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HOPE SPRINGS

by Richard Conlon

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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HOPE SPRINGS was premiered by IMPACT at The Castle Theatre,
Wellingborough, UK in 2004.

CHARACTERS

SAM – Sensitive and thoughtful, prone to melancholy.

THE PRINCIPAL – Brisk, cold and businesslike, but should not be played as evil or malevolent.

THE RINGLEADER – Intelligent, charming and charismatic, quick to anger and cool.

THE INSPECTOR – Has a natural authority, observant with keen judgement.

THE ASSISTANT – A little slow-witted, but not a buffoon.

PUPIL 1 – Used to getting what they want through their looks and charm – a flirt.

PUPIL 2 – Street wise and assured. Cocky, almost to the point of aggression.

PUPIL 3 – Idealistic, principled and thoughtful.

PUPIL 4 – Mercurial, creative, sardonic.

PUPIL 5 – A thief and a liar, with an aggression just barely below the surface.

PUPIL 6 – A little disgruntled that their plan of ‘working hard and getting out’ has been disrupted.

PUPIL 7 – The ideal kind of pupil for the institution – wants to complete the programme and get out as quickly as possible.

PUPIL 8 – Joyfully belligerent about the institution – refuses to be cowed or broken.

ISLAND VOICES 1-6 – Are the **CHORUS** of the piece and can slip in and out of being observers, scene-setters and characters in their own right.

PARENTS 1-6 – Should not be shown to be monsters, they need to seem to have few options left.

STAFF 1 & 2 – Manipulative and divisive.

***PUPIL**– the asterisk before pupil indicates that these lines can be given to one pupil or shared between two, three, four or five pupils, depending on the needs of the cast.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The text is gender-neutral throughout and can be approached by casts of either gender, any mix of both, or indeed any non-binary actor. This same simple principle also extends to ethnicity. Needless to say, casting throws up interesting debates about the politics of the everyday and can shine new light on the lines. I hope this approach to writing the piece means teachers and directors can give the most appropriate part to the most suitable performer.

Familiarity with the characters will give readers and performers a chance to inhabit them and find a way to deliver the lines that work – for ease of use though, I make these suggestions in the character descriptions.

I try to remain engaged with productions as they happen. Please feel free to contact Concord Theatricals with questions from actors/students and any queries about the piece – any thoughts will be welcomed and answered directly. I will endeavour to send a ‘good luck’ message to the cast and crew, and am always interested to see images from productions.

ACT ONE

(During the opening section, each strand [THE LETTER, CHORUS, PRINCIPAL, PUPILS and STAFF] is totally unconnected, there should be no confusion that they are referring to each other.)

ISLAND VOICES. Shh... Shh... Shh...

SAM. To all my friends, this is not an easy letter to write. I shall miss all of you more than many of you think – there’s no point in me pretending that my time here has been happy – I don’t think any of us can say that, but many of you have made it – as bearable as it ever could be...

ISLAND VOICES. ‘Hope Springs’

ISLAND VOICE 1. On-Screen Promotional Film.

ISLAND VOICE 2. National Parent Market.

ISLAND VOICE 3. Southern Division

ISLAND VOICE 4. Open.

ISLAND VOICE 5. Play.

*(Music.)**

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PRINCIPAL. Welcome to our facility. As you can see, our institution is nestled in a beautiful, rugged landscape miles from anywhere. Only accessible by boat, we control everything that goes on here. Everything. Over the years, word has spread about the work we do here and in other places, some of what you will have heard will be true, other things will be fiction or myth. This much is true: we get results, the results you want, and the results you pay for.

ISLAND VOICES. Stop.

PUPIL 1. I couldn't believe it. I never thought they would do this. What teenager doesn't go through some kind of dodgy period, for god's sake it comes with the territory. It's what you're supposed to do isn't it. Their vision of me was as this pure virginal little thing who was going to eventually give herself to my one true love when I got married. I don't think so. But that doesn't make me evil does it. I still can't believe they sent me here.

STAFF 1. Excuse me, just *what* do you think you're doing in here?

PRINCIPAL. So who are we? The staff and board of this facility work for a company, a very successful and profitable company, called Youth Correction Limited. We have a number of institutions across the country all working towards the same goal. To save your son, or your daughter.

ISLAND VOICES. Stop.

