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Omaha Theatre Company for Young People
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Where the Red Fern Grows

adapted for the stage by Brian Guehring based on the novel by Wilson Rawls
a play for a minimum of 2 women/4 men

Human Characters

| | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| OLDER BILLY | a grown man remembering his childhood |
| BILLY COLMAN | a twelve year old boy |
| PAPA | his farming father |
| MAMA | his protective mother |
| GRANDPA | the town's store owner |
| STATION MASTER'S WIFE | Tahlequah depot manager's wife |
| HEAD JUDGE | championship coon hunt judge |

For a cast of 7, The actor playing older Billy can double as the head judge and station master. For a cast of 6, Older Billy's narration can be recorded with the puppeteers doubling as the station master's wife and head judge.

Puppet Characters

| | |
|---------------|---|
| OLD DAN | a strong, aggressive redbone coon hound |
| LITTLE ANN | a smart, playful redbone coon hound |
| RACCOONS | the hunting targets |
| MOUNTAIN LION | an Ozark devil cat |

The puppets are envisioned as rod puppets with the puppeteers in view. The adult Dan and Ann puppets should be detailed: hopefully able to sit, wag their tails, and move their heads. Ideally there will also be puppy versions of Dan and Ann.

Settings

the Colman log house on the Cherokee reservation
Grandpa's general store in the small Oklahoma town
the Tahlequah, Kentucky mail depot
the woods and rivers of the Ozark Mountains

The set design is envisioned to incorporate puppetry elements also {especially the trees that get chopped down and the rivers}.

Time

the Great Depression

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Brian Guehring

(BILLY is cleaning his lantern in front of the house. PAPA enters)

PAPA

This is the big night ain't it?

BILLY

It sure is, Papa, and I've waited a long time for it.

MAMA

Where are you going to hunt?

BILLY

I'm not going far, just down to the river.

MAMA

Billy, I don't approve of this hunting, but it looks like I can't say no; not after all you've been through.

PAPA

Aw, he'll be all right. Besides, he's getting to be a good-sized man now.

MAMA

Man! Why, he's still just a little boy.

BILLY

Mama, I'm almost 14.

PAPA

You can't keep him a little boy always. He's got to grow up some day.

MAMA

I know, but I don't like it, not at all, and I can't help worrying.

BILLY

Mama, please don't worry about me. I'll be alright. I've been all over these hills, you know that.

MAMA

I know, but that was in the daytime. I never worried too much when it was daylight, but at night, that's different. It'll be dark and anything could happen.

BILLY

Nothing'll happen. I promise I'll be careful.

MAMA

Well, it's like I said, I can't say no, but I can't help worrying. I'll pray every night you're out.

(BILLY is quiet as MAMA exits into house.
BILLY feels guilty and starts to change his mind about going.)

PAPA

It's dark now, and I understand those coons start stirring pretty early. You had better be going, hadn't you?

(PAPA lights the lantern. BILLY and PAPA exit out of the house. LITTLE ANN and OLD DAN are waiting eagerly.)

PAPA

Why, they know you're going hunting. Know it as well as anything. Now, Billy, I'd like to see a big coonskin on the smokehouse wall in the morning.

BILLY

Yes, sir.

(PAPA exits into house. OLD DAN and LITTLE ANN gather around BILLY)

BILLY

Little Ann and Old Dan, I've waited almost three years for this night and it hasn't been easy. I've taught you everything I know and I want you do do your best. Tonight it won't be a hide dragged on the ground, but the real thing, so remember everything I taught you. I'm depending on you. Just put one up in a tree and I'll do the rest.

(LITTLE ANN is paying attention closely and licks BILLY's face. OLD DAN is not listening)

BILLY

Go get 'em!

(LITTLE ANN and OLD DAN streak for the woods and river¹. BILLY walks along listening to the wildlife in the woods. Soon, OLD DAN's deep voice starts bawling and startles BILLY)

BILLY

Who-e-e-e! Get'em Dan, Get him!

(LITTLE ANN's bark joins in)

BILLY

Who-e-e-e! Tell it to him, little girl. Tell it to him!

OLDER BILLY

My dogs had caught the trail of a raccoon and took after him down the river. A mile downstream, the ringtail pulled his first trick. He had run out onto the drift, leaped into the water and crossed the river. It was a simple trick, but I could tell by my dogs' voices that they had lost the trail.

(OLD DAN and LITTLE ANN are sniffing around. OLD DAN whimpers and cries coming up to BILLY)

¹ In the original design, the platforms for the hills slid apart to create a river area.
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BILLY

I'm not going to help you. And you're not going to find him out on that drift in the middle of the river. If you would just remember some of the training I gave you, you could find the trail. Now go find that ringtail.

