Remembrance Day Plays
for Schools and Communities

Grades 5 to 12

Written by Barbara Brockmann
Illustrated by S&S Learning Materials

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Why a Play for Remembrance Day?

Every November 11th schools across our country hold Remembrance Day Services. Poems are read, songs are sung, a trumpet is played, and children are exhorted to both remember the tragedy of war and the benefits of peace. But beyond those general concepts, what exactly are they asked to Remember?

Elementary teachers are often uncomfortable teaching the history of Canada’s war efforts because of the horrors invariably connected with warfare. Some have little general or specific knowledge of Canada’s participation in wars -- due, in part, to the fact that the eras of WWI, WWII, and the Korean War are not usually part of the Grade 1 to Grade 8 curricula across Canada.

Every year teachers scramble to reinvent the Remembrance Day “wheel”. And every year the focus is on the ‘Poppy’, ‘Sacrifice,’ and ‘Peace.’ In schools with new immigrant populations, teachers sometimes emphasize current events and the wish for peace in some of their students’ conflict laden countries of origin. While this is a well intentioned approach to a difficult subject, it overlooks the rich and moving history of Canada’s unique experience of war.

Recognizing these challenges we must remember that there is one day a year – in fact one hour of that one day – where educators across the country have the opportunity of helping younger students develop a meaningful understanding of how the experience of War has played an integral part in painting the canvas of Canadian life.

Remembrance Day Plays for Schools and Communities is an age-appropriate platform that allows educators to transform this brief yet emotional observance into an imaginative experience of Canada’s proud wartime history. While recognizing the sadness and sacrifices of war, these plays honour the bravery and the triumphs of our fallen and our Veterans, their experiences and the experiences of their families and communities.

Theatre serves as a particularly powerful teaching/learning tool. Not only do actors, singers, and dancers directly engage in specific ‘roles’ within the context of wartime events, an audience of children, parents, and veterans witness a synopsis of the conflict and its social and cultural effects. The past comes alive. What has been especially gratifying is the response of veterans who see children re-enacting and honouring their experiences.

“This has been a great tribute for us veterans, because it brings home our experiences. My father was in the first war, and I was in the second. Now my grandchildren will understand.” – Veteran Patrick O’Keeffe.

“I’ll tell the Korean War Vets that the Korean War isn’t forgotten any longer.” – Veteran Les Peate, President of the Korea Veterans Association of Canada.
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LETTERS FROM THE GREAT WAR: 1914-1918

A Play and A Ceremony

Suitable for Performance by: Grades 7 to 12

Plot Summary:

The play opens in **Scene One: The Call** in a town square somewhere in Canada where young Canadians in three separate groupings announce their intention of ‘joining up.’ They are: youthful scholar Michael, determined Black Canadian Jeremiah Jones, and spirited Grace MacPherson. In trying to convince a loved one they are doing the ‘right thing,’ they each promise to write home. As they join the enlistment line, the choir in the town square sings “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary.”

The “I’ll write home as often as I can” theme provides the structure for the rest of the play, in which the characters deliver their ‘letters’ in a series of interconnected monologues, highlighting and personalizing different aspects of the war experience. The setting is indicated by the scene title. The three young Canadians who were introduced in Scene 1 are integrated throughout the play. **Scene 2: The Trenches** ends in a modern dance entitled “No Man’s Land Waltz.” **Scene 3: The Munitions Factory at The Home Front** concludes with the singing of “Till the Boys Come Home “(Keep the Home Fires Burning). Michael, Jeremiah, and Grace meet up in **Scene 4: The Hospital**, which ends with a moving choral rendition of “In Flanders Fields.”

Michael, Jeremiah, Grace, and Soldier Talbot Papineau lead **Scene 5: Ceremony of Remembrance**. The Cast and Crew enter the stage during the Honour March to solemn but moving music. The laying of the wreathe is followed by the Last Post and the Moment of Silence, which ends with the singing of “O Canada.”

Acting Roles:

**Speaking roles:** 34 individual roles

Group scenes for additional non-speaking roles: • marketplace opening • soldiers in the trenches • munitions factory workers • wounded soldiers / working nurses in the hospital

Music / Choral Options:

a) **“It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”** by Jack Judge and Harry Williams
b) **“Till the Boys Come Home (Keep the Home Fires Burning)”** by Lena Guilbert Ford and Ivor Novello
c) **“In Flander’s Fields”** by Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae. (Many musical versions are available.)
d) Honour March: **“Hymn to the Fallen”** from the movie “Saving Private Ryan”

Dance Options:

**“No Man’s Land Waltz”:** a modern dance to jolting or haunting instrumental music which emphasizes the madness of trench warfare, and the tragedy of this war in particular.

[Previous performances: Fisher Park Public and Summit Alternative Public School, Ottawa, Ontario]

Characters and Costumes

In order of appearance. Roles with full names are based on real people. Use the character list below to record the names of your cast members!

