The Invisible J. Michael Hess

By James D. Waedekin

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Here's a poignant but necessary look at the problems of teenage bullying and suicide. J. Michael is a high school student and aspiring writer. Already dead, he narrates the events that lead up to his suicide. Along the way, we meet Melissa, his unrequited love; Ms. Dodge, the hopeful English teacher; Artie, a tough, rival student; and Mr. Butler, the ineffectual high school principal. Finally, J. Michael's overwhelmed mother and a tough district attorney round out the cast. Together these multidimensional characters paint a complex picture of the pressures J. Michael must face on a daily basis. As his journey climaxes, the young poet is left with the miraculous truth that "what we do affects the world around us," and the world of the living may not be all that bad -- though, it is a place his muse will no longer take him.

SETTING

J. Michael's journey leads us through a classroom, an office, a courtroom, and a park with swings. Less is more, and whenever possible, rely on lights and sound to suggest setting.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 m, 4 w)

J. MICHAEL HESS: High school student. He is 16 years old, has uneven cropped hair, glasses, a slight build. His clothing hangs on him.

MELISSA JONES: Neighbor. She is 16 years old and has a sense of style and confidence.

MS. PAULA DODGE: Mid-20s, a relatively new school teacher.

ARTIE LANDRES: J. Michael's rival at school. He is 17 years old, athletic, and good-looking.

EDITH HESS: J. Michael's mother. Eyes swollen and red, she has no more tears.

PRINCIPAL BUTLER: High school principal. Young, hip.

CHERYL STONE: District attorney. Elegant, dynamic, the perfect child-advocacy attorney.

Performance Time: 45 minutes.

PROPS

Notebook paper
Portfolio
Trash can
Folder
Playground swing, bench, or seesaw
Chair
Classroom desk

The Invisible J. Michael Hess

(AT RISE: LIGHTS fade up on J. MICHAEL HESS, alone in a pool of light. Despite this, he is genuinely enthusiastic, and he has a contagious grin.)

J. MICHAEL: *(To the audience.)* I'm gonna tell you a story. A miraculous story. And I know you're probably not going to believe it. And I'm okay with that. Five minutes ago, I know I wouldn't have believed it, but I wanna tell you anyway. I've got to. *(Pause.)* Okay, so you're saying to yourselves right now, "Jason, relax. Jason, get a grip on it all, dude." But that is precisely what I don't want to do. 'Cause if you knew me before all this ... oh, how can I better explain this? *(Pause.)* I didn't expect all of the attention. You know. When I killed myself. Okay, maybe in a parallel universe. But not in my world. You know? I really didn't expect all the attention.

(LIGHTS fade up on MELISSA JONES.)

MELISSA: *(To the audience.)* It was easy for guys to push J. Michael around. Throw him off bleachers. Slam him into lockers. Put him into lockers. Send him hurtling down school staircases like he was nothing. *(Pause.)* We were friends. When I was little. Drifted when we got older. Yeah, I knew J. Michael. All in all, I guess you could say Michael was a boy alone. Treated as if he were nothing. *(Pause.)* He may as well have been invisible to … to the girls at George Washington High School.

J. MICHAEL: In many ways, I was. And to you.
MELISSA: *(Turning now to HIM, apologetically.)* You are not invisible to me.

(LIGHTS out on MELISSA. MS. PAULA DODGE appears in another pool of light.)

MS. DODGE: *(To the audience.)* A police officer came into my classroom. He was … investigating … allegations … well, J. Michael had been absent or late 74 out of 78 school days. And I had heard some stories myself. That his clothes were not right, that he smelled bad, that he had virtually no friends at all. And I was working with J. Michael. Working through all this … on his behalf. I honestly thought my efforts … were helping. *(Pause.)* In my class, he worked hard. He enjoyed working hard in my class. A budding writer. Sometimes all teenagers seem like "budding writers" to their English teachers, I know. Especially girls, who write that dark poetry about "pain" or even so much "misunderstanding." From parents. With boys. But J. Michael, his insight was so different from that. I encouraged him. I thought I did. *(Pause.)* I had heard that a teacher, a teacher, can you believe it? A teacher had made J. Michael clean off his own chair when another classmate … spat on him. And there were few … repercussions … later when Artie Landres also picked him up in gym class and spun him like a top. *(Pause.)* He may as well have been invisible … to his other teachers.

J. MICHAEL: In many ways, I was. And to you.

MS. DODGE: *(To HIM, compassionately.)* You are not invisible to me.

(LIGHTS out on PAULA DODGE. A new pool of LIGHT fades up on ARTIE LANDRES.)

ARTIE: *(To the audience.)* Hess was a faggot. And if he wasn't a faggot, he was going to turn into one. The closet was his refuge. Everybody knew it. Hell. He died in one. *(Pause.)* Kept acting like he wanted Melissa, inside his head knowing there was no way he would be with her. Hanging around her, no, stalking her. And now they're talking about needing to pass anti-bullying legislation when he was the one who wanted in everyone's face. Getting in our faces. Just give the faggots their own school. *(Pause.)* Yeah. He may as well have been invisible … to anyone that mattered.

J. MICHAEL: In many ways, I was. And to you.

ARTIE: *(To HIM, venomously.)* You were not invisible to me.

(LIGHTS out on ARTIE LANDRES, and up on PRINCIPAL BUTLER.)

PRINCIPAL BUTLER: *(To the audience.)* He could not deal with the students. Simple as that. Yes, he told me the harassment had escalated. From his somewhat narrow perspective, it probably had. Not from mine. *(Pause.)* Disciplinary action had been taken, on my part. I talked to the guys. Told them, ease up. You have to understand that J. Michael, well, he was a young 16-year-old, you know what I'm saying? The other students were into more, shall we say, mature pursuits. Like dating. Gossip. And I'm not responsible for his missing Game Boy. We tell the kids no electronic devices on campus for the very reason they could be lost or stolen. So whose fault is that? Really? I can't chase after every little incident. Not when a student can prevent it. He deserves a little accountability. *(Pause.)* Other than these one or two little issues, he may as well have been invisible … to his administrators.

J. MICHAEL: In many ways, I was. And to you.

PRINCIPAL BUTLER: *(To J. MICHAEL, dispassionately.)* You are not invisible to me.

(LIGHTS fade out on PRINCIPAL BUTLER and up on Prosecuting District Attorney CHERYL STONE.)

CHERYL STONE: *(To the audience.)* Ladies and gentleman of the jury. It is April. April. And her Christmas decorations are still up! What kind of mother keeps such an unsafe home? And this is only one example. *(Pause.)* Every day she put her child at risk, creating a home environment that was unhealthy. Unsafe. And J. Michael's case is not about suicide but about parental responsibility. Every parent whose child commits suicide should worry. I'm not afraid to point the finger at a grieving parent. Nor should you be afraid of looking out for J. Michael's justice.

End of Freeview

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