



Sample Pages from Drum Taps

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DRUM TAPS

A PLAY IN ONE ACT ADAPTED BY
Lindsay Price

FROM THE POETRY OF
Walt Whitman



Drum Taps

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Drum Taps

Large Cast Version (as many actors as necessary)	6
Small Cast Version (2M+3W)	34

The text is exactly the same, just adjusted for the different cast sizes.

Music

There are two Civil War era songs in the script, both of which can be sung a cappella. Directions on where to find the music can be found at the end of the script. Many moments suggest the use of bugle and drum, which appropriately represent the Civil War. In an ideal world it would be great if these moments were played live.

Vocabulary

There is a vocabulary list at the back of the script. It's so important to understand what you are saying.

Costumes

There are a variety of costuming options. Though these poems centre on the Civil War, it's not necessary for the characters to be dressed in authentic clothes or dressed as soldiers. They represent a book of poems, and secondly, the common man; they are the observers of their situation.

The cast could all be dressed in the simple garb of Walt Whitman. Take a look at pictures of him as a young man.

The costumes can look as if they are made of manuscript pages covered in ink scrawls. All the costume pieces are simple, never fancy.

The cast can each be dressed to reflect their character. Perhaps all in the same colour of cloth but in a manner that clearly shows a clerk, a tramp, a bride, an immigrant and so on.

The only vital thing is that the costumes must have a lot of pockets. Barring that, each character must carry a satchel or a knapsack. Numerous times throughout the play the character pull pieces of paper out of their costumes, as they bring the poetry out of them. There must be a place to keep those pieces of paper!

Set

The set is made up of wide stone stairs. This will allow you to create levels with the large group. Feel free to come up with the combination of stairs, platforms, or cubes that suits your group. Avoid using modern chairs.

Movement

Because the base of this work is poetry, there is not going to be any instinctual or immediate clues to movement and blocking. It is necessary that each poem is thought out from a physical standpoint – otherwise it becomes a group of people standing on stage reciting a poem. I have tried to be specific in the stage directions with possible actions with gestures, tableaux, individual and group movement suggestions. Please feel free to explore your own. Do not leave the physical element out of the picture. It's another piece that is going to make a two dimensional poem into a three dimensional play.

The Text

Yes, this is poetry. But the instant you start speaking the words as poetry, as what we stereotypically think poetry should sound like, the piece is done for as a play. Give humanity to the words just as Whitman does. When you speak the words, give them passion, energy, sadness, anger, joy and without a speck of formality that denotes a 'poetry' reading. That's when the play will really leap to life.

Author's Note

Drum Taps appears in the larger collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*. This adaptation uses the 1892 deathbed edition. The *Drum Taps* poems explore Walt Whitman's account of the US Civil War.

Walt Whitman worked on *Leaves of Grass* for many, many years. The first edition appeared in 1855, and the last in 1892. Poems came and went, were edited and added depending on what was happening in his life. Whitman experienced the Civil War firsthand working as a volunteer nurse. *Drum Taps* first appeared in the collection in 1865.

Whitman's poetry was not universally embraced in his lifetime. He was called vulgar, obscene, and at one point lost his job after one edition of the poems were published.

Are his poems vulgar? I suppose that depends on your point of view. I find them completely and utterly human. Whitman wanted to show the life of a human being, all aspects of life, on the page: good, bad, positive and negative. The poems are a full life in words; complex, contradictory, arrogant, humble, laughing, weeping, angry, soulful, flesh and blood. The poems beg to be staged and breathed to life.

This adaptation does not cover the complete list of poems from *Drum Taps*, and in some cases, only showcases a selection from a particular poem. The purpose of the adaptation is to highlight and dramatize. The poems used are listed at the back of the script.

Having said that, it's **VERY** important to note that none of Walt Whitman's words have been changed. They are as they appear in the poems. These are his words and must remain as is. **No words may be changed or modernized.** It's Whitman!

Work with the words, come to a complete understanding of what is being said and why it might be said. The more actors work toward creating a full character who would speak in this manner, the more rich and dimensional the end product will be.

Large Cast Version

For the Large Cast Version, the character list is made up of 6m/14w for a total of twenty characters.

Feel free to re-configure the gender split, make characters gender neutral, further divide up the lines to create more characters. In the workshop version of *Drum Taps*, for example, The Poet was played by two actresses.

One of Whitman's themes is 'the Individual' and to that end all the characters come from individuals mentioned in the larger collection *Leaves of Grass*. I have included the list below as well as extra characters if you wish to expand the cast. It's very important that each actor has a symbolic place in the poem. It will give the actor a base for their character development; the cast should never simply spout the words.

Given that there isn't a lot of character help in the script, each actor should create a character profile with name, age, background, family situation and living situation. Think about the relationships between characters - are any of them related? Give each character a physical gesture or stance. The audience should be able to get a sense of who the characters are by how they enter, move and stand.

The more specific the character, the more alive the poetry will become. If you ignore character development, you're missing out on taking the play to the next level. The more three-dimensional the characters, the more three-dimensional the play.

If you have fewer actors than characters listed in this initial list, simply double up the dialogue.

Female

- The Poet
- The Child
- The One-Year Wife
- The Lunatic
- The School Teacher
- The Factory Girl
- The Beautiful Sister
- The Widow
- The Nurse
- The Seamstress
- The Night Watch-man's Daughter
- The Immigrant
- The Pioneer
- The Actress

Male

- The Soldier
- The Farmer
- The Clerk
- The Tramp
- The Grave Digger
- The Lawyer

Extra Characters

The Sailor, The Carpenter, The Blacksmith, The Deacon, The Fare-Collector, The Printer, The Prisoner, The Gentleman, The Artist, The Innkeeper, The Father, The Camerado, The Mother, The Spinning Girl, The Maid, The Bride, The Young Sister, The Spinster, The Lady, The Governess, Mother of All, The Matron, The Peddler

In the darkness a single drum beat is heard. A tight light rises on THE POET who kneels by the side of the stage. She has a weathered notebook in her hand.

THE POET rips a page from the notebook and holds it up.

Voices from the darkness gently whisper.

VOICES: (*whispering*) Song of the Banner at Daybreak.

THE POET lets the page fall to the ground.

THE POET: (*still kneeling*) O a new song, a free song. Flapping, flapping, flapping, flapping, by sounds, by voices clearer. By the wind's voice and that of the drum. By the banner's voice and child's voice and sea's voice and father's voice.

THE POET stands. She now pulls a piece of paper out of her costume. She is pulling the poetry out of her.

As THE POET speaks, lights slowly rise on the rest of the stage. Centre stage there is a large paper banner. The banner has a large book painted on it. 'Drum Taps by Walt Whitman' is written across the book.

THE POET: Low on the ground and high in the air. On the ground where the father and child stand, in the upward air where their eyes turn, where the banner at daybreak is flapping. Words! (*holding up the notebook*) Book-words! What are you? Words no more.

Offstage there is the sound of a low hum. This hum will gradually grow in sound as THE POET continues to speak.

THE POET: For hearken and see, my song is there in the open air and I must sing with the banner and pennant a-flapping.

THE POET crosses to the other side of the stage. Speaking with heartfelt energy to the audience.

THE POET: (*pulling out another piece of paper*) I'll weave the chord and twine in. Man's desire and babe's desire. I'll twine them in. I'll put in life. I'll put the bayonet's flashing point. I'll let bullets and slugs whizz, as one carrying a symbol and menace far into the future, crying with the trumpet voice, (*a bugle is heard*) Arouse and beware! (*a bugle is heard*) Beware and arouse!