Scene 1: The Call

Michael: (young, scholarly, enthusiastic)
Father: (older, distinguished)
Jeremiah Jones: (determined, Black Canadian, dressed for a church picnic)
Marie: (Black Canadian girlfriend, dressed for a church picnic)
Grace MacPherson: (20 years old, spirited, intelligent)
Mother: (older woman)
Non Speaking Roles: (two enlistment officers, various people in a crowd)

The Choir: (could be dressed in 1910’s clothing with appropriate hats or caps and perform onstage like an era-appropriate choral group)

Scene 2: The Trenches

Group A: (relates to early war experience, tone is generally teasing and information is presented slightly ironically, still with a sense of humour)

Soldier 1: Robert Dorman: (very young and naive)
Soldier 2: (describes experience of waiting and the trenches)
Soldier 3: (describes trench foot)
Soldier 4: (emphasizes noise)
Soldier 5: (camaraderie among the varied “boys”)
Soldier 6: (darkly descriptive forays into no-man’s land)

Group B: (relates to experiences of critical Canadian battles)

Soldier 7: Michael: (Ypres and the gas experience)
Soldier 8: (the Somme)
Soldier 9: (victory at Vimy)
Soldier 10: Jeremiah Jones: (victory at Vimy)
Soldier 11: Brigadier General Alex Ross: (victory at Vimy)

Group C: (tone is tired and disheartened)

Soldier 12: Francis Pegahmagabow: (Aboriginal Canadian, serious, deliberate)
Soldier 13: (angry about the war)
Soldier 14: Talbot Papineau: (questions the war)
Soldier 15: (weary, full of premonition, mentions Passchendaele)

Non-Speaking Roles: (this scene may make use of additional soldiers)
Scene 3: Munitions Factory at The Home Front

The munitions workers are wearing period skirts and blouses underneath matching simple grey or blue cotton tunics. Hair is tied up under unadorned shower caps. They may mime or carry a variety of items like a pail, hammer, screwdriver, or a large funnel.

Munitions Worker 1: (rough girl) __________________________________________
Munitions Worker 2: (rich, middle aged, secretly pleased) _______________________
Munitions Worker 3: (middle class wife, worried) _______________________________
Munitions Worker 4: (hard working, former servant, very capable) ________________
Munitions Worker 5: (young, university student) _________________________________
Munitions Worker 6: (Michael’s sister) _________________________________________
Munitions Worker 7: (working class) __________________________________________
Munitions Worker 8: (Marie - same as Scene 1) ________________________________
Non-Speaking Roles: (Additional female factory workers: enough to make lines of factory workers on the stage, out of which the actresses emerge.)
________________________________________________________________________

Scene 4: The Hospital

Nurses were called “bluebirds” and wore a light blue blouses with blue A-line skirts. This outfit had a starched white collar and white cuffs. Doctors might be dressed in army uniforms with white jackets on top. Stretcher bearers would be dressed in army uniforms and wearing Red Cross armbands. There would be several soldiers wearing uniforms with parts of their bodies bandaged, or lying in bed in pyjamas.

Nurse 1: (bluebird uniform, harried) __________________________________________
Grace: (dirty and blood stained mechanics overalls, cap) _________________________
Soldier 10: (Jeremiah - in bed with pyjama’s and housecoat, bandaged shoulder) ________
Stretcher Bearer 1: (working class man, appealing to God) _______________________
Stretcher Bearer 2: (working class man, quietly heroic) __________________________
Nurse 2: (bluebird uniform, thoughtful) _________________________________________
Patient 1: (philosophical) ____________________________________________________
Patient 2: (Black Canadian) _________________________________________________
Lieutenant Colonel Doctor John McCrae: (frustrated, begging) __________________
Nurse 4: Marion Landry: (bluebird uniform, thoughtful, mature) __________________
Non-Speaking Roles: Soldiers wrapped in bandages, or being bandaged. Some resting, talking, playing cards. Could use the same soldiers as in Scene 2.
SCENE 1: THE CALL

Golden light floods the stage while popular period music plays and a crowd mingles in the town square. A table and two chairs are carried out and used by two officers while a third soldier flanks a large “ENLIST NOW” sign. Out of the crowd emerges three distinct groupings: Michael and his Father, Jeremiah and Marie, Grace and her Mother. Freeze into tableaus.

Father: Michael, what’s the meaning of that uniform? Where are your school books?

Michael: Since war has been declared Father, my plans have changed. I’ve signed up.

Father: (stunned) What do you mean you’ve signed up? How could you?

Michael: Actually, father, the question is really more like: How could I NOT sign up when my country needs me? I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t do my bit. University will just have to wait.

Father: Of course I don’t want you to go, but frankly, I understand your feelings. If I was a young man again I’d probably do the same thing. Your mother though (shakes head)… convincing her will be another matter.

