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The Spirit of River City

BOOK BY

Randolph Hobler

MUSIC AND LYRICS BY

Randolph Hobler

Version: 1/3/16

THE PLAYERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

TEN ANGEL CLERKS, dressed in white
TEN NEW HEAVENLY ARRIVALS, dressed in black
ELDER MEREDITH, Meredith Willson, an 82-year-old in heaven
MEREDITH WILLSON, 16-year-old son of John and Rosalie Willson
HAROLD KEIDLE, one of Meredith's friends
INKY WIGGLESWORTH, another of Meredith's friends
CHARLIE HAVERDEGRAIN, a lisping, red-haired, heavy-set friend of Meredith's
MARIAN MCGUIRE, cheerleader in her teens
PEGGY WILSON, a cheerleader
CHEERLEADER, in her teens
SQUIZ HAZELTON, old man who sits on a bench
SCATTERGOOD BAINES, another old benchesitter
CLARENCE WEATHERBEE, another old benchesitter
HOMER RODEHEAVER, another old benchesitter
ROSALIE WILLSON, Meredith's mother, in her early 40's
JOHN WILLSON, Meredith Willson's father, in his early 40's
DIXIE WILLSON, Meredith's 14-year-old sister
ZI LING, 16-year old Chinese girl who works in a laundry
GAO PEI, laundry owner
REVEREND RINSENHAUSER, 50-ish pastor.
LOUIS ARMSTRONG, as a young man
PHONE TENDER, music union hall clerk
JIM SCHLICT, clarinet player
GIUSEPPE, trombone player
SPANKY, mummer banjo player
LASZLO, accordion player
MACTAVISH, trumpet player
HOXIE, 16-year old black banjo player
JULIO, 16-year old Mexican banjo player
RUNNING FEATHER, stone-faced 16-year-old Shoshone banjo player.
JOHN PHILIP SOUSA, age 74
CABLE CAR PASSENGERS
MASON CITY TOWNSPEOPLE
FARMER, as in American Gothic
FARMER'S DAUGHTER, as in American Gothic.

[MANY ROLES ARE DOUBLED]

THE SETTINGS AND TIME

ACT ONE

Heaven, June 15, 1984

Mason City, Iowa, 1928

ACT TWO

San Francisco, California 1928 into 1929

Mason City Iowa, July 4, 1929

MUSICAL NUMBERS

ACT ONE

1. "New Arrivals" ANGEL CLERKS AND NEW ARRIVALS IN HEAVEN
2. "On the Air" MEREDITH AND ENSEMBLE
3. "Edgewise" MEREDITH
4. "Post-War Prayer"/"You Are River" ROSALIE/ANGELIC CHOIR
5. "The Clip-Clop Life" THE BENCHSITTERS
6. "Sears, Dear Sears" ENSEMBLE
7. "Why Can't a Girl?" DIXIE
8. "Duel Duet" MEREDITH AND JOHN
9. "The Only Time to Act is Now" ELDER MEREDITH AND MEREDITH
10. "You Can't do This to Me" DIXIE
11. "Thanks Be to Music" LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND ENSEMBLE

ACT TWO

1. "Alphabetter Friends" ZI LING
2. "Play it from Your Heart" UNION HALL MUSICIANS
3. "Listen to their Dreams" ROSALIE
4. "That's the Kind of Life for Me" BANJO BOYS
5. "I Will Follow My Song" MEREDITH
6. "I'll Be There" ZI LING
7. "Sousa Helps" MEREDITH AND SOUSA
8. "Different" JOHN
9. "People of the USA" ENSEMBLE

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE: HEAVEN

(There are six white booths, labeled “Cloud Nine Surfing”, “Star Gazing”, “Cupid Training”, “Limbo”, “Angel Choir” and “Remorse.” A large electronic panel displays the date: June 15, 1984. A large sign in the shape of stairs indicates who’s running heaven.

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Each booth is manned by an angel clerk in white, wearing white eye shades. Each has a white phone, a thick white manual, a white clipboard, an oversized white pen and a large white stamp. THE CLERKS answer phones, slam the phones down, stamp papers, ring bells, go through check lists on clipboards and slam file drawers closed.

The CLOUD NINE SURFING CLERK wears a white bathing suit and carries a white surf board. The STAR GAZING CLERK wields a white telescope. The CUPID TRAINING CLERK carries a white cupid bow and arrow. The LIMBO CLERK wears a white limbo-dancer outfit. The ANGEL CHOIR CLERK wears a white choir gown, with a white hymnal. The REMORSE CLERK has a large white handkerchief with which he periodically wipes away tears. He wears a white suit with a white tie.

NEW ARRIVALS to heaven have white hair, slide down a white slide, eyes closed, hands clasped on chest, holding a lily. All are dressed in black funereal clothing. THEY land on a white mattress, are awakened.

THE ARRIVAL CLERKS: A young female FLOWER YANKER CLERK in a white pants suit yanks each lily and tosses it into a white can labeled “Lilies”. A PHOTOGRAPHER CLERK in white photographs new arrivals with a flash camera. They are temporarily dazed by this. A white-clad FINGERPRINTING CLERK fingerprints each arrival. A CLOTHES-RIPPING CLERK in white then rips off the black outfits of the NEW ARRIVALS, revealing all-white clothing underneath. Each NEW ARRIVAL must “Take a Number”; each piece of paper is about 18 inches long.

8 NEW ARRIVALS, bewildered by the bureaucracy, are being processed at various booths.

These activities are done in rhythm--the stamping, ringing of phones, slamming of phones into cradles, the camera flashes, the plunking down on the mattress, the ripping off of clothes, the closing of file drawers.)

SONG: NEW ARRIVALS

(The rhythm continues underneath as a percussive layer in the song.)

FLOWER GRABBER CLERK

CHECK IN!

PHOTOGRAPHER CLERK

LOOK AT THE LENS!

FINGERPRINTING CLERK

PRESS YOUR FINGER!

CLOTHES-RIPPING CLERK

YA GOTTA TAKE A NUMBAH!

FLOWER GRABBER/PHOTOGRAPHER/FINGERPRINTING/CLOTHES-RIPPING CLERKS

KEEP IT MOVIN', KEEP IT MOVIN'

CLOUD SURFER CLERK

NEXT IN LINE!

STAR GAZING CLERK

READ THIS!

LIMBO CLERK

SIGN HERE! No, here!

CLOTHES-RIPPING CLERK

DIS IS NOT DA TIME FER YA TA SLUMBAH!

NEW ARRIVAL #1

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE PEARLY GATES?

CLOUD SURFER CLERK

Dude!

WE HAD TO MODERNIZE

NEW ARRIVAL #2
WHAT HAPPENED TO ST. PETER?

**CLOUD SURFER, STAR GAZING, LIMBO, ANGEL CHOIR AND REMORSE
CLERKS**

DOWN-SIZED!

NEW ARRIVAL #3
HEY, DON'T WE GET A SET OF WINGS?

REMORSE CLERK
WE HADDA CUT SUPPLIES

ALL NEW ARRIVALS
(Whining.)
SO WHAT'RE WE GONNA, WHAT'RE WE GONNA
WHAT'RE WE GONNA, WHAT'RE WE GONNA DO?

ALL CLERKS
Do?

*(To the end of the song, the REMORSE CLERK does not participate, standing
apart, crosses his arms and makes other disapproving gestures.)*

**FLOWER GRABBER/PHOTOGRAPHER/FINGERPRINTING/CLOTHES-
RIPPING CLERKS**

DO, DO-DO, DO, DO-DO

CLOUD SURFER CLERK
YOU CAN SURF DOWN A NIMBUS CLOUD

STAR GAZING CLERK
YOU CAN GAZE UPON A GALAXY

CUPID TRAINING CLERK
AIM AN ARROW AT A LONELY HEART

LIMBO CLERK
YOU CAN DO THIS
...no that!

ANGEL CHOIR CLERK
SING A SOARING MELODY

**CLOUD SURFER, STAR GAZING, LIMBO AND ANGEL CHOIR CLERKS
AND NOW'S THE PERFECT TIME FOR YOU TO START**

REMORSE CLERK

Or...you can..."Re"!

ALL NEW ARRIVALS

"Re?"

REMORSE CLERK

Sure!

YOU CAN RE-FLECT, RE-THINK
RE-NOUNCE WRONGS OF YESTERDAY
YOU CAN RE-TRACE, RE-VIEW
RE-JECT HOW YOU WENT ASTRAY

CLERKS

RE-

REMORSE CLERK

-SET YOUR CIRCUMSTANCE

CLERKS

RE-

REMORSE CLERK

-CLAIM YOUR SECOND CHANCE

CLERKS

RE-

REMORSE CLERK

-PAIR RE-LATIONSHIPS

CLERKS

RE-

REMORSE CLERK

-WRITE LIFE SCRIPTS

CLERKS

RE-

REMORSE CLERK

-DO WHAT YOU DID BEFORE

REMORSE CLERK AND ALL CLERKS

RE-RE-RE-GRET YOUR PAST NO MORE

ALL CLERKS

You mean...

ALL CLERKS AND NEW ARRIVALS

RE-

CLOUD SURFER CLERK

-SURF ON NIMBUS CLOUDS?

ALL CLERKS AND NEW ARRIVALS

RE-

STAR GAZING CLERK

-GAZE AT GALAXIES?

ALL CLERKS AND NEW ARRIVALS

RE-

CUPID TRAINING CLERK

-AIM AT LONELY HEARTS?

ALL CLERKS AND NEW ARRIVALS

RE-

ANGEL CHOIR CLERK

-SING MELODIES?

ALL CLERKS

RE-DO WHAT WE DID BEFORE?

RE-RE-RE-PEAT WHAT WE ADORE?

REMORSE CLERK

No! I mean...

ALL CLERKS AND NEW ARRIVALS

RE-

REMORSE CLERK

-DRESS THE TIMES YOU FLOPPED

ALL CLERKS AND NEW ARRIVALS

RE-

REMORSE CLERK

-WISE THE BALLS YOU DROPPED

ALL CLERKS AND NEW ARRIVALS

RE-

REMORSE CLERK

-FORM YOUR FATAL FLAWS

ALL CLERKS AND NEW ARRIVALS

RE-

REMORSE CLERK

-TRACT FOKES PAHS

ALL CLERKS AND NEW ARRIVALS

RE-DO WHAT YOU DID BEFORE

RE-RE-REGRET YOUR LIFE NO MORE

ALL NEW ARRIVALS

But ho-ow?

REMORSE CLERK

Here, I'll show you.

(ELDER MEREDITH, 82 years old, with white hair and black glasses, dressed in black, slides down the slide. Same routine. Dazed, he takes a number. The REMORSE CLERK reads from his clipboard.)

106,223,479,076!

ELDER MEREDITH

That's me!

REMORSE CLERK

Name?

ELDER MEREDITH

Meredith Willson.

(Sees the clerk misspelling his name. Points.)

ELDER MEREDITH

Two "l's".

REMORSE CLERK

Time for your remorse check.

(During the following, ELDER MEREDITH shakes his head "No", for each item. He occasionally makes faces at the audience.)

I need to take down what you're remorseful about. Missteps? Mishaps? Mistakes? Misdeeds? Misbehaviors? Mischief? Misjudgement? Misfortunes? Misappropriations?

REMORSE CLERK (cont'd)

Misdemeanors? Miscarriages of justice? ...Miscellaneous?

ELDER MEREDITH

You forgot "Misgivings".

REMORSE CLERK

(Annoyed.)

Okaaaaay! Misgivings then.

ELDER MEREDITH

My father. He was more like a granite institution than a human being...He, he, never...never once in my life did I hear my name pass through my father's lips.

REMORSE CLERK

Are you saying...

ELDER MEREDITH

He never called me by my name. Ever. As if I didn't exist.

REMORSE CLERK

In over 36 million cases, I've never heard a doozy like that!

ELDER MEREDITH

"Meredith" is not exactly a spectacular name, but it's mine...and I so wanted, so much, you know, to hear him say it.

REMORSE CLERK

I'm so sorry.

ELDER MEREDITH

Even on his death bed, he never acknowledged what I'd achieved. His death bed! I even played flute for him, right there in the hospital. At that point, what did he have to lose? I've always wondered if there was anything I coulda done.

REMORSE CLERK

Well, now's your chance.

ELDER MEREDITH

What?

REMORSE CLERK

You *can* go back.

ELDER MEREDITH

I could turn things around? Hear my name? How?

REMORSE CLERK

That's what we do around here. You can rewind your life. Go back and talk to your younger self at the point where you can make a difference. But there are strict instructions! First, you'll need this.

(HE whips out a white baton.)

It's for conducting.

ELDER MEREDITH

(Grabs the baton.)

I know, I know!

(HE bom-bom's the first 11 notes of "76 Trombones" waving the baton about.)

REMORSE CLERK

(Grabs the baton back.)

No! Not for conducting music. For *re*-conducting your life! Re-composing it, if you will.

(HE swings the baton from right to left, left to right and in circles.)

REMORSE CLERK (cont'd)

Use this baton—wisely-- to stop, start and reverse time. Oh, and one other thing. You'll be invisible. So the only one who can hear you will be your younger self. He'll think you're inside his head. Just pretend you're him.

(He pushes ELDER MEREDITH up the slide. The NEW ARRIVALS help.)

You can do it, I know you can! So, go.

NEW ARRIVALS AND REMORSE CLERK

Go, go, go, go...!

(ELDER MEREDITH reaches the top of the slide and HE's gone. Lights fade.)

SCENE TWO: MASON CITY FOOTBALL FIELD

(Lights strobe, swooshing sound as we're swept back in time. Bleachers appear. A 1920's-style manual football scoreboard reads:

DODGE CITY 51 MASON CITY 7
PERIOD 4

Also above the bleachers a large red-and-black banner reading:

MASON CITY MOHAWKS
1927 STATE CHAMPIONS

In the bleachers wearing visibly frayed and tattered red-and-black band uniforms and hats are the BAND— INKY, on trumpet; HAROLD on clarinet, and CHARLIE, with a pronounced lisp, on drums. A trombone rests on the bleachers. JOHN WILLSON, dressed in a black-and-red bandmaster's uniform, stands before the band. He is rigid, over-controlling. He smokes a corn-cob pipe. THREE CHEERLEADERS, one of whom is PEGGY WILSON, dressed in black-and-red cheerleader outfits and carry black-and-red pom-poms. She's sweet on MEREDITH. Another cheerleader is MARIAN MCGUIRE. MEREDITH's head is buried in his music notebook, wielding a pencil. He's initially a timid lad, his eyes darting nervously. Four cardboard cut-outs of life-size musicians placed behind the band, including a trombone. TWO MEN sit in the bleachers. FOUR BENCHSITTERS, four crotchety old men who carry their bench wherever they go sit on it: SQUIZ, SCATTERGOOD, CLARENCE, and HOMER. Everyone looks dejected.)

CHEERLEADERS AND BAND

(Overlaps with "Go, go" from previous scene)

Go-o, Mohawks

Go-o, Mohawks

(Two referees' whistles, a big cheer and applause.)

ELDER MEREDITH

Well I'll be John Brown if this isn't Mason City! The football field, anyway...So, this's gotta be 1928!

(HE tries out the baton and sweeps it, accompanied by a chimes sound, to freeze everyone but his younger self.)

ELDER MEREDITH (cont'd)

Why, here's my old friend, Inky. Inky Wigglesworth, IV. And my buddy, Harold Keidle master clarinetist! This seems like just yesterday! And good 'ol Charlie Haverdegrain. The kid with the lisp. And there's Marian...Marian McGuire. And whoa! Lookit me! I look scared of everything. That's cause I was! Whaddya know, my old music notebook! I was the only one in my school composing. Wrote the senior class song that year. Yessir, back when I worshipped John Philip Sousa. Little did I know I would later actually play in his band! Oops, look how Peggy's makin' googly eyes at me. Mmm. I ended up marrying her. And it didn't end up well. She didn't want kids but never told me. Hardly an uptempo relationship. Well, I'll be switched! There's Papa. Stern as stone, like always! I don't quite yet know what to do about him. Guess I'll just have to lie in wait.

(ELDER MEREDITH waves his baton accompanied by chimes, re-animating the scene. HE exits.)

HOMER

Scattergood, back when we played, footballs were made of genuine, Grade A pigskin!

SCATTERGOOD

The real McCoy, Homer! Now they make 'em out of this dad-blasted cow leather!

SQUIZ

What's the world comin' to?

CLARENCE

They went and took the oink out of football!

SCATTERGOOD

Ironmen like us never needed these namby-pamby knee pads!

(His knees buckle and HE drops his part of the bench, moaning in pain and holding his knees.)

HAROLD

Meredith, look at this place! It's as flat as yesterday's beer! Meredith! Are you in there?

MEREDITH

(Sings parts of his "working song", which will eventually be "People of the USA", gesticulating with his pencil, writing, erasing.)

Bah, bah, bah, we are in every category...we fit in every category...we *fall*... in every category...

HAROLD

(HAROLD grabs the pencil, holds it away from MEREDITH.)

Mere, what're you doin'?

MEREDITH

You know, composin'. It's gonna be like a Sousa march. I hope.

HAROLD

OK, fine, but I'm asking you, don't you wish you were somewhere else?

MEREDITH

(Tries to grab the pencil back form HAROLD.)

I dunno, Harold. It'd be scary to leave comfy ol' Mason City. But I do have a wish.

HAROLD

What?

MEREDITH

Naw, you guys wouldn't go for it.

INKY

C'mon, Mere, we're your best friends. We'll love it.

MEREDITH

I wish I could get just one of my songs on the radio. It could be heard by millions!

HAROLD, CHARLIE AND INKY

Radio?

HAROLD

Long shot!

INKY

Fat chance!

HAROLD

Pipe dream!

CHARLIE

I'll athith you on the radio thtathon, Mere. I can be your announther.

MEREDITH

Thanks, Charlie!

(MEREDITH gets increasingly pumped up by listening to the following dialogue.)

INKY

Radio *is* pretty neat.

HAROLD

Like KGLO, Mason City!

A CHEERLEADER

Why, at our house we have a Miraco Ultra 5 tube radio!

CHARLIE

Tho? We have a Crothly Bandboth sikh tube!

HAROLD

That's nothing! We have a Metrodyne All-Electric Ultra-Selective Super 8 tube!

INKY

Radio's the cat's whiskers!

HAROLD

The cat's meow!

THREE CHEERLEADERS

The cat's pajamas!

MEREDITH

You bet!

(MEREDITH snaps his fingers.)

SONG: ON THE AIR

(MEREDITH drops his music and an approximately 8-foot-high version of a wooden period radio with a lighted dial appears as the bleachers and their occupants recede.)

ENSEMBLE

IT'S SENSATIONAL! INSPIRATIONAL!
INNOVATIONAL! RADIO!
IT'S SURPRISING! HYPNOTIZING!

ENSEMBLE (cont'd)
MESMERIZING! RADIO!

MEREDITH

I GOTTA GO, ON RADIO
WORK MY WAY UP, TO MY OWN SHOW
WITH MY OWN SONGS AND MY OWN BAND
BEAMING MUSIC ACROSS THE LAND

(CHARLIE pretends he's speaking into a microphone. The ENSEMBLE sit down on the floor in front of him, as if a live radio audience.)

CHARLIE

Ladieth and gentlemen, thith ith The Meredith Willthon Thow! Brought to you by our thponthor, Thanka Coffee! Thtarring Kaythe Thmith, Tommy Dorthy and Al Jolthan, who will thing Meredithth thongs! And featuring the New York Thympony Orchethtra, with Harold Keidle on clarinet, Inky Wigglethworth on trumpet and led by your hotht, the one and only, Meredith Willthon!

MEREDITH

Thank you, Charlie. Wonderful to be here! Good evening, America! We hope you love our show tonight! May the good Lord bless and keep you.

ON THE AIR, MY FONDEST FANTASY
I COULD SHARE, ALL THAT'S INSIDE OF ME
ALL I NEED IS A SHOT, JUST ONE CHANCE
CUT ME IN ON THE ACTION, CUT ME IN AT THE DANCE

(MEREDITH here gestures/acts in reverent ways, folding hands in prayer to the large radio, etc.)

OH RADIO, HOW I ADORE THEE
THY WONDROUS WAVES REACH OUT TO ME
THOU SENDEST TINGLES RIGHT UP MY SPINE
HELP ME STAR, HELP ME SHINE

ON THE AIR, MY FONDEST FANTASY
I COULD SHARE, ALL THAT'S INSIDE OF ME
ALL I NEED IS A SHOT, JUST ONE CHANCE
CUT ME IN ON THE ACTION, CUT ME IN AT THE DANCE

(MAN #1 and MAN #2 open up the giant radio like pair of barn doors. Inside FOUR WOMEN DANCERS wearing vacuum tube costumes step out of the radio and dance with the ENSEMBLE.)

MEREDITH (cont'd)

OH RADIO, I PROMISE YOU
I'LL DO YA PROUD, I'LL SEE IT THROUGH
NO FORCE ON EARTH CAN MAKE ME STOP
I'LL SCALE THE HEIGHTS, RIGHT TO THE TOP

ON THE AIR, MY FONDEST FANTASY
I COULD SHARE, ALL THAT'S INSIDE OF ME
ALL I NEED IS A SHOT, JUST ONE CHANCE
CUT ME IN ON THE ACTION, CUT ME IN AT THE DANCE

ENSEMBLE

MEREDITH

DANCING ON THE AIR

MY MAGIC CARPET RIDE

ON THE AIR

WHERE MY DREAMS WAIT FOR
ME

ON THE AIR

THEY'LL HEAR ME FAR AND
WIDE

ON THE AIR

THAT'S WHERE I WANT TO BE
ON THE AIR!

ON THE AIR!

(As the CHEERLEADERS exit, the giant radio lifts out and the bleachers move back downstage. MEREDITH retreats to his own timid world, sitting on the front bleacher, whistling his "working song", poking the air with his pencil, erasing, writing in his music notebook. CHARLIE, INKY and HAROLD fuss about, putting their instruments in their cases. JOHN paces back and forth, muttering to himself.)

JOHN

(JOHN speaks in fits and starts—sometimes sounding commanding and glib as he used to me—sometimes hesitant and uncertain.)

Three boys in the band? I used to have 60! So embarrassing! My gift of gab? My great recruiting tool! What happened to my silver tongue? My golden touch? I need to light a fire under these kids.

(To the BOYS, gesturing with his pipe.)

Boys, we are too small to compete in the Iowa Band Contest next July. Can't you

JOHN (cont'd)

get any of your friends to join up?

(The BAND members shrug.)

Three players? We're a laughingstock! The winning band gets to go to New York City, you know. Gets to play on the NBC Radio Red Network! WEAH! We've gotta to do *something*. I know! Just...*sound* like a bigger band!

CHARLIE

How're we thuppothed to do that, Mr. Willthon?