The offstage hum sound is in full voice now, it's an open-mouthed sound growing with every second.

THE POET: *(growing louder and with more passion)* I'll pour the verse with streams of blood, full of volition, full of joy! Then loosen, launch forth, to go and compete, with the banner and pennant a-flapping!

THE ENSEMBLE bursts right through the banner. The characters are exploding out of the book. They roar downstage with ferocity and bloodthirstiness.

THE ENSEMBLE moves with fierce energy to form a tableau downstage. The air crackles with excitement as THE ENSEMBLE enthuses with glee about the prospect of going to war.

As they speak, THE POET moves among THE ENSEMBLE, pulling out pieces of paper from their costumes.

The book of poetry is coming to life.

ALL: Beat! Beat! Drums! Blow! Bugles! Blow!

SOLDIER: Through the windows.

WIDOW: Through doors.

FACTORY GIRL: Burst like a ruthless force.

CLERK: Into the solemn church and scatter the congregation.

SCHOOL TEACHER: In the school where the scholar is studying.

NIGHT WATCH-MAN'S DAUGHTER: Leave not the bride groom quiet. No happiness must he have now with his bride.

FARMER: Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain.

MEN: So fierce you whirr and pound you drums.

WOMEN: So shrill you bugles blow.

ALL: Beat! Beat! Drums! Blow! Bugles! Blow!

A cannon blast. The lights flicker. The space shakes. THE ENSEMBLE wavers but stays on their feet.

SEAMSTRESS: Make no parley.

BEAUTIFUL SISTER: Stop for no expostulation.

IMMIGRANT: Mind not the timid.

LUNATIC: Mind not the weeper or prayer.

TRAMP: Mind not the old man beseeching the young man.

CHILD: Let not the child's voice be heard,

ONE YEAR WIFE: Nor the mother's entreaties.

LAWYER: Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie
awaiting the hearses,

MEN: So strong you thump or terrible drums.

WOMEN: So loud you bugles blow!

*There is the sound of a cannon blast. It's closer. The
lights flicker.*

*THE ENSEMBLE wavers but stays on their feet. They
raise their fists in the air and cheer. They now spread
out across the front of the stage, speaking with fierce
energy to the audience.*

*They each pull a piece of paper from their costumes,
holding it out toward the audience*

ALL: Thunder on!

GRAVE DIGGER & NURSE: Stride on, Democracy!

PIONEER: Strike with vengeful stroke!

ACTRESS: And do you rise higher than ever yet,

ALL: O days, O cities!

POET: Crash heavier, heavier yet O storms.

*THE ENSEMBLE changes positions, each moving to
a new spot downstage. They continue to speak with
a fevered energy, as if it were essential to get their
message across.*

ALL: Spring up O city!

LAWYER: Not for peace alone, but be indeed yourself, warlike!

CHILD & SEAMSTRESS: Fear not!

FACTORY GIRL: Submit to no models but your own O city!

ACTRESS & ONE YEAR WIFE & CLERK: Behold me!

PIONEER: Incarnate me as I have incarnated you!

FARMER: I have rejected nothing you offer'd me.

WIDOW: Whom you adopted I have adopted.

LUNATIC: Good or bad I never question you.

ALL: I love all.

NURSE: I do not condemn anything. I chant and celebrate all that is yours, yet peace no more.

POET: In peace I chanted peace, but now the drum of war is mine.

ALL: War, red war is my song through your streets, O city!

They each hold their piece of paper high in the air with a cheer.

The cannon sounds and fades away. THE ENSEMBLE looks up as if listening. The lights flicker and change.

THE ENSEMBLE look at one another and nod, ready for the next section.

ALL: (whispering) First O Songs for a Prelude.

They let their piece of paper fall.

THE ENSEMBLE scatters.

SOLDIER moves centre stage. He begins to march with a huge smile on his face. There is pride and joy in all the characters.

The drum cadence changes. It is a slow and steady beat. The drum calls the young men from their homes to join the fight.

SOLDIER: First O songs for a prelude, lightly strike on the stretch'd tympanum pride and joy in my city.

A few characters fall in formation with SOLDIER.

SOLIDER & WIDOW: How she led the rest to arms.

Another section of characters falls into formation.

BEAUTIFUL SISTER & PIONEER: How she gave the cue.

Another section of characters falls into formation.

PIONEER: How at once with lithe limbs, unwaiting a moment, she sprang;

ALL: How you sprang!

The rest fall into formation.

ACTRESS: How you threw off the costumes of peace with indifferent hand.

CLERK: How your soft opera-music changed,

FACTORY GIRL: And the drum and fife were heard in their stead.

SOLDIER: How you lead to the war,

They stamp the ground and raise their fists.

ALL: (*shouting*) To the drum-taps prompt!

They stamp the ground and cheer. THE ENSEMBLE scatter into smaller groups, and pictures. They shake hands. They clap shoulders. They twirl each other in their arms. They hug in celebration. There is great camaraderie, pride and happiness.

SOLDIER: The young men falling in and arming. The mechanics arming, (the trowel, the jack-plane, the blacksmith's hammer, tost aside with precipitation)

LAWYER: The lawyer leaving his office and arming. The judge leaving the court.

NURSE: The driver deserting his wagon in the street, jumping down, throwing the reins abruptly down on the horses' backs.

FARMER: The salesman leaving the store. The boss, book-keeper, porter, all leaving.

ALL: Squads gather everywhere by common consent and arm!

They give a shout and scatter about the stage. In the next section, THE ENSEMBLE prepares to go off to war. They throw satchels over their shoulders. One grabs a drum. A couple shoulder muskets.

IMMIGRANT: The new recruits, even boys,

TRAMP: The old men show them how to wear their accouterments,

CHILD: They buckle the straps carefully.

ONE YEAR WIFE: Outdoors arming, indoors arming, the flash of the musket-barrels.

LUNATIC: The white tents cluster in camp.

GRAVE DIGGER: The arm'd sentries around.

POET: The sunrise cannon, and again at sunset.

*There is the sound of a cannon. THE ENSEMBLE
cheers the sound. They are gleeful and rejoice.*

SCHOOL TEACHER: Arm'd regiments arrive every day, pass through the city, and embark from the wharves.

BEAUTIFUL SISTER & NIGHT WATCH-MAN'S DAUGHTER: How good they look as they tramp down to the river, sweaty, with their guns on their shoulders!

ALL: How I love them!

FACTORY GIRL: How I could hug them, with their brown faces,

FARMER: And their clothes and knapsacks cover'd with dust!

WIDOW: The blood of the city up,

ALL: Arm'd! Arm'd!

SEAMSTRESS: The cry everywhere.

*When they come back into formation, it is as a soldier
unit. Clearly this is symbolic as opposed to realistic.
They march smartly in unison and with pride.*

SOLDIER: The flags flung out from the steeples of churches and from all the public buildings and stores.

PIONEER & ACTRESS: The tearful parting, the mother kisses her son, the son kisses his mother.

CLERK: Loth is the mother to part, yet not a word does she speak to detain him.

SOLDIER: The tumultuous escort, the ranks of policemen preceding, clearing the way.

Along with the drum beat there is now the added sound of a crowd. THE ENSEMBLE looks from side to side, as if they see the crowd. They wave, see loved ones, express excitement.

TRAMP: The unpent enthusiasm.

NURSE: The wild cheers of the crowd for their favorites.

