

PLAYS FOR
New Audiences

A Division of Children's Theatre Company

Nivelli's War

by Charles Way

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Characters

The Stage Manager.

The Great Nivelli.

Mother.

Father

Ernst

Mr Dethier

Tante Sophie

Mr H

Russian soldiers [2]

The Princess

The Butler

American soldiers [2]

The play was written for a minimum cast of five.

The play 'Nivelli's War' is entirely fictional. It is inspired however by a real person who was called Herbert Levin whom I discovered while researching on the internet. Levin was a magician who changed his name to Nivelli and who survived the holocaust. With these three elements I created a story about a magician who helps a child at the end of world war two. This play is not a depiction of the character of or the experiences of Herbert Levin {1906-1977}, who became known as 'The magician of Auschwitz' however out of respect and in honour of the elements that inspired my play I named my character after him.

Charles Way

SCENE ONE

A theatre

A stage

On the stage is a picture/poster of this evening's act.

'The Great Nivelli'

The picture shows The Great Nivelli [A magician] wearing a dark coat and a black hat. He wears white gloves that seem to shine with their brightness. In one white hand he holds a bunch of brightly coloured balloons which float above his head. The Great Nivelli is smiling.

[The Great Nivelli enters. He is smiling just like in the picture. When he realises no one is there the smile drops from his face. With some aplomb he pulls out his watch.]

Mr N Oh-maybe I'm a little early.

[He looks at his watch. And makes it disappear.]

Mr N Ha-still got it. Hello-any one about?

[Now he sees his own face on the poster.]

Mr N Oh there you are. Never late- not you. Always get to the theatre first don't you. Always smiling. Triumphant. Yes-I know, I know-how much younger than me you look -but you're not really. No-you just don't age between performances. What am I doing-I'm talking to a picture? My my-what an old theatre it is-very old—it's a miracle really. What's that?

[He hears a muffled sound from somewhere in the theatre.]

Mr N Hello?

[The stage manager enters. The smile returns to The Great Nivelli's face.]

SM Oh-Mr Nivelli-you're here. You're here. I am so sorry-

Mr N Yes-I came through the stage door.

SM Oh and I wasn't there to- [He looks at his watch]

Mr N Yes-I'm a little early-

SM I can't believe it-The Great Nivelli -standing there-on my stage-after all this time.

Mr N Please call me Ernst.

SM The Great Nivelli.

Mr N Yes-it's been a few years since I-Ernst- was last here.

SM We put you in all the papers-The Great Nivelli-returns to his home town. We're honoured.

Mr N Thank you. Thank you.

SM Overwhelmed.

Mr N Thank you.

SM Overjoyed.

Mr N It's a lovely old theatre.

SM A miracle how it survived the war.

Mr N I was thinking the very same.

SM So many buildings round here were reduced to rubble.

Mr N Yes- I used to live-just---

SM I have swept this floor a thousand times for some very famous actors but I have never been happier than today-sweeping it for you.

Mr N Ernst.

SM The Great Nivelli.

Mr N Thank you.

SM Even your poster brought a smile to my face.

Mr N You're very kind. [He scowls at the poster]

SM Shall I show you to your dressing room?

Mr N No-I would like to stand here for a few minutes. Get the feel of the theatre. You understand.

SM Of course. I shall leave you alone. Every artist has their own routine-their own mystery.

Mr N That's right.

SM But let me take your cane.

Mr N Thank you-thank you

SM And your hat.

Mr N And my hat too? Very well-take it.

SM Welcome Home-The Great Neville.

[The stage manager turns away but then realises that he does not have the cane. He turns to see Nivelli holding it. Confused he takes it and turns away. A second cane appears in Nivelli's hand- he taps the stage manager on the shoulder who turns- takes the cane. This is repeated with a third cane. On the third cane-Nivelli steals the hat from the stage manager's head so that when he turns back Nivelli is standing as in his first position with both hat and cane.]

SM OH! OH! YOU! Ha,ha- marvellous. What a privilege. To be made a proper fool of by the Great Nivelli. I shall tell my grandchildren. [Exit]

[He looks at the smiling poster of himself.]