(OLD DAN returns to the hunt. LITTLE ANN approaches BILLY)

BILLY

I'm ashamed of you, little girl. I thought you had more sense than this. If you let him fool you this easily, you'll never be a coon dog. I can't tell you the answer. You have to figure it out for yourself.

(BILLY sits down dejected as his dogs continue to search. OLD DAN starts to whine as LITTLE ANN starts to cross the river.)

BILLY

What is it, Ol Dan? (seeing LITTLE ANN) Whoo-e-e-e! Way to go Little Ann!
(OLD DAN jumps in the river)

OLDER BILLY

At that moment, no boy in the world could have been more proud of his dogs than I was. Never again would I doubt them. I knew that never again would a ringtail fool them by swimming the river.

(The dog barking gets louder)

BILLY

Get him, boy. Get him, girl.

(The dogs bawl out long-drawn-out sound to let BILLY know they treed the raccoon.)

BILLY

Whooo-e-e-e. Way to go! You did it! You treed your first raccoon.

(BILLY runs to catch up with his axe in his hand. LITTLE ANN and OLD DAN are circling around a humongous sycamore tree. BILLY walks once around the tree dejectedly)

BILLY

Come on. We'll go someplace else and find another raccoon.

(BILLY turns to walk away. The dogs start whining. OLD DAN places his front paws on the trunk and starts bawling)

BILLY

I know he's there, but there's nothing I can do. I can't climb it. Why it's sixty feet to the first limb and it would take me a month to cut it down.

(LITTLE ANN starts licking BILLY's hands)

I'm sorry, little girl. I want him just as badly as you do, but there's no way I can get him. C'mon now. You're both acting silly. You know I'd get the raccoon for you if I could but I can't.

(LITTLE ANN puts her tail between her legs and won't look at BILLY. OLD DAN hides behind

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tree. BILLY looks at tree)

BILLY

I don't care how big you are. My dogs fulfilled their part of our bargain. Now its up to me to do my part. I'm going to cut you down. I don't care if it takes me a whole year.

(BILLY starts to chop the tree. The dogs get excited. Lights fade to darkness. Sound of chopping continues)

scene 9

(Lights rise as dawn appears. The tree now has a sizable chunk chopped out.²)

GRANDPA (from off-stage)

Whoo-e-e!

BILLY

Whoo-e-e!

(GRANDPA follows sound to find BILLY)

GRANDPA

There you are. Your mother's worried. When you didn't come in, she didn't know what had happened. I figured you might be here. Boy, this is a big one alright.

BILLY

The biggest one in the river bottoms.

GRANDPA

That's all right. The bigger they are, the harder they fall. How are you getting along?

BILLY

Not so good, Grandpa. I don't think I can cut it down. It's just too big. I guess I'll have to give up.

GRANDPA

Give up! Now I don't want to hear you say that. No, sir, that's the last thing I want to hear. Don't ever start anything you can't finish.

BILLY

I don't want to give up, Grandpa, but it's just too big and my strength's gone.

GRANDPA

You know, Billy, I think this tree-chopping of yours is all right. I think it would be a good thing if all young boys had to cut down a big tree like that once in their life. It does something for them. It gives them determination and will power. Those're good things for a man to have.

BILLY

I don't know about determination and will power, all I see is all the choppin I have left.

² I envision this as a huge 3 dimensional tree that the chorus can rotate to show some of the tree has been cut. Or maybe a foam hunk of the tree can be removed.

GRANDPA

Well don't give up. You've just been going at it wrong. To do work like that a fellow needs plenty of rest and food in his stomach.

BILLY

How am I going to do that? I can't leave the tree. If I do, the raccoon'll get away.

GRANDPA

No, he won't. That's what I came down for.

BILLY

How are you going to make the ringtail stay in the tree, Grandpa?

GRANDPA

That's another one of my coon-hunting tricks; learned it when I was a boy. We'll keep him there all right. You're sure he's in that hollow limb, are you?

BILLY

There's no other place he could be.

GRANDPA

Well, in that case, we'd better put our man along about here.

BILLY

What man?

GRANDPA

Now don't tell your father.

(GRANDPA gets scarecrow he has brought)

BILLY

Why did you bring our scarecrow?

GRANDPA

To keep that ringtail in the tree. To us it'll be a scarecrow, but to that ringtail it'll be a man. When he pokes his head out of the hole, he'll see this man standing there and he won't dare come down. It'll take him four days to figure out it isn't a real honest to goodness man. And by then, it'll be too late.

(GRANDPA sets up scarecrow)

GRANDPA

We'd better be going. It's getting late, and we don't want to miss your mother's chicken and dumplings.