ONE YEAR WIFE: The artillery.

GRAVE DIGGER: The silent cannons, bright as gold,

SOLDIER: Drawn along, rumble lightly over the stones.

BEAUTIFUL SISTER: Silent cannons, soon to cease your silence, soon unlimber'd to begin the red business.

LAWYER: All the mutter of preparation, all the determin'd arming.

WIDOW: The hospital service, the lint, bandages, and medicines.

NIGHT WATCH-MAN'S DAUGHTER: The women volunteering for nurse.

SOLDIER: The work begun for in earnest, no mere parade now.

THE ENSEMBLE moves forward. Bloodthirsty now. Ready to go to war.

ALL: War! An arm'd race is advancing!

SOLDIER: The welcome for battle, no turning away.

ALL: War!

SOLDIER: Be it weeks, months, or years.

ALL: An arm'd race is advancing to welcome it!

They give a cheer and raise their fists again, only to be met with a booming and overwhelming cannon blast. This one throws THE ENSEMBLE to the ground. They break apart and scatter about the stage.

The lights flicker and dim. A red light washes the stage. This is the real deal. This is what war is really like.

There is another cannon blast. And another. Smoke again begins to creep across the stage. The space shakes. Perhaps portions of the stone steps crack.

There is the sound of war. Voices yelling. Conflict crashing. Metal crashing. There is the sound of frantic bugle and drum.

THE ENSEMBLE must fight to be heard. They crawl on the ground, over each other, desperate to stay alive. There is constant movement. Some fight to stay on top, some fight to stay close to the ground.

In this section the lights are dim and full of shadows.

SOLDIER: The engagement opens there and then in fantasy unreal.

ALL: The skirmishers begin.

ACTRESS: They crawl cautiously ahead.

CHILD: (*arms over her head*) I hear the irregular snap! snap!

FARMER: I hear the sounds of the different missiles.

POET: The short t-h-t! t-h-t! of the rifle balls.

ONE YEAR WIFE: I see the shells exploding leaving small white clouds.

CLERK: I hear the great shells shrieking as they pass.

LUNATIC: The grape like the hum and whirr of wind through the trees.

There is the sound of a shrieking cannon and an explosion.

ALL: Tumultuous now the contest rages!

SCHOOL TEACHER: The crashing and smoking.

GRAVE DIGGER: The pride of the men in their pieces.

IMMIGRANT: The chief gunner ranges and sights his piece.

NIGHT WATCH-MAN'S DAUGHTER: And selects a fuse of the right time.

TRAMP: After firing I see him lean aside and look eagerly off to note the effect.

SEAMSTRESS: Elsewhere I hear the cry of a regiment charging.

NURSE: The young colonel leads himself this time with brandish'd sword.

LAWYER: I see the gaps cut by the enemy's volleys.

WIDOW: Quickly fill'd up, no delay.

THE ENSEMBLE crawl over each other as they now slowly make their way to stand. They are never completely still, always looking around in panic and fear.

BEAUTIFUL SISTER: I breathe the suffocating smoke.

FACTORY GIRL: Then the flat clouds hover low, concealing all.

SOLDIER: Now a strange lull comes for a few seconds, not a shot fired on either side.

There is a moment of silence. No sound but the ragged breathing of the characters.

Then there is the sound of a shrieking cannonball and an explosion. The lights flicker. THE ENSEMBLE is thrown to the ground.

ALL: Then resumed the chaos louder than ever.

GRAVE DIGGER & PIONEER: With eager calls and orders of officers.

CHILD: While from some distant part of the field.

LAWYER: The wind wafts to my ears a shout of applause.

CHILD: Some special success?

THE ENSEMBLE crawl over each other to once again find a way to stand. They now move slowly as a group, as soldiers looking for the enemy.

In this next section the external sounds begin to slowly fade.

POET: And ever the sound of the cannon far or near.

ALL: Rousing even in dreams.

NURSE: A devilish exultation.

LUNATIC: And all the old mad joy in the depths of my soul.

CLERK: And ever the hastening of infantry shifting positions.

ACTRESS: Batteries, cavalry, moving hither and thither.

GRAVE DIGGER: The falling, dying, I heed not.

ONE YEAR WIFE & PIONEER: The wounded dripping and red I heed not.

The movement is far from uniform. It is lurching. One after another characters fall to the ground leaving THE SOLDIER for last.

NIGHT WATCH-MAN'S DAUGHTER: Some to the rear are hobbling.

TRAMP: Grime.

ALL: Heat.

NURSE: Rush.

FACTORY GIRL: Aid-de-camps galloping by.

FARMER: Or on a full run.

WIDOW: With the patter of small arms,

SOLDIER: The warning s-s-t of the rifles. And bombs busting in air, and at night the vari-color'd rockets.

All sound fades. There is a pause as THE ENSEMBLE breathes heavily. In the dim light, all we hear is ragged breathing.

The lights slowly change. They rise on a new day. Now we can fully see the characters. They are now dirty and bloody. They are scattered on the ground.

THE POET and THE SEAMSTRESS stand and step forward. THE SEAMSTRESS tries to wipe her face on her sleeve.

THE POET rips a piece of paper from her notebook and holds it high.

POET: (very subdued) Cavalry Crossing a Ford.

THE POET lets the paper fall. THE SEAMSTRESS gives a look of insecurity to THE POET. THE POET gives a nod of encouragement and gently pushes THE SEAMSTRESS forward. She describes what she sees in front of her.

SEAMSTRESS: A line in long array where they wind betwixt green islands. They take a serpentine course, their arms flash in the sun. Hark to the musical clank. (pointing out) Behold the silvery river, in it the splashing horses loitering stop to drink. Behold

the brown-faced men. Each group, each person, a picture. The negligent rest on the saddles. Some emerge on the opposite bank. Others are just entering the ford. While scarlet, and blue, and snowy white, the guidon flags flutter gaily in the wind.

A drum cadence picks up. THE ENSEMBLE moves slowly and with pain back into formation.

During the following THE LAWYER reveals a bloody wound on his arm. THE SCHOOL TEACHER brings out a bandage from her satchel and binds his arm. The others march slowly and with great fatigue.

THE POET pulls out a piece of paper and holds it high.

POET: An Army Corps on the March.

THE POET lets the paper fall.

GRAVE DIGGER: With its cloud of skirmishers in advance,

FACTORY GIRL: With now the sound of a single shot snapping like a whip, and now an irregular volley.

PIONEER & GRAVE DIGGER & FACTORY GIRL: The swarming ranks press on and on.

PIONEER: The dense brigades press on.

GRAVE DIGGER: Glittering dimly, toiling under the sun,

FACTORY GIRL: The dust-cover'd men in columns rise and fall to the undulations of the ground,

PIONEER: With artillery interspers'd.

FACTORY GIRL: The wheels rumble,

GRAVE DIGGER: The horses sweat.

PIONEER: As the army corps advances.

There is the sound of a cannon blast. The drum fades. Those standing are thrown to the ground. THE LUNATIC reveals a bloody leg. THE ONE YEAR WIFE reveals a bloody shoulder. They tend to their wounds. THE ACTRESS struggles to stand. She leans on THE BEAUTIFUL SISTER.

THE POET pulls out a piece of paper.

POET: By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame.

THE POET lets the piece of paper fall.

ACTRESS: By the bivouac's fitful flame, a procession winding around me, solemn and sweet and slow.

BEAUTIFUL SISTER: But first I note, the tents of the sleeping army, the fields' and woods' dim outline.

