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Dramatic Publishing

THE SUMMER OF JACK LONDON

A Play in Two Acts
by
ANDREW J. FENADY

based on his novel



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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ANDREW J. FENADY

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(THE SUMMER OF JACK LONDON)

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I would rather be ashes than dust! I would rather my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry rot. I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. The proper function of man is to live, not exist. I shall not waste my days in trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.

— Jack London
1876-1916

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THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY of Woodstock, Illinois”

THE SUMMER OF JACK LONDON

A Play in Two Acts

For 20 Principals: 13 Men, 7 Women, extras
(doubling possible)

CHARACTERS

JACK LONDON	SCRATCH NELSON
HOBSON	FELICITY BAMBRIDGE
DUKE FANOUDAS	MRS. BAMBRIDGE
CAPTAIN DIEQUEST	VIVIAN CHAPEL
FIRST OFFICER SPINNER	ELSA HEINZ
COOKIE	MR. BIERCE
DOLAN	CLEERY
MARTINEZ	NARRATOR'S VOICE*
ELMER DODSON	NURSE
ELIZA LONDON	MYRON QUINCY
FLORA LONDON	YOUNG MAN
JOHN LONDON	JOE GOOSE
JENNY PRENTISS	ABLE
DUTCH	BAKER
LEACH DAVITS	BEASLY
PHILIP BAMBRIDGE	CLARK
BOBBY WINTERS	DANKER
MAIMIE	NEWSBOY'S VOICE

*The role of the narrator's voice is optional.

Author's notes and suggestions

As Elmer Dodson says to his pupil Jack London in the play ... “I don't have a damned one.”

except

Challenge your imagination, skill, and creative instincts.

Jack London painted bold and brave images of places and people on the printed page.

You have the advantage of the proscenium...alive with energy and emotion. Use it.

* * * *

The melody for “A Capital Ship” can be found at the end of the playbook.

ACT ONE

(Dark stage. SOUND of wind, rain, heavy seas, fierce waves slamming onto a ship's scuppers—thunder rumbles, lightning cracks a crooked cross through the night sky.)

Slowly, a solitary LIGHT illuminates a space high, as high as possible, on the stage, revealing: ship's topmast—a crow's nest—a young man, JACK LONDON, barely conscious, lashed to the lookout. Only part of the topsail visible as the mast sways, rolling in a long sea—canvas flaps and booms in a whiplash. Then, as the sea calms and the swaying slows—another LIGHT illuminates a small area of the stage below and we hear voices before we see two sailors: HOBSON, with one good leg, the other crudely fashioned from wood; DUKE FANOUDAS, a Greek with a body borrowed from his Olympic ancestors.)

HOBSON. That devil Diequest ... cost me my leg and he'll cost London his life.

FANOUDAS. He can't last much longer, Hobby.

HOBSON. Not with the sun blisterin' skin by day and wind shiverin' bones by night—swayin' ninety feet over the sea with nothin' to eat or drink and sails boomin' like cannon in the brain ...

(A voice, then a figure interrupts. CAPTAIN ERIK DIEQUEST, eyes of fire and ice, a dead cigar clamped in his stone-carved jaw. Dressed in devil's black from head to heel with a peaked captain's hat fit square on his forehead. With him, FIRST MATE CYRUS SPINNER, smiling obsequiously, and COOKIE, as dirty as his pots and pans.)

DIEQUEST. Mr. Hobson.

HOBSON. Aye, Captain.

DIEQUEST. Mr. Hobson, do you know how to spell insubordination?

HOBSON. No, sir.

(DIEQUEST removes and points the cigar at HOBSON'S stump.)

DIEQUEST. But you've learned the consequences of insubordination.

HOBSON. Yes, sir.

DIEQUEST. So is Mr. London learning. So must all the crew, otherwise this ship would sink in a sea of chaos and anarchy. Don't you agree? *(Silence.)* Mr. Spinner, Cookie, did you hear me ask Mr. Hobson a clear and simple question?

SPINNER. I did, sir. Clear and simple.

HOBSON *(deliberately)*. Aboard the *North Star*, Captain Diequest, I agree with everything you say.