JOHN

Just... play like there are more of you! Harold, aim your clarinet higher in the air...and... and...blow harder. Charlie Haverdegrain, use... four drumsticks instead of two.

(There is a sudden crashing sound off-stage and JOHN jumps in fear in reaction.)

What's that?

HAROLD

Oh, they're just putting away the bleachers, Mr. Willson.

JOHN

Oh.

(He tries to pull himself back together.)

INKY

What about me, Mr. Willson?

JOHN

Inky, play twice as many notes on that trumpet! And...think big! Even one more instrument would help. Like this trombone! Just rusting away!

HAROLD/INKY/CHARLIE

Thanks, Mr. Willson, so long!

JOHN

So long boys! See ya at rehearsal!

(As HE picks up the trombone and shoves it at MEREDITH, ELDER MEREDITH edges into the scene.)

Comere, you! Trombone! You gotta play trombone. The heart of the band!

MEREDITH

I already play piano...

JOHN

You can't very well play piano in a marching band!

ELDER MEREDITH

*(HE waves his baton, freezing the scene, except for MEREDITH.
To audience.)*

Oh boy, red flags all over this! This is starting off way off key.

*(He moves behind and a bit to the left of MEREDITH, to talk near his ear.
This device is used throughout the show. Much of the time, ELDER MEREDITH
doesn't look at MEREDITH, but looks off in parallel to the distance where
MEREDITH is looking. HE speaks to MEREDITH in his normal, low,
adult voice.)*

You, uh, I can't let him push you, me around.

MEREDITH

Who's that?

ELDER MEREDITH

*(Catches himself. HE then speaks in a more youthful voice. HE uses this higher
voice throughout when speaking to MEREDITH, but his normal, lower
adult voice when speaking to the audience.)*

I mean, there goes Papa again, pushing me around. Why can't he respect me? He never even calls me by my name!

MEREDITH

He never has.

ELDER MEREDITH

I kinda wonder, though, Harold Keidle's father calls him "Harold". And Charlie Haverdegraine's dad calls him "Charlie."

MEREDITH

Papa's different, is all.

ELDER MEREDITH

“Different” doesn’t mean “right”, though. He calls Dixie “Dixie”. Why not call Meredith “Meredith”? My name’s as important as anyone’s!

MEREDITH

Gosh, I never thought about it that way before.

ELDER MEREDITH

Now I just did! This just doesn’t sound right. I gotta stand up to him.

MEREDITH

But, I’m worried.

ELDER MEREDITH

Of course, he can’t spank me anymore. Maybe I should speak up.

MEREDITH

He won’t listen, he’ll just roll all over me.

ELDER MEREDITH

It’s worth a shot. What’s the worst that can happen?

(ELDER MEREDITH waves his baton to animate JOHN and backs away as MEREDITH summons up his resolve.)

MEREDITH

Papa, you

(MEREDITH and JOHN shove the trombone back and forth on each syllable.)

can’t...com...pose...on...a...trom...bone!

JOHN

Forget composing! We need trombone players.

MEREDITH

There’re things more important than trombones. Like calling me Meredith!

JOHN

What’s more important than trombones? Do you know how many trombones they had in the Victory Parade?

MEREDITH

(Wincing.)

Yeah, Paris, July 14th, 1919, down the Champs...

(JOHN's eyes go wide as he is seized by the memory of the event HE finally ends the struggle dance as he wrenches the trombone from MEREDITH.)

JOHN

...Elysées!

(JOHN alternates between rhythmic 4-4 chanting, bursting with confidence and losing his rhythm, losing his way, verbally stumbling, his old self struggling to burst back to the fore, all the while gesticulating with the trombone.)

MEREDITH

Here we go again!

JOHN

Bastille Day!
Thousands of Yanks!
Bayonets gleamin'!
The end of the Great War!

(Sound effects of many soldiers' marching boots. A scrim descends behind JOHN and MEREDITH with silhouettes of marching WW I soldiers with their distinctive hats and bayonets. MEREDITH follows after JOHN, trying to talk to him. JOHN marches, mixing in right and left turns, about-faces.)

JOHN

And me...there, in front of Pershing's Own band...
My cornet wailing
Marching right next to the one
The only
John Philip Sousa
Knight of the Baton!
The March King himself!

Festooned with ribbons was he!
Bedecked with medals was he!

Then "Stars and Stripes Forever"
Da-da-da-da-da, da-da-DAH
Da-da-da, da-da-da, da-da, DAH, da!

Then, in the rear, the Ambulance Corps

MEREDITH

(Wearily and angrily.)
John Philip Sousa
Knight of the Baton...

Bedecked with medals...

Can we talk?

JOHN (cont'd)

American Ambulance Corps
 Millions screamin'!
 Millions cheerin'!
 Sousa wavin' his arms
 Till it looked like he would fly!

What a march! What a day!
 What a great triumphant day!

MEREDITH (cont'd)

Can you stop?

Will you listen?

(JOHN tries to put the trombone in MEREDITH's hands. MEREDITH folds his arms in refusal. So JOHN lays the trombone at his feet and points at it.)

Next week, trombone lessons! No discussion!

(HE walks off. ELDER MEREDITH steps on stage while MEREDITH walks to one side.)

ELDER MEREDITH

(To audience.)

Holy Toledo! You come at him pianissimo and he comes back at you fortissimo! This is gonna take a mite longer than I thought.

(Exits.)

MEREDITH

Argh! Thomas Edison may have invented the light bulb, but my father invented the run-on sentence! If he'd written the 23rd psalm in the Bible, he'd've written "My mouth runneth over." I know what it is. Papa's like the universe...He just goes on forever.

SONG: EDGEWISE**MEREDITH**

HE'S A TIDAL WAVE OF TALK
 A-CRASHING ON THE SHORE
 A NEVER-ENDING STORY
 HE'S A NEVER-ENDING BORE

HE'S A WATERFALL OF WORDS
 CASCADING DOWN ON ME
 SWAMPING UP MY LIFE
 HOW CAN I PUT HIM OUT TO SEA?

MEREDITH (cont'd)

NO ROOM IN THERE, TO SQUEEZE A WORD
TO WEDGE A WORD IN EDGEWISE
I DON'T KNOW HOW, TO BE HEARD
TO WORK A WORD IN EDGEWISE

HE'S A HURRICANE OF HYPE
HE'S RAINING VERBS AND NOUNS
NO WONDER THAT HIS THUNDER DROWNS
OUT ALL THE OTHER SOUNDS
HE'S A BROKEN RECORD, BROKEN RECORD, BROKEN RECORD
IN AN ENDLESS RUT
WHY CAN'T SOMEBODY COME ALONG
AND TAPE HIS BIG TRAP SHUT?

NO ROOM IN THERE, TO SQUEEZE A WORD
TO WEDGE A WORD IN EDGEWISE
I DON'T KNOW HOW, TO BE HEARD
TO WORK A WORD IN EDGEWISE

WHAT TO DO? IN THIS SITUATION? RIGHT NOW!
WHAT TO DO? FOR ANY CONVERSATION? AT ALL!
HOW 'BOUT AN EXPLANATION? MAYBE SOME INSPIRATION?
FROM SOMEWHERE, FROM SOMEONE, SOMEHOW!

(Lights fade.)

SCENE THREE: MASON CITY LIBRARY

(A mailbox is nearby. MEREDITH, carrying a manila envelope in one hand and his music notebook in the other, enters and approaches the mail box, while bah-bahing his working song. He holds up the envelope and crosses his fingers.)

MEREDITH

KYW, Chicago!

(Puts the envelope into the mailbox. REVEREND RINSENHAUSER, a fifty-ish, confused, fuddy-duddy pastor in a black outfit with white collar and carrying a Bible, enters, fulminating. HE always walks sideways and/or backwards. MEREDITH is walking while bah-bahing, reading from his music notebook.)

REVEREND RINSENHAUSER

Dell and hamnation! Speakeasies! The seath of divilization! Flappers! The whole world is oming to a kend! As the skirts go up, the mock starket goes down!

(THEY bump into one another.)

MEREDITH

Oops! You startled me!

REVEREND RINSENHAUSER

Weredith Millson! There's scothing to be nared of. You just need to gook where you're loing!

MEREDITH

Sorry, Reverend Rinsenhauser! I was busy composing.

REVEREND RINSENHAUSER

Composing? We've got all the nymns we heed. Who can top Lartin Muther? Repent, my boy, repent before it's loo tate!

(RINSENHAUSER exits. MEREDITH shakes his head, laughing at Rinsenhauser's language.)

MEREDITH

Lartin Muther!?

(Touches the library door.)

The dibrary loor?

MEREDITH (cont'd)

(HE turns the handle to the library door once and is intrigued with the sound it makes. HE clicks it back and forth.)

Knob.

(HE tilts his head to one side.)

K-nob!

(Smiles. HE knocks on the door once.)

K-nock!

(Pause. HE knocks on the door twice.)

K-nock, k-nock.

(HE moves 180 degrees to be opposite himself as if talking to himself.)

Who's there?

(HE moves 180 degrees to be opposite himself again.)

I don't k-now!

(MEREDITH enters the library. ROSALIE WILLSON works at the desk. Her small wicker basket with the Bible inside sits on the desk. She always carries this with her everywhere. At one table, TWO TEENAGE BOYS read books and at another PEGGY and a CHEERLEADER. MEREDITH sneaks up behind ROSALIE.)

MEREDITH

(Whispering)

Hi, Mama!

ROSALIE

(Loudly)

Ahhh!

A CHEERLEADER, PEGGY AND TWO TEENAGE BOYS

Shhh!

MEREDITH

Mama, don't you know you're supposed to be quiet in the library?

ROSALIE

Good Lord, you gave me a start! Don't ever do that again!

MEREDITH

What're you reading?

ROSALIE

Meditations on Deuteronomy. You must read it. Deuteronomy's good for your soul.

MEREDITH

Mama! You already make us go to church three times on Sunday.

ROSALIE

That'll make you three times as good. I almost forgot...this came in the mail for you today.

MEREDITH

WEAF Radio! New York!

(HE rips open the envelope.)

"The program director thanks you for your song submission, but it doesn't fit our needs at this time." Aaaaanh!

ROSALIE

Don't get discouraged.

(SHE lays a hand reverently on the Bible.)

"Knock and it shall be opened unto you."

MEREDITH

Knocked down is more like it. That's sixteen rejection letters so far.

(HE throws the letter into the waste-paper basket.)

ROSALIE

Then you need to pray for success.

(SHE gets on her knees and starts to pull MEREDITH down.)

MEREDITH

(Shaking her off.)

Mama! Not in the library! These radio people won't give me the time of day. And Papa doesn't care either. He's trying to jam the trombone down my throat.

ROSALIE

Well, Lordy be, why shouldn't you play it?

MEREDITH

Aw, you're on his side.

ROSALIE

OK, if you want choose a different instrument, look it up in "Instruments", that's in "Music", Section 780.

(MEREDITH passes PEGGY as HE heads for the stacks.)

PEGGY

(Coquettishly.)

Hi, Mere!

MEREDITH

Hi, Peggy!

(Kind of shy, HE continues on into the stacks.)

ROSALIE

John! There'll be no peace in this family until he finds his way back.

(MEREDITH begins opening books, riffling through them, taking notes in his music notebook. ROSALIE picks up three books that need to be replaced in the stacks and reads the spines.)

"Bleak House". "Paradise Lost". "Hard Times".

SONG: POST-WAR PRAYER/YOU ARE RIVER

(Deep sigh. SHE takes up her wicker basket and mimes entering church, edging into a pew, picking up the hymnal, turning the pages and singing from it, as if to God.)

ROSALIE

MY MAN CAME BACK FROM OVER THERE
NO CRUTCH, NO LIMP, NO CANE
HIS EYES AGLAZE, A FAR-OFF STARE
THAT HE WOULD NOT EXPLAIN

WHO STOLE THAT WRINKLE FROM HIS NOSE?
THAT TWINKLE FROM HIS EYE?
THAT CRINKLE FROM HIS SMILE?
WHO, AND WHY?

(SHE looks up, side-to-side, waiting for an answer. None comes.)

ROSALIE (cont'd)

More?

FOR YEARS AND YEARS I'VE TRIED TO COPE
BUT HAVE NOT FOUND A WAY
I'VE REACHED THE FAR END OF MY ROPE
AND CAN'T WAIT ONE MORE DAY

I CANNOT DO THIS ON MY OWN
WITHOUT A SIGN OR CLUE
WITHOUT SOME GUIDING LIGHT
ON WHAT TO DO

(SHE looks up, back and forth, waiting for an answer. None comes.)

More?...Amen?

(SHE kneels.)

Please?

*(A shaft of light shoots down on her as the rest of the stage goes dark.
ROSALIE listens, with awe, wonder.)*

WOMEN'S ANGELIC CHOIR

IN BUBBLES YOU ARE BORN, AS A SPRING, AS A SPRING
THEN SOON YOU ARE A BROOK, BABBLING, BABBLING
YOU GROW INTO A RIVER, GRAND AND WIDE
THROUGH THE COUNTRYSIDE TILL YOU ARE BESIDE

ANOTHER RIVER THAT YOU JOIN
TO BE WITH HIM, TIL THE END
YOU GO, YOU FLOW WITH HIM
ROUND EACH TURN, ROUND EACH BEND

THERE MAY BE RAGING RAPIDS, TUMBLING FALLS
THERE MAY BE JAGGED ROCKS AND STEEP CANYON WALLS
BUT THROUGH IT ALL, ROLL ON TOGETHER
CARINGLY, FLOW ON TOGETHER
FAITHFULLY, STAY ON TOGETHER
TO JOIN ALL RIVERS IN THE SEA

*(MEREDITH bounds out from the stacks excitedly waving his
notebook.)*

MEREDITH

Mama, what are you doing?

ROSALIE

(MEREDITH helps her get up. SHE recovers herself. Return to normal lighting.)

Uuuhhh...Receiving?

MEREDITH

Mama, listen to this! The cornet was invented in 1828 by this French guy Antoine.

ROSALIE

Your father's instrument! He played it at Notre Dame. He had such high hopes. But the very day he came back from the war, he hung it up in the den and just stared at it for the longest time.

MEREDITH

Why doesn't he play it anymore?

ROSALIE

I think it reminds him of the Great War.

MEREDITH

I don't know what was so great about it.

ROSALIE

I don't either. It changed a lot of people, including your father. So you'll take up the cornet?

MEREDITH

Un-unh. The sousaphone was invented by John Philip Sousa himself...in 1895!

ROSALIE

A perfect instrument for you, then!

MEREDITH

Naah! I want something different, really different. The saxophone's from Belgium and

(HE pronounces the three "r's" as in French.)

zee French Horn is from...

ROSALIE

(Also rolls the "r".)
...France!

MEREDITH

(In German accent.)
Nein, Germany! Can you believe it?
(With both hands, MEREDITH snaps the book shut decidedly.)

ROSALIE

Speaking of music, look what I've borrowed for you.
(SHE hands MEREDITH a book. HE holds it at arm's length, suspicious.)

MEREDITH

"The Story of John Philip Sousa". I was afraid it was going to be "Leviticus by the Numbers". Thanks, Mama! I can get ideas in here for the march I'm workin' on.
(ROSALIE grabs the wicker basket with the Bible in it and SHE and MEREDITH exit the library and start walking.)

Mama, I was just wonderin'.

ROSALIE

Un-hunh?

MEREDITH

When you and Papa were choosing my name, did you spend hours researching it right here in the library? Hunched over books of baby names? Did you make long lists and fight over which one was best? Did you toss and turn, unable to sleep, for weeks on end, over the choices? Did you...

ROSALIE

(Abashed.)
Not exactly.

MEREDITH

Oh, so, the list was shorter?

ROSALIE

Much shorter. We couldn't really agree, you see.

MEREDITH

So you talked it out and reached agreement?

ROSALIE

Well, we got to an agreement, but not by talking... We, we picked your name out of a... hat.

MEREDITH

What?

ROSALIE

A hat. Your father's derby hat.

MEREDITH

So Papa didn't like my name?

ROSALIE

I had no idea that bothered you.

MEREDITH

He's never used it. Once.

(Rosalie absorbs this. They arrive at the Willson house, white with black shutters. Over the front door is a banner reading "Remember, Do Unto Others..." . A clarinet doing fancy runs plays "Bye, Bye Blackbird". THEY enter the living room. There's a Victrola and a short pile of 78 records in the room. A grandfather clock in the corner. A banner on one wall reads "God Gave you This Day: Meet the Challenge". Beneath it is the piano, with a clarinet case leaning against it. On one wall is a painting of Beethoven. There is an oversized black Bible with gold lettering: "THE FAMILY BIBLE". DIXIE WILLSON is playing the clarinet. SHE wears a middy blouse. Throughout the show SHE wears middy blouses of varying colors. DIXIE stops playing, looking sad. MEREDITH sits at the piano plunking out his working tune with single notes, and making annotations in his music notebook on the piano. ROSALIE kisses DIXIE on the cheek and puts down her basket. DIXIE looks forlorn. ROSALIE hugs her.)

ROSALIE

You know, dear, when things really get me down, I just curl up my bed, fluff up my pillow...

(SHE takes the Bible out of the basket, opens it and points to the text.)

and read a few chapters of Thessalonians.

DIXIE

Mamaa! ...Hey, why can't I play clarinet in the boy's band? The girls say I'm even better 'n Harold Keidle!

ROSALIE

Dixie, you are! In fact...

(SHE starts rifling through a basket of magazines.)

ROSALIE (cont'd)

Look.

(SHE grabs a magazine and starts to read excitedly.)

Helen May Butler. She's got her own all women's band up in Minneapolis. They call her the "female Sousa"...And Sousa himself once invited her to conduct *his* band!

(SHE hands the magazine to DIXIE, who eagerly grabs it, plopping herself into a chair and burying her head in it. ROSALIE sits down next to MEREDITH at the piano, his music notebook propped up on it, writing notes, erasing, etc.)

MEREDITH

(Sings part of his working song, playing chords.)

Neighborhood of people, no, neighborhood of brothers...mmm...neighborhood of brotherhood!

ROSALIE

It's helpful to know what chords go along with your melody. The same note will sound very different, depending on the chord.

(SHE plays the same note with a major, minor and a diminished chord. MEREDITH plays some of the melody with chords. JOHN enters, puffing on his habitual corncob pipe, and carrying a newspaper.)

JOHN

(Gruffly.)

What's that?

MEREDITH

Just a song I'm working on.

JOHN

Well, it's got no melody.

(Grabs the music notebook and looks at it.)

It's just...notes.

(MEREDITH, in anger, hits multiple dissonant piano keys with two palms, grabs back his music notebook. JOHN is about to react when ROSALIE intercedes.)

ROSALIE

(Reproachfully.)

John....

MEREDITH

(ELDER MEREDITH enters and observes.)

One of these days, Mama, my songs'll be on the radio!

JOHN

(JOHN needs to be moving as he says this, to pay off the upcoming backwards bit.)

You on the radio? When hens grow teeth!

MEREDITH

(MEREDITH, apologetically. HE needs to be moving.)

I was just sayin'...

ELDER MEREDITH

(He waves his baton and everybody freezes. To audience.)

This'll never do! He can't waltz around the subject like that...He's got to defend my, his dream!

(HE waves his baton again. Everyone else on stage moves backwards on any motion they had, but at twice the speed, and squeak out their lines as if it's videotape running backwards.)

MEREDITH

(Squeaky backwards sounds for "I was just sayin...")

JOHN

(Squeaky backwards sounds for "You on the radio? When hens grow teeth!")

MEREDITH

(Then ELDER MEREDITH waves his baton again and everyone freezes. HE taps MEREDITH on the shoulder, animating him.)

ELDER MEREDITH

I can't let him get away with this! He can't predict the future! I can write songs! I did! Why, "May the Good Lord Bless and Keep You" was on the Hit Para...

MEREDITH

"May the Good Lord Bless and Keep You"? That's what Mama always says...

ELDER MEREDITH

I mean, first pushing trombones down on me, now telling me I can't compose? Isn't this a free country?

MEREDITH

But it's not a free family.

ELDER MEREDITH

But you're, *I'm* free to try to get through to him. I've gotta keep at it. I've gotta!
(*ELDER MEREDITH waves the baton again, re-animating everyone.*
He remains to observe.)

JOHN

You on the radio? When hens grow teeth!

MEREDITH

I *will* be on the radio if it takes me...

JOHN

(*Grabs notebook again and tosses on the floor.*)
And forget composing! That'll get you nowhere!

MEREDITH

Hey!
(*MEREDITH stoops over to get his notebook, glares at JOHN*
then storms out. Several moments of embarrassing silence.)

DIXIE

(*Tentatively.*)
What about me, Papa, don't you think I'm a great clarinet player?

JOHN

Ooooh! You're all right for a girl, I guess. At least *you've* chosen a band instrument.

DIXIE

Then, let me be in the boy's band!

JOHN

Puhh! There were *nooo* women in Pershing's Own.
(*As HE sits up, HE gets a faraway look, we hear the stomping of*
boots come up for a beat or two, then fade away, as he comes
back to the present.)

Like women on navy ships...Bad luck! No girls in the Mohawks' band. The town won't hear of it.

DIXIE

(*She puts her hands on his and begs.*)
Please?

JOHN

(Shakes her off.)

Fiddlesticks!

(Upset, DIXIE runs out of the room. ROSALIE looks after her sympathetically.)

ROSALIE

John, I'm doing all I can on God's green earth to encourage Meredith and Dixie with their music, and you go and pull the rug right out from under me! Twice in one day!

JOHN

The band needs a trombone. But my son refuses to play it! And what's with all this composing? *I never learned to compose!*

ROSALIE

That's what *he* wants to do. He wants to make a name for himself by composing. And speaking of names, isn't it about time you started calling Meredith by his own name?
(JOHN is brought up short.)

JOHN

I'll call him whatever I want. What are you suddenly bringing this up for?

ROSALIE

He deserves to be called by his name. It's his God-given birthright. And Dixie--she deserves to be in the boys' band.

JOHN

It's just not done.

ROSALIE

That's what they said about Jesus overturning the moneychangers' tables!

JOHN

What does Jesus have to do with my band?

ROSALIE

It's about time you upset some applecarts right here in Mason City. Who cares what people think? Whatever you're doing isn't working.

*(ROSALIE holds JOHN at arms length by the shoulders, staring at him.
JOHN is absorbing what she has said, but pulls himself away.)*

JOHN

Jesus isn't the answer to everything, you know. He didn't do much for those soldiers.

(Shudders and pained look.)

It was just too, too horrible. There was nothing to handle their pain. Nothing.

ROSALIE

You can talk to me about it, you know.

(JOHN shakes his head, turns his head down, leaves the room.)

ELDER MEREDITH

Oh, my!

(Lights fade.)