ALL: (*whispering*) The darkness,

ACTRESS: Lit by spots of kindled fire.

ALL: (*whispering*) The silence,

ACTRESS & BEAUTIFUL SISTER: Like a phantom far or near an occasional figure moving.

BEAUTIFUL SISTER: (*looking around her*) The shrubs and trees, (as I lift my eyes they seem to be stealthily watching me) while wind in procession thoughts; O tender and wondrous thoughts –

ACTRESS: Of life and death.

BEAUTIFUL SISTER: Of home and the past and loved, and of those that are far away.

ACTRESS: A solemn and slow procession there as I sit on the ground,

BEAUTIFUL SISTER: By the bivouac's fitful flame.

ALL but THE CHILD sink the ground. All bloody, dirty, battered and exhausted. THE CHILD sings.

CHILD: Just before the battle mother,
I am thinking most of you.
While upon the field we're watching
With the enemy in view.
Comrades brave are 'round me lying,
Filled with thoughts of home and God.
For well they know that on the morrow,
Some will sleep beneath the sod.

Farewell mother you may never
Press me to your breast again,
But oh you'll not forget me mother,
If I'm numbered with the slain.

As THE CHILD sings, THE ENSEMBLE helps each other to stand, and wipe the blood and dirt from their faces.

CHILD: Hark! I hear the bugles sounding,
 'Tis the signal for the fight.
 Now may God protect us mother,
 As He ever does the right.
 Hear the Battle cry of Freedom
 How it swells upon the air.
 Oh yes we'll rally 'round the standard,
 Or we'll perish nobly there.

Farewell mother you may never
 Press me to your breast again,
 But oh you'll not forget me mother,
 If I'm numbered with the slain.

*THE POET and THE NIGHT WATCH-MAN'S
 DAUGHTER pull out pieces of paper. They hold them
 high.*

POET: Come up from the Fields father.

*THE POET lets her paper drop, but THE NIGHT
 WATCH-MAN's DAUGHTER brings hers in close
 to her chest. The piece of paper is a letter. THE
 ENSEMBLE turns to her. Now they are not soldiers,
 but a family waiting to hear word from the front lines.*

NIGHT WATCH-MAN'S DAUGHTER: (holding the paper) Come up
 from the fields father, here's a letter from our Pete. And come to
 the front door, mother, here's a letter from my dear son.

*They freeze in a tableau. THE TRAMP, THE WIDOW
 and THE ONE YEAR WIFE move to the side. They
 observe the picture.*

WIDOW: Lo, 'tis autumn.

TRAMP: Lo, where the trees, deeper green, yellower and redder
 cool and sweeten Ohio's villages, with leaves fluttering in the
 moderate wind.

ONE YEAR WIFE: Where apples ripe in the orchards hang, and grapes
 on the trellis'd vines.

WIDOW & TRAMP: (to each other) Smell you the smell of the grapes
 on the vines?

TRAMP & ONE YEAR WIFE: (to each other) Smell you the buckwheat,
 where the bees were lately buzzing?

All three look up.

WIDOW: Above all, lo, the sky so calm,

TRAMP: So transparent after the rain, and with wondrous clouds.

ONE YEAR WIFE: (*kneeling, feeling the earth*) Below too, all calm, all vital and beautiful, and the farm prospers well.

ALL THREE: Down in the fields all prospers well.

NIGHT WATCH-MAN'S DAUGHTER: (*coming out of freeze*) But now from the fields come father. Come at the daughter's call. And come to the entry mother, to the front door come right away.

The tableau changes. THE SCHOOL TEACHER moves centre, THE FARMER on her right, THE NIGHT WATCH-MAN'S DAUGHTER on her left. The rest of THE ENSEMBLE sits at their feet.

THE WIDOW, THE TRAMP and THE ONE YEAR WIFE move to the other side of the stage as they speak.

WIDOW & SCHOOL TEACHER: Fast as she can she hurries,

TRAMP: Something ominous.

ONE YEAR WIFE & SCHOOL TEACHER: Her steps trembling.

ONE YEAR WIFE: She does not tarry to smooth her hair nor adjust her cap.

SCHOOL TEACHER: Open the envelope quickly. (*she grabs the piece of paper*) O this is not our son's writing, yet his name is sign'd. O a strange hand writes for our dear son. O stricken mother's soul!

WIDOW: All swims before her eyes, flashes with black, she catches the main words only. Sentences broken –

ALL: (*whispering*) Gun-shot wound in the breast. Cavalry skirmish. Taken to hospital. At present low, but will soon be better.

THE SCHOOL TEACHER collapses at the knees. The others hold her up. They weave with her back and forth.

ONE YEAR WIFE: Ah now the single figure to me, amid all teeming and wealthy Ohio with all its cities and farms.

TRAMP: Sickly white in the face and dull in the head. Very faint. By the jamb of a door leans.

NIGHT WATCH-MAN'S DAUGHTER: Grieve not so, dear mother.

WIDOW: The just-grown daughter speaks through her sobs. The little sisters huddle around speechless and dismay'd.

NIGHT WATCH-MAN'S DAUGHTER: See, dearest mother, the letter says Pete will soon be better.

They bring THE SCHOOL TEACHER to a seat. She clutches the piece of paper to her chest with a dazed look on her face. The others touch her shoulder, stroke her hair. But nothing matters.

THE TRAMP, THE WIDOW, and THE ONE YEAR WIFE move to stand behind.

TRAMP: Alas poor boy, he will never be better. Nor may-be needs to be better, that brave and simple soul. While they stand at home at the door he is dead already.

ALL: (*whispering*) The only son is dead.

WIDOW: (*placing a hand on THE SCHOOL TEACHER's shoulder*) But the mother needs to be better. She with thin form presently drest in black.

SCHOOL TEACHER: By day her meals untouch'd, then at night fitfully sleeping.

TRAMP: Often waking.

WIDOW: In the midnight waking.

ONE YEAR WIFE: Weeping, longing with one deep longing.

WIDOW & SCHOOL TEACHER: O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life escape and withdraw.

TRAMP: To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son.

There is the sound of a faraway cannon shot. THE ENSEMBLE turns their head to the sound. There is another faraway cannon shot.

The drum cadence picks up again. They wearily stand and move downstage into formation. They march in place. The lights dim.

THE POET pulls out a piece of paper and holds it high.

POET: A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown.

THE POET lets the paper fall.

LUNATIC: A march in the ranks hard-prest, and the road unknown.

FARMER: A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the darkness.

IMMIGRANT: Our army foil'd with loss severe, and the sullen remnant retreating.

CLERK: Till after midnight glimmer upon us the lights of a dim-lighted building.

IMMIGRANT: We come to an open space in the woods, and halt by the dim-lighted building.

THE ENSEMBLE comes to a halt and wearily put down whatever they carry. They scatter about the space. THE LUNATIC picks up a lantern from the ground and peers into the darkness. She moves forward with THE CLERK, THE IMMIGRANT and THE FARMER.

LUNATIC: 'Tis a large old church at the crossing roads, now an impromptu hospital. Entering but for a minute I see a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made:

ALL: Shadows of deepest, deepest black,

LUNATIC: Just lit by moving candles and lamps. And by one great pitchy torch stationary with wild red flame and clouds of smoke,

THE LUNATIC passes off the lantern to THE CLERK.

CLERK: By these, crowds. Groups of forms vaguely I see on the floor, some in the pews laid down.