Mr N What are you looking at? You know how long this journey was? How tired I am? That would wipe the smile from your lips.

[He goes to the poster and turns it around so the smiling face is no longer visible. He is satisfied with this. He then takes from his coat pocket-a pair of white gloves and puts them on in a theatrical manner. He then takes a balloon from his pocket and blows it up. At the first blow-he hears a musical sound. He looks at the balloon then blows it again and once more a musical note is heard. He stares at the balloon-then blows again and as he blows the music develops and to Mr Nevilli's surprise he sees someone behind him-a woman dressed circa 1930's holding a baby basket. The more he blows-the more she comes into focus. He stares at her. The stage manager enters.]

SM Mr Nivelli- forgive me-

Mr N Yes?

SM Tea?

Mr N Tea?

SM Would you like some?

Mr N Tea lovely-Uh do you-uh? [He points towards this apparition]

SM Milk?

Mr N Yes milk- no sugar.

SM No sugar.

Mr N Do you –I mean do you not see –? [He points vaguely into the air]

SM Are you alright Mr Nivelli?

Mr N Yes, yes- a long journey. I just wondered if you saw-- never mind.

SM Milk, no sugar.

Mr N Thank you, thank you.

[The stage manager goes. Mr Nevilli is left in silence. He slowly lets the air out of the balloon and the image behind him fades-he stares at the balloon and then blows again. A light rises now on the woman-who is his mother and beside her now stands a young German soldier soldier-his father. Very carefully Mr Nivelli ties a knot in the balloon. The family stand still for a photo. A flash of light. As Nivelli watches this scene his hand moves to his own wallet-for in it is this actual photo. In the distance they hear the sound of gunfire. The soldier turns and is gone.

Nivelli stares at his Mother. How young she seems. How real-it's as if he could touch her. He looks at the balloon –which is now taken from his hand by a young boy. Could it really be? Yes-himself-what would he be about 6/7 years old? How ragged he looks. The boy runs home. His older self follows.]

SCENE TWO

Ernst Mama. Look I've got a balloon.

Mama You're late.

Ernst I've got a balloon.

Mama And it's almost dark-where have you been?

Ernst It's a balloon.

Mama Look at your knees-

Ernst Fell over.

Mama Where?

Ernst On my knees.

Mama I've told you a hundred times Ernst- a thousand times not to play in those houses. And you've cut yourself?

Ernst It's a balloon.

Mama They're dangerous. Don't you understand? Full of old rusty nails and if you get one of those stuck in you-you'd get blood poisoning- and there's nothing I could do to save you because there's no medicine anywhere in the city. Hey? Look at me. And what if you trod on an unexploded bomb? BOOOM-where would you be then?

Ernst In bits.

Mama [She hugs him]. I like the balloon very much-of course. Who doesn't like balloons? Show me the person who doesn't like Balloons and I'll eat my apron.

[She puts the apron in her mouth and growls. Now she fetches a bowl to wash his knees.]

Mama Looks bad. Doesn't it hurt?

Ernst No.

[She applies the cloth and water]

Ernst Ow.

Mama Who were you playing with?

Ernst Torvald.

Mama Just Torvald?

Ernst Torvald's going away to Furstenhagen next week. He says he doesn't know when he'll be back.

Mama The war will be over one day Ernst. The children will all come back.

Ernst What if the war doesn't end?

Mama It will end. I'm telling you it will. [She blows on his knee to dry it]

[The Great Nevilli watches.]

Mama Wash your hands. Lay the table now.

Ernst What's for supper?

Mama Beef soup—and bread. I got the last loaf of the day.

[They sit. Ernst peers at the soup]

Mama What are you looking for?

Ernst Beef.

Mama Close your eyes. Oh lord we give thanks for this beef flavoured soup- We give thanks for our great nation and pray that the war will be over soon-[Silence] and that Ernst's friends can come back to Frankfurt.

Ernst Amen.

Mama Amen.

Mama I'll take a bowl up to Grandpa-you can start if you want to.