SCENE FOUR: MASON CITY TRAIN STATION

(The four BENCHSITTERS enter, groaning with the aches and pains of old age and lugging in their bench. THEY groan in unison as THEY put it down.)

HOMER

If my name's not Homer Rodeheaver, that John Willson's lost it!

SCATTERGOOD

He used to wrap the whole town 'round his little finger!

SQUIZ

Used to rouse up a crowd into a frenzy.

CLARENCE

Built up the biggest band in Iowa.

HOMER

The war took something out of him.

SCATTERGOOD

He keeps yappin' away about that consarned parade. Keeps repeatin' himself. Keeps repeatin' himself.

SQUIZ

He's been acting strange ever since he came back from "over there". He should take up a respectable job—like farming!

CLARENCE

Hey, Scattergood, that reminds me, you know what happens when they foreclose on your tractor?

SCATTERGOOD

No, Clarence, can't say that I do.

SQUIZ

They send you a John Deere letter.

CLARENCE

The election's only a week off. I'm votin' for that Iowa boy, Hoover. He'll make one fine president. No way I'm votin' for a...

(Whispering—makes a cross with two fingers)

CLARENCE (cont'd)

Catholic...like Al Smith.

SCATTERGOOD

When I first voted there were no Catholics running.

SQUIZ

When you first voted, it was before there *were* any Catholics!

HOMER

When *I* first voted, it was for Chester Arthur. Those were the days!
(The BENCHSITTERS sigh as they put their hands behind their heads and gaze up to the sky.)

HOMER, CLARENCE, SQUIZ, AND SCATTERGOOD

Ahhhhhh!

CLARENCE

We sound sooo old!

SCATTERGOOD

Some people say we're cantankerous.

SQUIZ

Others call us crotchety.

CLARENCE

A whole bunch of 'em call us crabby.

SQUIZ, SCATTERGOOD, CLARENCE AND HOMER

And they're right!

SQUIZ

Now they've got all these consarned new-fangled contraptions.

SCATTERGOOD

Yeah, like the Model T!

HOMER

You know what the "T" stands for, don't you?

SQUIZ, SCATTERGOOD AND CLARENCE

"Too fast"!

CLARENCE

Old-fangled worked just fine for me!

SQUIZ

In my day, all you needed was a horse to get around.

SCATTERGOOD

What's the rush?

HOMER AND CLARENCE

Where's the fire?

SONG: THE CLIP-CLOP LIFE

(During this song, the BENCHSITTERS do a soft shoe.)

SQUIZ, CLARENCE, HOMER AND SCATTERGOOD

I MISS THE CLIP-CLOP, CLIP-CLOP
LIFE OF NOT SO LONG AGO
WHEN YOU COULD STOP AND SEE
THE SCENERY
AND DRINK IT ALL IN SLOW
ALL IN SLOW

PLEASE TAKE ME BACK TO WHEN YOU
HAD THE TIME TO THINK THINGS THROUGH
WHEN YOU COULD ROLL YOUR EYES
UP TO THE SKIES
CONTEMPLATING WHAT TO DO

BECAUSE TODAY
WON'T GIVE ME TIME TO LET MY FANCIES ROAM
YESTERDAY'S BECOME MY HOME SWEET HOME
HOME SWEET HOME

OH, FOR THOSE CLIP-CLOP DAYS WHEN
LOVE WOULD LINGER IN THE AIR
WHEN EVERY KISS WOULD BE ETERNITY
AND EVEN THEN WITH TIME TO SPARE

THERE IS NO NEED FOR SPEED, YOUR TRUSTY STEED
IS ALL IT TAKES TO GET YOU ALL IT TAKES TO GET YOU

DIXIE

Mere, I'm serious, if I don't get into that band, I'm going on a hunger strike!

MEREDITH

(Distracted.)

That's nice. Papa used to have 60 pieces in that band.

DIXIE

(Whining urgently, continuing to poke, etc.)

Nice!? I'll, I'll, lock myself in my room forever!

MEREDITH

You love your room...I do remember Papa buying uniforms for the whole band...

DIXIE

I'll jump off the footbridge!... Into the river!...Drown!... Mere, where are you going?

(On the freight train chugging into the station a young BLACK HOBO, one leg hanging out of a freight car doorway, is strumming a banjo.)

DIXIE

Mere, are you listening to me?

(MEREDITH, transfixed, walks up to the BLACK HOBO. HE stares intently at the banjo. DIXIE shakes MEREDITH's sleeve.)

Me-re!

MEREDITH

That's it!

DIXIE

That's what?

MEREDITH

My instrument!

(Blackout.)

SCENE FIVE: MASON CITY TOWN SQUARE

(THREE WOMENFOLK going about their business. One storefront has the name “FEIFFER DONUT”, in capital letters that are removable—for a later scene. Cutaway view inside billiard parlor, with large sign outside, “Billiard Parlor”. JOHN is playing pool with THREE MEN. Again, his rant stops, starts.)

JOHN

Six ball, side pocket!

(Takes a shot. Talks as he marches around the pool table. Sound effects of pounding boots and the scrim with silhouettes of marching soldiers with bayonets as before. The MEN line up behind JOHN, unseen by him, with cues held on the shoulders like rifles, doing a mock march.)

And I tell you, the doughboys were marchin’! Bayonets a-gleamin’ in the sun! Boots a-stompin’. Cannon a-boomin’. Planes a-zoomin’. And right next to me, *the* John Philip Sousa!

(JOHN finally stops to take his shot and looks at the MEN. THEY disassemble quickly from their march.)

Four ball, side pocket!

(DIXIE, carrying her clarinet case, determined, marches in and taps JOHN on the shoulder.)

Ye-es?

DIXIE

Papa, one more time, can’t I *please* play clarinet in the boys’ band?

JOHN

No daughter of mine is going to be a son. Nosir! Why, we didn’t have a single woman in that Victory Parade...Or any married ones either!

(JOHN and the MEN laugh. DIXIE puts down her clarinet case, grabs the cue from JOHN and breaks it over her knee.)

DIXIE

That’s not fair!

(JOHN starts after her, DIXIE grabs her clarinet case and runs around the pool table as JOHN chases her, occasionally stopping on opposite sides as she changes direction, etc.)

JOHN

Young lady! You’re going to have to pay for that...

(JOHN chases DIXIE out the door. INKY, HAROLD and CHARLIE enter the square.)

WOMAN #1

It's here!....It's here!

WOMAN #2

What's here?

WOMAN #1

The Sears Catalog! No, *oodles* of Sears Catalogs!
(*General hubbub. The four BENCHSITTERS enter, carrying their bench. MEREDITH enters from one direction, DIXIE and ROSALIE from other directions.*)

MEREDITH

I've never seen people get so excited over a few pieces of paper.
(*The ENSEMBLE, horrified, gasp loudly in unison.*)

WOMAN #1

A few pieces of paper! This is the *Sears* Catalog! Why, there's a rug in here with fringes on *both* ends!

WOMAN #2

This fall catalog has *everything*!

INKY

Where else could you get linoleum paste *and* rebabbiting jigs?

WOMAN #3

Oooooo Fletcher's Castoria *and* toe spreaders?

HAROLD

Ooooo Hinkle's Pink Pills *and* Dr. Meanwell's Canvas Shoes?

ENSEMBLE

(*A short, bespectacled, wimpy MAILMAN "drives" a Post Office Model T Ford, loaded with Sears Catalogs, onto the stage.*)
Only from Sears, Roebuck and Company!

SONG: SEARS, DEAR SEARS

(*The ENSEMBLE grab the catalogs from the Model T, dance with the catalogs. Over the course of the choreography the mailman gets trampled underfoot.*)

WOMENFOLK

SEARS, DEAR SEARS
I'VE MISSED YOU SO SINCE SPRING
SIX LONG MONTHS THAT SEEMED LIKE YEARS
AS I DREAMED OF ALL YOU'D BRING

LIKE PERFUMES, PENDANTS, POWERPUFFS AND PILLS
PUMPS AND PURSES, PETTICOATS AND FRILLS
PITCHERS, PIE PLATES, POTS AND PUDDING PANS
PICKLES, PEA SEEDS, PEACH PRESERVES IN CANS

ALL MEN/BOYS IN THE ENSEMBLE

SEARS, DEAR SEARS
THE NEWEST IN THE LAND
YOU'VE GOT THE UP-TO-DATEST
LATEST CROP OF EVERY BRAND

LIKE CRANKSHAFTS, CLEAVERS, CARBURETORS, KITS
CAULKING OAKUM, COUNTERSINKS AND BITS

ALL MEN/BOYS IN THE ENSEMBLE

CATTLE CLIPPERS, CAMPHORATED OILS
CLUTCHES, COAL TAR, CALIPERS AND COILS

DUET: INKY AND WOMAN #1

YOU ARE MY WISHBOOK
MY WINDOW TO THE WORLD OUTSIDE
WHERE I CAN WISH ALL DAY
WITH YOU AS MY GUIDE

DUET: HAROLD AND WOMAN #2

YOU ARE MY WISHBOOK
YOU MEAN EVERYTHING TO ME
WERE IT NOT FOR WISHES
THEN WHAT WOULD LIFE BE?

GIRLS

SEARS, DEAR SEARS
I READ YOU END TO END
CUDDLED ON THE COUCH WITH YOU
YOU'RE A COUNTRY GIRL'S BEST FRIEND

WITH SWEATERS, SATINS, SILKY SCARVES AND SUEDES
SANDALS, SLIPPERS, SERGES AND BROCADES
SASHES, SACHELS, SHADOW STRIPES AND CLIPS

GIRLS
STOCKINGS, SLICKERS, SABLE COATS AND SLIPS

CHARLIE
THEARTH, DEAR THEARTH
YOU'RE HEAVY ATH A HOG
YOU'RE ATH HEFTY ATH A HORTH
YOU'RE MY WEIGHTY, HULKY.

HAROLD
...MIGHTY...

INKY
...BULKY...

CHARLIE, HAROLD AND INKY
...CATALOG

WITH BASEBALLS, BASS HORNS, BEEMAN'S PEPSIN GUM
BIKES, BATS, BOOTS BOATS, BASKETBALLS AND DRUMS
BANJOS, BOY'S BELTS

MEREDITH
Banjos?
(The BOYS all nod.)
What page?

INKY
Right here, on page 586!
(MEREDITH grabs the catalog from INKY, sits down and buries his nose in it.)

MEREDITH
The Supertone Banjo! \$9.95!
(MEREDITH stands up, slamming shut the catalog and starts to rush off with it.)
I've gotta order this!

CHARLIE
Mere, where you goin'?

MEREDITH
Western Union!
(MEREDITH runs offstage.)

CHARLIE, HAROLD AND INKY
BANJOS, BOYS BELTS, TACKLE BOXES, HOOKS
FOOTBALL BLADDERS AND DETECTIVE BOOKS

ENSEMBLE

YOU ARE MY WISHBOOK
MY WINDOW TO THE WORLD OUTSIDE
WHERE I CAN WISH ALL DAY
WITH YOU AS MY GUIDE

YOU ARE MY WISHBOOK
YOU MEAN EVERYTHING TO ME
WERE IT NOT FOR WISHES
THEN WHAT WOULD LIFE BE?
HERE'S TO SEARS
THREE CHEERS FOR SEARS
SEARS, SEARS, SEARS!

(Lights fade.)

SCENE SIX: THE WILLSON HOME

(Mid-afternoon. MEREDITH and DIXIE on the front porch. DIXIE, pouting holds her clarinet. A stuffed doll is next to her.)

DIXIE

Ugh!

MEREDITH

What's eatin' you?

DIXIE

There's not one *single* reason I can't be in the boys' band! After all, I'm no ordinary, average, run-of-the-mill clarinetist.

MEREDITH

Then, what are you?

DIXIE

I'm a clarinetiste.

(DIXIE plays an impressive fast melody, playing loud and aiming the clarinet up at the second story.)

JOHN

(Pokes his head out of the upstairs window.)

The answer is still "No!" And the cost of that cue is coming right out of your allowance!
(HE slams the window shut. DIXIE put down the clarinet, puts a hand on her hip and begins wagging her finger in mock-scolding fashion, at the doll.)

DIXIE

Dixie be a lady
Dixie, be polite!
Temper, temper, temper!
Don't put up a fight!
Dixie, mind your manners
Mind your P's and Q's
Dixie!

(Whispers.)

Keep your voice down
Don't you blow a fuse!

(She shoves the doll into MEREDITH's arms.)

SONG: WHY CAN'T A GIRL?

(During the song, DIXIE grabs the doll back from MEREDITH and uses it as a prop.)

DIXIE

I DON'T WANT THEM TELLING ME
WHAT I CAN AND CANNOT BE
WHO ARE THEY TO SAY A GIRL CAN'T WISH FOR MORE?
WHEN A BOY SHOOTS FOR THE SKY
THEY WILL CHEER CAUSE HE'S A GUY
ALL I WANTA DO IS EVEN UP THE SCORE

UGH!

AND I DON'T LIKE IT WHEN THEY SNEER
THAT I CAN'T HAVE A CAREER
JUST BECAUSE MY NAME'S NOT JACK OR JEFF OR JIM
I'VE BEEN CUT OFF AT THE PASS
BEEN SHOVED OFF ONTO THE GRASS
BECAUSE I AM A HER AND NOT A HIM

WHY CAN'T A GIRL, DREAM OF THE DAY
WHEN SHE CAN MARCH INTO THE HALLS OF HISTORY?
WHY CAN'T A GIRL, LIVE FOR THE DAY
WHEN SHE CAN BE ANYTHING SHE WANTS TO BE?

I'M NOT GONNA DUMP MY DREAM
CAUSE I WON'T RUN OUT OF STEAM
LET THEM TRY AND STOP ME ANY WAY THEY CAN

THOSE WHO HATE GIRLS TO BE FREE
JUST CAN'T SEE THE IRONY
THAT STATUE OF LIBERTY IS NOT A MAN!

WHY CAN'T A GIRL, DREAM OF THE DAY
WHEN SHE CAN MARCH INTO THE HALLS OF HISTORY?
WHY CAN'T A GIRL, LIVE FOR THE DAY
WHEN SHE CAN STEP RIGHT UP TO LEAD THE BAND
FIGHT FOR RIGHT AND MAKE A STAND
CAST A LINE AND LAND A SHARK

SMASH THE BALL OUT OF THE PARK
SLAY A DRAGON WITH HER SWORD

DIXIE (cont'd)

BE A CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD
FIGHT THE BIG, DEFEND THE SMALL
RUN A TOWN, RUN A STATE, RUN IT ALL!

WHY CAN'T A GIRL, BE PRESIDENT LIKE A MAN?
WHY, WHY, WHY
WHY, SHE CAN!

(MEREDITH springs up to give DIXIE a grandiose salute.)

MEREDITH

Madame President, as head of government, do you think you could speed up the delivery of my banjo? It's been five days already!

DIXIE

I think I can arrange it for today.

MEREDITH

You can?

DIXIE

Yes. Here comes the mailman now!

(The MAILMAN, on crutches, heavily bandaged and not coping well trying to carry the mail, enters. MEREDITH rushes towards him and grabs a brown box so rapidly the MAILMAN falls down. HE madly opens the box and takes out the banjo, as the MAILMAN stumbles offstage. MEREDITH rummages inside the box, pulls out a pick and a chord book, which he gives to DIXIE to hold. Plucks a tentative chord. Huge smile. On that same chord HE strums tentatively, and sings a dummy tune with some lyrics to his working song.)

MEREDITH

It's the people of...it's the, we're the people of... America...free, we're all free, every stripe, every color, everyone of us...This is a real corker!

(The lights come up in John's den, as DIXIE exits. In the den, besides the usual accoutrements like bookshelves, are a period radio, a Red Cross flag, a large framed photograph of John Philip Sousa with a big black beard, with large lettering beneath: "Sousa". There is a desk, a desk chair, and a leather easy chair. A cornet hangs on the wall. JOHN is sitting, listening to a scratchy 78 playing Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" on the Victrola, and puffing on his corncob pipe. JOHN looks up at the cornet. Gets up, puts down his pipe, walks over to the cornet. Takes it slowly down off the wall. Examines it. HE looks like HE's going to play it, then shakes his head and puts it back up on the wall. HE turns on the radio where there is talking. With his banjo, MEREDITH enters the house, then hesitantly opens the den door.)

MEREDITH (cont'd)

Papa?

(MEREDITH thrust his banjo out, half proud, half afraid.)

I've chosen an instrument. Just like you wanted!

JOHN

A banjo? Banjos are for...minstrel shows.

(MEREDITH becomes increasingly despondent as JOHN carries on, glaring intensely at the banjo, and touching it in various places as if inspecting a horse.)

It's not a woodwind. It's not a reed.

(HE twangs one string loudly.)

Not brass! It's simply not a band instrument!

MEREDITH

But Papa, you can sing along...

JOHN

Banjos won't get you anywhere. Why, John Philip Sousa himself...

(HE gestures towards Sousa's photograph looks at it reverently for several beats.)

...would *never* have banjos! We had no banjos in the Victory Parade! You, you'll send it back!

(ROSALIE and DIXIE enter and listen to the conversation.

MEREDITH holds up the banjo for them to see.)

MEREDITH

No! And my name's not "you". It's Meredith. M-E-R-E-D-I-T-H!

JOHN

(Reaching to grab the banjo.)

Then I will, Buster!

(MEREDITH pulls it out of reach.)

MEREDITH

Buster?! Oh no, you don't!

JOHN

Oh, yes I do!

(HE tries to grab the banjo again.)

Disobey me, eh? That does it! The gloves are off!

(ROSALIE and DIXIE recoil. JOHN grabs a broomstick and assumes a fencing posture.)

JOHN (cont'd)

En garde!

MEREDITH

(MEREDITH puts the banjo aside, grabs the umbrella and assumes a fencing posture.)

Taste my steel!

JOHN

(THEY both bring their "swords" up their faces in the formal salute that precedes a fencing match. DIXIE and ROSALIE put their hands to their cheeks in surprise. JOHN speaks to DIXIE and ROSALIE.)

Out of the room! We're going to solve this man to man!

(ROSALIE and DIXIE leave the room, closing the door behind them, then listen at the door.)

SONG: DUEL DUET

(During this song, MEREDITH and JOHN fence, with their "swords" clashing in rhythm to the notes, punctuated with thrusts. THEY hold their non-sword hands on their hip, fencing-style. THEY bound about the room like Errol Flynn pirates, jumping on furniture, knocking down chairs, lamps, etc. Periodically THEY lock swords, handle-to-handle, nose-to-nose, then break away. By the end of the song the den is a mess.)

JOHN

YOU'RE DRIVING DOWN A HIGHWAY OF DOOM
ON THE PATH TO DEFEAT
(JOHN makes a major "sword" thrust.)

Ha!

ON THE ROAD TO NOWHERE
DOWN A DEAD END STREET

MEREDITH

(MEREDITH makes a thrust.)

Unnh!

WHAT A WINDBAG, WHAT A BLOWHARD, WHAT A QUACK!
WHAT A BUNCH OF HOT AIR!

JOHN

Gotcha!

MEREDITH

WHAT A MOUND OF MALARKY
NICE TO KNOW YOU CARE

Ooof!

JOHN

Why you little whippersnapper! I oughta..

MEREDITH

You oughta what?

JOHN AND MEREDITH

(THEY lock swords.)

Aaah!

(Pushing on his "sword", JOHN forces MEREDITH to the floor where he lies, temporarily winded while JOHN moves away to a spotlight to sing to the audience, unheard by MEREDITH. ELDER MEREDITH enters, stands by the wing to observe.)

JOHN

I? I oughta

TAKE CHARGE AND PULL RANK
GIVE THE KID A SPANK
YANK HIS PIGGY BANK
MAKE HIM WALK THE PLANK

Too late! But...

I REALLY WANT TO
GUIDE HIM, THROUGH DANGER
HIDE HIM FROM HARM
SHIELD HIM FROM FAILURE
SPARE HIM ALARM

HELP HIM TO HANDLE
WHAT LIFE MAY THROW HIS WAY
STEEL HIM FOR BATTLE
SHAPE HIM UP TO FIGHT ANOTHER DAY
(ELDER MEREDITH is moved by this, puts his hand to his heart, looks to heaven, exits. MEREDITH struggling, manages to get up to continue the fight.)

But call a truce? What's the use?

MEREDITH

Whippersnapper, eh?

JUST TRY ME, TRY TO PUSH ME TO THE BRINK
WHO CAN TELL WHAT I'LL DO?

My point!

BETTER WATCH YOUR BACKSIDE,
I'M WARNING YOU

JOHN

There! *You, warning me?*

WHY YOU WEISENHEIMER, WISE-GUY SMARTY PANTS!
YOU MUST DO, AS I SAY

MEREDITH

Touché!

JOHN

I AM MASTER OF THIS MANOR
AND SONS MUST OBEY!

Oooh!

MEREDITH

Obey? Fooey!

JOHN

Why you...

JOHN AND MEREDITH

(THEY lock swords again.)

Awwwwh!

*(This time MEREDITH forces JOHN down, exhausted, lying on
the floor, panting, while MEREDITH moves aside to the spotlight
to sing to the audience, unheard by JOHN.)*

MEREDITH

Yes, why?

WHY SHOULD I FOLLOW HIS ADVICE?
HAVE TO PAY THE PRICE?
SKATIN' ON THIN ICE
THANK YOU, BUT NO DICE!

Instead,

IF HE WOULD ONLY SHOW ME
ONE BRIGHT SIDE
OF WHAT IS TO BE

MEREDITH (cont'd)

LET JUST ONE SUNBEAM SHINE DOWN ON ME
GIVE ME ONE SUNRISE
INSPIRE ME TO GO FAR
ALL IT TAKES, ALL I NEED
IS JUST THE TWINKLING OF ONE STAR
(JOHN struggles up this time to rejoin the fray.)
But call it a truce? What's the use?
*(JOHN and MEREDITH charge at one another from a fair
distance and shout while charging.)*
Now for my grand finale!

JOHN

Now for my crushing blow!
(Swords drawn, THEY crash into one another.)

JOHN AND MEREDITH

Arrgghh!
*(Exhausted, THEY both crumple onto their backs on the floor. Noticing
the silence, ROSALIE and DIXIE gingerly open the door and walk in,
looking at the destruction. THEY start to pick things up.)*

ROSALIE

More like "boys will be boys"!

JOHN

(DIXIE turns on the radio. JOHN sits up.)
Hear that? Election news!

RADIO ANNOUNCER

This is KGLO radio with the NBC News Summary at six. Millions of Americans have been going to the polls today to decide who will be the next President of the United States; Alfred E. Smith or Herbert Hoover. Mr. Smith, whose campaign slogan is "A Winner for You", will spend election evening listening to the returns on the radio at his room in the Hotel Biltmore in New York City. Hoover has been spending the day at his home in Palo Alto, California, near San Francisco. He was serenaded outside his home by an orchestra led by John Philip Sousa, who turned 74 today.