CLERK & IMMIGRANT: At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad,

IMMIGRANT: In danger of bleeding to death. He is shot in the abdomen.

All FOUR kneel.

FARMER: I staunch the blood temporarily.

LUNATIC: The youngster's face is white as a lily.

CLERK: Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o'er the scene fain to absorb it all.

THE CLERK holds up the lantern.

ALL: Faces. Varieties. Postures beyond description.

IMMIGRANT: Most in obscurity.

FARMER: Some of them dead.

LUNATIC: Surgeons operating.

CLERK: Attendants holding lights.

FARMER: The smell of ether.

IMMIGRANT: The odor of blood.

They peer in the darkness. They see nothing but horror.

ALL: The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms.

CLERK: The yard outside also fill'd.

LUNATIC: Some on the bare ground. Some on planks or stretchers.

IMMIGRANT: Some in the death-spasm sweating.

FARMER: An occasional scream or cry.

CLERK: The doctor's shouted orders or calls.

LUNATIC: The glint of the little steel instruments catching the glint of the torches.

FARMER: These I resume as I chant, I see again the forms, I smell the odor.

IMMIGRANT: Then hear outside the orders given:

CLERK: (*calling out*) Fall in, my men. Fall in.

They turn as if hearing the call. They turn back.

LUNATIC: But first I bend to the dying lad, his eyes open, a half-smile gives he me. Then the eyes close. Calmly close.

They lean back and close their eyes. There is a pause. All we hear is the drum. They open their eyes and stand.

FARMER: And I speed forth to the darkness.

IMMIGRANT: Resuming.

CLERK: Marching.

LUNATIC: Ever in darkness marching,

FARMER: On in the ranks.

LUNATIC: The unknown road still marching.

The four fall back into formation. THE ENSEMBLE picks up their feet, creating a heavier tramp. All we hear is the heavy stamp of feet on the ground and the drum cadence. They ALL give a military stop and freeze. There is no sound.

THE POET steps forward. She rubs her face with her hands and then pulls out a piece of paper. She holds it high.

ALL: (whispering) To A Certain Civilian.

THE POET crumples the piece of paper and throws it to the ground.

POET: Did you ask dulcet rhymes from me? Did you seek the civilian's peaceful and languishing rhymes? Did you find what I sang erewhile so hard to follow? Why I was not singing erewhile for you to follow, to understand. Nor am I now.

THE POET continues to pull out pieces of paper, crumple them and throw them to the ground.

POET: I have been born of the same as the war was born. The drum-corps' rattle is ever to me sweet music. I love well the martial dirge, with slow wail and convulsive throb leading to officer's funeral;

ALL: What to such as you anyhow such a poet as I?

POET: Therefore leave my works, and go lull yourself with what you can understand, and with piano tunes. For I lull nobody, and you will never understand me.

THE PIONEER places a hand on THE POET's shoulder. THE POET turns to THE PIONEER and buries her head in her shoulder.

THE LAWYER steps forward. He pulls out a piece of paper and holds it in his hands, staring at it.

LAWYER: Bivouac on a Mountain side. I see before me now a traveling army halting. Below a fertile valley spread, with barns and the

orchards of summer. Behind, the terraced sides of a mountain, abrupt, in places rising high – broken with rocks. With clinging cedars. With tall shapes dingily seen. The numerous camp-fires scattered near and far, some away up on the mountain. The shadowy forms of men and horses. Looming. Large sized. Flickering. (*he looks up, holding his piece of paper high*) And over all the sky – the sky! (*lets his piece of paper drop*) Far, far out of reach, studded, breaking out, the eternal stars.

The lights change. There is the distant sound of a cannon blast.

THE ENSEMBLE scatter about the space with purpose. Moving and acting as if in a military hospital. They are doctors and nurses tending to the wounded. They move quickly and with purpose. There is no sorrow in their actions; they are getting the job done.

THE CHILD sings.

CHILD: Ah! May the red rose live alway,
To smile upon earth and sky.
Why should the beautiful ever weep?
Why should the beautiful die?
Lending a charm to every ray
That falls on her cheeks of light,
Giving the zephyr kiss for kiss,
And nursing the dew-drop bright.

Ah! may the red rose live alway,
To smile upon earth and sky.
Why should the beautiful ever weep?
Why should the beautiful die?
Why should the beautiful ever weep?
Why should the beautiful die?

At the end of the song THE ENSEMBLE moves to form a line. They pull out a piece of paper and hold it high.

POET: The Wound Dresser.

They let the pieces of paper fall.

During the following, they ALL do the same movements, whether they are talking or not. They are the wound dresser.

Small Cast Version

LIZBETH

ALICE

MEG

THOMAS

HENRY

One of Whitman's themes is 'the Individual' and to that end it's important that you pay attention to character development. The cast should never just spout words. Given that there isn't a lot of character help in the script, each actor should create a character profile with name, age, background, family situation and living situation. Think about the relationships between characters - are any of them related?

Give each character a physical gesture or stance. The audience should be able to get a sense of who they are by how the characters enter, move and stand.

The more specific the character, the more alive the poetry will become. If you ignore character development, you're missing out on taking the play to the next level. The more three-dimensional the characters, the more three-dimensional the play

Other Suggestions: encourage the actors to explore common Walt Whitman themes (such as war, the body and soul, democratic identity, nature, individual identity). Use these themes when making physical choices.

Look at the character list in the large cast version of this play and make sure each character has one of those identities.

In the darkness a single drum beat is heard. Light rises on THOMAS who kneels by the side of the stage. He has a weathered notebook in his hand. He flips through a couple of the pages. He comes to a specific place in the book and stops. He looks at the audience.

THOMAS rips a page from the notebook and holds it high.

Voices from the darkness gently whisper.

VOICES: (whispering) Song of the Banner at Daybreak.

THOMAS lets the piece of paper fall.

THOMAS: (still kneeling) O a new song, a free song. Flapping, flapping, flapping, flapping, by sounds, by voices clearer. By the wind's voice and that of the drum. By the banner's voice and child's voice and sea's voice and father's voice.

THOMAS pulls a piece of paper out of his costume. He lets it fall.

As THOMAS speaks, the lights rise on the space. The rest of the characters stand in a tableau centre stage. Smoke creeps across the space. THOMAS stands.

THOMAS: Low on the ground and high in the air. On the ground where the father and child stand, in the upward air where their eyes turn, where the banner at daybreak is flapping. Words! (holding up the notebook) Book-words! What are you? Words no more.

The others start a low hum which grows gradually as THOMAS speaks.

THOMAS: For hearken and see, my song is there in the open air and I must sing with the banner and pennant a-flapping.

THOMAS crosses to the other side of the stage. Speaking with heart felt energy to the audience.

THOMAS: (pulling out another piece of paper from his costume) I'll weave the chord and twine in. Man's desire and babe's desire. I'll twine them in. I'll put in life. I'll put the bayonet's flashing point. I'll let bullets and slugs whizz, as one carrying a symbol and menace far into the future, crying with the trumpet voice, (a bugle is heard) Arouse and beware! (a bugle is heard. THOMAS looks toward the sound) Beware and arouse!

The group is in full voice now, mouths open, the sound grows.

THOMAS: (*holding up the notebook*) I'll pour the verse with streams of blood, full of volition, full of joy!

THOMAS makes to throw the notebook toward the group.

There is the sound of a cannon blast. The stage is plunged into darkness. The drums play a continuous roll, calling the soldiers to battle. There is a bugle call.