Michael: Everyone’s saying we’ll be home by Christmas. (gets an idea) Perhaps I’ll stay on a bit longer once it’s over. I could tour around Europe. Maybe visit the old sod and see where you and Mother were born. (emphasis) And no matter what, I’ll be sure to write to you everyday!

Father claps Michael on the back and they freeze

Jeremiah: (Looking into the picnic basket and smacking his lips.) What a fine picnic you’ve prepared Marie.

Marie: (coyly) I had an idea you’d pick my basket at the church harvest fair.

Jeremiah: (teasing her) Well, after you told me that the one with the yellow bow had your fried chicken and raspberry pie, I knew what to do!

Marie: Why Jeremiah Jones, aren’t you the boldest thing. (pouting) Maybe next church picnic I’ll tell Austin Davis which basket is mine.

Jeremiah: (becoming serious) You just might have to do that anyway Marie. You see, I’ve decided to enlist.

Marie: Jeremiah! What did you want to go and do that for? What has the government ever done for you or for our families?
Jeremiah: I know Marie, but this is not about what the government has or hasn’t done for us. This is a war and like all the other boys I have to do my bit to protect you and our families. Besides, I’m certain that after we do our part the government will give us some part in running the government! They need us Marie. Just last week, Albert tried to enlist but they turned him down on the basis of his skin colour. Phhhhh! The government may think they don’t need us yet, but they will. And when that time comes, I’ll be going.

(Marie becomes teary and turns away.)

Jeremiah: (moving close to Marie) And, Marie, while I’m away, will you write to me... everyday?

Puts arm around her, and they freeze.

Grace: Momma, I simply must go. You KNOW that I was the first girl in Vancouver to have my own car. You KNOW I can fix my own automobile and change my own tires. Just last week I had a blow out, I jacked up the car and changed the tire all by myself.

Momma: Gracie, I admit you are talented behind the wheel. But driving around town is not the same thing as going off to war.

Grace: Well, how about when that silly teenage boy ran in front of my car and got himself knocked down? I kept my cool. I was decisive. I knew every second counted and so I put him in my car and drove him right to the hospital. I did what needed to be done when it needed to be done. I didn’t scream or go into hysterics like some nervous Nelly. Even the police praised my quick thinking.

Momma: Even so Gracie, you’re the youngest of my children, and with your brother Alex so recently killed at Gallipoli (chokes up)...

Grace: Don’t you see Mother, that’s exactly why I must go. I also never dreamed that Alex would die. He was always so lucky. And now that I’ve just heard that Boy Templeton was killed in action I am more certain than ever that this is what I must do. I’m sure I could be an ambulance driver and once I’m there the willpower and courage will come to me.

Momma: An ambulance driver? Whoever would let a girl drive an ambulance?

Grace: The Volunteer Aid Detachment. They need the boys for fighting and they need us girls for everything else.

Momma: But...but...How will you ever travel from here in Vancouver to Europe?

Grace: I...I didn’t want to let you in on this until I had a definite plan, but I’ve been going to the Canadian Pacific Steamship Office every day at lunch for the past two months asking for free passage. I told them: “The boys get it, why not me? I’m volunteering too.” And they gave it to me Mum: free passage to England. I leave next Thursday.
Momma: Gracie, my Grace... (They embrace) I’ll only let you go if you promise to write home as often as possible.

Grace embraces her mother. The crowd becomes animated again as the three young people join the line-up. Choral group moves to the lip of the stage as curtains close behind them.

CHOIR: “It’s A Long Way to Tipperary,” by Jack Judge and Harry Williams

SCENE 2: THE TRENCHES

The soldiers pour into the theatre space through any available doors, moving low and quickly, as if on patrol. Once on stage they take up position in their groups A, B, or C. Ominous music plays. Each group rotates to centre front where they have their moment in the spotlight when the music stops and the side groups freeze in tableau. Each location has its own distinct task: soldiers stage right might be hunched over a small fire warming their hands or making tea; soldiers centre stage where the performance takes place are writing and reading; soldiers stage left are sniping or preparing to go “over the top.”

Group A: letters relate to early war experience, information is initially presented with an ironic but humourous or teasing tone.

Soldier 1: Robert Dorman: Dear Mother, it’s your own Bob with the 75th division of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. I can hardly believe I’m actually here in uniform, especially after you yanked me out the first time I enlisted on account of me being underage. I understand why you did it Mother, but I need you to understand why I had to sneak away to join up. So here it is: a little “Verse And Worse” by R.O. Bob Dorman. I called it “The Argument”.

Hello Mother, what do you know
I enlisted today I said I’d go
Yes, I mean to do my little bit
Afraid? Why Mum, never thought of it
Oh I know it’s true all that you say
Only fifteen and going away
But age don’t count it’s the heart within
The courage to lose the faith to win
So come now Mother, you mustn’t cry
Other boys have joined so why not I
It won’t last long please understand
Then I’ll come Home to the things we planned