(JOHN and MEREDITH sit bolt upright.)

JOHN AND MEREDITH

John Philip Sousa!

(JOHN turns the radio off. He and MEREDITH both stand

reverently for several beats in front of the Sousa photograph.)

MEREDITH

(Hopefully.)
Hey, Papa, Sousa invented the Sousaphone in 1895.

JOHN

Nonsense!

MEREDITH

He did, too!

JOHN

Couldn't have!

MEREDITH

Did, too! I looked it up in the libe...

JOHN

What in thunderation do *you* know about John Philip Sousa? I *knew* him!
(JOHN pushes MEREDITH aside and marches imperiously out of the den. ELDER MEREDITH hovers into the scene. MEREDITH is upset, doesn't know what to do, slumps on the chair. DIXIE moves over to comfort him.)

ELDER MEREDITH

(Waves his baton to freeze the scene. To audience.)
Talk about Iowa stubborn! I've got to change the tune here.
(Waves his baton to unfreeze MEREDITH. To MEREDITH.)
What to do, what to do.

MEREDITH

Yeah! There's nothing to do. He just runs out on me, even when I'm right!

ELDER MEREDITH

What if there were something I could do?

MEREDITH

Like what? He's impossible.

ELDER MEREDITH

Like, maybe I should stop thinking I have to do it all myself?

MEREDITH

Don't I?

ELDER MEREDITH

There's no shame in asking others for help. Who's closest to him?
(MEREDITH looks at ROSALIE. ELDER MEREDITH waves his baton to unfreeze DIXIE and ROSALIE.)

MEREDITH

Mama, can't you talk to him?

ROSALIE

About the Sousaphone?

MEREDITH

No, about the banjo, composing, my name! About...why can't he just listen?

ROSALIE

(Sighs. Looks heavenward. ELDER MEREDITH walks into the scene to observe.)
Is this one of those jagged rocks?

MEREDITH

Whatever you can do, please, Mama? Anything?

ROSALIE

(Putting her arm over MEREDITH's shoulder.)
Part of me says it's all in God's hands. The other part of me says God helps those who help themselves.

MEREDITH

I hope that means "Yes".
(He walks out to the porch.)

ELDER MEREDITH

I remember this! This is the time I took a hankerin' to Peggy. How to get me away from her. Avoid a divorce this time around. Time to get me outta here! That could also shake up Papa. Throw a little counterpoint into the equation. Mmm.. San Francisco! Turned out to be my favoritest city. Doncha know, I ended up as the youngest conductor *ever* at the San Francisco Symphony. I was so young my contract had a peach fuzz exemption clause. How do I swing this...?
(Snaps his fingers.)
I'll play the Sousa angle.
(To MEREDITH.)
Sousa's in San Francisco. Time to go!

MEREDITH

Go?

ELDER MEREDITH

Beat a path to the west! Rub shoulders with greatness!

MEREDITH

I dunno...

ELDER MEREDITH

Strike while the iron is hot!

MEREDITH

Gee, I've never been west of Clear Lake...

ELDER MEREDITH

There's a bigger world out there!

MEREDITH

I get the flutters just *thinkin'* of leavin' town.

ELDER MEREDITH

Maybe I shouldn't decide things based on what I'm afraid of. Maybe, just maybe, I should decide based on what I want...and, hey, Sousa's not gettin' any younger! He could even help me with my song!

MEREDITH

But now?

SONG: THE ONLY TIME TO ACT IS NOW

ELDER MEREDITH

HE WHO HESITATES IS LOST
WHO PROCRASTINATES PAYS THE COST
THE WORLD WON'T WAIT WHILE YOU DELIBERATE
AHEAD'S THE ONLY WAY TO PLOW
THE ONLY TIME TO ACT IS *NOW!*

MEREDITH

I SHOULD LOOK BEFORE I LEAP
CRAWL BEFORE I CREEP
LET ME LIE IN STATE
SO I CAN MEDITATE

ELDER MEREDITH

More like “vegetate”!

MEREDITH

ABOUT THE CHOICES THAT I FACE
THE TORTOISE ALWAYS WINS THE RACE

ELDER MEREDITH

OFF YOUR DUFF! INTO GEAR!
WON'T YOU PLEASE CHOOSE BY THE END OF THE YEAR?

MEREDITH

IF I BECOME A DO-OR-DIER
THAT'S JUMPING FROM THE FRYING PAN
RIGHT INTO THE FIRE

ELDER MEREDITH

HE WHO VACILLATES WILL LOSE
WHO EQUIVOCATES SINGS THE BLUES
YOU'RE TEMPTING FATE WHEN YOU PREVARICATE
THE CLOCK IS RUNNING OUT AND HOW!
THE ONLY TIME TO ACT...IS *NOW!*

MEREDITH

IF I DELAY?

ELDER MEREDITH

YOU LOSE THE DAY!

MEREDITH

IF I POSTPONE?

ELDER MEREDITH

YOU'RE OVERTHROWN!

MEREDITH

DRAG MY FEET?

ELDER MEREDITH

YOU'LL BE DEAD MEAT!

MEREDITH

IF I RECESS?

ELDER MEREDITH
YOU'LL BE A MESS!

MEREDITH
WHAT IF I STALL?

ELDER MEREDITH
FOUL BALL!

MEREDITH
OVERDUE?

ELDER MEREDITH
YOUR WATERLOO!

MEREDITH
WAVER?

ELDER MEREDITH
DISFAVOR

MEREDITH
WAFFLE?

ELDER MEREDITH
AWFUL!

MEREDITH
GUESS THERE'S NOTHING LEFT FOR ME BUT TO ALLOW
THE ONLY TIME TO ACT

ELDER MEREDITH
TO KEEP FROM GETTIN' WHACKED!

ELDER MEREDITH AND MEREDITH
THE ONLY TIME TO ACT IS NOW

(On the button, both hold up their left wrists to look at their watches, and freeze. Lights fade. "Deck the Halls" plays under the transition. The grandfather clock strikes 3 A.M. MEREDITH, dressed in a coat and hat, with a small period suitcase and his banjo over his shoulder, tiptoes into Dixie's bedroom and taps her on the shoulder.)

Shhhh!

MEREDITH

DIXIE

Mere, what are you doing?

MEREDITH

Leaving.

DIXIE

Where?

MEREDITH

San Francisco. I'm gonna find John Philip Sousa! And I'll be as far away from Papa as I can get!

DIXIE

Just before Christmas? Papa'll be very upset.

MEREDITH

He doesn't notice me now. Why would he notice me if I'm gone?

DIXIE

You can't leave me here alone! I'll be an only child!

MEREDITH

(Puts his arm around her shoulder.)
Gee willikers, Dixie, don't cry, it'll be OK.
(DIXIE pulls away.)

SONG: YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME

DIXIE

OH, DON'T SKIP TOWN OR LEAVE THE NEST
DON'T FLY OFF UPON YOUR QUEST
THAT'S NOT BEIN' BROTHERLY
YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME

I'LL BE STUCK SHOVELIN' SNOW
CHOPPIN' WOOD THE LAWN TO MOW
RAKIN' LEAVES BACKBREAKIN'LY
YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME

WHO CAN I WHINE AT IF YOU DISAPPEAR?
WHO CAN I BLAME IF YOU'RE NOT HERE?
WHAT ABOUT THE FOOD FIGHTS THAT I ENJOY?
IF YOU RUN OFF, WHO CAN I ANNOY?

DIXIE (cont'd)

DONCHU LEAVE ME
HIGH AND DRY I NEED YOU
AS MY FALL GUY
DON'T DUCK OUT DON'T YOU DARE FLEE
YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME

I'LL GO KERFLOOEY IF YOU GO AWAY
I'LL THROW A SNIT FIT EVERY SINGLE DAY
WHAT IF THEY COMMIT ME TO THE WAYWARD GIRLS HOME?
THEY'LL THROW ME IN CHAINS AND MY MOUTH WILL FOAM

DONCHU DASH OFF TO THE WEST
LEAVIN' ME ALONE, DEPRESSED
STAY AND I'LL BE ON MY BEST
I'LL BE SO SISTERLY
DO NOT DO THIS TO ME

NO, YOU CAN'T

MEREDITH

I can't?

DIXIE

YOU CAN'T

MEREDITH

I can't?

DIXIE

NO, YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME!

MEREDITH

Gee, you really *will* miss me!

DIXIE

What about money? Do you have any?

MEREDITH

Uh, six dollars and forty cents.

DIXIE

(*SHE reaches over to her pocketbook and gives MEREDITH a coin.*)
You're going to need more than that! Here, take my allowance.

MEREDITH

A quarter?

DIXIE

Hey, it's more than you had a minute ago.

(MEREDITH kisses her on the forehead.)

MEREDITH

Now *that* was a sisterly thing to do!

(HE tip-toes out of the room. Sound of approaching train. DIXIE goes to window to watch him leave. SHE takes a candle, puts it in the window, lights a match and lights the candle. Lights fade. Sound of train stopping, then starting up again and off into the night, with its whistle echoing.)

SCENE SEVEN: OMAHA TRAIN STATION

(Morning at the Omaha train station. LOUIS ARMSTRONG, in his 20's, is waiting for the train, nattily dressed in suit, a fedora, black-and-white shoes, a gold bracelet on his left wrist and a white handkerchief in his breast pocket. His winter coat is slung over his shoulder. HE periodically displays a huge, bright smile and has his trademark gravelly voice. Next to his feet is a trumpet case, with the words, "The Hot Five". EIGHT MEN and FOUR WOMEN TRAIN PASSENGERS [the PASSENGER CROWD] wearing winter coats, some with suitcases, are on the train platform. One hand wagon is piled high with luggage. The same "Chicago and North Western" cattle car pulls into the station. MEREDITH is shoved off of the train.)

ENGINEER'S VOICE

And stay off!

(MEREDITH falls on his stomach as the freight train chugs off. HE starts pounding his fists on the ground and flailing his legs in the air in an angry fit at the feet of LOUIS, who has to dance a jig to avoid having MEREDITH pound his feet. MEREDITH doesn't know he's almost hammering LOUIS' feet. During the course of the following scene, the TRAIN PASSENGERS are drawn closer and closer into the dialogue between MEREDITH and LOUIS until they form a tight group behind the pair.)

MEREDITH

No, no!

LOUIS

No, what?

MEREDITH

Now I'll never make it to San Francisco!

LOUIS

Why're you goin' to Frisco?

MEREDITH

(HE pounds one fist after the other in rhythm with the words "John", "Phillip" and "Sousa". LOUIS's jumps synchronize to this.)
I've gotta find John Philip Sousa.

LOUIS

Sousa? He sho' nuff wouldn't have me in his band.

MEREDITH

Why not?

MEREDITH (cont'd)

(LOUIS hoists MEREDITH up so they stand nose-to-nose.)

LOUIS

Take one look!

MEREDITH

Oh! I mean, oh.

LOUIS

What's your name, Little Shaver?

MEREDITH

Meredith, sir. Mere for short. Who're you?

LOUIS

Don't go callin' me "sir". My born name's Louis. But my pals call me...Satchmo.

(Huge grin. By now the PASSENGER CROWD has converged on the two. MEREDITH starts pacing worriedly back and forth. The PASSENGER CROWD paces along with him.)

MEREDITH

I'm never going to get there!

LOUIS

Hey, the ticket's only 28 bucks!

MEREDITH

Awwhhh!

(HE shows his wallet to LOUIS. LOUIS offers him money.)

Oh, I couldn't.

LOUIS

Yes, you could. And you don't have to pay me back. Down the road, jus' help some other poor banjo player.

(MEREDITH accepts the money.)

PASSENGER CROWD

Awwwww.

MEREDITH

Gosh, Louis, thanks a million!

LOUIS

Did you know the banjo was invented by colored folk?

MEREDITH

(Shakes his head, as does the PASSENGER CROWD.)
What do you play?

LOUIS

I jus' blow a little trumpet. You handy with that thing?

MEREDITH

I know all the strums and chords. I even know movable diminisheds!

PASSENGER CROWD

Ooo—ooo!

LOUIS

Where are you stayin'?

PASSENGER CROWD

Yeah, where?

MEREDITH

A hotel?

(The PASSENGER CROWD laughs, slapping their thighs.)

LOUIS

Hotels'll run you nine bucks a night! OK...there's the YMCA. That's a buck a night. Naw. Your best bet's a Chinatown rooming house.

MEREDITH

Chinatown?

(The PASSENGER CROWD chortles, elbowing each other.)

LOUIS

Mere, where're you from?

MEREDITH

Mason City, Iowa.

LOUIS

That explains it.

(The PASSENGER CROWD laughs.)

Why you wanta meet ol' man Sousa?

PASSENGER CROWD

Yeah, why?

MEREDITH

He's my hero! I'm trying to write marches, just like him.

(Hurriedly.)

But, what if I can't find him? What if he won't see me? What if he won't talk to me?
What if...

LOUIS

...what if you just relax and cross one bridge at a time?

PASSENGER CROWD

Yeah, what if?

LOUIS

The first bridge? Getcher self down to the Union Hall on Jones Street and get you some
gigs with that banjo.

MEREDITH

Who'll I talk to?

PASSENGER CROWD

Yeah, who?

LOUIS

The tender.

PASSENGER CROWD

The who?

LOUIS

The phone tender. He hands out the jobs. Then you can bring joy to people with your
music. You know, music ain't just entertainment. Slaves in the cotton fields couldn't get
through the day without music. And music can even save lives. Sometimes people get
real down and music is the only thing between them an' the deep under.

*(In the following production number THE ENSEMBLE on the platform
dances, throwing off their winter coats, hats and gloves to join the dance.
During the song, LOUIS breaks out his signature white handkerchief,
gesturing with it, occasionally mopping his brow.)*

SONG: THANKS BE TO MUSIC

LOUIS

WHEN YOU'RE HEAVIN', LET SONG LIGHTEN THE LOAD
WHEN YOU'RE HAULIN', LET SONG SHORTEN THE ROAD
WHEN YOU'RE PICKIN', LET SONG BRACE UP YO' BACK
WHEN YOU'RE PLOWIN' LET SONG TAKE UP THE SLACK

LOUIS (cont'd)

THANKS, THANKS, THANKS BE TO MUSIC
THANKS, THANKS, THANKS BE TO SONG
THANKS, THANKS BE TO MUSIC
THANKS, THANKS, BE TO SONG

LOUIS AND ENSEMBLE

WHEN YOU'RE TROUBLED, SING OUT TO EASE THE PAIN
WHEN A STORM STRIKES, SING OUT IN THE RAIN
WHEN THERE'S SORROW, AND TEARS WON'T STAY AWAY
LET SWEET MUSIC, HE'P YOU THROUGH THE DAY

THANKS, THANKS, THANKS BE TO MUSIC
THANKS, THANKS, THANKS BE TO SONG
THANKS, THANKS BE TO MUSIC
THANKS, THANKS, BE TO SONG

WHEN YOU'RE EMPTY AND YOU CAIN'T FIND NO PEACE
LET SONG GIVE YO' TIRED SOUL RELEASE
WHEN YOU THINK YOU CAN'T STAND IT NO MO'
LET SONG SHOW YOU

MEREDITH AND LOUIS

WHAT YOUR LIFE IS FOR

LOUIS

THANKS,

MEREDITH

THANKS,

MEREDITH AND LOUIS

THANKS BE TO MUSIC

LOUIS

THANKS,

MEREDITH

THANKS,

MEREDITH AND LOUIS

THANKS BE TO SONG

LOUIS

THANKS,

MEREDITH AND LOUIS

THANKS BE TO MUSIC
THANKS, THANKS, BE TO SONG

LOUIS

NOW SNAP!
(ONE QUARTER OF THE ENSEMBLE start snapping their fingers)
AND CLAP!
(A SECOND QUARTER OF THE ENSEMBLE start clapping their hands)
AND SLAP!
(A THIRD QUARTER OF THE ENSEMBLE do thigh slaps)
AND TAP!
(THE FOURTH QUARTER OF THE ENSEMBLE tap their feet to this rhythm. Choreography where LOUIS and half the ENSEMBLE and MEREDITH and the other half of the ENSEMBLE have a slap-body-slap-hands dance duel back and forth—patting juba--finally merging together to sing the end of the song.)
LET'S SEE WHAT YOU'VE GOT OVER THERE!

ENSEMBLE

SONG, SONG
LET THERE BE SONG
SONG, SONG
LET THERE BE SONG

SONG, SONG
LET THERE BE SONG

SONG, SONG
LET THERE BE SONG

SONG, SONG
LET THERE BE SONG

SONG, SONG
LET THERE BE SONG

SONG, SONG
LET THERE BE SONG

LOUIS

SONG, SONG
LET THERE BE SONG
WHEN THE WORK'S TOO HARD

MEREDITH
WHEN YOUR PAPA HATES
YOUR MUSIC

LOUIS
WHEN THE DAY'S TOO LONG

WHEN RADIO REJECTS YOU

LOUIS
WHEN YOU AIN'T GOT A
PENNY

MEREDITH
WHEN YOU ONLY HAVE
SIX BUCKS

LOUIS, MEREDITH AND THE ENSEMBLE

THANKS, THANKS, THANKS BE TO MUSIC
THANKS, THANKS, THANKS BE TO SONG
THANKS, THANKS BE TO MUSIC
THANKS, THANKS, BE TO SONG
OH, NOW, THANKS, THANKS BE TO SONG
THANKS, THANKS BE TO SONG
THANKS BE TO MUSIC

ENSEMBLE

OO-OO—WAH!

LOUIS AND ENSEMBLE

THANKS BE TO SONG!

(Curtain.)

ACT TWO
SCENE ONE: CHINATOWN

(Sounds of tinkly, gongy Chinese music. Busy street sounds. Colorful drops of Chinese signs. Red Chinese lanterns hang from the fly loft. Four CHINESE WOMEN wearing Chinese basket hats, illuminated by four spotlights from above, perform a stylized dance. THEY pull out hidden ribbons on little metal extensions and wave them around, first one in one hand, then one in another. MEREDITH enters, carrying his suitcase and his banjo. A pencil behind his ear. HE is enraptured with Chinatown's exoticness. HE taps at some Chinese cymbals with his pencil. HE sees a red sign with white lettering that says, in Chinese and English, "Gao Pei Hand Laundry" above the door, with another red sign in white lettering in both languages that reads "Room to Let". An illustrated Chinese calendar hangs on the wall. There are some brown-paper-wrapped laundered shirts with numbered pink tickets, wrapped in twine. A short bamboo plant sits in a pot on a table. There's a sewing machine behind the counter. ZI LING, a cute 16-year-old Chinese girl, stands behind the counter, wrapping laundered shirts in brown paper. SHE wears a red string in her hair. SHE wears a bright blue high-collared silk shirt with flared sleeves that stop at the elbow and a lightly gathered skirt that falls below the knees. SHE has a very slight Chinese accent. There is a ball of brown twine at her counter that she can use to twirl, work with in her various scenes. SHE periodically refers to a book on the counter. MEREDITH, who seems lovestruck upon seeing ZI LING, bounds into the laundry. ZI LING jumps back, surprised.)

ZI LING

My goodness! You scare me!

MEREDITH

Oh, sorry! Didn't mean to. Hello. I...say, what's that book you've got there?

ZI LING

Oh, dictionary. I memorize the words.

MEREDITH

Good for you! How many have you memorized so far?

ZI LING

Only through the letter "K".

MEREDITH

Holy Cow! I can barely remember what I had for breakfast today!

ZI LING

Ooo, I love to learn words.

MEREDITH

Me, too, especially words that rhyme. Uh...so...like...

There once was a maiden so pretty
 Nobody thought she could be witty
 To set off her good looks
 She read hundreds of books
 And now she is mayor of the city.
(ZI LING giggles delightedly putting her hands to her mouth.)

ZI LING

English letters are so different from Chinese.

(SHE opens the dictionary and gazes in.)

SONG: ALPHABETTER FRIENDS

ZI LING

A-B-C HOW SMALL YOU ARE
 MY DEAR TINY FRIENDS
 D-E-F ORTLESSLY YOU COMBINE
 IN THREES OR FIVES OR TENS

G-H-I LOVE EACH OF YOU
 EVERY CURVE AND LINE
 J-K-L EMENTARY YOU MAY BE
 WHO CARES? THAT SUITS ME FINE

M-N-O VER JOYED AM I
 TO KNOW YOU, TO KNOW YOU
 YOU MAKE ME SO HAP P-Q-R YOU
 GLAD TO KNOW ME, TOO?

S-T-U 'RE STRONG SILENT TYPES
 YET YOU SPEAK TO ME
 V-W-X TRAORDINARY
 HOW THAT CAME TO BE

Y-Z
 TWENTY-SIX IN ALL
 THAT'S PLENTY, NO MORE!
 WHAT BETTER FRIENDS THAN LETTER FRIENDS
 COULD ANYONE ASK FOR?
 WHAT BETTER FRIENDS THAN LETTER FRIENDS
(SHE kisses the inside of the book.)
 COULD ANYONE ASK FOR?

MEREDITH

26 is plenty to learn. How many letters are there in Chinese?

ZI LING

About 35,000.

MEREDITH

Omigosh! That's amazing, Miss...Miss...

ZI LING

Zi Ling.

(SHE gives a slight Chinese head bow. MEREDITH and ZI LING's eyes lock as they are clearly taken with one another, lifting MEREDITH's spirits.)

This means "beautiful pieces of jade". What's your name?

MEREDITH

Meredith Willson. Son of Will, I guess. But I don't know what a "will" is, though. Uh, is there a room available?

ZI LING

Yes. Do you want to rent?

MEREDITH

Maybe, how much?

ZI LING

One dollar fifty cents.

MEREDITH

Per night?

ZI LING

Oh, no! Each week.

(MEREDITH beams.)

GAO

(GAO PEI, the scowling laundry owner, comes forward aggressively.)

Neh oh ning du ging moeh ah? Fang hoee dun eh dugay neh gung. Pooh ho noy sam.

(ZI LING bows her head in hurt submission, and speaks back to GAO in Taishan Chinese.)

ZI LING

Hola Gao schlan sang. Coee shieng du gan fong.

GAO

Kung nien! Neh onh du ging no *ah*?

ZI LING

I told him we are talking about renting the room upstairs. So...Why are you here?

MEREDITH

To find *John Philip Sousa*.

(ZI LING tilts her head.)

Oh. He's the Knight of the Baton! The March King! The most popular music man in the world. I'm going to be a composer just like him. Mr. Sousa's here in San Francisco, somewhere.

ZI LING

What is "march"? I must learn this word.

(SHE goes to the dictionary, starts turning the pages. GAO grabs her arm roughly and gestures towards the stairway. MEREDITH notices this with some alarm.)

GAO

Neh du moa du koi ghiu.

ZI LING

I must show you room, then get right back to work.