THOMAS: (*over the din*) Then loosen, launch forth, to go and compete, with the banner and pennant a-flapping!

The lights come up full and the characters all come to life. THOMAS is in the middle. They cheer at the excitement of going to war.

During the following THOMAS moves from character to character. He pulls out pieces of paper from their clothing. He is pulling the poetry out of them and bringing it to life.

ALL: Beat! Beat! Drums! Blow! Bugles! Blow!

LIZBETH: Through the windows. Through doors.

MEG: Burst like a ruthless force.

LIZBETH: Into the solemn church and scatter the congregation.

HENRY: In the school where the scholar is studying.

ALICE: Leave not the bride groom quiet. No happiness must he have now with his bride.

LIZBETH: Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain.

MEG: So fierce you whirr and pound you drums. So shrill you bugles blow.

ALL: Beat! Beat! Drums! Blow! Bugles! Blow!

There is the sound of a cannon blast. The lights flicker. The space shakes. They waver but stand their ground. The group moves downstage.

LIZBETH: Make no parley. Stop for no expostulation.

HENRY: Mind not the timid. Mind not the weeper or prayer.

THOMAS: Mind not the old man beseeching the young man.

ALICE: Let not the child's voice be heard, nor the mother's entreaties.

MEG: Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting
the hearses,

ALL: So strong you thump or terrible drums. So loud you bugles blow!

*There is the sound of a cannon blast. It's closer. The
lights flicker.*

*They all waver but stand their ground. They raise their
fists in the air and cheer. They spread out across the
front of the stage, speaking with fierce energy to the
audience.*

*Each pulls out a piece of paper from their costume
and holds it out toward the audience.*

HENRY: Thunder on!

HENRY & MEG: Stride on, Democracy!

LIZBETH: Strike with vengeful stroke!

LIZBETH & THOMAS: And do you rise higher than ever yet,

ALL: O days, O cities!

ALICE: Crash heavier, heavier yet O storms.

*The group changes positions, each moving to a new
spot downstage. They continue to speak with a fevered
energy, as if it were essential to get their message
across.*

ALL: Spring up O city!

LIZBETH: Not for peace alone, but be indeed yourself, warlike!

ALICE: Fear not! Submit to no models but your own O city!

HENRY: Behold me! Incarnate me as I have incarnated you!

MEG: I have rejected nothing you offer'd me.

THOMAS: Whom you adopted I have adopted.

ALICE: Good or bad I never question you.

ALL: I love all.

ALICE: I do not condemn anything.

THOMAS: I chant and celebrate all that is yours, yet peace no more.

LIZBETH: In peace I chanted peace, but now the drum of war is mine.

ALL: War, red war is my song through your streets, O city!

They each hold their pieces of paper high in the air with a cheer.

The cannon sounds and fades away. The lights flicker and change.

They look at each other and nod, ready for the next section.

ALL: (whispering) First O Songs for a Prelude.

They let their piece of paper fall.

LIZBETH moves centre stage. She begins to march with a huge smile on her face. There is pride and joy in all the characters.

The drum cadence changes. It is a slow and steady beat. The drum calls the young men from their homes to join the fight.

LIZBETH: FIRST O songs for a prelude, lightly strike on the stretch'd tympanum pride and joy in my city.

ALICE falls in formation with LIZBETH.

ALICE: How she led the rest to arms.

HENRY falls into formation.

HENRY: How she gave the cue.

THOMAS falls into formation.

THOMAS: How at once with lithe limbs, unawaiting a moment, she sprang;

ALL: How you sprang!

MEG falls into formation.

MEG: How you threw off the costumes of peace with indifferent hand.

ALICE: How your soft opera-music changed,

LIZBETH: And the drum and fife were heard in their stead.

HENRY: How you lead to the war,

They stamp the ground and raise their fists.

ALL: (shouting) To the drum-taps prompt!

They stamp the ground and cheer. They scatter about the space. They shake hands and clap shoulders. They twirl in each others arms. They hug with excitement. There is great camaraderie, pride and happiness.

LIZBETH: The young men falling in and arming.

THOMAS: The mechanics arming, (the trowel, the jack-plane, the blacksmith's hammer, tost aside with precipitation)

HENRY: The lawyer leaving his office and arming. The judge leaving the court.

ALICE: The driver deserting his wagon in the street, jumping down, throwing the reins abruptly down on the horses' backs.

MEG: The salesman leaving the store. The boss, book-keeper, porter, all leaving.

ALL: Squads gather everywhere by common consent and arm!

They give a shout and scatter about the stage. In the next section, they prepare to go off to war. They throw satchels over their shoulders. ALICE grabs a drum. THOMAS shoulds a musket.

ALICE: The new recruits, even boys,

THOMAS: The old men show them how to wear their accouterments,

ALICE: They buckle the straps carefully.

HENRY: Outdoors arming, indoors arming, the flash of the musket-barrels.

MEG: The white tents cluster in camp.

LIZBETH: The arm'd sentries around.

MEG: The sunrise cannon, and again at sunset.

*There is the sound of a cannon. They cheer the sound.
They are gleeful and rejoice.*

HENRY: Arm'd regiments arrive every day, pass through the city, and embark from the wharves.

THOMAS & ALICE: How good they look as they tramp down to the river, sweaty, with their guns on their shoulders!

THOMAS & ALICE & MEG: How I love them! How I could hug them, with their brown faces,

ALL: And their clothes and knapsacks cover'd with dust!

LIZBETH: The blood of the city up,

ALL: Arm'd! Arm'd!

LIZBETH: The cry everywhere.

*When they come back into formation, it is as a soldier unit. Clearly this is symbolic as opposed to realistic.
They march smartly with pride.*

LIZBETH: The flags flung out from the steeples of churches and from all the public buildings and stores.

LIZBETH & THOMAS: The tearful parting, the mother kisses her son, the son kisses his mother.

ALICE: Loth is the mother to part, yet not a word does she speak to detain him.

HENRY: The tumultuous escort, the ranks of policemen preceding, clearing the way.

Along with the drum beat there is now the added sound of a crowd. They look from side to side, as if they see the crowd. They wave, see loved ones, express excitement.

MEG: The unpent enthusiasm.

ALICE: The wild cheers of the crowd for their favorites.

THOMAS: The artillery.

ALL: The silent cannons, bright as gold,

THOMAS: Drawn along, rumble lightly over the stones.

LIZBETH: Silent cannons, soon to cease your silence,

MEG: Soon unlimber'd to begin the red business.

HENRY: All the mutter of preparation, all the determin'd arming.

ALICE: The hospital service, the lint, bandages, and medicines.

MEG: The women volunteering for nurse.

HENRY: The work begun for in earnest, no mere parade now.

They move forward. Blood thirsty now.

ALL: War! An arm'd race is advancing!

LIZBETH: The welcome for battle, no turning away.

ALL: War!

LIZBETH: Be it weeks, months, or years.

ALL: An arm'd race is advancing to welcome it!

They give a cheer and raise their fists again, only to be met with an overwhelming cannon blast again. This one throws them all to the ground.

The lights flicker and dim. A red light washes the stage. This is the real deal.

There is another cannon blast. And another. Smoke again begins to creep across the stage. The space shakes and portions of the stone steps crack.

There is the sound of war. Voices yelling. Conflict crashing. Metal crashing. There is the sound of frantic bugle and drum.

The characters crawl on the ground, over each other, desperate to stay alive as they are plunged in the middle of horror. They must fight to be heard over the sounds of war.

