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Dramatic Publishing

NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

A play by
RONN SMITH

Based on the award-winning novel by
AVI



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH)

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“The story of Philip Malloy, his family, friends, teachers, and school shouts to be shared.”

So said the *New York Times* in reviewing Avi’s award-winning documentary novel *Nothing But the Truth*. The play by Ronn Smith, based on the Avi novel, is Philip Malloy’s story—a dramatic tale of a student who broke a faculty rule, was suspended from school, and found that he and his family were soon caught up in a national media event, trading charges and countercharges regarding respect, freedom, and patriotism.

For Jordan, Brenna, Meghan and Zachary

IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

All producers of NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH *must* give credit to Avi as the author of the book and Ronn Smith as the author of the play in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and in all instances in which the title of the play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the play and/or a production. The names of Avi and Ronn Smith *must* also appear on a separate line, on which no other name appears, immediately following the title, and *must* appear in size of type not less than fifty percent (50%) the size of the title type. Biographical information on Avi and Ronn Smith, if included in the playbook, may be used in all programs. *In all programs this notice must appear:*

“Produced by special arrangement with
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY of Woodstock, Illinois”

INTRODUCTION

by Avi

In its original form my novel, *Nothing But the Truth*, told a story with the use of notes, dialogues, memos, newspaper articles, and diary entries. Each item was dated and timed so as to create a gripping story.

I wrote it that way in order to take my author's voice, so to speak, out of the story, wanting, instead, to put the reader in charge. That way readers could experience just how complicated that thing is we call truth. The novel became a kind of mystery story—not a “who done it?” so much as a “what happened?”

The form of *Nothing But the Truth* was new to many people. Though the book is a novel, albeit, a “documentary novel,” as I called it, a fair number of people who enjoyed the book called it a play when writing to me.

Actually there were a couple of literary creations that helped me create the form. The first *was* a play, but a particular kind. Let me explain.

When I first began to write—back in high school and college—I wanted to write plays. In my studies of drama, I came upon a type of play called a “living newspaper.”

Living newspapers—written and produced in the thirties—were teaching plays. That is, they attempted to teach audiences about the day's politics and economics. While they did have plots and characters, they also called for the projection of documents on screens, had actors read other documents and newspaper stories, and even shared statistics with audiences. In short, they dramatized current politics.

While I never saw one of these plays, I did read them and found the form fascinating. In fact, in college I tried to write a living newspaper. What was it about? How hard college was! I hasten to say it was never staged. But I did remember the form.

The other thing that really helped me shape my idea for the novel, *Nothing But the Truth*, also came from the nineteen-thirties. At that time a kind of mystery game was put on the market. It came in a box, and consisted of a collection of documents which constituted the evidence pertaining to a murder investigation. There were police reports, photographs, memos, interviews, tickets, train schedules, and even (as I recall) a cigarette stub and match. You sifted (and read) all these bits of evidence to determine who the criminal was. Then you opened a sealed envelope to see if you were right.

Thirty years later this same game was put on the market again, not in a box, but as a *book*. That is, the publisher put the “evidence” in regular book form, with illustrations of the cigarette stub, tickets, etc. Now the reader had to read a *book* of evidence to solve the mystery.

In legal language, evidence is called “discovery.” The first title of *Nothing But the Truth* was just that: *Discovery*.

So it was a play and a game—both of which I experienced as *books*—that gave me the idea for the form of *Nothing But the Truth*.

Since the novel was published many schools have requested permission to do it as a play. Having put play-writing far behind me, I turned to my friend Ronn Smith, a skilled playwright, to write a good theatrical version—which he has done. This version of *Nothing But the Truth* is truly a play. In fact, it might be interesting to compare the play version to the original novel. You’ll see there’s quite a difference.

In some respects, what you have in your hands is the kind of play I was trying to write more than thirty years ago. Here’s hoping it gets performed on a stage many times.