(ZI LING and MEREDITH start to move towards the stairs.)

MEREDITH

How come you're working on Christmas?

ZI LING

I am Confucian. We don't celebrate Christmas, but we do celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival. And the Moon Festival! Do you want the room?

MEREDITH

Yes!

(SHE gestures to show him up the stairs, going first to show him the way.)

I'm working on a march myself, you know. It goes like this...It needs work.

(HE dah-dah-dahs his working song. The lights fade.)

SCENE TWO: UNION HALL, SAN FRANCISCO

(New Year's Eve. A PHONE TENDER in coat and tie sits at a table with a period telephone and microphone. A sign on the wall reads "Musicians Union: Local 6". A pool table. SPANKY, dressed in elaborate feathers as a mummer, with his banjo case near him, plays cards with LASZLO, his accordion near him, and with JIM SCHLICT, whose clarinet case is on the floor beside him. MACTAVISH plays pool with GIUSEPPE. A trumpet case and trombone case are near the pool table. Except for SPANKY, all the musicians are dressed in tuxes, but with the ties loose and their coats slung over chairs. Three telephone booths are against one wall.)

PHONE TENDER

Jim Schlict, clarinet! Golden Gate Theater, Booth 3!

(JIM SCHLICT grabs his clarinet and tux coat and rushes to Booth 3.)

LASZLO

(Hungarian accent.)

Nossing new! Same ol' musicians ve haff here! Ve need new blood!

SPANKY

Laszlo, just don't bite me on the neck!

GIUSEPPE

I lova you-a guys! You-a da salta-a-da earth! But howsabouta a little pepper?

(MEREDITH pauses fearfully before entering, gathers himself together and enters, banjo slung over his shoulder, still visibly nervous. The MUSICIANS perk up, swarm all over MEREDITH, laughing, poking, examining, etc. THOSE with pool cues pound them on the floor in a catchy rhythm that continues under the dialogue.)

GIUSEPPE

(Gives MEREDITH a slap on the shoulder.)

Hey, looka da newa kid onna block! Mamma mia! A Banjo Boy!

SPANKY

(Inspects behind both of MEREDITH's ears.)

Yep! Wet behind the ears!

MACTAVISH

(Scottish accent. Grabs MEREDITH's leg, taps on the sole of his foot.)

Crivvens! Jings! Losh! Michty me! A tenderfoot!

LASZLO

(Pulls MEREDITH's jaw down abruptly to look in his mouth.)
Szezám, táruj! Short in the tooth!
(As a collective swarm, the MUSICIANS jostle MEREDITH towards the PHONE TENDER's desk. THEY continue to poke at MEREDITH, jab each other in the ribs, etc.)

GIUSEPPE

This-a the best night otha year to get-a work. Newa Year's Eve! You playa banjo good?

MEREDITH

Sure do! And I compose!

PHONE TENDER

You don't look too composed to me!

GIUSEPPE

Spanky playsa banjo, too! In a stringa-band.

MEREDITH

Crikey! I've never seen so many feathers outside a chicken coop!
(Laughs around the room.)
What do you play?

SPANKY

All marches! Alabama Jubilee! Golden Slippers!

PHONE TENDER

Hey, Spanky! Do you know how to get two banjo players to play in unison?

SPANKY

I dunno.

PHONE TENDER

Shoot one!
(Musicians laugh.)

LASZLO

Hey, Spanky, didja hear the one about the man who had six months to live?

SPANKY

No, but I think you're about to tell me.

LASZLO

He said, "Doc, is zhere *anything* I can do?" And zeh doctor says, "I'm afraid not. But, zhere is vun thing you could try." "Vat? I'll try anything." "Find yourself an ugly girl zat plays zeh banjo and move to Pittsburgh." "Vill zat help me live longer?" "No, but it'll make zeh time go by *really* slow."

(Musicians laugh.)

GIUSEPPE

And thisa MacTavish! Trumpet.

MACTAVISH

(Every "t" he utters is a glottal stop on top of a thick Scottish accent.)

Me laddie, if you wanta be a go-getter, you gotta put-a little bit-a you in the song. Half the battle's bein' sure every little itty-bitty thing is what'll pretty much make the song better. It'll show in your attitude. It'd be a pity if you bottle it up. Don't settle. Don't be a quitter. What'll matter is to show your mettle. That'll put you in fine fettle.

MEREDITH

Do they give you sheet music when you show up at work?

(General laughter.)

SPANKY

Music? Schmusic! You won't knock 'em dead even if all you do is play every note perfectly! After you *learn* it up here...

(HE jabs his finger to MEREDITH's head.)

...then,

(HE flings some sheet music back over his shoulder.)

you gotta *play* it from here!

(HE pokes MEREDITH's chest.)

LAZSLO

You got to let eet out! Play vhat you feel. Eet's not verk. Do I *verk* my instrument? No! I *play* my instrument.

(The following choreography focuses on singing to MEREDITH, swarming around him.)

SONG: PLAY IT FROM YOUR HEART**GIUSEPPE**

(Exaggerated basso profundo voice.)

IF-A YOU PLAY

GIUSEPPE, MACTAVISH, LAZSLO

FAST OR SLOW, HIGH OR LOW, TO THRILL THEM FROM THE START
DON'T WORRY 'BOUT THE MUSIC

(On the word "heart" THEY pound their chests in quarter notes so the held note pulsates.)

PLAY IT FROM YOUR HEART

GIUSEPPE

IF-A YOU ARE

GIUSEPPE, MACTAVISH, LAZSLO

COOL OR HOT, HEP OR NOT, FOR YOU TO STAND APART
DON'T READ IT FROM THE MUSIC

(LAZSLO throws a bunch of sheet music up in the air, back over his head, on the word "music".)

PLAY IT FROM YOUR HEART

MACTAVISH

IF ALL YOU DO IS HIT THE NOTES
AND KEEP THE BEAT PRECISELY
YOU'LL SOON DISCOVER THAT THE CROWD'S
NOT TREATING YOU SO NICELY

GIUSEPPE

(More slowly, expansively.)

IF-A, ON THE OTHER HAND-A YOU REACH-A
DEEP DOWN IN-A-SIDE FOR-A FEELING
RIGHT THERE IN FRONT OF-A YOU, YOU'LL-A FIND
THE AUDIENCE-A IS-A KNEELING

GIUSEPPE, MACTAVISH, LAZSLO

IF-A IT'S A RAG OR HYMN, LIGHT OR GRIM
THERE'S ONE WAY TO BE SMART
DON'T WORRY 'BOUT THE MUSIC, PLAY IT FROM YOUR HEART

ENSEMBLE

MARCH OR WALTZ, JAZZ OR SCHMALTZ
TO REACH THE REALM OF ART
DON'T READ IT FROM THE MUSIC

(In two pairs, in rapid succession, on the third and fourth beat after the word "music" THEY make two quick rips of the music paper then drop the papers.)

PLAY IT FROM YOUR HEART
HEAVEN'S WAITING WITHIN

(ENSEMBLE members put palms religiously together, tap their feet impatiently, roll their eyes.)

ENSEMBLE

ANGELS ARE STANDING BY
OPEN UP THE GATES OF YOUR HEART
AND LET THE FEELINGS CAGED INSIDE TAKE WING AND FLY

(For each instrument, ENSEMBLE members pantomime the playing of each.)

IF YOU PLAY VIOLIN, ACCORDIAN
FLUTE OR SLIDE TROMBONE
FORGET ABOUT YOUR FINGERS
FORGET ABOUT THE TONE
IF IT'S A BIG BASS DRUM OR CORNET
BASSOON OR STEEL GUITAR
BE ONE WITH THE MUSIC, THEN YOU'LL BE A STAR

SPANKY

(As MEREDITH catches on and contributes, MUSICIANS slap him on the back, give him the thumbs up sign, etc.)

FORGET ABOUT THE SHARPS AND FLATS

MEREDITH

FORGET ABOUT THE KEY

SPANKY

YOUR HEART AND SOUL DON'T REALLY CARE

SPANKY AND MEREDITH

IF IT'S IN F OR G

LAZSLO

RELAX AND YOU'LL ELECTRIFY

MEREDITH

DON'T THINK ABOUT THE SCORE

LAZSLO

RELEASE THE JOY INSIDE YOU

ENSEMBLE

AND THE CROWD WILL ROAR FOR MORE

(Music without singing for choreography in three parts:

- 1. A polka, during which ensemble members periodically shout "stolaht!"*
- 2. A Mexican hat dance with a sombrero on the floor. Ensemble members periodically shout "woo!" and "arriba!" MUSICIANS blindfold MEREDITH and put a pool cue in his hand as a red-heart piñata descends from the*

ENSEMBLE (cont'd)

fly loft. When MEREDITH hits it with the cue, it bursts open and red helium balloons with a large white note on both sides of each burst out and fly up slowly.
 3. A hora, during which MEREDITH is hoisted up on a chair and carried about. Ensemble members periodically shout "l'chaim!", "mazel tov!", "hey!" and "ho!" During this one MUSICIAN bursts forward to do a Russian kick dance. The MUSICIANS pull him away as if this dance doesn't belong. MACTAVISH does a brief Scottish dance and is hustled away. Then, MEREDITH grabs his banjo and plays flashily from here to the end of the song.)

HEAVEN'S WAITING WITHIN
 ANGELS ARE STANDING BY
 OPEN UP THE GATES OF YOUR HEART
 AND LET THE FEELINGS CAGED INSIDE
 TAKE WING AND FLY

MARCH OR WALTZ, JAZZ OR SCHMALTZ
 TO REACH THE REALM OF ART

DON'T READ IT FROM THE MUSIC
 PLAY IT FROM YOUR HEART
 DON'T READ IT FROM THE MUSIC
 PLAY IT, SAY IT, BRAY IT, PORTRAY IT
 SASHAY IT, DISPLAY IT, BROADWAY IT
 PLAY IT FROM YOUR HEART
 (MUSICIANS pat MEREDITH on the back for his banjo playing.)

PHONE TENDER

Here, sign this.

MEREDITH

What is it?

PHONE TENDER

Your union card.

(MEREDITH signs.)

Your ticket to the top, kid!

(Others laugh as the PHONE TENDER gives the card to MEREDITH.)

MEREDITH

Can I get on the radio with this?

(Laughter all around.)

PHONE TENDER

Yeah, on K...N-O!

(HOXIE, a black 16-year-old with a banjo slung over his shoulder, enters the hall and walks, with determination, but a bit worried also, across the entire stage to the PHONE TENDER's desk. As HE walks by them the MUSICIANS stiffen and step back, and look at one another.)

HOXIE

I'm sorry. It's New Year's 'n all. I need work.

PHONE TENDER

See here, this won't do. Just get out of here. Now! Getcher self over to Local 669 where you and your kind belong.

HOXIE

Please?

PHONE TENDER

Go on, now! Scoot!

MEREDITH

Why won't they let you play?

HOXIE

My fine white-feathered friend...your name?

MEREDITH

Mere...

HOXIE

Mere, I'm Hoxie. These are just the breaks. Around here, Negroes can only play in Oakland or on the Barbary Coast. I ran away from Atlanta hoping things would be better here.

MEREDITH

I'll make them better. It's time to help another banjo player. C'mon!

HOXIE

Hold on, what're you doing?

MEREDITH

They can't do this!

HOXIE

They just did. Don't try to fight city hall.

PHONE TENDER

Meredith Willson, banjo! Orpheum Theater! Booth 2!

(MEREDITH marches by himself up to the PHONE TENDER. The ITALIAN MUSICIAN waves his hands and shakes his head, as if to dissuade him.)

HOXIE

Mere, don't!

MEREDITH

Instead of my playing the Orpheum, I want to substitute my friend Hoxie, here.

PHONE TENDER

Out of the question.

MEREDITH

Why not?

PHONE TENDER

Who do you think you are?

MEREDITH

I don't know who I am. But I *do* know who I'm not. I'm not the kind of person who treats people like that.

(HE takes out his union card, looks at it for a beat or two, wondering what to do, then rips it up and throws it at the tender. The MUSICIANS gasp. As HE walks over towards HOXIE, the various MUSICIANS give subtle shrugs, indirect eye glances, etc. MEREDITH takes HOXIE by the elbow and starts to walk out with him.)

HOXIE

Mere, don't walk out! They'll never let you back. I'm telling you, you'll be sorry. This is the only place to get music work in this town.

MEREDITH

I'll think of something.

HOXIE

Yeah, and tomorrow mornin', my dead Daddy's gonna up and rise from the grave!

(Lights fade.)

SCENE THREE: GAO PEI'S LAUNDRY, CHINATOWN

(*ZI LING* is ironing. *SHE* holds her pained shoulder, winces, then continues ironing. *MEREDITH* enters, testing out melodies and lyrics to his working song.)

MEREDITH

Freedom cannot be saved by sea, land or air...no...by land, air or sea...then, you and me, you and me. Zi Ling, what's this on your arm?

(*SHE* pulls away, embarrassed.)

A burn?

ZI LING

It is nothing, just an accident with the iron.

MEREDITH

That must've hurt. You know, I've never seen you *not* working. How many hours a day do you put in?

ZI LING

16, sometimes 18.

MEREDITH

Holy jumping jeeppers! Good thing you get paid for all those extra hours.

ZI LING

I don't get paid at all. I am mui tsai.

MEREDITH

What? What's mui tsai?

ZI LING

Back in Taishan, my father had to sell me for one ounce of gold. I must work for Mr. Gao Pei.

MEREDITH

I thought *he* was your father.

ZI LING

Oh, no. I have been working for him for five years, and I must work for him two more. Then will I be free. Free to be an English teacher.

MEREDITH

We've gotta go to the police!

ZI LING

On my ancestors' grave, no! If they find out, they kill me. Mr. Gao Pei is friends with The Tong!

MEREDITH

Tong?

ZI LING

Gang, very dangerous. Mere, I have to tell you. Gao Pei is very angry you have not paid rent.

MEREDITH

I'll find some work soon, can't he just wait?

ZI LING

(Glancing fearfully over her shoulder.)
No, no, you must pay!

MEREDITH

Zi Ling, it's hard to find work and John Philip Sousa at the same time.

ZI LING

Maybe you should find work, *then* find Mr. Sousa.

MEREDITH

I can do both! I have to do both!

ZI LING

Work should always come first. Always.

MEREDITH

Come on, why?

ZI LING

Is Mr. Sousa going to pay you? You can always see him later.

MEREDITH

But Sousa's one reason I came here. Though now I've got two.

GAO

(Poking angrily at MEREDITH's chest. In his face.)
Neh zi-ahn yo go du.

MEREDITH

What's he saying?

ZI LING

He says he wants rent. And he wants it now.

MEREDITH

Tell him I'll have it...in..in a week.

ZI LING

Coee gong coee zee koay zhlan kay haee way go.

GAO

Mm ho yi ha goay zhlan kay. Kway zhing dueeoh yo go. Mm ho yi ha goay zhlan kay. Kway zhing dueeoh yo go.

ZI LING

He says "No, now".

MEREDITH

Tell him I don't have it now.

ZI LING

Coee kway zhing mo tang go.

GAO

(Points at MEREDITH, then threatens to hit ZI LING, she cringes.)
Kao coee kway zhing du yo tay.

ZI LING

(ZI LING, upset.)
He says, "Too bad." You must go now. You better get your things.
(MEREDITH reluctantly starts going up the stairs. ZI LING looks crushed.)

MEREDITH

But, what am I gonna do? Where am I gonna go?
(HE goes into his room.)

ELDER MEREDITH

(Enters. To audience. Heavy sigh.)
Oooh boy. We've gone into a minor key here. Mmm. Not much to go on. I could just let him be. Let him cry it out. Isn't that what parents do? I wouldn't know.
(Looks up towards MEREDITH's room.)

ELDER MEREDITH (cont'd)

It's a bit dicey, fiddling with history. Things have a way of taking on a life of their own.

(MEREDITH comes out of his room with his banjo and bag. HE walks down the stairs. ZI LING is watching sadly from the laundry.)

Oh! I can't just say nothing. He needs something to latch onto.

(ELDER MEREDITH shrugs his shoulders and winces at the audience, to convey this is a feeble attempt on his part. HE speaks to MEREDITH.)

Sometimes, things are darkest just before the dawn.

MEREDITH

It'll be dark all right with no roof over my head.

ELDER MEREDITH

Things'll turn out OK. I'll make do.

MEREDITH

I'll make do where?

ELDER MEREDITH

I have to believe that things'll work out. Just believing it helps make it happen.

MEREDITH

Is that so?

ELDER MEREDITH

(Pointing at MEREDITH, then himself.)

Believe you me!

(MEREDITH casts a sad smile at ZI LING, who tears up also. Spotlight on her and on MEREDITH. THEY stare sadly and longingly at each other as the two spots simultaneously fade.)

SCENE FOUR: WILLSON LIVING ROOM

(ROSALIE sits in a chair reading a newspaper with large headline, her Bible basket on a side table next to her as JOHN enters.)

JOHN

So, what news in the Globe-Gazette, Rose?

ROSALIE

Nothing much, except the town fathers are up in a swivet...

(SHE holds up the headline and reads it.)

"Boys must keep out of billiard establishments."

JOHN

Rose, we've got bigger problems. Is our son ever coming back, for gosh sakes?

ROSALIE

You mean is...

(She speaks it out slowly.)

...Me-re-dith.

JOHN

(He rolls his eyes.)

This Mere...this son of mine won't join the band. He's out there *composing*.

ROSALIE

He's out there looking for his hero, *your* hero, I might add. You should be proud of him.

JOHN

Well, *I* never composed, I mean, I did try my hand at it a bit, but I didn't keep it up, actually...

ROSALIE

Why, John, I do believe you are jealous! Jealous of your own son!

JOHN

Me? Jealous? That's crazy...

ROSALIE

It's why...it's why you didn't call him by his name...as if, if he didn't have a name, he didn't exist...maybe he'd go away. Which he did!

JOHN

I drove him away?

ROSALIE

John, maybe you should think less about yourself and more about Meredith and Dixie. Start by helping them. And you can even make a new start yourself. You built that band up once, and you can do it again. Remember, when we take one step, God takes two. Maybe you need a new approach. I've been reading this book by Dale Carnegie.

JOHN

"Influencing Men in Business?" I know all about that, why, I practically invented influence!

ROSALIE

I know dear, but there's one thing in here you don't do.

JOHN

What's that?

ROSALIE

Listen.

JOHN

Listen to what?

ROSALIE

It's more like listen to *whom*. Like Dixie. And Mere. You want him to be in the band? Listen. And when you do talk, call him by his name. Carnegie says you can convince more by listening more.

JOHN

That doesn't make any sense to me.

(ROSALIE puts her right index finger vertically against her lips and holds it there, distracting JOHN.)

I...*What* are you doing?

ROSALIE

Dale Carnegie says to do this. To stop yourself from talking too much. He says nobody ever learned a thing by talking.

JOHN

That looks strange.

ROSALIE

He says it makes you look like you're thinking deeply about what people are saying.

(JOHN folds his arms in resistance.)

But what it's really doing is stopping all the words from pouring out.

(JOHN folds his legs as a further sign of resistance. SHE pulls out the Bible from the basket, turns pages, milks the moment.)

There's this quote that was written just for you...Ecclesiastes 32, Verse 8.

(JOHN scrunches up his face in further resistance. She clears her throat.)

"Let thy speech be short."

(SHE puts her finger to her lips.)

SONG: LISTEN TO THEIR DREAMS**ROSALIE**

OPEN, KEEP YOUR EARS OPEN
LET HOPES SHINE LIKE SUNBEAMS
SEE HOW SILENCE CAN BE GOLDEN
LISTEN,
(Finger to her lips.)
LISTEN TO THEIR DREAMS

OPEN, LET YOUR MIND OPEN
WELCOME ALL THOUGHTS AND THEMES
CARE FOR WHERE THEIR LIVES ARE LEADING
LISTEN,
(Finger to her lips.)
LISTEN TO THEIR DREAMS
(They dance.)

CHILD IS FATHER TO THE DREAM
WE GROW UP TO PURSUE
IF NOBODY LISTENS
WILL THE DREAM COME TRUE?

OPEN, LEAVE YOUR HEART OPEN
THOUGH THEY GO TO EXTREMES
LET THEM POUR OUT EVERY YEARNING
LISTEN,
(Finger to her lips. HE responds finally by putting his finger to his lips. Then THEY both drop fingers away.)
LISTEN TO THEIR DREAMS
BE SURE TO LISTEN, LISTEN TO THEIR DREAMS.
(ROSALIE puts her index finger to her mouth. As does JOHN. THEY do a "finger kiss" ...kissing with their index fingers on their lips. Lights fade.)

SCENE FIVE: STREET IN SAN FRANCISCO

(A ramp simulating a steep San Francisco street. MEREDITH enters, talking to himself as HE composes lyrics to his working song, his banjo strapped over his shoulder. HE stops to write in his music notebook, walks on, stops, etc.)

MEREDITH

It's not...not...spangled banners...that...that make us great...no, this country great, no...brave...It's not, uh, fruited plains that make amber grains...no the grains of amber, grains of amber, what? That make the grains of amber...wave!
(MEREDITH comes upon HOXIE, with JULIO, a Mexican 16-year-old, and RUNNING FEATHER, a 16-year-old Shoshone Indian. HE has black hair, braids, wears a vest with some beads and a bandana around his head. HE has fun with the audience slyly mocking Native American stereotypes, including playing up being overly stone-faced. All have banjos. RUNNING FEATHER, sitting cross-legged on the ground, tosses and catches in one hand a tan leather-covered ball the size of a hacky sack. Through the rest of the show HE habitually tosses this up and down in one hand. JULIO is rooting through a garbage can, flinging food items out onto the stage, and HOXIE is catching them. Just as MEREDITH approaches, JULIO is literally upside down in the garbage can, with only his legs sticking out.)

HOXIE

Mere!

MEREDITH

(MEREDITH and HOXIE shake hands.)

Hoxie! How are you!

HOXIE

Mere, this is Julio...

(JULIO extracts himself from the garbage can. HE is high-strung, always moving, overly-active, bouncy.)

He's as antsy as a Mexican jumping bean.

JULIO

(Deeply suspicious of MEREDITH.)

Qué? Thees gringo ees a friend of yours?

(MEREDITH is taken aback.)

What does he know about us? About leeving in the street?

MEREDITH

I was thrown out of my room in Chinatown, so, that makes me a street person, too!
(JULIO is only slightly appeased.)

HOXIE

And this is Running Feather. He's Shoshone.

RUNNING FEATHER

(Equally suspicious. Makes a stiff arm gesture and folds his arms.)
White devil!

JULIO

Yanqui!

HOXIE

Hold on, fellas! This Mere is a regular guy. Why, he even plays banjo!

JULIO

(HE picks up his banjo and plays a chord.)
Oh, si? Juno E-flat seventh chord?
(MEREDITH whips out his banjo and matches the chord.)

