



Arthur Reel

Adapted from the short story by Stephen Crane

Norman Maine Publishing

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“If I am going to be drowned..if I am going to be eaten...
by the name of the seven mad gods who rule the seas...
why was I given the sight of land?
Why was I not just drowned at the outset?
It sure is an injustice...to drown a man
who has worked so hard to stay alive.”

—Correspondent

The Open Boat

DRAMA. This play chronicles the harrowing events of four men shipwrecked off the coast of Florida. Trapped at sea in a small lifeboat, the men take turns rowing. Soon they spot a lighthouse, but as they get closer to shore, the surf becomes dangerously rough. When no rescue boat arrives, the men become increasingly weary and despondent. Desperate, the Captain realizes that the only chance for survival is to row the lifeboat as close to the shore as possible and then swim the rest of the way. This absorbing and masterful play reveals man's alienation and vulnerability as he faces a fierce and unforgiving existence, and humanity's inexorable search for unattainable answers.

Performance Time: Approximately 20-25 minutes.

About the Story

Adapted from Stephen Crane's classic short story, "The Open Boat," this play depicts the real-life events of 1897 when Crane and three companions were shipwrecked off the Florida coast as they journeyed to Cuba.

Characters

(4 m)

CAPTAIN: Though injured and sorrowful at having lost his ship, he maintains authority and control as he attempts to guide his crew to safety.

COOK: Talkative.

OILER: Powerful and adept seaman; largest and strongest of the four.

CORRESPONDENT (FOURTH MAN): Has an air of mystery.

Setting

At sea in a small rowboat or dinghy. Boat rocks up and down and from side to side.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: At sea in a lifeboat.

Scene 2: Night, at sea.

Scene 3: Dawn, at sea.

Scene 4: Night, on shore.

Props

Boat oars
Pail
Strap from a life preserver
Coat, for Oiler

Special Effects

Screams
Timber cracking
Waves crashing
Loud "swish" in water
Roar of surf

Scene 1

(AT RISE: Before lights fade up, there is a loud noise, men scream, timber cracks, a cry: "Man the lifeboats!" Another crack, more screams, the rush of surf. Silence. Lights fade up on a small lifeboat, center stage. Oiler, Captain, and Fourth Man are seated. Cook is rowing.)

OILER: Some narrow clip it was.

CAPTAIN: She's gone now. Fine steamer.

COOK: Ye'll have another, Captain.

CAPTAIN: Many of the crew's gone with 'er, Billie.

OILER: We're alive an' well, Captain.

CAPTAIN: Had 'er ten years...good vessel. Rooted with fine timbers.

COOK: There'll be another, Captain.

(Long pause. The Cook rows. The waves move the boat up and down and from side to side.)

OILER: Look there! Canton-flannel gulls.

COOK: Sittin' there as if they're enjoyin' the sight.

CAPTAIN: Uncanny an' sinister.

COOK: *(Fearful.)* Looka that one! Right over us!

OILER: Careful! He'll sit on your head!

CAPTAIN: Ugly brute! *(Hoots loudly, clapping his hands to scare the bird away.)*

OILER: Looks like he was cut with a jackknife.

COOK: Sonovabitch!

OILER: Be gone! *(Claps hands.)* Be gone!

CAPTAIN: Easy! Don' rock 'er, boys!

OILER: Git on, ye bitch!

CAPTAIN: She'll turn over, boys!

COOK: Go on, git!

OILER: Git'n hell...

CAPTAIN: There, she's flyin'! We can breathe better.
(Pause. Cooks rows.)

COOK: *(To the Fourth Man.)* Here, spell me. You...fella.

(The Fourth Man does not reply. He stares hard at the waves. The Oiler moves forward and exchanges places with the Cook.)

COOK: I think...I see... *(Suddenly, pointing.)* Land!

CAPTAIN: Where?

COOK: There! It's a house of refuge!

CAPTAIN: Must be the one just north o' Mosquito Inlet.

(Oiler rows hard.)

OILER: Soon's they see us, they'll come off in one of their boats.

(The Fourth Man turns quickly.)

FOURTH: Who'll see us?

OILER: The crew.

FOURTH: They don't have crews.

COOK: Sure they have crews.

FOURTH: They don't... *(He stops abruptly, turns away.)*

OILER: Mebbe it's not even a house of refuge...

COOK: *(Straining to see.)* Anyway... it's gone now...