DIEQUEST. Well, then, you *have* learned. And so will Mr. London.

HOBSON. Yes, sir.

DIEQUEST. If he survives. Lay to now, both of you.

(FANOUDAS and HOBSON move off, with HOBSON's peg leg stomping on the deck. DIEQUEST smiles and waves a mock salute to the unconscious—or at least delirious—JACK LONDON on high. LIGHT on LONDON fades.)

DIEQUEST. He should be tame by now, Mr. Spinner.

SPINNER. You've seen to that, sir.

DIEQUEST. And I'll see to something else. The first vessel into San Francisco brings the highest price for its skins.

COOKIE. You've always been first, Captain.

DIEQUEST. There's a score of sealers too close astern. Set the skysails, Mr. Spinner, and we'll need every man-jack to make time. Order the crew to bring him down ...

(LIGHTS begin dimming. DIEQUEST, then SPINNER and COOKIE walk off.)

SPINNER. Aye, sir.

DIEQUEST. ...at six bells ...tomorrow.

SPINNER *(chuckles)*. Aye, sir. Six bells ...tomorrow.

(The stage goes dark. MUSIC. Slowly an area is illuminated revealing an elevated fragment and rail of North Star now docked, cargo unloaded, canvas folded. Crewmen, one at a time, are filing down the gangplank. MUSIC fades. We hear:)

SPINNER'S VOICE. Dawson.

(Then LIGHTS further illuminate SPINNER seated at a table on deck. CAPTAIN DIEQUEST stands next to the

table and COOKIE stands near the captain. Each crewman signs as he is paid.)

SPINNER. Fanoudas.

(FANOUDAS signs and is paid. DIEQUEST smokes his cigar and remains silent.)

SPINNER. Hobson.

(HOBSON hobbles up. Signs, pockets pay and with some difficulty, hoists his seabag as JACK LONDON appears, handsome face, now clearly visible, coarse chestnut hair, thick shoulders, deep chest and heavy arms—also carrying his seabag.)

SPINNER. London.

(As LONDON steps forward and is signing:)

DIEQUEST. Mr. London.

LONDON. Aye, sir.

DIEQUEST. Did we furnish you with sufficient material for your literary endeavors?

LONDON. Yes, sir.

DIEQUEST. Good. We wouldn't want to disappoint the next Rudyard Kipling. *(SPINNER and COOKIE laugh.)* Once we came to terms you were as good a seaman as I've had on board. You're welcome to ship with me again.

LONDON. Thank you, sir.

SPINNER. Ofty—Ofty.

(As the next sailor steps forward, LONDON lifts his seabag and catches up to HOBSON who is having difficulty negotiating the gangplank while using the rail.)

LONDON. Here, Hobby, let me give you a hand.

HOBSON. It's not a hand I need, Jack. It's a leg. But thanks.

(As they make it off of the gangplank LONDON turns back facing North Star.)

LONDON. Captain Diequest, sir.

DIEQUEST *(puffs from the rail)*. Yes, Mr. London.

LONDON. Just one more thing, Captain, sir. You can go straight to hell.

(The CREW on and off the ship stiffen.)

DIEQUEST. This distance is deceiving to the ears, Mr. London. Would you come closer and repeat what you just said?

LONDON. This is dry land I'm standing on, not your ship. You want to hear better, you come closer.

(A wave of excitement galvanizes the crewmen as DIEQUEST approaches LONDON.)

DIEQUEST. You said something about hell, Mr. London.

LONDON. I did.

DIEQUEST. So did Milton. "Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven."

LONDON. Seven months the rest of this crew and I spent on your hellship, mister, and I...

DIEQUEST. "Mister." So you reason that down here I'm not your captain. Down here we're equals, is that it, London?

LONDON. I value myself above being the equal of a wanton murderer.

DIEQUEST. Maybe you'd like to put a voice to your complaints so all your mates can hear...before I tear the tongue out of your face.

LONDON. I've done more than that. I've put it down on paper. Names and dates. All documented.

DIEQUEST. Our ship's log isn't good enough for our literary friend, Mr. London. He keeps one of his own.

