs. Ross.

DOROTHY. I'm a troublemaker, actually.

ZAN. Yeah?

DOROTHY. I press the call button too much.

(Pause.)

There are all kinds of prisons.

*(**ZAN** sits down, finally, in the chair next to Dorothy's bed.)*

Go ahead. Start at the beginning. The sun and the sea and the man and his boat…

ZAN. You already read it?

DOROTHY. Oh, yes. I've read all of these.

(Beat.)

Sometimes it's comforting to revisit a place you've been before.

*(**ZAN** looks at **DOROTHY** for a moment, then opens the book.)*

(The lights shift.)

Chapter Two

*(**ZAN** steps away from Dorothy's room and picks up a stack of library books from offstage. He pauses there for a moment and talks to the audience.)*

ZAN. The first time I set foot in a public library was when Mrs. Ross sent me to pick up some books for her.

The library here is a Carnegie Library. With the big, fancy entryway. You know? Stone steps going up to big double doors.

The first thing I thought was, "They're not going to let me in."

I didn't understand that they let everybody in.

*(**ZAN** looks over at **DOROTHY**.)*

Chapter two.

*(The lights shift as **ZAN** goes back into Dorothy's room.)*

I brought your books.

DOROTHY. Excellent.

ZAN. You have, like, a hundred books in here already.

DOROTHY. You can never have too many books.

ZAN. Okay...

(Pause.)

I'd never been there before.

DOROTHY. To the library? Why not?

ZAN. I dunno.

(Beat.)

Nobody took me.

DOROTHY. Your mother didn't take you to the library when you were little?

ZAN. I don't have a mother.

*(***DOROTHY** *looks at* **ZAN** *a moment.)*

DOROTHY. Sorry.

ZAN. It's okay.

(A moment.)

DOROTHY. What did Mrs. McPherson send over?

*(***ZAN** *sets the books down, one by one, as he answers.)*

ZAN. Something with a flower on the front. Something with a man on the front. A poetry book. A mystery with cats in it.

DOROTHY. Mmm… Mrs. McPherson knows what I like.

ZAN. Why do you call her that?

DOROTHY. Why do I call her what?

ZAN. "Mrs. McPherson."

DOROTHY. That's her name.

ZAN. I mean, why not her first name? You're the same age.

DOROTHY. We are not remotely the same age! She is much older than me! How old do you think I am?

*(***ZAN** *wisely keeps his mouth shut on that one.)*

Politeness. Respect. It's important, what we call each other. What we allow people to call us. Mr. Hardt.

ZAN. You don't have to call me that.

DOROTHY. I choose to call you that.

ZAN. I don't care what you call me.

DOROTHY. You should start.

ZAN. You sure are bossy for somebody who respects me so much. Mrs. Ross.

*(**DOROTHY** laughs.)*

DOROTHY. Oh! I almost forgot. Look behind that plant.

*(**ZAN** looks at **DOROTHY** oddly, but does as she asks. He reaches behind the plant, and takes out a little container of red jello. He looks at it for a moment, then sets it in front of **DOROTHY**.)*

No, it's for you. There are spoons in the drawer.

(Beat.)

History, poetry, memoir, or gardening?

ZAN. Whichever one has the most pictures.

DOROTHY. Gardening it is, then.

*(**ZAN** gets a spoon from the drawer, opens the jello, and begins eating it.)*

*(**DOROTHY** hands **ZAN** an oversized gardening book.)*

ZAN. *Make Your Garden Wild with Native Plants.*

*(**ZAN** pages through the book.)*

Do you have a garden?

DOROTHY. *(Nods.)* I do. A wild profusion of flowers. A chair under an old oak tree where I have my coffee on sunny summer mornings. I miss my garden terribly. One plant in the window is just not the same.

*(**DOROTHY** looks away, overcome with missing.)*

ZAN. How long have you been here?

DOROTHY. Forever.

(Pause.)

Seventeen days. This trip. My arms are purple pincushions.

(Pause.)

I'm thinking of drawing little marks on the wall, to mark the duration of my incarceration. Like the Count of Monte Cristo.

ZAN. What's wrong with you?

*(***DOROTHY** *doesn't answer.)*

Sorry.

DOROTHY. It's okay. I just…

(Beat.)

I don't like to talk about it.

(A moment.)

Let's read about wild gardens, shall we? We will be transported to a world where the sun is high and the air is sweet – and every inch is full of goldenrod and Douglas aster. Showy tarweed. Mexican sunflower! Red-flowering current! Purple coneflower! And milkweed for the butterflies.

*(***ZAN** *turns to the first page of the book, but then glances up at* **DOROTHY**.*)*

ZAN. Thank you for the jello, Mrs. Ross.

DOROTHY. Thank you for the books, Mr. Hardt.

*(***ZAN** *nods.)*

(The lights shift.)

Chapter Three

*(**ZAN** goes over to the shelf by the window, and picks up a large dictionary that has been carefully placed there.)*

ZAN. *(To the audience.)* Chapter three is about dictionaries.

*(**ZAN** carries Dorothy's dictionary over to her bed.)*

This is, like, a million pounds.

DOROTHY. There are a lot of words in there.

ZAN. I can look up any word I want on my phone. In, like, two seconds.

DOROTHY. I wish young people wouldn't constantly use the word "like." It makes you sound equivocal about everything.

ZAN. What does that mean?

DOROTHY. Look it up.

*(**ZAN** pulls out his phone.)*

In the dictionary!

ZAN. Why do you think that's better?

DOROTHY. I have mixed feelings about machines.

ZAN. You'd probably be dead now without them. Right?

*(**ZAN** looks through the dictionary for the word "equivocal.")*

Equi...?

DOROTHY. Equivocal. E-Q-U-I-V-O-C-A-L.

*(**ZAN** hunts for the word.)*

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