Avi
Boulder, Colorado

FOREWORD
by Ronn Smith

I have been involved in theatre for many years. I have directed new plays by young playwrights, served as a dramaturg (something of a research assistant) for established directors, and written about the theatre and its designers. And I am an avid theatre-goer.

What I have learned from the people I have worked with, the designers I have interviewed, and the productions I have seen is deceptively simple. Whether it is a Greek tragedy or a Shakespearean comedy or a play by Tennessee Williams, the single most important component for good theatre is a good story. This is not to say that the other elements of theatre—i.e., acting, direction, scenery, lighting, costumes—are not important. But for me, the most satisfying theatrical experiences I have had were those that involved a good story.

Avi's novel, *Nothing But the Truth*, is a good story. I don't know if it is a true story that actually happened somewhere that one could point to on a map, but it feels true. And I like the way it is told. The juxtaposition of dialogue, diary entries, letters, and memos (to mention only some of the literary devices used by Avi) does present, as Avi writes in his introduction, "a kind of mystery story—not a 'who done it?' so much as a 'what happened?'" story.

When Avi asked me to adapt his novel to the stage, I knew that I would have to simplify the story. One of the wonderful things about novels in general and mystery novels in particular is that the reader—if she or he chooses to—can flip forward to get some idea about where the story is going, or turn back to a previous page to check on a detail. This is very helpful when it comes to trying to solve a mystery before reaching the end of the book.

In the theatre, however, such flipping back and forth is impossible (although on several occasions in the theatre I have wanted to stand up and shout, “Hey, that was really good; let’s see that part again!”). The experience one has while watching theatre is more linear, which necessitates that the story be told in a simple, more straightforward fashion. This is especially necessary if the audience’s attention is not to wander during the performance.

If you compare this script and Avi’s novel, you will discover that I have downplayed or eliminated certain parts of the story. This is not because they are less important than other parts, but because I could not fit all of Avi’s rich, wonderful detail on the stage in a reasonable period of time. I have, however, tried to retain the “what happened?” mystery of the novel, which I think is the key to the novel’s great appeal. Even at the end, as the light fades on Philip Malloy, it is difficult to say precisely who was right or who was wrong or exactly what happened. If, on leaving the theatre after the performance, the audience is heard discussing these questions, then you will know that the story has been told properly and that the production was a success.

Ronn Smith
Providence, Rhode Island

NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

A Play in Two Acts

For 38 speaking roles (22m and 16f)

(with doubling, can be performed by 5m and 5f, see page xii)

CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

PHILIP MALLOY, student (14 years old)

MARGARET NARWIN, teacher (mid- to late 50s)

BERNARD LUNSER, teacher

DR. GERTRUDE DOANE, principal

STUDENT #1

STUDENT #2

STUDENT #3

ALLISON DORESETT, student

COACH EARL JAMISON, teacher

BEN MALLOY, Philip's father

SUSAN MALLOY, Philip's mother

KEN BARCHET, student

LISA GIBBONS, student

JACOB BENISON, teacher

TODD BECKER, student

JANET BARSKY, student

DR. JOSEPH PALLENI, assistant principal

TED GRIFFEN, school board candidate

JENNIFER STEWART, reporter for the *Manchester Record*

DR. ALBERT SEYMOUR, school superintendent

JAKE BARLOW, talk radio host

MRS. GLORIA HARLAND, chairperson of school board

CALLER #1 (Steve)

CALLER #2 (Liz)

ROBERT DUVAL, reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

CALLER #3 (Roger)

CYNTHIA GAMBIA, student
JESSICA WITTINGTON
HANK MORGAN
CHARLES ELDERSON
CARLTON HAVEN
DAVID MAIK
LAURA JACOBS
ROLANDO MERCHAUD
MS. HARBOR
AMERICAN LEGIONNAIRE
GEORGE BROOKOVER, principal of Washington
Academy
MISS ROONEY, teacher at Washington Academy

PLACE: Almost anywhere in the United States.
TIME: The present.