RUNNING FEATHER

(HE plays a chord.)
E-flat seventh with flatted fifth?
(MEREDITH instantly plays this chord.)

JULIO

(Plays a chord.)
Oh, yeah? E-flat seventh with an augmented fifth?
(MEREDITH matches again. JULIO and RUNNING FEATHER are impressed. All three start playing together, and this acts as underscoring as the conversation goes forward.)

MEREDITH

Hoxie, how'd you do New Year's Eve?

HOXIE

(Starts playing his banjo along with the others.)
I played a little at a colored place, the Club Alabam. Nothin' since.

RUNNING FEATHER

No work. Bad spirits!

JULIO

As many jobs here as snowballs in Tijuana! If only each of us had even one place to play.

HOXIE

If only we had our own music. That'd be the trick!

MEREDITH

I write songs! Songs you could sing along with on the banjo. Songs we could play on the radio!

HOXIE

I've just been playin' the ol' songs.

MEREDITH

I'm working on this new march and since coming out here, I've added new lyrics to make the song more specific.

RUNNING FEATHER

About?

MEREDITH

About all the places Americans come from. I've met people from all over. You know, Italy, Hungary...Mexico. But now I'm stuck, because, Indians are from here, so...my song doesn't work.

RUNNING FEATHER

No! Not from here! Long ago, our ancestors from land far to west. The great crossing.

MEREDITH

Then...that means....no one's from here?

RUNNING FEATHER

Hmmmpf!

MEREDITH

America had no people here?

(RUNNING FEATHER nods.)

Now I can finish!

(Sings.)

WE COME FROM EVERYWHERE

HOXIE

So, who's going to do your song?

MEREDITH, HOXIE, JULIO, RUNNING FEATHER

We are!

MEREDITH

We'll form a group.

HOXIE

And do your song.

JULIO

Si! Si! And play mariachi songs!

RUNNING FEATHER

And war chants!

HOXIE

And ragtime!

RUNNING FEATHER

Our name...

JULIO

The Four Amigos!

HOXIE

The Four Brothers!

RUNNING FEATHER

The Banjo Braves!

MEREDITH

The Banjo Boys!

HOXIE, JULIO AND RUNNING FEATHER

That's it!

JULIO

Eh! Mere, what'll we wear? How about sombreros?

HOXIE

How about zoot suits and spats?

MEREDITH

No, I know just the thing. Have you seen those banjo players who play in the string bands? With their wild outfits, with all the feathers?

(The ramp starts to move off to make way for the upcoming train.)

RUNNING FEATHER

Feathers good for me.

JULIO

Those guys are fantastico.

MEREDITH

Then, once we've made some dough, we'll get those costumes. Now we are...

HOXIE

The...

RUNNING FEATHER

...Ban...

JULIO

...ho...

MEREDITH

...Boys...

SONG: THAT'S THE KIND OF LIFE FOR ME

(Rhythmic train chug-chug comes up gradually and reaches full volume as it arrives. The back of a train—like a Presidential campaign train—emerges in the center of the stage. Instead of the presidential seal, there's a sign: "Banjo Boys". Then the chug-chug rhythm of the train keeps in sync throughout the song. The train car sways back and forth as if in motion.)

RUNNING FEATHER

With banjos blazing...
(HE hops on the train.)

JULIO

We'll heet the dusty trail...
(Hops on train.)

MEREDITH

We'll sweep across the plains...

(Hops on train. A scrim lights up with a simple outline map of the U.S.)

HOXIE

And play every town in America!
(Hops on train.)

MEREDITH

(As the song progresses, lines are drawn from point-to-point on the map. A mix of short, medium and long lines. The drawer times each stroke to end neatly at the end of a given line. By the end of the song, the map is a webbed, dense tangle of lines.)

WE’LL DRIVE ‘EM BONKERS, IN DOWNTOWN YONKERS
 WE’LL RUN AMOK IN KEOKUK

RUNNING FEATHER

WE’LL BE A HIT, IN ALGONQUIT
 THEY WILL SQUAWK LIKE AN APACHE
 WHEN WE PLAY IN WAXAHATCHIE
 WE’LL BE IT!

HOXIE AND MEREDITH

(As the BANJO BOYS jump off the train, a CROWD of fans—men and women—come in from both wings to dance and cheer along for the rest of the song. Lots of positive interaction between THE BANJO BOYS and the crowd.)

IN PASCAGOULA AND ASHTABULA
 WE’LL SWALLOW SHAME AND FEAST ON FAME
 WE’LL PLAY IT NOISY WHEN WE HIT BOISE

JULIO

(In this verse, four of the WOMEN in the CROWD drop handkerchiefs at the feet of THE BANJO BOYS, titter and flirt.)

THE SEÑORITAS IN MILPITAS
 THEY WILL GREET US AND WILL EAT US
 UP YOU’LL SEE

MEREDITH

(On the words “Livin’ on limelight” main lights fade, and spots shine on the BANJO BOYS as they look up to “bask” in the limelight. Then the main lights come back up again.)

LIVIN’ ON LIMELIGHT, GIVEN THE GLORY
 IF THAT’S OUR STORY

MEREDITH (cont'd)

THEN, THAT'S...THE KIND OF LIFE...FOR ME!

BANJO BOYS

WE'LL MAKE 'EM HOLLA
IN WALLA WALLA
WE'LL LOVE TO PLAY PISCATAWAY
GIVE US A CRACK, AT CADILLAC
WE'LL SIT PRETTY IN DODGE CITY,
IT'S A PITY WE'LL END UP IN PONTIAC

GRANDIOSE, STANDING O'S, BRAVISSIMO'S
(In this verse, THE CROWD makes broad dismissive gestures as part of their dance, visually bewailing bad performance.)
IF WE FALL SHORT, IN DAVENPORT
OR IF WE FAIL IN CARBONDALE
OR SHOULD WE CHOKE, IN ROANOKE
OR IF WE STUMBLE AND WE TUMBLE
AS WE FUMBLE DOWN IN HUMBLE
WE'LL GO BROKE

RUNNING FEATHER/JULIO/HOXIE

Who cares? We'll be...

MEREDITH

(A red carpet rolls out from under the back of the train down to the lip of the stage. RUNNING FEATHER and JULIO jump off one side of the train while MEREDITH and HOXIE jump off the other. THEY combine and play their banjos and sing as they come down the carpet, reaching the end of the carpet at the end of the song. The CROWD, now positive, surges, dances and cheers on either side of the red carpet, many throwing confetti.. TWO PHOTOGRAPHERS, with fedora hats and press passes in the brim snap pictures with the flashes going off in rhythm to the song. On the words "Livin' on limelight" main lights fade, and spots shine on the BANJO BOYS as they look up and "bask" in the limelight. Then the main lights come back up again.)

LIVIN' ON LIMELIGHT, GIVEN THE GLORY
IF THAT'S OUR STORY
THEN, THAT'S...THE KIND OF LIFE...FOR ME!

RUNNING FEATHER/JULIO/HOXIE

YOU BETCHA!

MEREDITH
THAT'S...THE KIND OF LIFE...FOR ME!

RUNNING FEATHER/JULIO/HOXIE
I GETCHA!

MEREDITH
THAT'S THE KIND OF LIFE FOR ME

HOXIE
AND ME!

JULIO
AND ME!

RUNNING FEATHER
AND ME!
*(THE BANJO BOYS and THE CROWD exit, as the train moves
offstage. ELDER MEREDITH enters.)*

ELDER MEREDITH
In fact, I did have a banjo band at this age. For some strange reason, we called it "The Jones Brothers". None of us was named "Jones"! We played in Mason City, but that's it. Well, maybe once in Charles City. But later, I played first flute in Sousa's band. The most memorable performance of all was a Sousa reunion concert—with past and present bands combined--at the cavernous Hippodrome Theater in New York City. 5,00 people in the audience! 200 musicians, including 40 trumpets, and 30 trombones! We practically blew the roof off! That was the inspiration for "76 Trombones".
(Lights fade.)

SCENE SIX: RUSSIAN HILL

(It's the Chinese New Year, February 10, 1929. MEREDITH and ZI LING sit on the hilltop, in the light of a full moon, holding hands. Behind them San Francisco Bay glistens in the moonlight. On the far side, Angel Island is visible. Sounds of the Chinese New Year Parade, and fireworks punctuate the night sky.)

ZI LING

This is the Chinese New Year. Year of the Snake.

MEREDITH

That's funny. We just call it February 10th. Thank God we're alone. Finally! How did you shake off that pickle-puss Gao?

ZI LING

I didn't. He's at the New Year's family banquet all night with his clan.

MEREDITH

Some day, somehow, I have got to get you away from him--from all this. I can't let him hurt you for two more years.

ZI LING

Oooh, that sounds so dangerous. I don't know.

MEREDITH

I'll have the money to do it soon enough. I've started a new band, the Banjo Boys. Four of us. We're going to play on radio stations. Radio is so amazing isn't it? The wave of the future! Then we'll hit the road.

(HE puts his arm around her shoulder.)

With you. Zi Ling, I want to be with you forever.

(THEY look out over the bay for a few moments in silence.)

ELDER MEREDITH

(Waves the baton to freeze ZI LING. To audience.)

I can hear the strings! Mmm! Sounds serious. I better make sure she wants kids!

(To MEREDITH.)

Yeah, how terrific to be married to Zi Ling and raising a family. I wonder, I wonder if she'd want children, too?

MEREDITH

Why wouldn't she?

ELDER MEREDITH

Gosh, I just wonder, is all.

MEREDITH

After all, if she loves me, she'll have children.

ELDER MEREDITH

Maybe it's hard to know how people will act in advance. It never hurts to ask. Especially on a romantic night like this.

(HE waves ZI LING back to life.)

MEREDITH

Zi Ling, how do you feel about children?

ZI LING

Oh, I *love* children. They are sweet.

MEREDITH

I mean, children of your own.

ZI LING

Of course! If I did not have children, there would be no more ancestors!

(Pause as they continue to hold each other.)

Look! Over there. Angel Island. Where I arrived to Gold Mountain.

MEREDITH

Gold Mountain?

ZI LING

America! The men from Taishan who come here to search for gold, they call America "Gold Mountain". I spent three months there.

MEREDITH

Why so long?

ZI LING

They ask us hundreds of questions. If anyone tells a different story, they send us back. The guards, they kicked us. The food was like pig's food. Sometimes, we had to eat off the floor.

MEREDITH

(Hugs her.)

How could they?

ZI LING

The New Year makes me think of my family.

MEREDITH

Do you miss your father and mother?

ZI LING

Very badly. Do you miss your father and mother?

MEREDITH

I miss my mother but...not my father.

ZI LING

Why not?

MEREDITH

He talks over me all the time. He hates my banjo. He hates my composing. He hates me.

ZI LING

Did he tell you he hates you?

MEREDITH

No, but he just calls me "you". Maybe that's a good Chinese name, but not for me!

ZI LING

You don't know what's going on inside him. Chinese proverb say, "Hear the silence in the noise."

MEREDITH

What does that mean?

ZI LING

Your father has private thoughts, good private thoughts, but he doesn't know how to share. He might be afraid to.

MEREDITH

He certainly doesn't act afraid.

ZI LING

Whatever happen, you need to honor your father!

MEREDITH

He's sure making that hard to do.

ZI LING

No matter what, you must respect him!

MEREDITH

Even if he's mean to me?
(*She nods. He shakes his head.*)

ZI LING

Mere, what is your gold mountain?

MEREDITH

Me? Makin' music gives me whips and jingles! Everybody in my family is musical. My sister Dixie plays clarinet. My father plays cornet. My Aunt Lida plays guitar. And my mama Rose plays piano. As for me, I want to write songs that'll get on the radio. Songs that will live in people's hearts forever. And I'll do whatever I can to get there.

SONG: I WILL FOLLOW MY SONG

MEREDITH

I'M GONNA FOLLOW MY SONG (DON' STOP ME)
FOLLOW MY SONG (DON' BLOCK ME)
RARIN' TO GO, I'LL NEVER THROW
THE TOWEL IN

BECAUSE I'LL STICK TO MY GUNS (DON' DOUBT ME)
THOUGH I'VE NO FUNDS (ABOUT ME)
HOW SURE AM I? LET ME CLARIFY
AS SURE AS "STATION" FOLLOWS "TRAIN"
"SUGAR" FOLLOWS "CANE"
RAINBOWS FOLLOW RAIN
TARZAN FOLLOWS JANE (AAH—AAH—AAH!)
I WILL FOLLOW MY SONG

MY HANDS'VE GOTTA CLAP, MY FINGERS GOTTA SNAP
MY FEET'VE GOTTA TAP AND KEEP IN TIME
I TRY TO CATCH A RHYTHM THAT CANNOT BE BEAT
AND MAKE IT DANCE ALONG

(WHISTLES)

MY HEAD IS KINDA HOT, MY NERVES'RE KINDA SHOT
MY TUMMY'S GOTTA LOTTA BUTTERFLIES
I'VE GOT THE WRITIN' FEVER AND IT WON'T LET GO
UNTIL MY SONG IS DONE

(WHISTLES)

I'M GONNA FOLLOW MY SONG (DON' STOP ME)

MEREDITH (cont'd)

FOLLOW MY SONG (DON' BLOCK ME)
RARIN' TO GO, I'LL NEVER THROW
THE TOWEL IN
BECAUSE I'LL STICK TO MY GUNS (DON' DOUBT ME)
THOUGH I'VE NO FUNDS (ABOUT ME)

WHAT DO I NEED FOR ME TO SUCCEED?
I KNOW THAT SOMEHOW I'LL ADJUST
WITH SOME PIXIE DUST
FRIENDS AT BANKER'S TRUST
IT'S BROADWAY OR BUST
I MUST, FOLLOW MY SONG

NEITHER RAIN NOR SLEET NOR SNOW NOR HEAT
NOR DEAD OF NIGHT NOR BAD FROSTBITE
SHALL STAY ME VERY LONG FROM MY APPOINTED SOUNDS
'CAUSE I WILL FOLLOW MY SONG!
(ZI LING hugs MEREDITH and continues through her song as he holds her.)

MEREDITH

And what about *your* gold mountain?

ZI LING

Hmmph. Not here.

MEREDITH

Then where?

ZI LING

(SHE points longingly to the distance with her chin, staring out.)
There. Oh shee dung hoee.

SONG: I'LL BE THERE

ZI LING

I'LL BE THERE, SOMEWHERE FAR AWAY FROM HERE
WAY OUT THERE, IN THE FREE AND IN THE CLEAR
I'LL BE DOIN' WHAT I'M DOIN'
CAUSE I WANT TO, CAUSE I CARE
WAIT 'N SEE, I'LL BE THERE

I'LL BE THERE, IN A GENTLE LITTLE TOWN

ZI LING (cont'd)

FAR OUT THERE, WHERE YOU NEVER SEE A FROWN
WHERE YOU WAKE UP IN THE MORNIN'
HEARIN' LAUGHTER IN THE AIR
WAIT 'N SEE, I'LL BE THERE

HERE IS COLD AS STONE
EVEN THOUGH THE WEATHER'S WARM
HERE IS RAINY
THOUGH IT'S DRY
HERE IS STORMY
THOUGH THERE'S NOT A BREATH OF WIND
AND IT'S DARK BENEATH THE BRIGHT BLUE SKY

THERE IS WHERE I WILL RISE UP LIKE THE SUN
I'LL GO THERE AND I'LL SHINE ON EVERYONE
FROM THE MORNIN' TO THE EVENIN'
I'LL BE BEAMING EVERYWHERE
WAIT 'N SEE, I'LL BE THERE

TO BE THERE, OOO, OOO, OOO, OOO
THERE, AH, AH, AH, AH
THERE, MM, MM, MM, MM, MM, MM, MM, MM
THERE, OOO, OOO, OOO, OOO, OOO, OOO
I'LL BE THERE
(THEY kiss. Lights fade.)

SCENE SEVEN: UNION SQUARE

(March 1, 1929, Union Square outside the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco. Stage right is the lobby of the St. Francis, and next to that hotel room, both darkened. A NEWSSTAND VENDOR with a thick Irish brogue pushes his newsstand onto the stage chanting a ditty in a sing-song voice. On the word “day” and “away” he moves a third of his pile of newspapers so that he ends up with three piles. On “stout” HE brings out a big potato and puts it on the first pile as a paperweight. On “out” HE brings out a second potato. On “green” HE pulls out a watermelon and places it atop the third pile.)

VENDOR

St. Paddy’s Day, two weeks away
Killarney and Killeen
I’ll drink me stout till I pass out...
Or until I turn green.

Puts a whole new meanin’ on “the wearin’ of the green” , don’t it?
(MEREDITH enters breathing hard. HE’s bent over exaggeratedly from having climbed the steep hill. His banjo is slung from his shoulder. His clothes are even more raggedy.)

MEREDITH

These hills have turned my legs to butter!

VENDOR

Bucko, no one ever got strong walkin’ *down* hills!

MEREDITH

Oh, thanks!
(HE holds his hands on his lower back and exaggeratedly straightens himself up and stretches.)
Where’d all these hills come from, anyway?

VENDOR

Bejees, I dunno, but I don’t expect they’ll be going away anytime soon. You might as well get used to ‘em. Where you from, friend?

MEREDITH

Mason City, Iowa. Don’t laugh!

VENDOR

Wasn’t plannin’ on it. What’re you here fer?

MEREDITH

I'm trying to find somebody, is all. I've asked everybody. But all I've found are dead ends.

VENDOR

That's a fine how are ya! You didn't see fit to ask *me!* Who is it you're lookin' fer?

MEREDITH

John Philip Sousa.

VENDOR

(Waves a newspaper dramatically.)

By the numberless miracles of Saint Aidan! *I'm* the one's got to tell the world what's goin' on! I read the Chronicle front to back every day. Sometimes back to front. You know, they write down the comin's and goin's of people like Mr. Sousa every day.

MEREDITH

You mean...you know where he is?

VENDOR

All you had to do was ask, boyo! He always stays over there... 'cross Union Square, at the St. Francis.

(MEREDITH starts to go, but the VENDOR holds him back and speaks in a stage whisper to him, as if sharing a secret, and spelling out "U.S.A." with his finger.)

And I'll tell ya something special about his name. It ends in U...S...A.

(MEREDITH bolts towards the hotel. He stops after a few steps.)

MEREDITH

Hey, thanks, mister! Thanks a lot!

(Lights fade on newsstand and up on the St. Francis lobby. A large banner above a glass door in the back reads "KFRC Broadcast. 7:30 Tonight! Blue Monday Jamboree. With hostess Dorothy Gillespie, and starring Thelma Brown, Simpy Fitts and Edna O'Keefe." MEREDITH walks up to the sign in awe, then presses his face against the glass door.)

Wow, Edna O'Keefe!

(As MEREDITH leaves the lobby, it darkens. HE heads towards the hotel room, where the lights come up. A white-haired, white-mustachioed JOHN PHILIP SOUSA sits stooped in an armchair, asleep. His band jacket hangs on a hangar on a hook on the wall. On another hook hangs his band hat. On the table next to his armchair sits an 18-inch-long band baton with a globe and eagle on the top. There's a framed diploma on the wall. Hanging on a the wall is a fraternity paddle with the Greek letters "K K Ψ" prominent. On a hook on the wall hangs an Indian chieftain's headdress. There's a cane by his chair. SOUSA is tired and cranky. MEREDITH enters excited and weary at the

same time and breathing hard from rushing up the stairs. He just stares at SOUSA, with his jaw open for a long time until SOUSA looks over at him.)
Hello...?

SOUSA

(SOUSA awakes, taking his cane in hand. HE uses it to pound the floor to make points.)
I didn't ask for room service.

MEREDITH

Oh, I'm not room service...you're Mr. Sousa?

SOUSA

That I am, young man, but you've no business here, get on your way.

MEREDITH

(MEREDITH steps closer to look at SOUSA's face. and still staring, in awe.)
Where's your beard?

SOUSA

You came to ask me that? I haven't got time for this, get along now!

MEREDITH

Papa has your picture on his wall!

SOUSA

Well, I'm 74 now. We don't look the same forever, you know. So, here we are on the first day of my favorite month.

(MEREDITH cocks his head, not understanding.)
March!

(HE slams his hand on the table after saying "March". MEREDITH laughs after a little delay.)

You a musician?

MEREDITH

Yes, sir! Banjo, sir!

SOUSA

I owned a horse named Banjo. Banjo threw me clear off once, back in oh-three. Don't own him anymore. So, where're you from, Nebraska or some such?

MEREDITH

Mason City, Iowa. Meredith Willson's the name.

SOUSA

Small world. I've been a Mason for 51 years. Not the brick-layin' kind, mind you.

MEREDITH

My Papa said you'd never have a banjo in your band.

SOUSA

Did he ask me?

MEREDITH

I guess not...

SOUSA

Don't see anything wrong with it. These new string bands use banjos. They make quite a lively rhythm. In fact, did you know the banjo is the only 100% purely American-invented instrument?

(MEREDITH shakes his head.)

So, how does your Dad know so much about me? Who is he anyway?

MEREDITH

John Willson.

SOUSA

Willson?

(MEREDITH nods expectantly.)

From Iowa?

(MEREDITH nods again. SOUSA speaks more forcefully.)

John Willson from Iowa?

(MEREDITH nods.)

Nope. Never heard of him.

MEREDITH

But...he said he marched with you in the Great War Victory Parade. In Paris. In 1919.

SOUSA

Sorry. My last time in Paris was Independence Day in ought-four to unveil a statue of Lafayette.

MEREDITH

I don't understand.

SOUSA

What?

MEREDITH

All these years, I believed him about you and him marching together.

SOUSA

Now you know and you can just tell him.

MEREDITH

Oh, I'm not going back. Ever.

SOUSA

You know, you only get one father. He's the only one you'll ever have.

MEREDITH

Well, he's not doing a very good job at it.

SOUSA

(HE takes the framed diploma down from the wall.)

You know, I bring along some of the awards I've won with me when I'm on the road.

This is a honorary doctorate from Marquette University.

(HE puts this down and gets the college sweater, holding it over his chest.)

And this came with my honorary membership in Kappa Kappa Psi—the band fraternity, doncha know.

(HE next takes down the Indian headdress, putting it on.)

And here's my favorite. I'm an honorary chieftain of the Fire Hills tribe. They call me "Kee-Too-Che-Kay-Wee-Okemow".

MEREDITH

What does that mean?

SOUSA

"Great music chief!" ...Tell you what son...

(HE picks up the baton and offers it to MEREDITH.)

Take this. President Harrison presented this to me when I retired from the Marine Band.

MEREDITH

Oh, I couldn't, really...

SOUSA

Balderdash! What good is it to me anyway when I'm gone? Go ahead, read it.