Ernst No-I'll wait.

[Mama exits and we hear her go upstairs. The Great Nevilli watches his younger self staring at the soup. Suddenly Ernst eats the soup-it's gone. Mama returns. She sits and eats a few mouthfuls.]

Mama Do you want some more?

[Ernst shakes his head]

Mama Maybe you should go upstairs then and say goodnight to grandpa.

Ernst Do I have to?

Mama He can't get out of bed Ernst. He waits all day for a little visit from you. Go on.

[Ernst goes and Mama pours most of her soup into his bowl. The Great Neville watches her as she puts her head in her hands. She is exhausted. Ernst comes down stairs. He sees there is more soup in his bowl]

Mama There was more in the pot-go on.

[The air raid warning siren goes off.] [Herr Dethier enters. He is very stressed]

Dethier Everyone down to the cellar-Now. Everyone down to the cellar. Hurry along now Frau Beckman. Everyone down to the cellar.

[They go to the cellar and the Great Nevilli follows them.]

Mama It's alright Ernst. We're safe down here-Isn't that right Herr Dethier?

Dethier Oh yes-safe as houses. I mean-well. Do you want to play cards Ernst? What do you want to play?

Ernst Snip Snap.

Dethier Very well, very well. Snip Snap. The same as the last air raid- and the air raid before that- and the air raid before-in fact it's always Snip Snap isn't it Ernst. Oh yes -we've got quite a routine going on down here. Snip Snap.

Ernst Mother-will you play?

Mama Sure.

Dethier I bring the cards. You bring the coffee. The Americans bring the bombs.

[The bombs fall. Dethier can hardly hold the cards]

Dethier Frau Beckmann -you should send your son out of the city-while there is still time.

Mama Please don't interfere in things that don't concern you Herr Dethier.

Dethier They could concern me if you saw sense.

Ernst What are you talking about?

Mama Nothing-at all-ever.

Dethier You're mother doesn't like me Ernst.

Mama That isn't true Herr Dethier.

Ernst Yes it is.

Mama Ernst!

Ernst You told me you didn't like him.

Mama Oh!

Dethier It doesn't matter. I prefer honesty- and I honestly I say to you if our soldiers are told to defend the city to the death then the Americans will have no choice but to bomb and to bomb and blow up every building in every street. Who will survive it? You? Me? Ernst?

[Mama pulls Ernst away and gets him ready for bed.]

Ernst Is that true Mama? Mama?

Mama Shh. You remember your Tante Sophie?

[Ernst nods]

We went to stay with her at the farm- her and Rudi. Of course Rudi's not there anymore.

Ernst She had a chicken with one leg.

Mama That's right-she did.

Ernst But it could still lay eggs.

Mama Yes-

Ernst But it couldn't run.

Mama Ernst- if the bombing gets worse-I would like you to go and stay with Tante Sophie.

Ernst You'd come too.

Mama How can I go anywhere with your Grandfather in bed-unable to move? Who would feed him?

Ernst Then I don't want to go. I won't go. Not without you.

Mama It isn't safe here-.

Ernst But you said it would be safe. You said you would never send me away like the other children. You promised me.

Mama Things have changed. Herr Dethier is right.

Ernst I won't go-I won't go. I won't go.

Dethier Ernst. How dare you raise your voice to your Mother.

Mama Please-Herr Dethier-

Ernst I won't go. I won't go. I won't---

[The sound of the planes and bombing suddenly increases. They all look up and an explosion. When the smoke clears Ernst is getting ready to leave. His Mother brings a suit case. Mama tries to smile. Ernst cannot smile. She puts on his jacket- as he sulks. She pats the breast pocket because in there she has sown his name and address. He hears the sound of the train and looks at his Mother. She hugs him. He does not hug her. He scowls. The sound of the train gets louder and louder and his mother gets smaller and smaller and is gone. The Great Nivelli watches his younger self and as he fully inhabits the memory of his youthful loneliness he begins to fade from view until only Ernst remains - as the train leaves Frankfurt.]

PURCHASE PERUSAL FOR FULL SCRIPT