Approximate running time: 2 hours, with one intermission

* * * *

Production Notes

The stage is divided into four main acting areas: upstage center (UC), stage left (SL), stage right (SR), and downstage center (DC). Platforms are used to define these four primary acting areas, with the UC platform being the highest and the DC platform—the area closest to the audience—the lowest. The SL and SR platforms are of equal height. Two additional acting areas, downstage left and downstage right, can be used for some of the telephone calls and short monologues.

The UC acting area is used for the Malloy household; it contains a kitchen table and three chairs. The SL acting area is used for various public or student-affiliated locations in the high school; it contains four or five student desks and maybe a row of lockers set so as not to obscure the UC acting area. The SR

acting area is used for several administrative offices; it contains a single, solid desk and a desk chair. The DC acting area is a neutral space used for miscellaneous locations; it contains no furniture or other items.

A large rear projection screen is positioned behind each of the SR, UC, and SL acting areas. If production resources are limited, then one rear projection screen behind the UC acting area will suffice. When slides of classroom, hallways, and offices are used to help “set the scene,” these images are of a school near the theatre or, when the play is being produced by or in a school, of the school itself. (If production resources are severely limited, these screens and the projection of slides can be eliminated entirely. The absence of projected images will not adversely affect the production.)

Because the action of the play takes place in many short scenes in many different locations, it is recommended that the physical elements of the production be kept as simple as possible. The use of heavy or awkward set pieces should be kept to a minimum and props restricted to those the actors can carry on and off stage themselves. In this way, the production always remains focused on the characters and the story they are telling—never on how the story is being told.

Blackouts, except where indicated in the script, are to be avoided throughout the entire performance. At the end of each scene, the actors freeze in position for a quick beat, after which they move into position for the following scene. As the actors move to their new positions, the lighting should change to help indicate a new scene in another location.

Scene titles are to be projected either on one of the rear projection screens or on a screen suspended over the stage (maybe just beneath the proscenium arch). Exactly how and when the actors, lighting, and scene titles change must be choreographed carefully so that all changes are smooth, quick and consistent throughout the production.

An Additional Note

Although the list of characters indicates that there are thirty-eight speaking roles, the play can be performed by as few as ten actors (five male and five female). When ten actors are used, the roles should be assigned in the following manner:

Male

- Actor #1: Philip Malloy
Actor #2: Student #1, Ken Barchet, Todd Becker
Actor #3: Bernard Lunser, Jacob Benison, Ted Griffen,
Caller #1 (Steve), Robert Duval, Hank Morgan,
Carlton Haven, George Brookover
Actor #4: Coach Earl Jamison, Dr. Joseph Palleni, Jake Barlow,
Charles Elderson, David Maik, American Legionnaire
Actor #5: Ben Malloy, Dr. Albert Seymour, Caller #3 (Roger)
Rolando Merchaud

Female

- Actor #6: Student #2, Allison Doresett
Actor #7: Student #3, Lisa Gibbons, Janet Barsky,
Cynthia Gambia
Actor #8: Margaret Narwin
Actor #9: Dr. Gertrude Doane, Mrs. Gloria Harland,
Caller #2 (Liz), Miss Rooney
Actor #10: Susan Malloy, Jennifer Stewart, Jessica Wittington,
Laura Jacobs, Ms. Harbor

The following “memo” should be distributed to all audience members as they enter the theatre, or may be included as part of the program:

MEMO

HARRISON SCHOOL DISTRICT

Where Our Children Are Educated, Not Just Taught

Dr. Albert Seymour
Superintendent

Mrs. Gloria Harland
Chairman, School Board

STANDARD FORMAT FOR
MORNING ANNOUNCEMENT ON
PUBLIC-ADDRESS SYSTEM

1. 8:05 A.M. The Principal, or in his stead the Assistant Principal, or in his stead a designated member of the faculty, will say, “Good morning to all students, faculty, and staff. Today is Monday (or whatever day), January (or whatever month) 3 (or whatever day). Today will be a Schedule A (or B) day” (depending on what schedule).
2. Say, “Today in history...” (Please consult *Book of Days* in Principal’s office for appropriate references. Limit is three items.)
3. Say, “Please all rise and stand at respectful, silent attention for the playing of our national anthem.”
4. Turn on tape of anthem.

