

The Cop and the Anthem

A One-Act Play
from the short story by O. Henry

Adapted by Kevin Stone

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DEDICATION

For Kaele

STORY OF THE PLAY

Three hobos gather in New York City in the early 1900s. Winter is approaching, and they hatch a plan to get themselves arrested so they can winter in jail, where at least they will have a warm bed and three squares a day. They proceed with multiple attempts to get themselves nabbed, but each attempt fails for one reason or another. Dejected, they wander the streets until they come to a church where they hear a Christmas hymn playing. The beauty of the scene and the power of the music prompts them to pledge to reform their lives and start afresh—and it's at that moment they are arrested and sentenced to jail for vagrancy. A one-act play full of inspirational drollery and playful irony for 30 actors, or, with doubling, as few as 18. All the parts can be played by either male or female actors.

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PROPS

leaves and snowflakes to be gently tossed
barrel with fire
sticks with meat
rolling desk
gavel
5 brass musical instruments
bottle of wine
cheese plate under glass
roasted duck on a covered tray
whistle
cobblestone
umbrella
spatula
detachable sleeve on shirt
half-eaten sandwich wrapped in parchment paper
charcoal in a bucket

MUSIC / SOUND EFFECTS

wind blowing
wind dance music
antique shop bell
band music
car horns/traffic/shouting
duck quack
breaking glass (3 times)
tearing sleeve material
Christmas hymn
curtain call

SET

For ease of staging, all windows or doors are offstage. All that is needed on stage are a wall, SR, suggesting a city scene, and an area, SL, suggesting a city park.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(Flexible cast of 18 – 30+)

SPEAKING ROLES

STYMIE: A hobo.

SCOOTER: Another.

SOAPY: Another.

JUDGE

3 WAITERS

7 COPS: As individuals or divided as needed.

WOMAN: 1 and 2.

MAN: 1, 2, and 3.

UMBRELLA MAN

YOUNG WOMAN

SHORT-ORDER COOK

COAL CARRIER

NONSPEAKING ROLES

NORTH WIND: A dancer.

BAILIFF

5 SALVATION ARMY BAND MEMBERS: Play a short bit of
a rousing hymn.

EXTRA CROWD MEMBERS

CASTING NOTES

All the parts can be played by either male or female actors, with slight changes in the dialogue. There are many options for doubling. Do what works best for your cast. Here are a few examples.

Cop 1, 3, and 7

Cop 2, 4, and 6

Cop 5 and Bailiff

Band and Crowd

Waiter 2 and Coal Carrier

Waiter 3 and Short-Order Cook

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(AT RISE: MUSIC up. SFX: wind. A SPOTLIGHT on NORTH WIND, dancing up the aisle. As she dances, she strews autumn leaves into the audience. She enters stage. LIGHTS up to reveal 3 HOBOS, DSR, standing around a barrel, holding sticks and cooking meat over a fire. North Wind dances to the hobos and hands SOAPY her last leaf. He takes it and nods to North Wind, who exits, SL, dancing. MUSIC and SFX out.)

STYMIE: *(Holding up a very burnt piece of meat on the end of his stick.)* I'm no sous-chef, but my squirrel may be nearing a state of completion.

SCOOTER: I'm no food critic, but— *(Taps the meat.)* —you're right.

(STYMIE proceeds to try to bite into his morsel.)

SOAPY: Well, my compadres, we have arrived at a momentous day.

SCOOTER: Let me guess—the Carlton is inviting us to fill the vacancies in their royal suite.

STYMIE: *(Tossing the meat into the fire barrel.)* The Chez Josephine needs taste testers for their updated menu, and they desire the expertise afforded by our discriminating palates.

SOAPY: *(Holding up the leaf.)* Nothing so fortuitous as either of you hazard. Today is momentous but still mundane. Before us lies something quite elemental. The North Wind just visited and handed me a calling card from Jack Frost. Which can only mean one thing: our existence, like that of the migratory fowl, is about to change.

STYMIE: I know the change you mean: a few more Sunday editions of *The Times* over us at night.

