

This Dance Among Dances

A Play in One Act

Characters:

Benay: Young Ojibwe woman who falls ill. Daughter of Leo Pine.

Leo Pine: Middle-aged Ojibwe man, widower, who does seasonal labor in the reservation areas of Minnesota.

Jingle Dress Dancer: Spirit associated with Benay, the sick young girl. (Played by same actress as Benay.)

Irish Dancer

Poodle Skirt Dancer

Hip-Hop Dancer

Narrator

Time and Place:

The play is set at the end of World War I, when the Spanish influenza was responsible for many deaths. These scenes take place among the Ojibwe villages of the Great Lakes.

Narrator: Long ago a terrible illness came to the Ojibwe people of the Great Lakes. Many people were dying. In one Minnesota village, Leo Pine had buried his wife and young boy, only to have his twelve-year-old daughter fall ill. Although the medicine woman had come, the girl was not better and the father watched at her bedside, exhausted from nursing her and near despair.

(Curtain opens on a poignant scene stage left. Benay lays on her bed with a wet cloth draped across her forehead and Leo Pine, her father, is asleep in a

wooden chair beside her. Leo wakes as Benay moans and tosses fitfully in the bed.)

Leo: Oh, my girl. Little Benay. *Maazhi-ayaa*. She is sick something awful. What can I do? Oh, *Gichi-manidoo*, Great Spirit, do not take my little girl. She is all that is left to this miserable old fool of a fisherman. Give her strength again, to live a long life. Let her be here when the *manoomin* is ripe and fills our canoe bottoms. Let her be here to wear *makizinan*, new moccasins to dance the rice. I see her young legs dance so softly, so swiftly, I see my Benay well in *dagwaagin*, the fall with leaves as lovely brown as her skin. *(While he talks and prays, Leo's head begins to droop and soon he falls back asleep.)*

Narrator: As many Ojibwe people know, sometimes our waking and our dreaming worlds work together to help us with the problems we face in our lives. This is what happened for Leo two centuries ago. In the Minnesota summer, when he had fallen asleep praying, *Gichi-manidoo* must have taken pity on him and sent him a vision in his dream. But even visions require work, as Leo Pine is to learn. Watch now as you see his dream begin to materialize and imagine how it might feel for Leo to leave his body behind, to enter that other place, a dream world powerful enough to change his waking world.

Three young girls enter stage right. All are dressed for special dances or dance eras: one for hip hop, one for Irish dance, and one in poodle skirt and bobby socks. They seem to be arguing amongst themselves. Finally, they stop and look at the scene before them.

Irish Dancer: I tell you I was sent for this audition.

Poodle Skirt Dancer: Does this look like Ireland?

Hip-Hop Dancer: Dah! Does it look like the 50s?

Poodle Skirt Dancer: Okay, okay. The man's waking up. Let him run his own show.

The girls all strike a dance pose, trying to look their best, smile and wave at Leo Pine. Throughout the beginning of the scene, they play up the competition, trying to upstage one another. Late in the scene, as the desperate reality of the situation becomes more clear, they begin to show authentic feelings for Leo and Benay and try their best to help.

Leo has heard the commotion in the room and is startled at what he sees. But before he goes to the girls, he rechecks that Benay is warmly covered. Then with one more worried glance at his daughter, he stands, smooths his hair and clothes, and moves quickly to the other side of the stage, to try to keep the girls from disturbing Benay. As he stands from the chair, a body form is left behind indicate, that he has simply risen in his dream.

Hip-Hop Dancer: *(Looking Leo over as he approaches.)* Had a tough night did you?

Leo: *Eya.* It is a hard time for our people. Many have fallen ill. Have you *(looking them over doubtfully)* come to help? Did *Gichi-manidoo* send you?

Poodle-skirt Dancer: Gichi. . .? More like Big Daddy. You dig? I've got a crazy dance for you. You hip?

Leo: A dance? I was just thinking about Benay and the way she can dance, dreaming about her smooth legs lifting like a deer. And now you have come from my dream. Is that—*animosh*—on your dress? Do you bead?

Poodle-skirt Dancer: I don't bead, man, but I do a mean jitterbug. You want to spin some disks and I'll give you a demo?

Irish Dancer: Listen he says he wants a dance with legs lifting like a deer. That is really more my forté, not yours.

Hip-Hop Dancer: And what, like my legs aren't long and limber enough? My dance has all the lift the guy could want.

Irish Dancer: Listen, clearly someone's made mistake here, by sending us all to the same audition in. . . uh, what century do you think this is anyway? But why don't we just each take a minute to show him our stuff and let the man make his own decision. *(Leo looks on more and more puzzled as the girls agree and then each do a 30 second demonstration complete with accompanying music. As they are doing their dances, a spirit being lifts itself from the sleeping form of Benay, looks at the resting girl, at her own solid body, and then to the scene before her. This fourth young woman, Jingle Dress Dancer, is wearing a traditional Ojibwe dress. Like Leo she seems confused by what is going on. When the three girls have finished they applaud one another and move back farther on the stage and begin quietly sharing techniques while the following scene takes place between Leo and the Jingle Dress Dancer.)*

Jingle Dress Dancer: *(Walks over to Leo.)* Aaniin, Grandfather.

Leo: *(Startled and a little unsure of what he is seeing.)* Benay, is it you? You are well?

Jingle Dress Dancer: Gaawin, grandfather. I am not your Benay. But I have been sent to help you. *(Gesturing.)* Who are these others?