5. After anthem is complete, say, "I have these announcements."
All administration and faculty announcements shall be made at this point.

6. Say, "May I now introduce _____ (name of student, grade) for today's sport and club news. Have a good day."

7. Student announcements.

8. All announcements should end by 8:15 latest.

DR. JOSEPH PALLENI

Assistant Principal

The following "article" should be distributed during the intermission:

SUSPENDED FOR PATRIOTISM

by J. Stewart, Education Reporter

Harrison. While it may appear to be an April Fools' Day joke, tenth-grader Philip Malloy of Harrison High School was suspended for singing *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

His parents, Susan and Benjamin Malloy of Harrison Township, do not consider themselves super-patriotic, but they did raise their son to have pride in our country. It was only natural then for Philip to sing along when the national anthem was played on tape during the morning exercises. According to Harrison School superintendent Dr. A. Seymour, there is no rule against singing the anthem. Indeed, in every other class Philip did just that. His new homeroom teacher, Ms. Margaret Narwin, however, changed the rules. Every time Philip lifted his voice to sing she threw him out of class, insisting a disturbance was being created.

School principal Dr. Gertrude Doane, who admits that the student has no previous bad marks on his record, saw the issue only as one of discipline, and referred all questions regarding school policy to Dr. Joseph Palleni, assistant principal. Dr. Palleni, however, refused to be interviewed regarding the incident.

ACT ONE

PROLOGUE

(Spot up on PHILIP MALLOY, who is standing in the DC acting area.)

PHILIP MALLOY *(to the audience)*. Two questions. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? *(Pause.)* Does anyone ever say no?

(Blackout.)

SCENE ONE

SLIDE: “Tuesday, March 13. 10:35 P.M. From the Diary of Philip Malloy”

(Lights up on PHILIP MALLOY, standing in the DC acting area. He is holding his diary.)

PHILIP MALLOY *(to the audience)*. Coach Jamison stopped me in the hall today to say that I should try out for the track team! That with me on the Harrison High team we could be county champs. Fantastic! He wouldn't say that unless he meant it. Will have to ask the folks to help me get new shoes. But Dad was so

excited I'm sure he'll help. (*He begins to leave, but then stops and turns back to the audience.*)

Oh, yeah. Sarah Gloss came over at lunch to say this girl, Allison Doresett, likes me. I wasn't sure who Allison was. Then I remembered. She's in my English class. Bet she heard about my running. Girls like guys who win. Ta-da! It's Malloy Magic time!

Talk about Malloy Magic. This time for—da-dum!—Miss Narwin. I mean, what can you do with an English teacher who's so uptight she must have been put together with superglue. She won't let people have their own minds about anything! And the stuff she makes us read! I can't believe how *boring* Jack London is! *The Call of the Wild*. Talk about dogs! Ma says *she* had to read it in school. There has to be better stuff to read. I thought high school was going to be different. (*Beat.*) Have to figure out a way to run past Narwin.

SLIDE: "10:45 P.M. From a Letter Written by Margaret Narwin to Her Sister, Anita Wigham"

(*PHILIP MALLOY exits and MARGARET NARWIN, holding the letter, enters. She stops in the DC acting area.*)

MARGARET NARWIN (*to the audience*). Yes, a body gets a little tired after doing *anything* for twenty-one years. And I have been teaching at Harrison High for that long. But I still believe I was meant to bring fine literature to young minds. When the connection is made—and from time to time it *is* made—it's all worth it. The truth is, I like my work. (*Beat.*)

But the other truth, Anita, is that students today are not what they used to be. There is no love of literature. They come to it reluctantly, fighting every inch of the way. I like them and their capacity for independence, but they seem to lack caring for anything other than themselves. If they ask me once more “What’s this have to do with *us*?” I think I’ll scream.

