

the
sacred
dance
of
yellow
thunder



Inspired by a true story

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BIG DOG PUBLISHING

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the sacred dance of yellow thunder



To
Iron Teeth
and
Luther Standing Bear

the sacred dance of yellow thunder

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the sacred dance of yellow thunder

Finalist, Maxwell Anderson National Playwriting Contest, 1984

DRAMA. Inspired by a 1972 incident that occurred in Gordon, Nebraska. Disappointed that no one is showing up to the American Legion dance, Legion members amuse themselves by humiliating a Native-American man and then forcing him to dance to his death. As Raymond Yellow Thunder dances, voices of his elders echo through the hall, conjuring life as it once was and reminding him of the Sun Dance, where men sacrifice their bodies by dancing for days for the sick. This stunning, provocative play offers a tour de force performance for a Native-American actor.

Performance Time: Approximately 30-45 minutes.



Raymond Yellow Thunder (1921-1972)

about the story

Raymond Yellow Thunder (1921-1972) was an Oglala Lakota, born in Kyle, South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. One of seven children, Raymond was born to Jennie and Andrew Yellow Thunder and was the grandson of Chief American Horse. As an adult, Raymond worked as a ranch hand in Gordon, Nebraska. On Feb. 12, 1972, Raymond was kidnapped from a car lot by Leslie and Melvin Hare, Bernard Lutter, and Robert Bayliss, who stripped him of his pants and undergarments, and took him to the American Legion club. An autopsy showed that Yellow Thunder died of blunt trauma to his head. The Hares, Lutter, Bayliss, and Jeanette Thompson were arrested for Raymond's death and charged with manslaughter and false imprisonment. Leslie Hare was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to six years and a \$500 fine. Melvin Hare was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to two years and a fine of \$500. Thompson's charges were dropped as the prosecution decided she did not participate in the crimes.

characters

(5 M, 2 F)

(With doubling: 4 M, 1 F)

RAYMOND YELLOW THUNDER: 51, Native-American Sioux who has come to the Legion hall to escape the cold weather; male.

JOE: A veteran of World War II; in his 50s but trying to look and act younger; has a beer belly; male.

RHONDA: Joe's much younger girlfriend; female.

CHARLIE: Early 40s, a veteran of the Korean War; wears a Legionnaire hat; male.

HARRY: Late 70s, a veteran of World War I; wears a Legionnaire hat; male.

NATIVE-AMERICAN WOMAN: Elderly Native-American woman; female.

NATIVE-AMERICAN MAN: Elderly Native-American man; male.

NOTE: Native-American Woman and Native-American Man may be voiceovers, if desired.

setting

American Legion Hall, a small town in Nebraska, February 1972.

set

American Legion Hall. At the rear of the stage there is a library-type table and chairs. Displayed behind the table are American flags and State of Nebraska flags. At SL, there is a small bar, several stools, and a jukebox. Photos of past American Legion leaders are displayed on the wall. The "basement" area is SR. There is a doorway next to the entrance of the American Legion Hall.

props

Coat, for Joe
Coat, for Rhonda
2 Legionnaire hats, for Harry and Charlie
Box of bottles
Crates
Glassware
Backpack, for Yellow Thunder
Coat, for Yellow Thunder
Handgun (fake)
Gavel

sound effects

Glen Miller song, or another suitable song
Sound of a strong wind
Drunken laughter
Sound of truck starting up
Big Band music
Bright orange light
"American Patrol" by Glenn Miller or another suitable song
may be used.

Note: Please be sure to secure rights for songs not in the public domain.

"That's it, folks.

You just saw
the most sacred
dance ever."

—Harry

the sacred dance of yellow thunder

(AT RISE: An American Legion Hall in a small town in Nebraska, February 1972. At the rear of the stage there is a library-type table and chairs. Displayed behind the table are American flags and State of Nebraska flags. At SL, there is a small bar, several stools, and a jukebox. Photos of past American Legion leaders are displayed on the wall. Spotlight up SL on Yellow Thunder. The rest of the stage is dark. Raymond Yellow Thunder is standing in a doorway next to the entrance of the American Legion Hall. Trying to keep out of the freezing wind, Yellow Thunder looks off into the distance and hears the voice of an elderly Native-American Woman. Separate spotlight up on an elderly Native-American Woman. Note: Native-American Woman's lines may also be in the form of a voiceover, if desired.)