CAPTAIN: *(Straining.)* Takes an anxious eye...to find a spot...so thin...

(Cook jumps up.)

COOK: There! There!

CAPTAIN: Yes! Exactly there!

COOK: A thin line!

CAPTAIN: Like some pen mark!

FOURTH: I saw it...too...

CAPTAIN: Row it! Move 'er straight ahead, Billie!

COOK: It's a station all right!

CAPTAIN: Bail 'er, Jack! Don't let up! Keep rowin'! Spell 'im, lad!

FOURTH: It's growing larger...I can see it. It's got color...

COOK: Looka that direction...there's more land!

CAPTAIN: *(To Fourth Man.)* Spell 'im! *(To Cook.)* Keep bailin', Jack!

(The Fourth Man and Oiler exchange places. The Cook continues to bail water with a pail. The Oiler assists.)

FOURTH: It's a crime...

CAPTAIN: Keep rowin', lad.

FOURTH: A diabolical punishment.

CAPTAIN: *(To Cook and Oiler.)* Just take 'er easy now. Don't spend yerselves. If we have to run a surf, you'll need all yer strength because we'll sure have to swim fer it.

(Oiler rests.)

OILER: I worked double-watch in the engine room just before she'd gone.

COOK: Same here in the kitchen...an' a night o' no sleep before.

FOURTH: This rowin', who'd ever dream it to be a sport?

OILER: Look at that now...they ought to be able to make us out now.

COOK: If anybody's lookin' through glasses.

CAPTAIN: *(To Fourth Man.)* Swing 'er head a little more north, lad.

OILER: Look! There...over there!

COOK: There's a man on shore!

OILER: He's walkin'...by God, he's walkin'!
COOK: No, he's stopped.
CAPTAIN: I can see 'im...
OILER: He's turnin' to us.
COOK: He's facin' us now.
CAPTAIN: By gawd, he's facin' us.
OILER: Look, he's wavin'.
CAPTAIN: By gawd, he's wavin'.
COOK: Just standin' there, wavin'.
CAPTAIN: We be awright now. Awright. (*Notices that the Rower is tiring.*) Spell 'im, Jack.

(*Cook and the Fourth Man exchange places.*)

OILER: There'll be a boat for us soon.
FOURTH: Look, he's going on. He's running!

(*Pause. The three men stare. The Cook rows.*)

OILER: Seems now...he's goin' up to that house there.
COOK: What's he doin' now?
OILER: He's standing still again.
CAPTAIN: What by geezus is the matter wi' him?
OILER: Look, now he's wavin' at us.
FOURTH: There comes another man.
CAPTAIN: He's runnin'.
OILER: Look at 'im go, would you?
FOURTH: Seems he's on...a...bicycle...
COOK: A what?
OILER: There he goes...right over to the other. They're both wavin' at us now!
FOURTH: There comes something else on the beach.
CAPTAIN: What the devil is that thing?
OILER: It looks like...a boat!

COOK: *(Rowing.)* How can it be a boat?!

CAPTAIN: It is. It's a boat awright.

FOURTH: No, it's on wheels.

COOK: *(Rowing.)* That must be the lifeboat. They drag 'em along the shore on wagons.

FOURTH: Look, there's another fellow...waving a little black flag.

CAPTAIN: Two fellows.

OILER: Here come two more.

COOK: That makes five.

OILER: No, six...mebbe more.

CAPTAIN: He's wavin' his coat. Wave back!

(Oiler whips coat off and waves it.)

COOK: Harder! Wave harder!

FOURTH: *(Astonished.)* Look at him wave that coat like a madman, round and round over his head.

OILER: *(Revelation.)* I don't think that's a lifesaving station. I think...it's a resort.

FOURTH: One of those winter resorts.

CAPTAIN: *(Realizing.)* They're not doin' a damn thing...just wavin'.

FOURTH: Just swinging their coats round and round.

CAPTAIN: By gawd, the hotel omnibus is bringin' over some of their boarders...

FOURTH: To see us...drown.

(Pause. Cook ceases rowing. All stare in direction of shore.)

COOK: What's the idiot with the coat mean? What's he signalin'?

FOURTH: Looks as if he's trying to tell us to go north.

OILER: Mebbe he means there's a lifesaving station...

FOURTH: Or he thinks we're fishing...

COOK: Mebbe he's drunk!