For example, right now I’m teaching *The Call of the Wild*. This boy, Philip Malloy, raised his hand to say he didn’t understand “who was calling who.” Now if I were to laugh, he would have been insulted. And I would have lost him. You have to treat students with such care and fairness.

This Philip is only a middling student, which is a shame. He’s a nice-looking boy. Intelligent. With real potential. Perhaps that’s why he irritates me so, for he shows no desire to strive, to make sacrifices for the betterment of himself. Like so many students, he exhibits *no* desire to learn. But it’s not even *that* that I mind so much. It’s a certain something—a resistance—to the idea that literature is important. But it is. I know it is. If I could only convince students of this.

I can hear you saying, “Come down to Florida.” Anita, I don’t know if I am ready. Yes, I could take early retirement, but the truth is, I would be lost without my books, my teaching, my students.

SCENE TWO

SLIDE: “Thursday, March 15. 8:05 A.M. Bernard Lunser’s Homeroom Class”

(PHILIP MALLOY, STUDENT #1, STUDENT #2, STUDENT #3, and BERNARD LUNSER in SL acting area. General commotion. SLIDE—on rear projection screen behind SL area: Classroom wall, maybe a blackboard or a row of windows.)

BERNARD LUNSER. Let’s go! Let’s go! Time to grab the moment!

INTERCOM *(voice of DR. GERTRUDE DOANE)*. Good morning to all students, faculty, and staff. Today is Thursday, March fifteenth. Today will be a Schedule A day.

BERNARD LUNSER. Get that, bozos? A day!

INTERCOM. Today in history: On this day in forty-four B.C., Julius Caesar was assassinated.

BERNARD LUNSER. And right after that they all ate a Caesar salad.

INTERCOM. It was in eighteen-twenty that Maine was admitted to the United States.

BERNARD LUNSER. And by eighteen-twenty-one they wanted out.

INTERCOM. Please all rise and stand at respectful, silent attention for the playing of our national anthem.

(PHILIP MALLOY and the other STUDENTS stand. PHILIP MALLOY’s attention is on the book lying open on his desk as the first verse of The Star-Spangled Banner is played over the intercom. NOTE: In following

scenes, unless otherwise noted, fade out music soon after the dialogue has been concluded.)

**Oh, say, can you see by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last
gleaming?...**

BERNARD LUNSER. Okay, Philip, is that your homework you're working on?

**Whose broad stripes and bright stars, thro' the
perilous fight...**

PHILIP MALLOY. I'm trying to pass an exam.

BERNARD LUNSER. Ah, the famous wit and wisdom of Mr. Malloy. Put the book away.

**O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly
streaming?...**

PHILIP MALLOY. Just one last paragraph?

BERNARD LUNSER. Away, Philip! Or I'll make you sing a solo!

**And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof thro' the night that our flag was still
there.**

Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

SLIDE: "11:05 P.M. From the Diary of Philip Malloy"

(PHILIP MALLOY in the DC acting area. He is holding his diary.)

PHILIP MALLOY *(to the audience)*. Winter term exams next week. I hate them. Studying is so boring! Three exams scheduled in one day! The trick is getting past the teacher. It's like a race. You have to have a strategy. You know when to take it easy, when to turn on the juice. Get teachers to *think* you're in control. Or when all else fails, make them laugh.

The exam I really want to study for is math. People think I'm weird, but I like math. I won't waste time on English. What can you say about a dog? Besides, it's just a matter of opinion! If only I could get Narwin to crack a smile. *(Beat.)*

Been checking out Allison. She looked cool today. Dad says that girls really go for sports stars.

Sunny at first today. Then cloudy. Bit of rain. Then sunny again. Still, I got in a workout. Mostly wind sprints. Then twenty minutes on Dad's rowing machine. Track team practice starts next week. Can't wait. That's all Dad and I talk about.