NATIVE-AMERICAN WOMAN: The entrance to the Black Hills was through a narrow passage known as Buffalo Gap. The wild animals came in through this gap for protection from the icy blasts of winter and so did the Sioux. There were springs of clear water and plenty of wood. Nature seemed to hold us in her arms. And there we were satisfied to live in our tipis all through the rough weather...

(Spotlight down on Native-American Woman. Joe and Rhonda enter and hurry past Yellow Thunder. Joe and Rhonda see Yellow Thunder but pay no attention to him because they are anxious to get out of the cold. Joe and Rhonda enter the hall. Spotlight up on an elderly Native-American Man. Note: Native-American Man's lines may be in the form of a voiceover, if desired.)

NATIVE-AMERICAN MAN: In our country, it grew very cold. The snow would freeze very hard after it fell. After the snow had frozen hard, we would start to play the hutnacute [pronounced "hu-ta-na-cu-te"] game. On clear

days we played this game dressed in breechcloth and moccasins only. In those days, we did not have the white man's shirt and stockings, but we did not feel the cold, as the game was very exciting and the exercise kept us warm. I was born in the Black Hills 95 years ago. The time of my birth was in the moon when the berries are ripe. My father was Cheyenne. My mother was Sioux.

(Spotlights down on Native-American Man and Yellow Thunder. Lights up on the interior of the hall. Harry is seated at the table. Behind the bar, Charlie is dragging up a crate from the basement. They are both wearing Legionnaire hats. Joe helps Rhonda remove her coat and Joe removes his coat as well. Charlie returns to the basement.)

RHONDA: *(To Joe, looking around the hall, disappointed.)* I don't believe this. Where's the band? No balloons...just those two old flags. Hey, I thought you said this was to be a dance party.

JOE: We're going to have music, but we gotta have the business meeting first.

RHONDA: *(Disappointed.)* Oh, no, a jukebox. *(Approaches the jukebox.)* I came out on a freezing night like this to dance to records? *(Looking at the titles. Disappointed.)* Not one decent song. Not one country-western.

CHARLIE: *(From basement, calls.)* Hey, Joe, you think I can get some help down here?

JOE: *(Shouts.)* There's an Indian outside. Maybe he can give you a hand.

(Charlie enters from the basement, carrying a box of bottles.)

CHARLIE: Yeah, think I'll try that. Basement needs a good cleaning, too.

JOE: Heck, Charlie, he'll probably do it for nothing...just to get out of the cold. It's freezing out there.

(Charlie exits outside the hall to speak to Yellow Thunder.)

RHONDA: And that's all this big old barn is good for. It's not for partying, that's for sure. And certainly not with that old geezer in charge. Well, I mean, my mother says he has the first penny he ever made.

JOE: Rhonda, will you please shut up?! You know, if it weren't for that, "old geezer" you just might not be here. Yeah, you might have been born a German.

RHONDA: Yeah, well, my grandfather told me all about "good old Harry Dunwell." He never saw a German except on the newsreel because he never left the country...Army supplies. And that's how he started his hardware business...stole the government blind. Well, can I at least have a drink while you're over there talking big business?

JOE: All right, all right...

RHONDA: And, Joey, the jukebox...I promise I'll keep it low.

(Charlie enters with Yellow Thunder.)

CHARLIE: *(To Joe.)* You're right. It's getting colder. *(To Joe and Rhonda, introducing.)* This here's Yellow Thunder.

(Joe and Rhonda look at each other and burst out laughing.)

JOE: *(Laughing.)* Sounds like a big fart after a dinner of burritos and beans!

RHONDA: *(Laughing.)* Or like something after a nuclear bomb!

CHARLIE: Come on, Yellow Thunder, booze is down in the basement. You can bring up as many as you can.

(Charlie and Yellow Thunder go to the basement.)