SCOOTER: And finding more wood to stoke our fire.

SOAPY: *(Crossing CS.)* Having received this deciduous presage of winter, my friends, it is time for us to leave these environs and seek a more temperate clime.

(SOAPY tucks the leaf into his jacket pocket.)

SCOOTER: Leave Madison Square?

STYMIE: A more amicable domicile will be hard to find.

SOAPY: Ah, my good fellows, this is our hearth and home for nine months per annum. But the remainder of the year—the more intemperate months—we can pack our bags and move to the island!

STYMIE: What island, Soapy? Long Island, I suppose?

SCOOTER: Manhattan?

STYMIE: Think bigger! Bermuda!

SCOOTER: Bora Bora!

STYMIE: Ah! Wouldn't that be the cat's meow? Soporific southern skies!

SCOOTER: I dream of a Mediterranean cruise!

STYMIE: Drifting in a Vesuvian bay!

SOAPY: What I propose is better than all of that!

SCOOTER: Soapy, are you touched in the head? How would the likes of us get to such a place?

STYMIE: I don't know any boat captains, and I can't swim.

SOAPY: Such exotic locales are indeed inaccessible to us. I refer to my vacation spot of choice—Blackwell's.

SCOOTER: Blackwell's Island?

STYMIE: The prison, you mean?

SOAPY: None other.

SCOOTER: Soapy, you had us going for a minute!

SOAPY: Hear me out. Blackwell's is a veritable paradise, *mon ami*: three months of assured board and bed. And guaranteed congenial company. Safe from the bluecoats and blast of winter. Blackwell's, my friends, is the essence of all that is desirable.

SCOOTER: Do you speak from experience?

SOAPY: I myself wintered last in Blackwell's.

(Enter JUDGE, SR seated behind a rolling judge's desk; the whole is pushed by the BAILIFF.)

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SOAPY: (*Cont'd.*) It was a simple matter of procuring my arrest. Slightly more involved was timing my incarceration to coincide with the onslaught of winter's fury. But, once I was secure in the hands of the law, I was brought before the judge, who raised his gavel and—

JUDGE: (*Slamming gavel.*) Three months on Blackwell's Island!

(*The BAILIFF pushes the JUDGE and desk off.*)

STYMIE: As simple as that?

SOAPY: As simple and as rewarding as that! (*Hugging BOTH of them.*) Think of it, gents, three months of epicurean delights, courtesy of New York's finest!

SCOOTER: It's true enough that winters in the Square can be harsh. But there are other ways. You forget philanthropy.

(*Enter the SALVATION ARMY BAND, SL.*)

STYMIE: Yes, see right there: the Salvation Army and their ilk will feed and lodge us, if worse comes to worst.

(*BAND plays a short bit of a rousing hymn.*)

SOAPY: I will have fallen on very hard times, indeed, to fall back on charity! For every benefit received from charity is required a payment of humiliation!

SCOOTER: You're too proud, Soapy.

SOAPY: Am I? Perhaps. I still say better to be a guest of the law than of philanthropy. At least the law does not meddle unduly with a gentleman's private affairs.

(*The BAND hits a sour note and exits.*)

STYMIE: Hearing you talk, the island begins to sound better and better.

SCOOTER: What is your recommended manner of seeking arrest?

SOAPY: Myriad roads lead to Blackwell's, my chums. But let me relate one *not* to try. In my first attempt last fall, I chose what I reckoned would be the pleasantest way to my winter retreat—to dine luxuriously at some expensive restaurant. After eating, I would simply declare insolvency, at which point I would be handed over quietly and without uproar to the nearest policeman.

SCOOTER: A good plan!

STYMIE: My mouth is watering already!

SOAPY: Ah, but wait till I tell you.

(Enter 3 WAITERS.)

SOAPY: *(Cont'd.)* I selected the Chez Josephine. I straightened my four-in-hand, given to me by a lady missionary that Thanksgiving. From the waist up, I was impeccable. It was only my trousers and shoes that were lacking. I walked in; I knew already what I would order: a bottle of Chablis *(WAITER 1 extends a wine bottle)*, some Camembert *(WAITER 2 lifts the glass over the cheese)*, and a roast mallard! *(WAITER 3 lifts the cover to reveal a duck on his tray.)*

STYMIE: Ah, roast duck!