SCENE THREE

SLIDE: "Friday, March 16. Memo to Philip from Dr. Joseph Palleni, Assistant Principal"

(PHILIP MALLOY in SL acting area. He is holding the memo. SLIDE: School hallway.)

PHILIP MALLOY (*reading*). “Dear Philip. As we head into spring term, the faculty committee has made some changes in homeroom assignments. This will facilitate the movement of students, as well as allow for a greater degree of freedom in the planning of spring term extra-curricular schedules. Your new homeroom teacher is Miss Narwin, in room two-oh-six. Effective Wednesday, March twenty-eight. Thank you for your cooperation.”

(*PHILIP MALLOY looks up at the audience, a look of horror on his face.*)

SLIDE: “8:20 P.M. Telephone Conversation between Philip and Allison Doresett”

(*PHILIP MALLOY in the UC acting area. ALLISON DORESETT in DC acting area. SLIDE—on rear projection screen behind UC area: Kitchen wall in the Malloy household.*)

PHILIP MALLOY. Can I speak to Allison, please?

ALLISON DORESETT. This is she.

PHILIP MALLOY. Oh, Allison. Hi, this is Phil Malloy.

ALLISON DORESETT. Oh, hi.

PHILIP MALLOY. Hey, I...I was wondering...the English exam. Did you read *The Call of the Wild* yet?

ALLISON DORESETT. I finished it last night. We’re supposed to review it tomorrow for the exam.

PHILIP MALLOY. I lost my copy.

ALLISON DORESETT. You what?

PHILIP MALLOY. It wasn’t my fault. See, I had this idea...I thought I’d read it to a dog.

ALLISON DORESETT. A dog!

PHILIP MALLOY. Well, it's about dogs, right? So I started to read it to him...this really mean dog...slobbering mouth, running eyes, the whole bit. Only see, he grabs it and starts to run away.

ALLISON DORESETT (*laughing*). This isn't true...

PHILIP MALLOY. No, listen! I'm serious! And I chased him into a yard and there he was...burying the book in the ground. I couldn't get it back. My point is, *he* hated it too!

ALLISON DORESETT. You're too much. I dare you to tell that to Narwin.

PHILIP MALLOY. You think I should?

ALLISON DORESETT. You always make remarks.

PHILIP MALLOY. Somebody's got to keep the class awake.

ALLISON DORESETT. I hate to tell you, Phil, but I liked the book.

PHILIP MALLOY. Whoops! Sorry, wrong number! Bye!

SCENE FOUR

SLIDE: "Monday, March 19. Margaret Narwin's Winter Term Exam"

(PHILIP MALLOY and MARGARET NARWIN in the SL acting area, facing the audience. They are each holding a copy of the exam. SLIDE: Classroom wall. NOTE: This image is not the same as the one used in Scene Two, but should be used for all subsequent scenes that take place in MARGARET NARWIN's classroom.)

PHILIP MALLOY (*to the audience*). “Question four: What is the significance of Jack London’s choice in making Buck, the dog in *The Call of the Wild*, the focus of the novel? Is the dog meant to be symbolic? Explain your answer. Can *people* learn from this portrayal of a dog? Expand on these ideas.”

MARGARET NARWIN (*incredulous, reading PHILIP MALLOY’s answer*). “The significance of Buck in Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* is that Buck is symbolic of a cat. You might think that cats have nothing to do with the book, but *that* is the point. Dogs are willing to sit around and have writers write about them, which, in my personal opinion, makes them dumb. I think cats are smart. Cats don’t like cold. A book that takes up so much time about a dog is pretty dumb. The book itself is a dog. That is what people learn from Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild*.”

PHILIP MALLOY (*reading MARGARET NARWIN’s response*). “Philip, this is an unacceptable response. *The Call of the Wild* is an acknowledged masterpiece of American literature. You are not required to like it. You *are*, however, required to give it your *respectful*, thoughtful attention. When you get your winter term grade, consider it a warning. Exam grade: C-minus.”

(*PHILIP MALLOY looks up at the audience, surprised.*)