In this section the lights are dim and full of shadows.

LIZBETH: The engagement opens there and then in fantasy unreal.

ALL: The skirmishers begin.

THOMAS: They crawl cautiously ahead.

ALICE: *(arms over her head)* I hear the irregular snap! snap!

HENRY: I hear the sounds of the different missiles.

MEG: The short t-h-t! t-h-t! of the rifle balls.

LIZBETH: I see the shells exploding leaving small white clouds.

HENRY: I hear the great shells shrieking as they pass.

ALICE: The grape like the hum and whirr of wind through the trees.

There is the sound of a shrieking cannon and an explosion.

ALL: Tumultuous now the contest rages!

THOMAS: The crashing and smoking.

MEG: The pride of the men in their pieces.

LIZBETH: The chief gunner ranges and sights his piece.

HENRY: And selects a fuse of the right time.

ALICE: After firing I see him lean aside and look eagerly off to note the effect.

THOMAS: Elsewhere I hear the cry of a regiment charging.

HENRY: The young colonel leads himself this time with brandish'd sword.

ALICE: I see the gaps cut by the enemy's volleys.

MEG: Quickly fill'd up, no delay.

They crawl over each other and slowly make their way to standing. They are never still, always looking around in panic and fear.

LIZBETH: I breathe the suffocating smoke.

THOMAS: Then the flat clouds hover low, concealing all.

LIZBETH: Now a strange lull comes for a few seconds, not a shot fired on either side.

There is a moment of silence. No sound but the ragged breathing of the characters. Then there is the sound of a shrieking cannonball and an explosion. The lights flicker. They are thrown to the ground.

LIZBETH: Then resumed the chaos louder than ever.

HENRY: With eager calls and orders of officers.

ALICE: While from some distant part of the field.

MEG: The wind wafts to my ears a shout of applause.

THOMAS: Some special success?

They crawl over each other to once again find a way to stand. They move as a group, as soldiers looking for the enemy.

In this next section the external sounds begin to slowly fade.

LIZBETH: And ever the sound of the cannon far or near.

ALL: Rousing even in dreams.

HENRY: A devilish exultation.

MEG: And all the old mad joy in the depths of my soul.

THOMAS: And ever the hastening of infantry shifting positions.

ALICE: Batteries, cavalry, moving hither and thither.

LIZBETH: The falling, dying, I heed not.

THOMAS: The wounded dripping and red I heed not.

MEG: Some to the rear are hobbling.

ALICE: Grime.

ALL: Heat.

HENRY: Rush.

LIZBETH: Aid-de-camps galloping by.

ALICE: Or on a full run.

THOMAS: With the patter of small arms,

MEG: The warning s-s-t of the rifles.

HENRY: And bombs busting in air, and at night the vari-color'd rockets.

All sound fades. There is a pause as they breathe heavily. In the dim light, all we hear is ragged breathing.

The lights slowly change. It is a new day. Now we can fully see the characters. They are now dirty and bloody.

LIZBETH & HENRY steps forward. LIZBETH pulls a piece of paper from her pocket and holds it high.

HENRY pulls a cloth out of his satchel and tries to wipe his face.

LIZBETH: (very subdued) Cavalry Crossing a Ford.

LIZBETH lets the paper fall. HENRY crouches and describes what he sees in front of him.

HENRY: A line in long array where they wind betwixt green islands.

They take a serpentine course, their arms flash in the sun. Hark to the musical clank. (pointing out) Behold the silvery river, in it the splashing horses loitering stop to drink. Behold the brown-faced men. Each group, each person, a picture. The negligent rest on the saddles. Some emerge on the opposite bank. Others are just entering the ford. While scarlet, and blue, and snowy white, the guidon flags flutter gaily in the wind.

A drum cadence picks up.

They move slowly and painfully back into formation. During the following THOMAS reveals a bloody wound on his arm. ALICE brings out a bandage from her satchel and binds his arm. The others march slowly and with great fatigue.

MEG pulls out a piece of paper and holds it high.

MEG: (subdued) An Army Corps on the March.

MEG lets the paper fall.

HENRY: With its cloud of skirmishers in advance.

MEG: With now the sound of a single shot snapping like a whip, and now an irregular volley.

ALICE & HENRY & MEG: The swarming ranks press on and on.

LIZBETH: The dense brigades press on.

MEG: Glittering dimly, toiling under the sun, the dust-cover'd men, in columns rise and fall to the undulations of the ground.

MEG: With artillery interspers'd.

HENRY: The wheels rumble, the horses sweat.

MEG: As the army corps advances.

There is the sound of a cannon blast. The drum fades. Those standing are thrown to the ground. HENRY reveals a bloody leg. MEG reveals a bloody shoulder. They tend to their wounds. ALICE struggles to stand.

ALICE pulls out a piece of paper.

ALL: (whispering) By the Bivouac's fitful flame.

ALICE lets the piece of paper fall.

ALICE: By the bivouac's fitful flame, a procession winding around me, solemn and sweet and slow. But first I note, the tents of the sleeping army, the fields' and woods' dim outline.

ALL: (whispering) The darkness,

ALICE: Lit by spots of kindled fire.

ALL: (whispering) The silence,

ALICE: Like a phantom far or near an occasional figure moving. (she looks around) The shrubs and trees, (as I lift my eyes they seem to be stealthily watching me) while wind in procession thoughts; O tender and wondrous thoughts – Of life and death. Of home and the past and loved, and of those that are far away. A solemn and slow procession there as I sit on the ground, By the bivouac's fitful flame.

ALL but THOMAS sink the ground. All bloody, dirty, battered and exhausted. THOMAS sings. He sings a cappella.

THOMAS: Just before the battle mother,
I am thinking most of you.
While upon the field we're watching
With the enemy in view.
Comrades brave are 'round me lying,
Filled with thoughts of home and God.
For well they know that on the morrow,
Some will sleep beneath the sod.
Farewell mother you may never
Press me to your breast again,
But oh you'll not forget me mother,
If I'm numbered with the slain.

As THOMAS sings, the rest help each other to stand, and wipe the blood and dirt from their faces.

THOMAS: Hark! I hear the bugles sounding,
 'Tis the signal for the fight.
 Now may God protect us mother,
 As He ever does the right.
 Hear the Battle cry of Freedom
 How it swells upon the air.
 Oh yes we'll rally 'round the standard,
 Or we'll perish nobly there.
 Farewell mother you may never
 Press me to your breast again,
 But oh you'll not forget me mother,
 If I'm numbered with the slain.

They all pull a piece of paper from their clothes and hold it high.

ALL: Come up from the Fields father,

All but MEG let their paper drop. MEG holds the piece of paper dearly to her chest. The rest to MEG. Now they are not soldiers, but a family waiting to hear word.

MEG: (*holding the paper*) Come up from the fields father, here's a letter from our Pete. And come to the front door, mother, here's a letter from thy dear son.

ALICE, THOMAS and HENRY gather around MEG to look at the piece of paper. They freeze in a tableau. LIZBETH circles them.

LIZBETH: Lo, 'tis autumn. Lo, where the trees, deeper green, yellower and redder cool and sweeten Ohio's villages, with leaves fluttering in the moderate wind. Where apples ripe in the orchards hang, and grapes on the trellis'd vines.

LIZBETH & HENRY: (*face to face*) Smell you the smell of the grapes on the vines? Smell you the buckwheat, where the bees were lately buzzing?