RHONDA: *(To Yellow Thunder.)* Save your strength. They just need one. Nobody's here as usual. *(Sarcastic.)* Big American Legion dance...social event of the year.

JOE: You know, this is the last time I'm bringing you—

RHONDA: You can say that again! Next time I date someone old enough to be my father, it's Vegas or nothing.

JOE: Now please keep quiet, will you? And, you know, maybe next month I will take you to Vegas.

RHONDA: And the jukebox, remember—I don't believe the numbers—another time, another place...

(Joe plugs in the jukebox. Rhonda presses some of the buttons. A Glen Miller song or another song is heard. Charlie enters from the basement carrying boxes.)

CHARLIE: *(To Joe and Rhonda.)* Nice guy. He's Sioux. Well, I'll be right there, and then we can start the meeting.

(Lights down on the hall. Spotlight up on Yellow Thunder, who is in the basement moving a crate. Spotlight up on Native-American Man.)

NATIVE-AMERICAN MAN: My father had led his men many times in battle, and when I was born, he gave me the name of Óta Kté or Plenty Kill because he had killed many enemies. But in those days, it was considered a disgrace, not an honor, for a Sioux to kill a white man. Killing a paleface was not looked upon as a brave act. We were taught that the white man was much weaker than ourselves.

(Spotlight down on Yellow Thunder and Native-American Man. Lights up on the Legion hall at a table where Harry, Charlie, and Joe are now seated, holding their meeting.)

HARRY: *(To Charlie.)* That Indian...is he a friend of yours?

CHARLIE: Nah, just helping out. We can pay him out of the kitty.

HARRY: I thought maybe he was a new member.

JOE: We're not that desperate. Not yet, anyway.

CHARLIE: I thought we were. Nobody's showing up. You know, I can remember guys with their wives...party would get wild.

HARRY: And we lost another member last week: Gus Farney, First World War Navy man. That Gus knew the best jokes. We'll have to send flowers.

CHARLIE: I'll make a note of it.

JOE: Never came to the meetings. I never met the guy.

HARRY: Before your time. Sickly...got influenza in 1917. Well, have you been doing any recruiting?

JOE: Yeah, and I thought for sure I had one. A Viet vet. Truck driver. Nice guy. I told him about all the benefits. Said he didn't want to hear about that war or any other. Said he just wanted to forget the whole thing.

HARRY: I would, too, if I were him. First war this country didn't win...bunch of gutless cowards. I told you to forget about those guys. Spoiled brats. Best equipment, too.

CHARLIE: Their heads are all soft, anyway. I heard they were all high on one thing or another.

JOE: Look, we gotta get some new blood.

HARRY: Fewer members make it more exclusive. We still have enough members for a parade.

JOE: Yeah, but not for a dance.

CHARLIE: They'll come around, you'll see. Man's gotta get away from his wife sometime. Legion Hall...only place you can really be yourself unless you're out hunting.

HARRY: *(To Joe.)* Speaking of wives, could you tell yours to lower the jukebox.

JOE: She's not my wife, Harry. My wife ran off a few years back. She's my date. And young ones...they like their music loud...very loud. *(Leaves the table.)*

HARRY: *(To Charlie.)* Don't know why he'd bring her, anyway. We never brought our wives or our girlfriends. Had more fun that way. One of the reasons for joining the Legion...just being out with the boys.

CHARLIE: We're having a dance tonight, Harry, remember? Thought that might bring in some new members, but the weather's against us.

HARRY: Only thing that'll bring in new members is a nice big war...one that we win. Something patriotic. I remember in the first war we had posters. I mean, these great posters. And the music...none of that crap she's playing. Songs with words everyone could sing and words that moved you—to cry, to shout—not just dance to. Yeah, we knew how to give a war in those days. I mean, Americans...we were Americans then.

CHARLIE: You know, I always said, you got Ed Sullivan to thank for it all. Oh, yeah, bringing over the Beatles. They started it all...dope, long hair.

(Joe is standing with Rhonda at the jukebox. Rhonda is dancing to the music.)