PUPIL 2. They think that even if you just experiment, you're going to go spinning down this chasm of addiction and end up a junkie on the street. I wasn't doing anything most of my friends weren't doing, and what's a drug anyway, my parents drink wine every day, but that's OK because that's nice and middle class isn't it. They're the ones who are supposed to love and care for me, how they could send me here is beyond me.

STAFF 2. Right, you are in such deep trouble.

PRINCIPAL. I was a teenager once; I am a parent now, I know what it is like. By the time I was fifteen, facilities like this were already beginning to offer their services. I was lucky, but I saw friends go off the rails and I know that if their parents could have sent them somewhere like this, their lives would have been turned around. As a parent with teenagers of my own I can tell you this, with my hand on my heart, that if one of my children displayed any of the tendencies that some of you may be worrying about, they would be straight in here, on the programme. You have to ask yourself: is your child safer on the streets with the pimps, drug dealers and junkies, or here...with us?

ISLAND VOICES. Stop.

PUPIL 3. We just didn't see eye-to-eye on anything, you name an issue and we'll be at absolutely opposite sides of the argument on it. It's not easy to develop your own mind and realise your parents are Nazis. Small-minded bigots. All I ever did was go on demonstrations, help organise rallies and things. Yes I got arrested, but not because I was breaking the law, but because the police are Nazis too. My parents really are fascists – only a fascist would send their child here.

STAFF 1. Now, now, come on – don't be hasty.

PRINCIPAL. Why should you think of spending large amounts of your hard-earned money on sending your child, your little darling, to us? Why indeed? Because you care. And because you cannot afford not to. The option of doing nothing and hoping for the best is for... well not for parents who truly love their children. Come with me now and we'll look at the buildings and the wonderful, remote setting, which are on offer to you, the concerned parents of today's young people.

ISLAND VOICES. Stop.

PUPIL 4. I hated school, just hated it. And they had this dream that I'd go on to be a doctor or a lawyer or something, but it's just not me. I'd rather work in a shop. I want to be in a band really, that's what I'd really love, they didn't get that. Screaming rows we would have about it, almost like stand-up fights with my dad. He wants me to be what he never had the chance to be, he says. Well I didn't fancy being made to succeed where he failed thank you very much. But I never thought I'd end up here.

STAFF 2. I mean it, don't do anything you might regret. Think about it.

PRINCIPAL. This collection of buildings around a large, old family home is the educational centre, dormitories and correctional facility, the staff live on-site, your children are never alone. There is nowhere else to go, nowhere to run to. We own the island and every building on it – when you sign over forty-nine percent of your parental rights to our company we become the only family, and the only home they will need – until we get the results you want.

ISLAND VOICES. Stop.

PUPIL 5. If I lived with my dad, he would have understood, he was a tearaway in his youth. He'd have been cool about it, it wasn't major thieving – just for the laugh, the buzz. There was nothing else to do where we lived, but my step-dad's a self-made man, loaded too. He hit me once, just once – I flattened him, kicked his head in. I still think I was right to, but I wish I hadn't – enjoyed it – so much. So she let him send me here.

STAFF 1. Please don't, no, please...no.

PRINCIPAL. There are days when being the principal of this institution can be hard, I don't mind telling you. On those days I make the most of this stunning landscape. I take a few hours to myself and walk to what, to me, is

a very special place indeed. Here, nestled deep within the woods, far from the main house are the natural features which give our facility its name.

The water that gushes in several places from these rocks were discovered by this island's first settlers hundreds of years ago, just as they were about to give up trying to find a source of fresh water, and therefore the chance to survive and thrive here. They knew then that they had found a better place. These then, are the Hope Springs, and here I sit and reflect when I need to recharge my personal batteries, before I rejoin the battle, the battle for the hearts and minds of your children. It's not easy, it's not attractive, our methods can, at first, seem excessive but they are necessary. I believe, that with your help, this is a battle we can win.

So, when things look bleak, when you are at the end of your tether, remember – there is a way forward. It's not hopeless, just when you think there's nowhere to turn – Hope Springs.

*(Music.)**

ISLAND VOICES. Stop. Close.

(As if just having watched the presentation.)

INSPECTOR. Well, that's not a lot to go on.

ASSISTANT. Is that it?

INSPECTOR. That's it.

ASSISTANT. No report, no file?

INSPECTOR. No.

ASSISTANT. No pages and pages of evaluation?

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INSPECTOR. No.