LIZBETH: Above all, lo, the sky so calm, so transparent after the rain, and with wondrous clouds. Below too, all calm, all vital and beautiful, and the farm prospers well.

LIZBETH & THOMAS: (*face to face*) Down in the fields all prospers well.

MEG: (*holding up the piece of paper*) But now from the fields come father. Come at the daughter's call. And come to the entry mother, to the front door come right away.

LIZBETH: Fast as she can she hurries,

ALICE: Something ominous.

LIZBETH: Her steps trembling. She does not tarry to smoothe her hair nor adjust her cap.

ALICE: Open the envelope quickly. (*she grabs the piece of paper*) O this is not our son's writing, yet his name is sign'd. O a strange hand writes for our dear son. O stricken mother's soul!

LIZBETH: All swims before her eyes, flashes with black, she catches the main words only. Sentences broken –

ALL: (*whispering*) Gun-shot wound in the breast. Cavalry skirmish. Taken to hospital. At present low, but will soon be better.

ALICE collapses at the knees. The others hold her up. They weave with her back and forth.

LIZBETH: Ah now the single figure to me, amid all teeming and wealthy Ohio with all its cities and farms. Sickly white in the face and dull in the head. Very faint. By the jamb of a door leans.

MEG: Grieve not so, dear mother.

LIZBETH: The just-grown daughter speaks through her sobs. The little sisters huddle around speechless and dismay'd.

MEG: See, dearest mother, the letter says Pete will soon be better.

They bring ALICE to a seat. She clutches the piece of paper to her chest with a dazed look on her face. The others touch her shoulder, stroke her hair. But nothing matters.

LIZBETH: Alas poor boy, he will never be better. Nor may-be needs to be better, that brave and simple soul. While they stand at home at the door he is dead already.

HENRY: The only son is dead.

LIZBETH: But the mother needs to be better. She with thin form presently drest in black.

ALICE: By day her meals untouch'd, then at night fitfully sleeping.

MEG: Often waking.

HENRY: In the midnight waking.

THOMAS: Weeping, longing with one deep longing.

LIZBETH & ALICE: O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life escape and withdraw.

LIZBETH: To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son.

There is the sound of a faraway cannon shot. The drum cadence picks up again. They wearily stand and move into formation. They march in place. The lights dim.

THOMAS pulls out a piece of paper and holds it high.

THOMAS: A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown.

THOMAS lets the paper fall.

HENRY: A march in the ranks hard-prest, and the road unknown.

ALICE: A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the darkness.

THOMAS: Our army foil'd with loss severe, and the sullen remnant retreating.

MEG: Till after midnight glimmer upon us the lights of a dim-lighted building.

ALICE: We come to an open space in the woods, and halt by the dim-lighted building.

They come to a halt and wearily put down whatever they carry. They scatter about the space. THOMAS picks up a lantern from the ground and peers into the darkness.

THOMAS: 'Tis a large old church at the crossing roads, now an impromptu hospital. Entering but for a minute I see a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made:

ALL: Shadows of deepest, deepest black,

THOMAS: Just lit by moving candles and lamps. And by one great pitchy torch stationary with wild red flame and clouds of smoke,

THOMAS passes off the lantern to ALICE and HENRY.

ALICE: By these, crowds. Groups of forms vaguely I see on the floor,
some in the pews laid down.

ALICE & HENRY: At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad,

HENRY: In danger of bleeding to death. He is shot in the abdomen.

ALICE and MEG kneel.

MEG: I staunch the blood temporarily.

MEG & THOMAS: (*THOMAS kneels*) The youngster's face is white as a lily.

MEG: Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o'er the scene fain to absorb it all.

HENRY and LIZBETH kneel.

ALL: Faces. Varieties. Postures beyond description.

THOMAS: Most in obscurity.

HENRY: Some of them dead.

ALICE: Surgeons operating.

MEG: Attendants holding lights.

LIZBETH: The smell of ether.

THOMAS: The odor of blood.

THOMAS holds up the lantern and they all lean forward, peering into the darkness. They see nothing but horror.

ALL: The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms.

ALICE: The yard outside also fill'd.

MEG: Some on the bare ground.

HENRY: Some on planks or stretchers.

THOMAS: Some in the death-spasm sweating.

LIZBETH: An occasional scream or cry.

THOMAS: The doctor's shouted orders or calls.

ALICE: The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the glint of the torches.

MEG: These I resume as I chant, I see again the forms, I smell the odor.

LIZBETH: Then hear outside the orders given:

HENRY: (*calling out*) Fall in, my men. Fall in.

They turn their heads, hearing the call. They turn back.

THOMAS: But first I bend to the dying lad, his eyes open, a half-smile gives he me. Then the eyes close. Calmly close.

They lean back and slowly close their eyes. There is a pause. All we hear is the drum. Then they open their eyes and stand, moving back into formation.

THOMAS: And I speed forth to the darkness.

HENRY: Resuming.

MEG: Marching.

ALICE: Ever in darkness marching,

LIZBETH: On in the ranks.

THOMAS: The unknown road still marching.

They pick up the tramp of their feet. All we hear is the heavy stamp of feet on the ground and the drum cadence. They give a military stop and freeze. There is no sound.

LIZBETH steps forward. She rubs her face with her hands and then pulls out a piece of paper. She holds it high.

ALL: (*whispering*) To A Certain Civilian.

LIZBETH crumples the piece of paper and throws it to the ground.

LIZBETH: Did you ask dulcet rhymes from me? Did you seek the civilian's peaceful and languishing rhymes? Did you find what I sang erewhile so hard to follow? Why I was not singing erewhile for you to follow, to understand. Nor am I now.

She continues to pull out pieces of paper and throw them to the ground.

LIZBETH: I have been born of the same as the war was born. The drum-corps' rattle is ever to me sweet music. I love well the

martial dirge, with slow wail and convulsive throb leading to officer's funeral;

ALL: What to such as you anyhow such a poet as I?

LIZBETH: Therefore leave my works, and go lull yourself with what you can understand, and with piano tunes. For I lull nobody, and you will never understand me.

ALICE places a hand on LIZBETH's shoulder. LIZBETH turns to ALICE and buries her head in her shoulder.

MEG steps forward. She pulls out a piece of paper and holds it in her hands, staring at it.

MEG: Bivouac on a Mountain side. I see before me now a traveling army halting. Below a fertile valley spread, with barns and the orchards of summer. Behind, the terraced sides of a mountain, abrupt, in places rising high – broken with rocks. With clinging cedars. With tall shapes dingily seen. The numerous camp-fires scattered near and far, some away up on the mountain. The shadowy forms of men and horses. Looming. Large sized. Flickering. *(She looks up, and reaches out with her arms, drinking in the sky.)* And over all the sky – the sky! *(she lets her piece of paper fall)* Far, far out of reach, studded, breaking out, the eternal stars.

The lights change. There is the distant sound of a cannon blast.

The characters scatter about the space. Moving and acting as if in a military hospital. They are doctors and nurses tending to the wounded. They move quickly and with purpose. There is no sorrow in their actions; they are getting the job done.

ALICE sings.

ALICE: Ah! May the red rose live away,
To smile upon earth and sky.
Why should the beautiful ever weep?
Why should the beautiful die?
Lending a charm to every ray
That falls on her cheeks of light,
Giving the zephyr kiss for kiss,
And nursing the dew-drop bright
Ah! may the red rose live away,
To smile upon earth and sky.
Why should the beautiful ever weep?
Why should the beautiful die?



help@theatrefolk.com www.theatrefolk.com

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