MEREDITH

"John Philip Sousa—presented by members of the U.S. Marine Band as a token of their respect and esteem, July 29, 1892." I don't know what to say. At all. I'll protect this with my life!

SOUSA

Take it. Treasure it. Someday, *you* can give it to some deserving person. Now, I must get some rest. Concert tomorrow!

MEREDITH

(Shaking SOUSA's hand vigorously.)

Mr. Sousa, this has been great! Thank you sooo much! And I hope you live to be a hundred!

SOUSA

I'll settle for 75. So, what have you been doing with that banjo?

MEREDITH

I'm composing a song. I don't know if it's good or anything. Could you take a listen?

SOUSA

Young man, at first *no* song is very good. Let me hear it.

(During the scene that follows, as SOUSA gives advice to MEREDITH playing his working song, SOUSA becomes increasingly animated, more and more intensely involved in MEREDITH's working song, first leaning forward, then standing, then putting on his jacket, then his hat, then his white gloves, then grabbing the baton and vigorously waving it as he directs MEREDITH. Finally, HE ends up marching and conducting.)

SONG: SOUSA HELPS

SOUSA

WELL, IT'S A MARCH! A GOOD START

MEREDITH

MY PAPA SAYS IT'S JUST NOTES, THAT THERE'S NO MELODY

SOUSA

THE MELODY'S IN THERE, YOU JUST HAVE TO TEASE IT OUT
DA-DA-DA-DA!

(MEREDITH plucks this out on his banjo.)

THAT FIRST BAR

(SOUSA sits up a bit in his chair.)

YOU LEAP UP TO THE TONIC TOO SOON

GO TO THE SIXTH INSTEAD. THAT'S IT. NOW BOUNCE
BACK AND FORTH ON THAT SIXTH.

DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA!

SOUSA (cont'd)

(MEREDITH plucks that out.)

DON'T GO UP TO THAT TONIC YET. MAKE THE AUDIENCE HANKER FOR IT.

(SOUSA sits up very straight in his chair.)

MORE BOUNCE. MORE JOUNCE. DA-DA-DA-DA-DA

(MEREDITH plucks this out.)

RIGHT! NOW GO DOWN, DA-DA-DAH!

(MEREDITH plucks this out.)

NOW TAKE IT TO D MINOR

MEREDITH

YOU MEAN...?

(MEREDITH plucks out some notes.)

SOUSA

(SOUSA stands up.)

YOU CATCH ON FAST! NOW WHERE SHOULD IT GO?

MEREDITH

HOW ABOUT...?

(MEREDITH plucks out a melody.)

SOUSA

(HE slaps MEREDITH on the head on "No tonic yet!")

NO TONIC YET! DELAY IT LIKE THIS!

(SOUSA makes conducting motions with his hand.)

DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DAH!

NOW THE TONIC!

(MEREDITH plucks this out.)

YES!

(SOUSA puts his band jacket on as MEREDITH plucks out more.)

GREAT!

(MEREDITH plucks more. SOUSA puts on his white gloves.)

WE NEED A BRIDGE!

(SOUSA puts on his band hat. SOUSA "da's" the bridge of "People of the USA" while MEREDITH plucks it. During this bridge, SOUSA grabs the baton and begins vigorously conducting with it. During the verse, SOUSA and MEREDITH march back and forth, SOUSA conducting with the baton. As he shouts out about various instruments BAND MEMBERS march in the background behind a scrim in silhouette as they're called out.)

PICTURE THE TRUMPETS! IMAGINE THE TROMBONES!

HEAR THE DRUMS! HEAR THE REEDS...AND THE FLUTES!

AND HEAR THE SOUSAPHONE!

(On the button of the song, the sousaphone blubbers out a comical downward blast. At the end SOUSA slumps happily into his chair. Lights fade on the hotel room. ELDER MEREDITH enters.)

ELDER MEREDITH

I'll be danged! The upbeat? I get to meet Sousa. The downbeat? I find out Papa's been lying through his teeth.

(MEREDITH stalks out of the hotel, carrying the Sousa baton.)

MEREDITH

Papa!...All those years! All those made-up stories!

ELDER MEREDITH

This is shocking.

MEREDITH

No kidding! He was out-and-out lying. To Mama. To Dixie. To me. To the whole town!

ELDER MEREDITH

I gotta set the record straight. Let him know I know.

MEREDITH

Go back? Naw. And jeesh, he won't believe me anyway.

ELDER MEREDITH

I can't be afraid of confronting him. Wait, you've...I've got him over a barrel! I've got proof!

(MEREDITH glances down at the baton.)

MEREDITH

I didn't think I could think of that!

ELDER MEREDITH

But I just did! I've got to set things straight with Papa. Sometime, I've gotta go back. Rattle his cage. Turn the tables on him. .

MEREDITH

Yeah!

(HE picks up his pace, more determined as he exits, holding the baton in front of him.)

SCENE EIGHT: STREETS OF SAN FRANCISCO

(The period signs of three radio stations —KGO, KLX, and KRFC are arrayed across the stage, in front of three different-looking buildings, meant to be miles apart. In the rear model cable cars ply up and down hills and we hear their clanging bells. The BANJO BOYS, excited about their prospects, enter each radio station looking for work and come out of each increasingly discouraged. This short sequence is done in strobe. As THEY approach each radio station, we hear upbeat banjo strains of “People of the USA”. As THEY leave each time, the music peters out and down. THEY plop down on the sidewalk, two of them facing the other two, so that they can notice the cable cars in the background. The strobe stops.)

MEREDITH

(Gesturing towards the cable cars. During the following exchange each absently glances at the cable cars.)

OK, so life *does* have its ups and downs.

HOXIE

Yeah, mostly downs.

JULIO

We're getting no place.

RUNNING FEATHER

And how!

HOXIE

Mere, no one's going to take us, face it! Look at us!

MEREDITH

That's no fair. It just shouldn't be.

HOXIE

Well, it is. So going inside these joints is not going to make it. We have to think of something else.

RUNNING FEATHER

(Gesturing broadly.)
Not inside. *Outside.*

JULIO

There's not enough people outside.

MEREDITH

Julio, you're right, outside, people can walk away. We need a..a captive audience.

HOXIE

(Visually during the following discussion, their attention is increasingly focused on the cable cars.)

Where people have nothing else to do.

JULIO

Where people are bored.

MEREDITH

Where people can't walk away.

RUNNING FEATHER

Where people...

MEREDITH, HOXIE AND JULIO

(Pointing towards the cable cars.)

...are going up and down!

(Upbeat "People of the USA" banjo music kicks in again. Strobe effect kicks in again. From the wings, a life-size cable car, with CABLE CAR PASSENGERS aboard, moves slowly across the stage. The BANJO BOYS hop on. THEY mime performing. As the cable car reaches the other side of the stage, it stops and the BANJO BOYS turn their banjos upside down and pass them around the cable car, as the CABLE CAR PASSENGERS throw money into the banjos. The CABLE CAR PASSENGERS get off, and a new set of CABLE CAR PASSENGERS hops on. The whole sequence is repeated as the cable car crosses the stage in the opposite direction. The BANJO BOYS hop off the cable car as it exits to the wings. THEY sit down, turn all four banjos upside down. All the bills fall out, and with great smiles, THEY start to divvy up their earnings. Lights fade.)

SCENE NINE: GAO PEI's LAUNDRY

(Late at night. No one on the street. ZI LING is asleep in bed. MEREDITH enters, with his banjo slung over one shoulder, his suitcase, and the Sousa baton. HE stealthily climbs the fire escape to the second floor and taps on the window.)

MEREDITH

(Whispering.)
Zi Ling!...Zi Ling!

ZI LING

(Sleepily, in her night shirt, ZI LING opens the window the rest of the way. MEREDITH kisses her.)
Mere! What are you doing?

MEREDITH

It's time. We've saved up money. I can finally get you outta here. We can go to Mason City. My song with the Banjo Boys can help us win the band contest.

ZI LING

You want to leave tonight?

MEREDITH

Yes, I really do. Zi Ling, this is our big chance!

ZI LING

Shhh! Gao Pei will hear.

MEREDITH

We've gotta move. Get your things.

ZI LING

I'm afraid to go...I'm afraid to stay.

MEREDITH

We'll be so far away, no one can touch you.

ZI LING

But I must honor my father's agreement.

MEREDITH

You can't help your father by being some kinda slave.

ZI LING

I must wait till the end of my service.

MEREDITH

You can't do this for two more years! We need to leave in two minutes!

ELDER MEREDITH

(ELDER MEREDITH waves his baton to freeze Zi Ling and MEREDITH.

To audience:)

I'm, he's going off-key. Forcing her to dig in her heels. Omigosh, I'm within a cat's whisker of losin' her! Let's try this again!

(HE waves his baton to trigger ZI LING and MEREDITH to "rewind" with all their gestures and movements backwards, squeaking out their lines backwards.)

MEREDITH

(Says "You can't do this for two more years! We need to leave in two minutes," backwards.)

ZI LING

(Says "I must wait till the end of my service," backwards.)

MEREDITH

(Says "You can't help your father by being some kinda slave," backwards. ELDER MEREDITH waves his baton, freezing the action. Taps MEREDITH on the shoulder to animate him.)

ELDER MEREDITH

(To MEREDITH.)

Ooo, I can't argue with her about her father. If we disagree, she'll never come with me!

MEREDITH

I have to think of something we agree on?

ELDER MEREDITH

Yes! Like, uh, what would *her* father want? And what could I do about my father?

(HE waves his baton to unfreeze ZI LING.)

ZI LING

But I must honor my father's agreement.

MEREDITH

But you can honor your father *more* by getting away. You can make more money as a teacher than at the laundry. Then, then, you could send more money back to your family in China....Tell you what. I'll honor *my* father. I'll talk to him. I'll let him explain.

ZI LING

You'd do that for your father?

MEREDITH

And, think! Your father would want *you* to have your Gold Mountain. It's waiting for you.... "There".

(HE gestures towards the distance. Visibly moved, she gives MEREDITH a big hug and disappears inside. SHE emerges with a small bag, but knocks something down, making a noise.)

GAO

Zi Ling? Mwah hian? Fossang moishlu ah?

(THEY both hurriedly climb down the fire escape and exit. GAO, in nightclothes, enters, furious, wielding a butcher knife and yells as HE exits in the same direction.)

ELDER MEREDITH

How scary. Just a word or two can spell the difference between winning or losing the whole she-bang! Depends on the specific words you choose, doesn't it? Like...like composing. The agony over choosing the right note. Like the agony over our life choices. Each note affects the rest of the melody. Each choice affects the rest of our lives. So living is just like composing...like composing the symphony of our lives... I like that! Though I suppose, there is one difference. On a piano...there are no gray keys.

(Lights fade.)

SCENE TEN: MASON CITY TRAIN STATION

(Daytime. July 4, 1929. Sound of an arriving train gets louder. THE BENCHSITTERS sit on their bench. The passenger train—with “Chicago North Western” on the side of the car—arrives. MEREDITH, ZI LING, HOXIE, JULIO and RUNNING FEATHER hop onto the platform. All have banjos slung over their shoulders, and each—including ZI LING—carries a traveling bag. MEREDITH is also carrying Sousa’s baton. ZI LING wears a bright blue silk shirt and slacks. THEY are all excited.)

TRAIN CONDUCTOR’S VOICE

Mason City, Iowa!

MEREDITH

Zi Ling, Iowa’s going to be a shock to you. There’re no steep streets like in San Francisco.

ZI LING

So?

MEREDITH

Without landmarks, it’s easy to get lost. So, to find our way around Iowa, we use longitude and flatitude. It’s so flat around here, the most popular last name is “Hill”....Iowa’s so flat the Mormons around these parts call themselves “Flatter Day Saints”.

(THEY move to a cameo of “American Gothic”, with a FARMER and the FARMER’s WIFE. Pitchfork prop. As MEREDITH speaks, THEY remain immobile, as if in a painting.)

This is Dr. McKeeby, our dentist.

(ZI LING looks horrified. As SHE speaks she gingerly touches the tip of one of the pitchfork tines with her finger and shudders.)

ZI LING

In America, your dentists use these?

MEREDITH

Oh, no! That’s for pitching hay!

(THEY continue to a white church.)

And here’s where we’ll get married someday!

(ZI LING titters, putting her hands to her mouth.)

No, really!

ZI LING

I am Confucian, I’ve never been to a Christian wedding.

MEREDITH

Oh...it's really nice, it's really romantic...here, I'll show you...
*(The church front turns to reveal altar where REVEREND
RINSENHAUSER fulminates.)*

REVEREND RINSENHAUSER

Whisky! Beer! Rum! The hive forses of the Apocalypse are upon us!

MEREDITH

There's nothing to be afraid of...Reverend Rinsenhauser! Can you please pretend to marry us?

REVEREND RINSENHAUSER

That's dust not jone! It has to be a weal redding!

MEREDITH

You have wedding rehearsals don't you? This is Zi Ling, she doesn't know how it works.

REVEREND RINSENHAUSER

What's the use when dudge ment jay is coming? And are you sure you want to get married in a Chresbyterian purch? OK, OK, like a rehearsal, then!

(Makes a to-do about clearing his throat.)

Gadies and lentlemen of Cason Mity...we are gathered here together to join Zeredith and Mi Ling in moly hatrimony.

If there be anyone here who has cause why this couple should not be munitied in arriage, they must fow or norever pold their heace. What therefore God jath hoined together, let no pan mut asunder. Do you, Meredith, take Li Zing to be your waffley leaded wife? To have and to hold, till peath do you dart? For picher or for roorer, in hickness and in stealth? For wetter or for burse?

MEREDITH

I do.

RINSENHAUSER

And do you, Zing Zing, take Meredith to be your lawfully hedded wusband?

MEREDITH

(Whispers to her.)

You say, "I do."

ZI LING

I do.

REVEREND RINSENHAUSER

(MEREDITH hesitates)
Son, it is kisstomary to cuss the bride.
(THEY kiss.)
I now pronounce you wan and mife!
(THEY exit the church.)

ZI LING

Now, *there's* someone I can teach English to!
(They come upon the BENCHSITTERS.)

SCATTERGOOD

Creepers! That Willson kid is back!

HOMER

Has the circus has come to town?

SQUIZ

What is this, the League of Nations?

CLARENCE

Oh, boy! We got trouble right here in Mason City.

MEREDITH

Sirs! This isn't trouble, these are my friends. Hoxie, Julio, Running Feather, and my girlfriend, Zi Ling.
(ZI LING bows from the head.)

SCATTERGOOD

How long have you been working on the railroad?

SQUIZ

All the live long day?

HOMER

But not when it's hot, only when it's Coolie.

MEREDITH

Hey, Mason City would be nothing without the railroad! And how would you guys entertain yourselves? You spend all day at the station watchin' all the trains come and go!

HOXIE

Mere, maybe this wasn't such a hot idea.

MEREDITH

(Moving his group along.)
It's OK, Hoxie. Mason City folks have good hearts, but you gotta give 'em time. Zi Ling, I also have to warn you about my mother. She's very religious.

ZI LING

How so?

MEREDITH

She used to give me piano lessons. Every time I started to play, she'd bow down, clasp her hands together, close her eyes and say "Oh, Lord!"
(THEY approach the Willson home. DIXIE is on the front porch and spies them first. She rushes down the stairs to hug MEREDITH.)

DIXIE

Mere! It's about time you got back! I'm *still* not in the boy's band. You have to do something! Mama! Papa! Mere's back!

HOXIE

A mansion!

JULIO

Casa grande!

RUNNING FEATHER

(HE makes a grand upside-down V gesture with his hands.)
Great white tee-pee! Lawn not bad either.
(ROSALIE enters, carrying her Bible basket. DIXIE runs up to the candle in the window and blows it out. ROSALIE, drops the basket and rushes to hug MEREDITH. DIXIE runs into the den.)

ROSALIE

"For this my son was lost and now is found!"

MEREDITH

Corinthians?

ROSALIE

(ROSALIE shakes MEREDITH by the shoulders.)
No, Luke!
(DIXIE is pulling JOHN by the arm into the room. His corn-cob pipe is in his mouth. RUNNING FEATHER goes up close to examine the pipe.)

RUNNING FEATHER

Peace pipe!

JOHN

(JOHN stands awkwardly a distance from MEREDITH, not knowing what to do. ROSALIE shoves JOHN over towards MEREDITH, waving the back of her hand at him. JOHN moves towards MEREDITH and awkwardly gives him a couple of perfunctory pats on the back.)

Who're these people?

MEREDITH

Papa, this is Hoxie an...

JOHN

I don't...

(HE catches himself and puts his finger to his mouth. MEREDITH is mystified and surprised he's given time to talk. HE forces himself to keep his finger to his mouth, while it looks like his mouth is ready to explode with words. ROSALIE is holding onto him, restraining him, helping him hold his finger to his mouth during the following exchange.)

MEREDITH

(MEREDITH keeps looking back at his father, mystified about what's going on and waiting for JOHN to interrupt, but HE doesn't.)
...and Julio an...

MEREDITH

(MEREDITH pauses to see he's allowed to talk, picking up on it more quickly and realizes HE's able to talk at length without interruption and smiles about this.)
...Running Feather an.....an...and we've been playing on cable cars and collecting coins in our banjos...they're our band...

JULIO

...The Banho Boys!

RUNNING FEATHER

Mere Willson. Great song writer!

MEREDITH

That's Running Feather, Mama. He's allergic to verbs.

ROSALIE

Why, don't you know, Mason City was founded by Indians. The Winnebagos. Right where Lime Creek and Willow Creek come together. I myself petitioned the town fathers many times about this. I told them they really ought to call this "River City".

MEREDITH

And, Mama, Papa, this is.....Zi Ling.

(ZI LING head bows towards ROSALIE, who awkwardly picks up on this and bows back. SHE bows to JOHN, who even more awkwardly reacts.)

JOHN

(During this exchange, DIXIE and ZI LING playfully bow to one another with hands in prayer position.)

We didn't know if...

(ROSALIE sidles up to JOHN and speaks in measured tones in a stage whisper.)

ROSALIE

Me-re-

JOHN

-dith... We didn't know if you were alive or dead! And just where are all these people supposed to stay?

MEREDITH

Hey, we'll work it out. Everyone...I've gotta talk to Papa, alone.

(MEREDITH guides JOHN towards the den.)

ROSALIE

Come on, everybody, I'll make lemonade.

JULIO

I love lemonade!

MEREDITH

(As MEREDITH and JOHN enter the den.)

Papa, I got to meet him....*him!* John Philip Sousa!

JOHN

No!

MEREDITH

Yes!

(MEREDITH unwraps the baton and hands it to JOHN.)

Papa, here's proof. President Harrison gave this to Mr. Sousa. And he gave it to me.

JOHN

(JOHN reads the inscription then looks reverently at the Sousa photo on the den wall.)

God, you *did* meet him!

MEREDITH

But Papa...he said he *never* met you.

JOHN

Oh, he probably just doesn't remember me...

MEREDITH

Papa, he wasn't even there. He was in the U. S. during that parade.

JOHN

Come on, he probably forgot.

MEREDITH

Papa! There's no way he'd forget. That was the biggest parade in history!

JOHN

What'd you have go off and meet Sousa for, anyway?

MEREDITH

Why did you lie to me? Why'd you have to lie to everybody?

JOHN

How was I supposed to know you'd meet Sousa?

(HE's about to go on, but puts his finger to his mouth again.)

MEREDITH

That's not the point! You've been setting yourself up as some kind of musical big-wig around here for years.

JOHN

Look, I *was* in that Victory Parade. I *was*.

MEREDITH

But...

JOHN

(JOHN takes his cornet down from the wall and looks at it.)
But, I wasn't playin' this.
(HE looks wistfully at the cornet, shakes his head and holds it.)

MEREDITH

Why didn't you ever tell me?

JOHN

I don't know. I got all caught up in the excitement. I was imagining playing this...
(Looks at his cornet.)
...during the parade. I wanted so badly to play it in the parade.

MEREDITH

Then, what *were* you doing in the parade?

JOHN

The truth? I was way in the back. Just driving an ambulance.
(HE points at the Red Cross flag on the wall.)

MEREDITH

An ambulance?

JOHN

A Red Cross ambulance. My job in the Great War.

MEREDITH

Saving *lives*? *That's* something to be proud of! But you never told us. You kept crowing about something that never happened!

JOHN

Once I told the story young ma...Meredith...
(MEREDITH reacts to hearing his name.)

I couldn't very well go back on it. And the more I told it, the more I kind of started believing it, I guess and the harder it was to admit the truth. ...So, I wasn't much of a musical hero, was I?

MEREDITH

Papa, in my book, saving lives beats being a musical hero, any day.
(Over the following dialogue, JOHN starts to feel the weight of not having to tell a lie anymore come off his shoulders, as he takes the Sousa picture down from the wall, and moves the Red Cross flag to where the Sousa picture was.)

MEREDITH (cont'd)

MEREDITH helps him with each of these actions. JOHN starts to reveal a spark of his old self.)

JOHN

Meredith, my boy, I need to rearrange things a bit, don't I? It's not about me and yesterday. It's about you and Dixie and your tomorrows.

(The re-arranging done, JOHN awkwardly puts his arm over MEREDITH's shoulder as THEY both look up at the flag.)

SCENE ELEVEN: MASON CITY TOWN SQUARE

(HAROLD, INKY and CHARLIE march onto stage, playing their instruments out of tune, out of rhythm. JOHN walks up to them, MEREDITH following.)

JOHN

Come on, boys! Where's the ol' zest, zip and zing?
(DIXIE, carrying her clarinet case, leads ZI LING in, holding her hand.)

MEREDITH

(Enters.)
 Papa, we *can* win the band contest!
(Derisive sounds and gestures from HAROLD and INKY.)

JOHN

Just how, Meredith?

MEREDITH

All we need are...
(MEREDITH holds out his banjo.)
 Banjos! Strut and strum! I even asked Mr. Sousa about it. He thought it was a great idea!

INKY

Well, banjos are one thing, but your friends here are, are...different.

MEREDITH

But different is good!
(JOHN holds up his index finger as if to speak, but catches himself, as HE holds his breath, then puts his index finger to his mouth to listen.)
 Look how different instruments from different countries contributed to music! Without these different countries, what kind of music would we have? Boring! The Banjo Boys represent different countries, too! Now's their time!

JOHN

(Almost convinced.)
 Anh....

MEREDITH

Papa, different wins! It wins band contests. You want to make me happy? Let me do it with my music. With our banjos!

JOHN

By jingo, yes! Let these boys play! We've gotta do something different to win.

(The HAROLD and INKY resign themselves to this decision, then start to get into the spirit of it.)

DIXIE

(SHE steps up boldly to JOHN, holding up her clarinet.)

Papa, girls are different! If Helen May Butler can conduct Sousa's band, I can darn well play clarinet in the boy's band!

(The BANJO BOYS and the BAND give her a rousing cheer.)