ASSISTANT. We have reams and reams of stuff on every other school in the area.

INSPECTOR. I think we have to stop thinking 'school' and start thinking 'correctional facility'.

ASSISTANT. Can't we go next week, it's hours away and I've got so much to do.

INSPECTOR. Someone needs to go out there and see that everything is OK. Apparently all communications are down, no one has heard a peep from them since last night, and so we're going to see that everything's OK, OK?

ASSISTANT. OK.

INSPECTOR. Good.

ASSISTANT. Can't the police go out there?

INSPECTOR. It's hardly a job for the police.

ASSISTANT. It's hardly a job for two educational inspectors.

INSPECTOR. One educational inspector and one assistant.

ASSISTANT. Fair point.

INSPECTOR. So what we'll do is this – I'll inspect, you assist.

ASSISTANT. OK.

INSPECTOR. It'll be nice to have a look inside one of those places.

ASSISTANT. If they're inside our area, why don't we have a file on them? Why haven't we visited before?

INSPECTOR. Private company, private land, private agreement between the parents and the organisation, a business arrangement. Not cheap either. The laws that apply to these places are pretty new, used to be illegal, and now, well it's a bit of a grey area. So we leave them

to it, unless we have a reason to drop in, which hasn't arisen until now.

ASSISTANT. We'll be gone all day I suppose?

INSPECTOR. An hour in the car, half an hour in a little boat.

ASSISTANT. I like boats – I'm good in boats.

INSPECTOR. It'll be interesting to meet the principal in person. With any luck we'll be there for lunch, we'll have a look around and no doubt it'll just be some technical thing that's gone awry – but still we'll have a look, and you'll still be home for your tea. One thing I do know is that these places are very efficiently run.

(Sudden noise of PUPILS all talking at once, there is dissent, argument. Via some gesture, the RINGLEADER gradually makes the others quiet.)

RINGLEADER. Thank you. Now, my fellow pupils, I think we can safely assume that, how can I put this, the old rules no longer apply. We are under a new regime, one of our own making, so we'd better try and organise.

PUPIL 3. I think that's fair enough.

PUPIL 6. This is crazy.

***PUPIL.** We are in so deep.

***PUPIL.** You should never have done it.

PUPIL 6. Unwise, very unwise.

***PUPIL.** I didn't want any part of it.

(The noise and argument almost begins again, but abates as the RINGLEADER begins.)

RINGLEADER. I hope it's safe to say that none of us wanted anything to do with this place, none of us wanted any part of it, but that choice was taken from us. And

perhaps what we have done is unwise, but as far as I could see it was unwise to just sit and take it.

PUPIL 2. I couldn't take it anymore.

***PUPIL.** It's OK for you, you weren't progressing like some of us were.

PUPIL 6. Yeah. You had less to lose.

***PUPIL.** Some of us worked hard to move through this place.

***PUPIL.** Over a longer time than you've had.

PUPIL 6. And now we'll be back where we started.

PUPIL 3. You call that progress?

PUPIL 6. It was our way out.

RINGLEADER. We realise that what we did doesn't sit well with some of you, but it was hardly something we could have sat down and taken a vote on was it, it had to be done, and it cannot be undone, we must deal with how we move on from here.

***PUPIL.** I want to leave. I want to get away from here.

RINGLEADER. You will.

***PUPIL.** Are you sure?

RINGLEADER. One way or another, you will leave here. But first, we have to organise, we still need to eat, we still need to keep this place running like there's no change.

***PUPIL.** But everything's changed.

***PUPIL.** I want to take it down brick by brick –

***PUPIL.** I want to see smoke billowing out of the windows.

PUPIL 3. Don't start on that.

RINGLEADER. No, don't. If we behave like that then we'll be little more than the animals they have treated us like for months.

PUPIL 6. Years.

PUPIL 3. Exactly.

RINGLEADER. But you are right, everything has changed, and I, for one, think that's a good thing. Don't you all?

(An uneasy agreement from the group.)

So, a plan will emerge, I'm sure of that but for now we just carry on –

PUPIL 6. We want to know.

RINGLEADER. What?

PUPIL 6. What did you do with *them*? *(An unease in the room as this is asked.)*

RINGLEADER. Ah. The fewer of us that know, the better for the rest of you. If you don't know, you can't be seen to be involved can you. So, you and you sort out food, find out what provisions we've got and how long they'll last. You are in charge of the offices; I think someone with a track record for arson should know what to do with all of our official records.