JOE: *(To Rhonda.)* I told you, keep it low. We're talking business.

RHONDA: You have to get something for your dues. You know, Joey, I am so tired of this dull, boring life. I wish my daddy had never moved back here. I loved it out there in California. And as for you...you are one boring per-son. Dismal. I mean, this town, this club, it's getting you nowhere. Joe, you know what? I'm dumping you. Oh, yeah, once this party is over, I am dumping you.

JOE: Now, Rhonda, I'm sorry. It's the weather. Look, just a few more minutes and we'll be dancing our butts off. Shoot, we'll be having a ball soon.

RHONDA: If it wasn't so cold out, I'd have left soon as I saw no one else was coming. You know, I find you men boring. I mean, *boring!*

JOE: We'll be through soon. Just gotta read last month's minutes.

RHONDA: Big deal. Like it matters. I remember the last parade. Six people showed up, and all of them were relatives. Everyone else was out of town.

JOE: Now, that's not true. Don't you remember that whole busload of protesters?

RHONDA: I don't count them. On second thought, they turned out to be more fun. I almost left town with them. Would have, if they hadn't been arrested.

JOE: Now why are you watching that Indian so much?

RHONDA: Because he's moving. Only live thing in the place.

JOE: Has he been trying to make a move on you?

RHONDA: Joe, please. Your meeting. I'm in a dancing mood, and not Indian style. Although, right now, I might even do that. At least, I'd be warm.

JOE: Rhonda, if I catch him eyeing you –

RHONDA: That's all I need! From one loser to another, and just what would you do? Wave your old flag at him? Show him your medals?

CHARLIE: (*Calls from the table.*) Hey, Joe! Harry can't stay all night.

JOE: (*Calls.*) I'm coming. (*Hurries over to the table. To Charlie and Harry.*) Sorry about that.

HARRY: Isn't she a little young for you? A man getting to be your age...hard to keep up with a girl like that.

JOE: It's not easy, I'll tell you. She just wants to go, go, go. But she sure makes me feel good...a hundred years young. Yeah, I need that girl. Yup, right now I really need that girl.

HARRY: Maybe I should get me one.

CHARLIE: Now, come on. Sooner we get this meeting over with, sooner we can start the party.

(Lights dim on Joe, Harry, and Charlie as they discuss financial matters at the table. Lights dim on Rhonda, who is now seated at the bar watching Raymond Yellow Thunder. Spotlight up on Yellow Thunder as he pauses a moment before opening a crate. Spotlight up on Native-American Woman.)

NATIVE-AMERICAN WOMAN: My grandmother was a medicine woman. She told me lots of things about how to care for myself. She said that if I should be bitten by a rattlesnake I must not get excited and run as that would heat up my blood. She told me a cedar tree is the safest place when lightning is flashing. Once in awhile an old Sioux man talks as if he himself had killed Custer, but most of the old men say that none of the Indians in the fight recognized any one soldier there. I have heard different old men say: "All white men look the same to me." At our tribal gatherings at Pine Ridge, we played old-time Indian games. In one game, four people stood in a row and sang four different songs. One had a war song, another a death song—

(Native-American Woman is interrupted by Rhonda as she calls to Yellow Thunder. Lights up on Rhonda and Yellow Thunder.)

RHONDA: *(Calls.)* Hey, you...Yellow Cloud!

YELLOW THUNDER: *(Correcting.)* It's Yellow Thunder.

RHONDA: I like "Yellow Cloud" better. Lightning and thunder scare me. Do you dance?

YELLOW THUNDER: Yeah, but not rock 'n' roll—the foxtrot, a two-step rumba.

RHONDA: I mean Indian dances. You know, like dancing around a fire beating your tom-tom.

YELLOW THUNDER: When I was a kid, but it's been so long I've forgotten.

RHONDA: You know, my father took us to Disneyland once when we lived in California, and they had all these Indians dancing. It was beautiful... *(Mimics dance movements.)*

...looking down, looking up...their feathers shaking...and bells, bells on their boots. (*Indicating jukebox music.*) I like this song. Great for dancing.

[END OF FREEVIEW]