JOHN

Ooooookay, yes, you too, Dixie, welcome to the band!

(DIXIE squeals, jumping up and down with joy. She lines up with the band.)

We'll be the only band with banjos. The only band with a girl. The only band...

MEREDITH

...with our own song! Papa, I wrote a song. A march!

JOHN

The only band with our own song! And the only band with our own...

ZI LING

(RUNNING FEATHER, JULIO and HOXIE bound onto the stage in their fancy mummer's outfits, striking a pose.)

...costumes!

(The BENCHSITTERS, carrying their bench, THREE MEN and THREE WOMEN, REVEREND RINSENHAUSER, the CHEERLEADERS, all angry, enter. ROSALIE enters from a different direction with her Bible basket.)

HAROLD

Uh-oh!

SQUIZ

(Stands up from bench to speak.)

Now, see here, Willson. We've got a bone to pick with you.

(HE sits down.)

THREE WOMEN

A lotta bones!

JOHN

Squiz, I know. The band. But I've figured out how to pull it out of the doldrums. Mere's friends...

(JOHN puts his arm around MEREDITH's shoulder.)

...will join us in the Iowa Marching Band Contest. Yes, sir!

JOHN (cont'd)

(DIXIE clears her throat.)

And, we're adding another clarinet!

(Puts his arm around DIXIE's shoulder. The CROWD murmurs disapproval.)

And a march Mere wrote.

(Aside to MEREDITH.)

Hey, is this song of yours any good?

(MEREDITH nods enthusiastically, JOHN squinches up his face skeptically. Then, to the CROWD:)

And new costu...

SQUIZ

(Stands up from bench to speak.)

John, that won't solve the band's problems. These kids here, they're not from Mason City.

(Sits down on bench.)

WOMAN IN CROWD

They're not even from Iowa!

REVEREND RINSENHAUSER

They're not even from the United Ates of Stamerica!

SCATTERGOOD

They don't belong here!

(The CROWD loudly murmurs approval. JOHN hesitates.)

MEREDITH

Papa, don't let them do this! This is your big chance! To bring back the old days!

(JOHN is only slightly convinced, weighing whether to go with MEREDITH or the crowd.)

HOMER

(Stands up from bench.)

Forget it, Willson!

(Sits down.)

MEREDITH

We can win the contest!

(JOHN looks from MEREDITH to the crowd.)

CLARENCE

(Stands up from bench to speak.)

You've had your chance, go on!

CLARENCE (cont'd)

(TWO BENCHSITTERS on either side of him push him down by the shoulders to sit.)

MEREDITH

You don't need Sousa any more! You only need you!

JOHN

(Inspired, JOHN rubs his hands together, dramatically hoists up his pants, paws the ground with his feet like a bull, puts his head down and charges towards the CROWD, pacing back and forth. THEY all move their heads following his movements.)

Folks, you're looking at this through the wrong end of the telescope. You're hopping on the horse before you've even thrown on the saddle. You're thinkin' these kids are different?

(The CROWD nods.)

And you're thinkin' different is bad?

(Crowd nods, murmurs of "Yes". During the following scene, JOHN gets more and more worked up, more animated, working the crowd, pointing, moving, etc. He jumps up on a wall.)

JOHN

Citizens of Mason City, let me tell you about different. If things weren't different around here, we'd flat out *die* of boredom! You wanta sing the same hymns every Sunday?

ENSEMBLE

(Clear, but not so loud.)

No.

JOHN

(Gestures towards the WOMEN.)

Wear the same dress every day?

WOMEN

God, no!

JOHN

(Moves over to the MEN.)

Eat meatloaf all year?

MENFOLK

No!

JOHN

(Moves over to TEENAGE GIRLS.)
Never change your hairstyles?

CHEERLEADERS

(Shrieking.)
Eeeeeek!

JOHN

You're darn tootin'. It's time for different. Different makes the world go 'round. When I married Rose, she couldn't even vote! Cause she was different! Now every woman in America can vote for Herbert Hoover!

(Cheers.)
If women can vote, it's high time we had a girl in the Mason City band!

JOHN

Dixie, welcome aboard!

ENSEMBLE

Hooray for Dixie!
(DIXIE beams. ROSALIE increasingly swells with pride at JOHN's performance.)

JOHN

(Puts his arms around HOXIE, RUNNING FEATHER and JULIO.)
Then we'll...we'll...

ROSALIE

(Steps forward.)
Adopt these darling banjo boys!
(RUNNING FEATHER, JULIO and HOXIE race over to group hug ROSALIE.)

RUNNING FEATHER, JULIO AND HOXIE

Mom!

JOHN

We'll enroll them in high school! We'll have different all right! Right here in Mason City. Are banjos different? As different as different can be.

ENSEMBLE

Can be!

**HALF THE
ENSEMBLE**

Different!
Different!
Different!
Different!

Different!
Different!
Different!
Different!
Different!
Different!
Different!

Different!
Different!
Different!
Different!

Different!

Different!
Different!
Different!

Different!
Different!
Different!
Different!
Different!

(RUNNING FEATHER, JULIO and HOXIE race over to embrace ROSALIE.)

Different!

Different!
Different!
Different!

Different!

Different!
Different!
Different!

**HALF THE
ENSEMBLE**

No,
sir!

No,
sir!

Nowhere!

Stock still!

JOHN

Yes, we've got
different

different, my friends
different in the morning
different in the evening
different till the cows come
home

Different from the get-go
different all over
different that'll make us
win
Do we want
same?

Is same our
game?

Same is a lickspittle,
lily-livered, listless, lazy,
lackluster,
road to nowhere

But we're somewhere
Right here!
Federal Avenue,
Our own Champs Elysées.

Where these
boys (and girl) will
Stop the town stock
still.

CLARENCE

(Jumps up from the bench.)

By gum, the old John Willson is back!

(The TWO BENCHSITTERS on either side of him pull him down by the shoulders to sit.)

JOHN

(Claps MEREDITH on the back.)

Mere! You pulled me out of it!

ROSALIE

(Thrusts arms up with relief and pride. Kisses JOHN.)

Hallelujah!

SONG: DIFFERENT

(During this song, each of nine of the ENSEMBLE take individual letters for "DIFFERENT" from the FEIFFER DONUT sign to surprise-display them at the end of the song.)

**HALF THE
ENSEMBLE**

Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!

Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!

Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!

Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Differ, Differ
Diff-er-ent!

**HALF THE
ENSEMBLE**

OR EARS!

TA!

AND POUND!

JOHN

THEY'LL
GAPE 'N GAWK 'N
GULP 'N GASP THEY
WON'T BELIEVE THEIR
EYES

THEY'LL GO "OOH"
THEY'LL GO "AAH"
TA-TA-TA
TA-TA-TA!

WE'LL
TOOT 'N STRUM 'N
BOOM 'N BLOW
WE'LL PUFF 'N PIPE 'N
POUND

YOU BOYS THAT
LEFT THE BAND?
HEY, JOIN IN FOR A
ROUND. NOW
WE'VE GOT OUR
OWN SONG TO

HALF THE ENSEMBLE (cont'd)

HALF THE ENSEMBLE (cont'd)

JOHN (cont'd)

Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!

AWAY!

SWEEP THE BANDS
AWAY

Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!

BUSTIN'!

BANJOS BUSTIN'

Diff 'rent!

THROUGH!

BANJOS BUSTIN' THROUGH

Diff 'rent!

WITH NEW COSTUMES
THAT'LL
SAVE THE DAY

Diff 'rent!

BECAUSE?

BEEEE CAAAUSE WE'RE
MOHAWKS

MOHAWKS!

Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!

WOO-WOO-WOO!

MOHAWKS ON THE WARPATH

WATCH THE OTHER BANDS
SHAKE IN THEIR BOOTS

AND DROP
THEIR FLUTES!

Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!

WE'LL DISLODGE DODGE
CITY

AND SHOW NO PITY!

Diff 'rent!

MUDDY UP CLEAR
LAKE
UNTIL THEY BELLYACHE

Diff 'rent!

(UGH!)

("Ughers" hold their stomachs.)

Diff 'rent!

GIVE A TANNING TO
MANNING

Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!
Diff 'rent!

MAKE GLUTEN OUT OF
OF NEWTON
AND WE'LL MAKE PORK LOIN
OUTTA WEST DES MOINES

(Two oink sounds)

Diff 'rent!

...DIFF—RENT...

CAUSE YOU ARE

Diff 'rent!

...AS EACH SNOWFLAKE
FALLIN' FROM THE SKY

HALF THE ENSEMBLE (cont'd) **HALF THE ENSEMBLE (cont'd)**

JOHN (cont'd)

Diff 'rent!

DIFF-RENT...

...AS EACH

Diff 'rent!

CLOUD... AS IT WHISPERS BY

DIFF-RENT...

Diff 'rent!

...AS EACH STAR THAT
WATCHES FROM ON HIGH
GOD MADE YOU

Diff 'rent!

DI-
FER-
-ENT

Diff 'rent!

THE APPLES OF HIS EYE
SO DIFFERENT IS THE WAY
WE'RE ALL SUPPOSED TO
BE
NOW SPELL IT!

Diff 'rent!

Diff 'rent!

Diff 'rent!

D-

D-

D-

*(One at a time, ENSEMBLE members hold up the letters in
"different" lining up downstage, in rhythm to the music.)*

-I-F-F-

-I-F-F-

-I-F-F-

E-R-E-N-T!

E-R-E-N-T!

E-R-E-N-T!

(Lights fade.)

SCENE 12: MASON CITY TOWN SQUARE

(Sounds of a amateurish high school band finishing a march then scattered applause.)

ANNOUNCER

(Pre-recorded from offstage, as from a microphone.)

Thank you, Fort Dodge High School Marching Band!

(As the lights come up, we see TOWNSPEOPLE, some waving American flags, some balloons. On the judging stand, decorated with 4th of July bunting, are the BENCHSITTERS as JUDGES, wearing jackets, bow ties, straw hats and special ribbons. THEY make notes on their clipboards while sitting on their bench. A large trophy sits on a table on the reviewing stand. A large banner, reading "1929 IOWA HIGH SCHOOL MARCHING BAND CONTEST". ZI LING, holding the Sousa baton, ROSALIE and REVEREND RINSENHAUSER stand together.)

ANNOUNCER

Remember, the winning band wins an all-expenses-paid trip to New York City to play on WEAJ on the NBC Red Network! And now, ladies and gentlemen, the final band in the Iowa Marching Band contest, the Mason City Mohawks!

(The BAND enters from both wings, merging in center stage. JOHN leads, with a wooden baton. Behind him are MEREDITH, RUNNING FEATHER, JULIO and HOXIE playing banjos in their feathered costumes. The CHEERLEADERS, wearing their cheerleading outfits, flailing black and redpom-poms. Then, two ENSEMBLE members holding up a black banner reading "MASON CITY MOHAWKS" in red. Then HAROLD, CHARLIE, and INKY, in crisp new uniforms, with their respective instruments. Then some ENSEMBLE members in band uniforms carry additional instruments like trombones, flutes, a tuba.)

SONG: PEOPLE OF THE USA**BANJO BOYS**

WE COME FROM EVERYWHERE
EVERY LITTLE CORNER OF THE EARTH
(A look of horror crosses the JUDGE's faces.)

SQUIZ

Stop!

CLARENCE

Stop!

SCATTERGOOD AND HOMER

Stop!

(The BAND stops, baffled and hurt. The CROWD murmurs.)

SQUIZ

Wait...

CLARENCE

...one...

SCATTERGOOD AND HOMER

...minute!

SQUIZ

No...

CLARENCE

...banjos...

SCATTERGOOD AND HOMER

...allowed!

EVERYONE

No banjos?!

SQUIZ

(ELDER MEREDITH enters and observes.)

Those...

CLARENCE

..are..

SCATTERGOOD AND HOMER

...the rules!

SQUIZ

Article Six...

CLARENCE

...Section Two...

SQUIZ, CLARENCE, SCATTERGOOD AND HOMER

No banjos!

(ELDER MEREDITH waves his baton to freeze the scene except

for MEREDITH. JOHN is speechless in shock. ROSALIE clasps her hands together in prayer and gazes upward. CHARLIE pensively sticks out his tongue to the side of his mouth. The THREE CHEERLEADERS do the three-monkey no-evil bit: one holds her ears, one covers her eyes, one covers her mouth with two hands. EVERYONE displays a different gesture.)

MEREDITH

Jumpin' juniper! We're done for! No contest! No New York! No *radio!*?

ELDER MEREDITH

Who's going to do something?

MEREDITH

Look at Papa! Not sayin' a word?!

(HE waves his hand in front of JOHN's face. No reaction.)

ELDER MEREDITH

Who's going to speak up?

MEREDITH

He *always* has something to say!

ELDER MEREDITH

Who's got the information to save the day?

MEREDITH

Just when you need him, he clams up!

ELDER MEREDITH

God, no, it's me! *I'm* the one that's got to say something.

MEREDITH

Me? No, hunh? What?

ELDER MEREDITH

Think!

MEREDITH

Think of what?

ELDER MEREDITH

Think hard!

MEREDITH

Think hard of what?

ELDER MEREDITH

Think *really* hard.

(*MEREDITH brightens and runs up to the base of the grandstand as everyone unfreezes at a wave of ELDER MEREDITH's baton.*)

MEREDITH

Your honorships! Your sirnesses! Your judgehoods! This is the Iowa High School Marching Band Contest, right?

SQUIZ

You're...

CLARENCE

...darn...

SCATTERGOOD AND HOMER

...tootin!"

MEREDITH

And Iowa's part of America, right?

SQUIZ, CLARENCE, SCATTERGOOD AND HOMER

Soooo.....

MEREDITH

So, this is an *American* marching band contest!

SQUIZ

Come, come, of course it's American.

MEREDITH

So, everything about it must be American, right?

CLARENCE

Yes, yes. All American. What the devil are you driving at?

MEREDITH

Then, *all* the other bands are disqualified! And there's no contest!

SCATTERGOOD AND HOMER

Horsefeathers!

MEREDITH

All the instruments in the bands are not American! They're all foreign! Not *one* of those instruments was invented in America!

(MEREDITH brightens and runs up to the base of the grandstand as everyone unfreezes at a wave of ELDER MEREDITH's baton.)

Is this the Dusseldorf Band Contest?

CROWD

(On this "no" the crowd's intonation is an extended upward sweep as THEY move their upper torsos and heads circularly in one direction.)

Noooo!

MEREDITH

(In normal voice.)

Is this the Moscow Band Contest?

CROWD

(Again, upward sweep, moving torsos/heads.)

Noooo!

MEREDITH

(In loud voice.)

The Helsinki Band Contest?

CROWD

(This time the "no" is an extended downward intonation. Torsos/heads all move in opposite circular direction.)

Noooo!

MEREDITH

No, it's an *American* contest! And the only American-invented instruments here today are these banjos!

(MEREDITH and the BANJO BOYS thrust their banjos up into the air. The ENSEMBLE cheers.)

So, you have three choices. Disqualify *all* the bands. Or allow only banjos. Or...

SQUIZ, CLARENCE, SCATTERGOOD AND HOMER

...we compromise and allow all instruments including banjos.

(SQUIZ, CLARENCE, SCATTERGOOD and HOMER roll their eyes, turning their hands palms up. The ENSEMBLE cheers. JOHN shrugs his shoulders as he looks at ROSALIE, uncertain about the quality of the song.)

SONG: PEOPLE OF THE USA

(The BAND begins to march with the high-stepping, high-strutting

90-degree-leg-angle style popularized by the Ohio State marching band. A rear scrim projects color video to convey there are now 60 instruments in the band. JOHN waves his baton half-heartedly, still skeptical about this song he has never heard. Progression until the words "People of the U.S.A.": JOHN looks as spotlights shine on, various towns persons a) smiling, b) tapping their toes, c) clapping, d) jumping up and down. As HE increasingly realizes THEY love this song, his baton motions become more energetic. Over the course of the song, JOHN moves from skepticism about the song to enthusiasm, to pride in his son, to love for his family, to fighting back tears, to joy, all his emotions are finally released and he's struggling to handle it all. All of this while he manages to keep conducting the song.)

BANJO BOYS

WE COME FROM EVERYWHERE
 EVERY LITTLE CORNER OF THE EARTH
 WE'RE ALL FROM EVERYWHERE
 NO MATTER WHAT THE COUNTRY OF OUR BIRTH

BANJO BOYS AND ENSEMBLE

WHAT WE'VE GOT IN COMMON IS WE'RE NOT THE SAME
(The BAND parts to make way for DIXIE, who has been in the rear. She wears a bright new band uniform and proudly plays clarinet. Swell of applause and shouts from the TOWNSFOLK as she marches to the front of the band. On either side of her, the band members bow with their bodies and instruments to acknowledge her.)
 WE WOULDN'T HAVE IT ANY OTHER WAY
(While continuing to conduct, JOHN smiles proudly, kisses DIXIE on the cheek.)

WE FALL IN EVERY CATEGORY YOU CAN NAME
 WE'RE THE PEOPLE OF THE U.S.A.

IT'S NOT SPANGLED BANNERS
 THAT MAKE THIS COUNTRY BRAVE
 IT'S NOT FRUITED PLAINS
 THAT MAKE THE GRAINS OF AMBER WAVE

FREEDOM CANNOT BE SAVED
 BY LAND, AIR OR SEA
 NO, IT'S NOT THE MOUNTAINS HIGH OR THE SPACIOUS SKIES
 BUT YOU AND YOU AND YOU AND YOU AND ME!

NO, IT'S NOT THE MOUNTAINS HIGH OR THE SPACIOUS SKIES
 BUT YOU AND YOU AND YOU AND YOU AND ME

BANJO BOYS AND ENSEMBLE

(ZI LING realizes she has the Sousa baton in her hand. She rushes over to MEREDITH, gives it to him while pointing to JOHN. At the moment MEREDITH gives his father the Sousa baton and takes back the small baton, on the scrim the silhouettes of marching WWI soldiers with bayonets appear, with the sound of pounding boots in sync with the song, until the song ends. These images are melded with the video images of the band members. JOHN's enthusiasm kicks up a notch as he hears the boots.)

WE HAIL FROM EVERYWHERE
 NOT A ONE OF US IS FROM THIS PLACE
 OUR ROOTS ARE EVERYWHERE
 THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE HUMAN RACE

(ZI LING realizes she has the Sousa baton in her hand. She rushes over to MEREDITH, gives it to him while pointing to JOHN. At the moment MEREDITH gives his father the Sousa baton and takes back the small baton, on the scrim the silhouettes of marching WWI soldiers with bayonets appear, with the sound of pounding boots in sync with the song, until the song ends. These images are melded with the video images of the band members. JOHN's enthusiasm kicks up a notch as he hears the boots.)

WE GOTTA BE SURE ALL OF US FROM
 A TO Z , ARE SHARIN' FAIR 'N' SQUARE IN EVERY WAY
 A NEIGHBORHOOD OF BROTHERHOOD FROM SEA TO SEA
 WE'RE THE PEOPLE OF THE U.S.A.!

HOXIE

FREE TO BE, SOMEONE LIKE ME

RUNNING FEATHER

FREE TO BE, SOMEONE LIKE ME

JULIO

FREE TO BE, SOMEONE LIKE ME

DIXIE

FREE TO BE, SOMEONE LIKE ME

BANJO BOYS AND ENSEMBLE

(The scenery changes over to the WEA F Studio in New York. A large WEA F, 660 AM sign drops in. A sign reading "NBC Red Network" drops in. A large sign saying "On the Air" descends. Then it illuminates. An "Applause" sign appears. Four old-fashioned microphones on mike stands appear as the BANJO BOYS and some ENSEMBLE members cluster about them. The TOWNSFOLK sit on the floor downstage, backs to the audience, becoming the

radio audience.)
WE COME FROM EVERYWHERE

JOHN

That's my boy!

BANJO BOYS AND ENSEMBLE
EVERY LITTLE CORNER OF THE EARTH

JOHN

He wrote this!

(JOHN gives MEREDITH a shoulder hug.)

BANJO BOYS AND ENSEMBLE
WE'RE ALL FROM EVERYWHERE
NO MATTER WHAT THE COUNTRY OF OUR BIRTH
*(MEREDITH gestures for ZI LING to join them at the center
microphone and SHE does.)*
WHAT WE'VE GOT IN COMMON IS WE'RE NOT THE SAME
*(JOHN goes over to bring ROSALIE to the center microphone. Gives
her a finger-kiss.)*
WE WOULDN'T HAVE IT ANY OTHER WAY
WE FALL IN EVERY CATEGORY YOU CAN NAME
(ELDER MEREDITH, moved, enters to observe the scene.)
WE'RE THE PEOPLE OF THE U.S.
PEOPLE OF THE U.S., PEOPLE OF THE U.S.A.
WE'RE THE PEOPLE OF THE U.S., PEOPLE OF THE U.S.
PEOPLE OF THE U.S.AAAAAY!

*(JOHN grandly gestures acknowledgement to the banjos HOXIE, JULIO
and RUNNING FEATHER are thrusting aloft. Then one of JOHN's hands
holds up MEREDITH's arm in triumph. The other hand holds up Sousa's
baton. ELDER MEREDITH holds both hands to his heart and bows his head.
MEREDITH's free hand holds up his banjo. ZI LING and ROSALIE hug
MEREDITH and JOHN from the side. DIXIE holds up her clarinet and kisses
it. TOWNSFOLK cheer. Curtain.)*

CURTAIN CALL: THANKS MEREDITH WILLSON

(When the actor who plays the MAILMAN comes out, someone trips him and HE somersaults forward, then stands up to take bow. When RUNNING FEATHER bows, HE holds his arms folded outstretched in front of him, Indian-style. After all the initial bows, the ENSEMBLE then sings new lyrics to "Thanks Be to Music". As "The Music Man" comes up, on the back scrim of heaven so do those words in big letters. Ditto "Here's Love" and "The Unsinkable Mollie Brown". Then, when THEY first sing "Thanks Meredith Willson", those words appear.)

ENSEMBLE

HERE IN IOWA [NEW YORK] [LOS ANGELES] [WHEREVER SHOW IS]
EVERYBODY IS A FAN
OF THAT MAS-TER-PIECE
"THE MUSIC MAN"
AND "HERE'S LOVE" WAS
A SHOW THAT WENT TO TOWN
AND WE ALL LOVED THE UN-
SINKABLE MOLLY BROWN

THANKS, THANKS, THANKS MEREDITH WILLSON
THANKS, THANKS, THANKS FOR YOUR SONGS

THA-ANKS, THANKS MEREDITH WILLSON
THANKS, THANKS FOR YOUR SONGS
THANKS, THANKS FOR YOUR SONGS

(Slow)

THANKS MEREDITH WILLSON
THANKS FOR YOUR SONGS
THANKS MEREDITH WILLSON, THANKS FOR YOUR SONGS!

(Curtain.)