CAPTAIN: Gawd, if they're all drunk...?
OILER: Looka him. He just stands there...
FOURTH: And keeps his coat revolving like a wheel.
COOK: The ass!
CAPTAIN: Look, there's more comin'. Now there's quite a mob.
Isn't that a boat?
OILER: No, that's no boat.
CAPTAIN: What else is it?
OILER: It's no damned boat.
FOURTH: You're blind. It's a boat.
OILER: It's no goddamned boat.
FOURTH: It's a goddamned boat!
COOK: Stop arguing! Spell me!

(Cook and Oiler exchange places. Oiler rows.)

CAPTAIN: By gawd, let's think clearly. Let's think clearly about this.
FOURTH: Think clearly? Yes. Give me a good reason for this...absurd thing. *(Loudly.)* Give me a reason!
CAPTAIN: Let's think now. Keep rowing...
FOURTH: Just tell me why. *(Rises on his knees.)* Just tell me why!
CAPTAIN: Shut up! Shut 'im up, Cook!
FOURTH: We'll drown...and that ass waves his coat round and round!
CAPTAIN: Ye'll turn us over! Shut 'im up!

(Fourth Man shakes his fist at the sea.)

FOURTH: Drown me! Just drown me! Just you drown me!
COOK: *(Staring at the shore.)* Why don't he quit it? Look at 'im, round and round. He must be having a good laugh.
CAPTAIN: He's an idiot. He's really an idiot.
FOURTH: Every man is an idiot! Every damned soul is an idiot!

OILER: If we keep on monkeying out here...if we have to flounder here all night...

CAPTAIN: Have faith. Have faith, Billie.

FOURTH: *(Laughs.)* What faith!

CAPTAIN: We must have faith, boys!

OILER: If we have to stay here all night...

COOK: *(Waves fist.)* I'd like to catch that sonovabitch! I'd like to give 'im one...just for luck!

CAPTAIN: Look at that...the land is disappearing.

(Oiler stops rowing. They all stare at the shore.)

FOURTH: *(Repressing, in a low voice.)* If I am going to be drowned...if I am going to be drowned...if I am going to be drowned...why in the name...?

CAPTAIN: *(Resigned.)* Take 'er out, Billie. Keep 'er head up...

OILER: *(Mechanically.)* Keep 'er head up...

FOURTH: Why in the name...of the seven mad gods...who rule the sea...?

COOK: The shore is gone...fer sure...

FOURTH: Was I allowed to come thus far...

CAPTAIN: Keep 'er head up...

FOURTH: And contemplate sand and trees...?

(BLACKOUT.)

COOK: Billie, what kind of pie d'ya like best?

Scene 2

(AT RISE: The four men are seated in the same places. Continuous action.)

FOURTH: Pie!

CAPTAIN: Don't talk about those things, blast ya!

COOK: I was just thinking about ham sandwiches.

OILER: Look! It's gotten darker.

CAPTAIN: A night at sea in an open boat can be a long one.

FOURTH: *(Half to himself.)* Could be the end of us...

OILER: Those people on the shore...they were blind...

COOK: They were cowards!

CAPTAIN: Save yer strength, boys. We'll have to try for it ourselves.

OILER: If we all don't get ashore... *(Stops rowing.)* ...two of you know where to send news of my finish.

COOK: Mine too. You know, Captain...

CAPTAIN: You know where to reach my sis, Billie.

OILER: *(To the Fourth Man.)* And you?

FOURTH: Masters. Correspondent for the Tribune...New York.

CAPTAIN: Got that? Got each other, boys?

(They all nod. Captain reaches out and shakes hands with everyone.)

FOURTH: Do you understand?! Do you understand this?! It's preposterous! Why was I brought here to be tortured?!

(The Fourth Man/Correspondent begins to rise. The boat sways. The others stare with astonishment.)

CORRESPONDENT: If I am to be drowned...! If I am to be drowned...! Fate! Can't it do any better?! *(Raises his fist.)* Just drown us! Just you drown us!

(Correspondent suddenly becomes aware of his outburst. There is an awkward pause.)

OILER: Look over there...on the northern horizon...the blue light...
CAPTAIN: *(Sadly.)* It'll be dark soon, boys...
COOK: My feet are cold.
CAPTAIN: Warm them...under me...
OILER: *(To Correspondent.)* Spell me awhile...

(The Correspondent nods, moves over slowly, and exchanges places with the Oiler.)

CORRESPONDENT: Shall I keep her making for that blue light north?
CAPTAIN: Yes. Keep it about two points off the port bow.