PUPIL 5. I can pick the locks on the filing cabinets.

RINGLEADER. Perfect. You lot attend to the boiler room and make sure that all is ticking over nicely down there. And you're in charge of our business further afield. You lot, clean up this place it's a mess.

***PUPIL.** No way.

RINGLEADER. This is not a place without rules, it is a place with *new rules*. It will not degenerate, I will have order. *(After a thought.)* And I have one request, I want your names.

***PUPIL.** Our names? What do you mean?

RINGLEADER. That's a thing that's always been used against us – the refusal to call us by our first names, like human beings. Well now, if you'll let me, I'm taking your names, your first names, your personal names,

your nicknames, I'm reclaiming them and I'm putting them to use.

PUPIL 6. I haven't got a clue what you're talking about.

RINGLEADER. Our names have only ever been on our files, our documents, I'm freeing them from bondage –

***PUPIL.** Are you going to put them up in lights?

RINGLEADER. Oh, it will be better – much better than that, trust me. But they are not mine to take, they are yours to give. Will you all give me your names?

(A murmur of confused approval.)

Good, thank you. I hope you like what I do with your names, in your name. Day one, year zero, new regime, clean slate. So...we are all equal – but I'm in charge. Now go to your jobs, and the rest of you, look out.

ISLAND VOICE 3. And the lookouts looked out, and they saw parts of the old place in a new light – brighter faces. A lightness in the air.

ISLAND VOICE 2. And in others, they saw that the old fear remained, that people talked quietly in corners. Furtive, restless.

ISLAND VOICE 4. And they heard the difference too – they heard none of the familiar squeak of trainers on polished tiles. Just the gentle slap, slap, slap of flip-flops.

ISLAND VOICES. Because you can't run away in flip-flops.

ISLAND VOICE 1. And the absence of the sound of keys on chains

ISLAND VOICE 5. And through the day, as quiet descended, people got on with what was asked of them or what they chose to do.

SAM. It's strange to think that I'll be the one who's free from this place before you – it's not the usual way

out, I'm sure you'll agree but it's the one which seems to make most sense to me – in truth it's the only one I can see. I could have tried to have stayed longer but it would have only been prolonging the inevitable, so I have decided to get it over and done with.

ISLAND VOICES. And the lookouts looked out.

ISLAND VOICE 4. Nothing.

ISLAND VOICE 5. Nothing.

ISLAND VOICE 3. Nothing.

ISLAND VOICE 2. Something?

ISLAND VOICE 1. What something?

ISLAND VOICE 2. Something over there?

ISLAND VOICE 3. In the water.

ISLAND VOICE 2. A boat.

ISLAND VOICE 1. Small boat or big boat?

ISLAND VOICE 2. Small boat.

ISLAND VOICE 1. People?

ISLAND VOICE 3. Two.

ISLAND VOICE 1. Police?

ISLAND VOICE 5. Don't think so.

ISLAND VOICE 1. Officials?

ISLAND VOICE 4. Think so.

ISLAND VOICE 1. From the company?

ISLAND VOICE 2. Don't think so.

ISLAND VOICE 3. Word travels fast for such a large place.

ISLAND VOICE 5. Along the corridors, the slap of flip-flops on bare feet.

ISLAND VOICES. Hard to run in flip-flops.

ISLAND VOICE 1. Through the halls.

ISLAND VOICES. Very undignified, flip-flops.

ISLAND VOICE 5. Down the stairs to the dining hall.

ISLAND VOICE 4. Which is fast becoming the hub.

ISLAND VOICES. The HQ.

PUPIL 1. One small boat – two people, official looking, just landing.

RINGLEADER. Good.

PUPIL 1. Good?

RINGLEADER. Yes, like I said, a plan will emerge, and one is emerging.

PUPIL 3. And what does this plan look like.

RINGLEADER. It's a bit vague at the moment, but I'll let you know when it firms up.

PUPIL 2. So for now?

RINGLEADER. For now, everything as normal.

PUPIL 2. Normal?

RINGLEADER. Normal-ish. Someone go and greet them, you've got passable social skills –

PUPIL 3. Thank you very much.

RINGLEADER. So you'll do that, someone tie up their boat safely.

PUPIL 1. I'll do that. I know just the place.

RINGLEADER. Relieve them of any burdens.

PUPIL 5. That'll be me.