BILLY

Come on, Little Ann. Come on, Old Dan.

(OLD DAN refuses to come)

GRANDPA

Well, I'll be darned. He knows that ringtail's there and he doesn't want to leave it. You've got a good hound there.

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(GRANDPA picks up OLD DAN and carries him away. All exit.)

scene 10

(MAMA is serving food at the table)

Breakfast is about ready, Billy.

MAMA

(BILLY walks in very stiffly)

Maybe you'd better let that raccoon go. I don't think he's worth all of this.

MAMA

I can't do that, Mama. I've gone too far now.

BILLY

(PAPA enters)

What's the matter? You a little stiff?

PAPA

(PAPA playfully slaps BILLY on the back. BILLY cringes)

A little stiff? Why, he could hardly put his clothes on.

MAMA

He'll be alright. He won't be swinging that ax long before he's as limber as a rag.
(MAMA just shakes her head)

PAPA

You know I woke up several times last night and each time I was sure I heard a hound bawling. Sounded like Old Dan.

PAPA

(BILLY bolts out the door.)

Ol' Dan!

BILLY

Where's Ol' Dan, girl?

(LITTLE ANN walks up to BILLY)

He's not here. I think he's gone back to the tree.

(LITTLE ANN starts whining)

I don't think he'd do that, would he?

MAMA

WHOOO-EEEE!!!!

BILLY

(OLD DAN bawls back)

He's there. He wanted to make sure the ringtail stayed in the tree. You see, Mama, why I have to get that ringtail.

BILLY

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MAMA

Well, I never in all my life. Yes, Billy, I can see now why you have to get that raccoon. My young Daniel Boone, go get that raccoon for those dogs!

(BILLY and LITTLE ANN take off. When they arrive at the sycamore. OLD DAN bawls even louder.)

BILLY

I'm proud of you, boy. It takes a good dog to stay with a tree all night.

(LITTLE ANN rolls in the leaves)

Of course you feel good. Lil' Ann. You had a warm night's sleep in the doghouse while Dan was here by himself watching the tree.

OLDER BILLY

I would have said more, but just then I noticed something. I walked over for a better look. There scratched deep in the soft leaves were two little beds. One smaller than the other. Old Dan hadn't been alone when he had gone back to the tree. There was no doubt that Little Ann just came back in the early morning to get me.

BILLY

I'm sorry, little girl. I should've known.

OLDER BILLY

With even stronger love and devotion for my dogs, I began cutting the tree again. It was torture. My body ached with each blow. By the middle of the afternoon, blisters started to rise up on my hands like small white marbles. When they filled up and burst, it was all I could do to keep from screaming. I wrapped my handkerchief around my hands. When even this didn't help, I knew it was the end.

BILLY

I can't do it. I've tried, but I just can't cut it down. I can't hold the ax any longer.

(LITTLE ANN whines and licks BILLY's sore hands. BILLY kneels down with his dogs)

BILLY

I'm sorry Lil' Ann and Ol' Dan. I can't chop anymore.

(BILLY starts to rewrap his hands when the sound of a breeze starts. None of the other trees but the sycamore move. BILLY grabs the dogs by the collars and backs off to safety. The great tree creaks and sways and finally tumbles³. The brown furry RACCOON starts to run when the tree reaches the ground)

BILLY

Get him, Dan, get him!

(DAN and ANN attack and kill RACCOON)

That's enough. He's dead.

(BILLY pulls up dead RACCOON)

Good job, Ol' Dan. Good job, Lil' Ann.

³ I see this huge very light tree to be sort of a rod puppet itself, with the chorus manipulating it to its crashing conclusion.

(BILLY and DOGS strut back to house)

PAPA

Well I see you got him.

MAMA

Billy, when I heard that big tree fall, I was scared to death. I was sure it had fallen on you.

BILLY

Aw, Mama, I was safe. It couldn't have fallen on me.

MAMA

Sometimes I wonder if all mothers have to go through this.

PAPA

I'll help you skin it.

BILLY

Papa, did you notice any wind blowing this evening?

PAPA

No, I don't believe I did. Why do you ask?

BILLY

Well, something strange happened in the bottoms. I didn't chop down the tree. A wind blew it over.

PAPA

That happens a lot.

BILLY

But it was the way the wind blew. It didn't touch another tree in the bottoms. I know because I looked around.

MAMA

The Good Lord must have helped you. He works in mysterious ways.
(MAMA exits into the house)

BILLY

Papa, do you think God helped me?

PAPA

I don't know, Billy. You must remember that the sycamore was the tallest tree in the bottoms. Maybe the wind was high enough to only catch that tree. No, I'm afraid I can't help you there. You'll have to decide that for yourself.