(Pause. Correspondent rows.)

CORRESPONDENT: The sea is calmer now...
CAPTAIN: Don't stop rowing, lad.
CORRESPONDENT: If I could rest...a few minutes...
CAPTAIN: Don't stop 'er, or the tilt of the rollers will capsize 'er.
CORRESPONDENT: *(Wearily.)* Cook...spell me...

(Cook rises and moves over. Correspondent falls tiredly to the bottom of the boat.)

OILER: *(To Cook.)* Warm your feet beneath us.
COOK: I'm fallin' asleep at the oars.
CAPTAIN: *(From bottom of boat.)* Keep 'er...head...
COOK: My...shoulders...

(Oiler takes the oars. Cook drops to the bottom of the boat and is instantly asleep.)

OILER: I'll row till I fall over...then...one of you... *(He continues to row, nodding, trying hard to keep awake.)* I'm gone...spell...me... *(Nobody answers him. The others seem to have fallen asleep.)* I'll keep 'er headed...for that light...north... *(He plies the oars until his head droops. It grows darker, until there seems to be only one light on the rower. Softly, meekly.)* Someone...spell...

(The Correspondent awakens with a jolt, sees Oiler is almost asleep, and drags himself over to him. They carefully exchange places.)

OILER: I'm awfully sorry, Fred.

CORRESPONDENT: That's all right, Billie.

OILER: I'll spell you in three or five...or the Cook will...

(The Oiler is instantly asleep. The Correspondent continues to row with great effort. There is only one light directly on the Correspondent's face. Suddenly there is a strange sound, a loud swish. Correspondent turns his head quickly from side to side. The sound is repeated.)

CORRESPONDENT: A shark! It's a damned...shark. *(He glances at the others.)* Goddamn.... *(He is about to call out to the other but decides not to.)* A goddamn...shark.... *(He continues to row, watching the shark carefully.)* A damned bitching shark. *(He glances at the others. When he realizes they are all asleep, he continues to speak in a low voice.)* If I am going to be drowned...if I am going to be eaten...by the name of the seven mad gods who rule the seas...why was I given the sight of land? Why was I not just drowned at the outset? *(The Oiler stirs.)* It sure is an injustice...to drown a man who has worked so hard to stay alive. *(Raises his voice.)* A crime! A damned crime! *(He continues to row. Darkness surrounds him.)* Why?! *(The Oiler stirs again.)* But why?! *(Oiler begins to raise his head.)* I would like to curse you! *(Oiler begins to sit up.)* I would like to...throw bricks!

(The Oiler sits up. The Correspondent is partially standing.)

OILER: *(To Correspondent.)* Pretty long night.

(Correspondent sits down.)

OILER: Those lifesaving people sure take their time.

CORRESPONDENT: Did you see the shark playing around?

OILER: Yes, I saw him. He was a big fellow.

CORRESPONDENT: Wish I had known you were awake.

OILER: Well, anyway, he's gone...

CORRESPONDENT: Spell me awhile...

(Oiler and Correspondent exchanges places. Pause. Oiler rows, pacing himself carefully.)

CORRESPONDENT: "A soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers."

OILER: It might've got bored, that thing...

CORRESPONDENT: "There was lack of woman's nursing...there was dearth of woman's tears..." *(Oiler stops rowing and listens.)*

"But a comrade stood beside him, and he took that comrade's hand...and he said, 'I never more shall see my own, my native land.'" *(Pause. Oiler rows again.)*

In my childhood...though I knew of this poem...I never thought about it, really. I never considered that it was real. It was less important to me than the breaking of a pencil point. D'you understand, Billie? *(Oiler nods, continues to row. The Captain stirs, begins to raise himself.)*

But now...with that thing out there...it was no longer just a picture in the breast of some poet. It was an actuality...stern, mournful... *(The Captain stares at the Correspondent. Oiler stops rowing again.)*

"Plainly...how plainly...he lies there on the sand...his feet straight and still...while his pale left hand rests upon his chest...in one last attempt...to thwart...the going of his life."

(The Cook stirs, begins to raise his head. Pause. The boat sways.)

CAPTAIN: Boys, she's drifted in pretty close. One of you had better take 'er out to sea again.

(Lights begin to fade.)

OILER: Cook, will you spell me?

COOK: Sure...

(They begin to exchange places as stage fades to black.)

[End of Freeview]