LONDON. All written down. How you pocket the food money and ladle up slop, how you goad the men into fighting each other for your amusement and clap 'em in the lazarette if they look at you sideways. How you bullied Hobson aloft in a storm and let him freeze to the ratlines till his leg had to come off. How you let Smitty die, murdered him just as sure as—

DIEQUEST. It makes for fine literature, doesn't it? (*He tosses away the cigar.*) And now I'll put the final entry in your book myself.

(He whips his hugely knuckled fist at LONDON. But LONDON swings the seabag in front of him and lets it drop as it absorbs the blow. LONDON crashes a hook into DIEQUEST's ear and presses with a wild whirlwind of lefts and rights, but DIEQUEST will not go down. DIEQUEST's stonefist cracks against LONDON's face, then he throws his bear-like arms around LONDON's

body and thrusts them both swirling to the ground behind several bales stacked on the wharf and out of sight except for fists and elbows—and occasionally LONDON's or DIEQUEST's head bobbing above the bales as blows are landed with hatred, with desire to hurt, maim, destroy, again and again—as the crew exhorts. SPINNER moves as if to go after LONDON, DUKE FANOUDAS draws and snaps a switchblade and the knife point is against SPINNER.)

FANOUDAS. Make one move and I'll rip you from belly to brisket.

(The fight concludes with LONDON standing—weaving, pumping the expired air into his burning lungs—and DIEQUEST in a bloodied, crumpled, unconscious heap. The CREW cheers and waves their approval—LIGHTS dim as SPINNER and COOKIE move to retrieve their fallen captain. MUSIC.

LIGHTS illuminate another stage area as two young students—DOLAN and MARTINEZ—pummel each other—falling down, rolling over and engaging in a much less telling and brutal version of the wharf fight. Several young SPECTATORS cheer and jeer as LONDON appears toting seabag, watches a moment or two, then approaches the gladiators on the ground.)

LONDON. All right, mates, break it up.

(The SPECTATORS voice protest at the interference: "Mind your own beeswax."—"Leave 'em be."—"Ship

out, sailor.”—“Who asked you?”—Etc. LONDON drops his seabag and pulls the combatants apart, holding on to them.)

LONDON. That'll do. Now don't you two fellas know that fighting... (*DOLAN sucker punches MARTINEZ. LONDON rattles DOLAN.*) Here! Stow that! Don't you know that fighting's the debate of the ignorant?

DOLAN (*points at LONDON's face*). Yeah?! How'd you get that?

LONDON (*grinning*). What's your name, boy?

DOLAN. Dolan. What's yours?

LONDON. London.

MARTINEZ. I'm Martinez. Jeez, are you Jack London?

(LONDON nods—the other students react with favor: “Hey, this here's Jack London.”—“I thought he was older.”—“I thought he was bigger.”)

DOLAN. We know all about you, Jack. Old man Dodson, he talks about you all the time...

LONDON. Yeah, what does he say?

MARTINEZ. He says you been a tramp.

LONDON. Please... “on the road.”

DOLAN. And you been to sea, and you're a writer.

LONDON. Mr. Dodson said that?

DOLAN. He said you won a writing contest in the newspaper when you was seventeen.

LONDON. First and last time I was published.

MARTINEZ. “Typhoon Off the Coast of Japan.” We even read it in class.

DOLAN. I'm gonna be a sailor.

LONDON. Finish school first.

DOLAN. Did you?

MARTINEZ. And you been an oyster pirate.

(LONDON ruffles both boys' hair.)

LONDON. How about shaking hands, fellas?

DOLAN & MARTINEZ. Sure. Okay, Jack. *(They do.)*

LONDON. See you around, fellas. *(The YOUNGSTERS start to move off.)* Hey, Dolan. *(DOLAN looks at LONDON.)* Keep your left hand high and your chin low. *(DOLAN nods, then turns. LONDON boots him lightly in the rear, winks.)* And protect your stern.

(LIGHTS dim and stage goes dark as we begin to hear the voice of ELMER DODSON reading.)