Leo: Aniin, Sister. They say, they too, were sent to me. But was it by Gichi-manidoo? I guess it must be. You are all here for my daughter, who needs healing. I think I may have prayed too fervently that she have strong legs for dancing. For over there are six strong legs, but I don't feel the spirit of healing.

Jingle Dress Dancer: I am that spirit, Grandfather. I am a healer, but the Great Spirit said we must also help your daughter to move again and regain

her strength. Perhaps that is why they (*gesturing to the three young women*) are here. For I am not a great dancer. (*Looks down at her garment.*) Maybe they will help us finish this healing dress and let you bring Benay a dance she can give to all the Anishinaabeg who are weak from this illness. Do you have a drum or rattle for a song?

Leo: Drum? *Gaawin geyaabi.* I gave it as a gift to the man who brought me wood to keep this girl warm.

Jingle Dress Dancer: Do not worry. Will we find music around us. The birds sing. Icicles tinkle. The partridge drum on the hollow log. Your daughter: Benay. Partridge. She is relative to the partridge! I think she must have a small steady beat (*demonstrates*) to help her dance.

As the two have been talking, the other three girls have gradually stopped their own interaction and begun listening and moving closer. Now they join in.

Irish Dancer: Oh, your daughter is ill? You must let us help. You need a sound? A steady beat for her to dance to? We Irish dancers have the click of our own feet. (*Does a quick couple of steps to show how this works.*)

Poodle-skirt Dancer: But you heard him say she will dance with moccasins. How will that make sound?

Hip-Hop Dancer: We hip-hop dancers sometimes use the sound of our own hands on our legs. (*Also demonstrates.*)

Jingle Dress Dancer: Yes, I see. You each *wear* your own sound somehow. What could Benay wear that both moves and sounds?

Leo: You said the icicles tinkle, the partridge drum on the hollow log. What if we made a tiny hollow cone that dangles like the icicles and moves with

the wind? The wind is spirit. And sound carried on the wind—that has power.

Jingle Dress Dancer: Eya. *Gichi-manidoo* has told us the air itself is holy.

Leo: That is what we need for the healing dress and dance. The cones could work like a rattle. But they must be struck by. . .by what to make a sound?

Poodle-Skirt Dancer: If she were to move her skirt, the way we do, like this(*taking the Irish Dancers hand and pantomiming the dance, shows how her skirt flows forward and back as she moves.*), the cones could strike against *each other* to make the sound. They would jingle.

Jingle Dress Dancer: Hmm. Almost like a medicine rattle. Grandfather, I think that will work. Together the dress and the dancer will bring the healing we need. Our northern airs are sacred and powerful. Let us try. We will learn how to swirl them in prayer.

(The five continue to confer about the dance, but Leo begins to become agitated.)

Narrator: Ah, it seems the fabric of the dream is beginning to tear. Leo looks troubled, like he wants to leave. Is something calling him back to the world where his daughter is suspended between life and death? Clearly he is torn between attending to his daughter and continuing the dream conversation that may bring about her healing.)

Jingle Dress Dancer: Go—you must. We will bring the dress, a dress that jingles, sings to call healing spirits. *(The four girls move toward the back of the stage where they pantomime the making of the dress.)*

Narrator: See how easily Leo Pine slips back into his sleep. But when he awakens how much of the dream will he hold on to? Will he allow the spirits of the dream to enter his waking world?

Leo returns to occupy the sleeping form on the chair. He again awakens, this time for real.

Leo: Gichi-manidoo. You have sent me a vision of four strong girls. These spirit helpers have told me what I must do, what Benay must do. Do not take her from this *wiigiwaam* nor from my world until you let us call on the spirits of these northern airs, on our relative the partridge, on the echos of the drum and rattle that she will wear. May it be done in a good way. May it be done for all the people. *(He turns to the bed, but finds only the lifeless shell from which the spirit stepped. Not understanding, he calls out.)* Benay! Oh. . .

Suddenly, the Jingle Dress Dancer appears before the old man with the three other dancers. They carry a beautiful dress, decorated with dangling cones.

Jingle Dress Dancer: She is not there, Grandfather. Her spirit is here in this dress we have made. When I put it on, she will take my place and you must help her as she begins to dance.

Leo: I will help her stand. And the dance. . .?

Jingle Dress Dancer: When she steps, one foot must spring up, the other must stay touching the ground, that way she will stir the spirit winds, the cones will create their own tinkling rattle, and still the jingle dancer will stay connected to the power of her mother earth, one foot always on the ground. Through these powers—of wind, drum, and earth—the dress and the dancer will become one. They will call on the spirits for a healing. This dance can be shared from this day and in every generation of the Anishinaabeg people.

A pow-wow song begins softly as the Jingle Dress Dancer is dressed by the other three girls who then gesture to Leo that he is to take over. Jingle Dress Dancer adlibs “Miigwech” and “Gigaawabamin” as she hugs the other dancers and then they step back into the shadows. Leo takes the girls hand

as she begins to dance, slowly and carefully at first and then with more vigor as the music rises.

Narrator: Did dancers from the future really come to an Ojibwe man in the dream that inspired the jingle dress? Perhaps not. But we do know that somewhere in the Great Lakes in the early 1900's a father, like our imaginary Leo Pine, did seek a vision and was granted a powerful dream. So a dream-born dress saved his daughter and became a legend among the Anishinaabeg people. And where ever you travel to pow-wows, all across the United States, you will find the tradition of the healing jingle dress continues to flourish. We call it *zaangwewemagooday*. (*Gestures to the Jingle Dress Dancer, who now moves into a vigorous performance of the dance.*) And this is how the dance is done.

End.