SCOOTER: You are a man of refinement and taste, Soapy.

SOAPY: That may be, and I thank you for saying so, but the waiters' eyes happened to fall on the part of me below my vest. One look at my frayed trousers and decadent shoes, and that was it.

WAITER 1: *Sortez! (Pulls the bottle to himself and exits.)*

WAITER 2: *Sortez! (Covers the cheese and exits.)*

WAITER 3: *Sortez! (Controls duck making it jump off the plate. SFX: quack! Waiter 3 snaps the cover over the duck and exits.)*

SOAPY: So, I was *sortezed*.

SCOOTER: That is a cautionary tale, if ever I heard one.

STYMIE: There's something to be said for aiming too high.

SOAPY: Like Icarus was checked in his upward flight, so I could not reach the luncheon sun.

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STYMIE: But who's to say that a similar ploy might not work in an establishment of lesser pretensions.

SOAPY: Hush!

(COP 1 strolls across the stage. The HOBOS try to act naturally. Cop 1 exits.)

SOAPY: *(Cont'd.)* It might work, Stymie. An establishment of lower repute would not balk at your tell-tale trousers and accusive shoes.

STYMIE: I'm thinking this café right here.

SOAPY: Be sure to get a good meal. While you're in the café, I will be implementing my own plan. And Scooter?

SCOOTER: I have a surefire scheme already formed in my brain.

SOAPY: That's fine! So, this is a farewell, of sorts.

(Enter JUDGE and BAILIFF.)

SOAPY: *(Cont'd.)* By this time tomorrow, the three of us will have stood before the judge and heard those five comforting words:

JUDGE: *(Bangs gavel.)* Three months on Blackwell's Island!

(Exit JUDGE and BAILIFF.)

SOAPY: So, I will see the both of you on our island of delectation!

STYMIE: *(Moving to the café door.)* Until then! Godspeed, my friends!

SOAPY and SCOOTER: *(Unison.)* Bye, Stymie!

(STYMIE exits into the café, SR. SFX: ding!)

SCOOTER: I must find a brick!

SOAPY: I can tell you are a man of action, Scooter!

SCOOTER: All that stands between me and paradise is one cobblestone! *(He exits, SL.)*

SOAPY: And now to wait for a man in blue.

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(SFX: Wind. Enter NORTH WIND, SL. She dances around SOAPY as he turns up his collar and tries to warm himself. Enter small CROWD, SR. North Wind exits. SFX out. Enter COP 2, SL.)

SOAPY: *(Cont'd.)* Perfect! Here's my chance! *(HE begins whooping and hollering and flailing about.)* Whoo-hoo! Hey, world! Yowza-yowza! And a rumblety-tumblety-do! Hi-ho! Hi-ho!

MAN 1: What on earth?

SOAPY: Hey, hey! What do you say!

WOMAN 1: What is wrong with that man?

SOAPY: It's called disturbing the peace, thank you kindly! Ho-ho! Hi-dee-dee! And an ooooo-ooooooooo! to the welkin!

(SOAPY dances and celebrates. COP 2 moves closer.)

SOAPY: *À la vôtre!* Ha! Ha! Ooba-dooba! Let the good times roll!

MAN 2: Officer—

COP 2: Not to worry. 'Tis but one of them Yale lads celebratin' the goose egg they give to Hartford College. Noisy, but no harm. We've instructions from the captain to leave them be.

MAN 3: *(Scoffing.)* Go, Yale!

WOMAN 2: I remember my college days. It wasn't that long ago, of course.

(The CROWD exits, laughing.)

COP 2: *(To SOAPY.)* I'm a Hartford man, myself. Enjoy your celebration. We'll get you next time.

(COP 2 laughs and exits. SOAPY stops dancing around.)

SOAPY: Times must be changing. There was a day when disturbing the peace was judiciously frowned upon.

End of Freeview

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