LIGHTS go up on another stage area where DODSON sits behind a small desk—then reveal LONDON nearby listening and awaiting the old man's reaction. A half-empty pint bottle of whiskey, uncorked, sits on Dodson's desk. If possible, an American flag with forty-five stars in background.)

DODSON *(reading aloud)*. "...by now Stacey was more dead than alive, choking on his own blood from the beating the 'Moaner' had given him. As the final act of victory, the 'Moaner' clamped his teeth into Stacey's ear and tore it from the old man's head. All the time Captain Diequest watched as the decadent rulers of Rome must have watched. Then he spat his dead cigar onto the deck and turned away. It was at Diequest's whim that the two

men fought. The *North Star* is the world we live in. Captain Diequest is the absolute ruler of that world. He rules it absolutely.”

(DODSON looks up at LONDON and shakes his head, takes a swig from the pint, corks it, opens a desk drawer, drops the bottle into the drawer and slams the drawer shut.)

LONDON. You think it's no good?

DODSON *(shakes his head again)*. It's not your writing, Jack...oh, it needs discipline, but that's not what I'm talking about.

LONDON. What then?

DODSON. The subject matter, man. Blood and biting and death.

LONDON. But it happened.

DODSON. Who cares, Jack? Who the hell cares?

LONDON. The men on that ship.

DODSON. They're not going to buy your stuff.

LONDON. The way you sound, nobody is.

DODSON. Jack, you've got to be practical. If you're going to make a living from writing—and damn few do—you've got to write for the marketplace, and there's no market for misery, for cruelty and death.

(LONDON moves closer to Dodson's desk.)

LONDON. Mr. Dodson, you once told me I should write about the romance of things.

DODSON. I did.

LONDON. Well, at first I thought there was nothing but cruelty and death on the *North Star*. But underneath, there was a kind of romance...in the way the sail took the wind...in the seals we were hunting...in the names of the places...in the hopes, even the tragedies of each crewman. That's the kind of romance I want to write about.

DODSON. Jack...

LONDON (*fast*). I want to write about things as they are...

DODSON. Jack...

LONDON. Not some phony, formal drawing-room kind of world full of bangles and bonbons.

DODSON. Jack!

LONDON. I don't want to sit snug and warm and safe in some library and write fantasies while I get old and soft...

DODSON. Old! You're not even...

LONDON. You remember that poem you read to us by Walter Scott?

DODSON. *Sir* Walter Scott. "The Clarion"?

LONDON. That's it, "The Clarion"! (*Recites from memory.*) "Sound, sound the Clarion, fill the fife!/ To all the sensual world proclaim,/ One crowded hour of glorious life/ Is worth an age without a name." That's what I'm talking about...crowding every hour with glory and drama, with excitement. I want to excite people and be excited myself.

(*DODSON wraps his knuckles on LONDON's papers.*)

DODSON. Jack, this is not the style of stuff that sells.

LONDON. Styles change. I know I need literary discipline...

DODSON. Not just *literary*.

LONDON. You helped me in the beginning.

DODSON. You were the best student I ever had. (*He opens the drawer, uncorks the bottle.*) You made it... well... (*He takes a swig.*)

LONDON. Will you help me again, Mr. Dodson?

DODSON. How?

LONDON. I'm going to make a novel out of this diary ...

(*DODSON rises, scratches his head.*)

DODSON. Oh, now you've graduated to novels.

LONDON. ...about that wolf, Diequest, and what happened on the *North Star*. What do you say to that?

DODSON. I say...if you've made up your mind, there's no power on land or sea that can deter you. What do you want me to do?

LONDON. Will you read it and make suggestions?

DODSON. I might. Will you pay any attention to what I suggest?

LONDON (*laughs*). I might.

(*They both laugh, then DODSON looks at LONDON and speaks with deep sincerity and affection.*)

DODSON. Jack, where you got it I don't know. I don't know your mother or father, but somehow you have a natural bent for writing. A gift. I'll do all I can to help you.

LONDON. Thank you, sir.

DODSON. Jack, how is your family?

LONDON. Don't know. Haven't seen 'em yet. Say, Mr. Dodson, how do I, uh...how do I look?