The Dark Tower

A One-Act Drama

Adapted from
"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" by Thornton Wilder

By
Bobby Keniston

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DEDICATION

This play is gratefully dedicated to Tracy Sue, who is a real-life Lady of the Lake, and just an amazing person all around.

STORY OF THE PLAY

Roland, a warrior and perhaps the son of a king, has reached the Dark Tower. After years of eschewing death, he seeks nothing but sweet release after lifetimes of wandering the Earth. At the Dark Tower, he is confronted by Three Sisters, each in her own window. While the Amber Sister taunts him, and the Silent Sister pities him, the Dark Sister encourages him to release his burdens by sharing his life story. As Roland travels through his memories, we meet classic characters such as Merlin and Nimue (the Lady of the Lake), as well as his wife, friends, and family that Roland has lost to the Dark Tower. Told in lyrical language and staged simply with theatricality, this adaptation of Thornton Wilder's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" traces the story back to its original roots, incorporating elements of the Arthurian legends, giving a depth and completeness to the tale that has never been seen before.

CAST OF CHARACTERS
(5 m, 7 w, or with doubling 5 m, 4 w)

ROLAND: A man who has eschewed death, but now comes to embrace it. At the top of this play, he bears a great weariness, as well as several physical wounds. He has come to the Dark Tower to rest. His weariness doesn't make him look older than he is. When he was younger, he was known as “Rowland.”

MERLIN: A sorcerer who is ageless, yet ages backwards. Taught a young Roland how to avoid death, and now does not want him to find the way out.

AMBER SISTER: The first lady Roland encounters at the Dark Tower. She has red hair and appears young, perhaps even in her late teens. She is beautiful. She possesses a playfulness that steers itself viciously into sarcasm and cruelty.

DARK SISTER: Also young and beautiful, but a bit more somber and serious than the Amber Sister. She is ultimately more forgiving as well. Dark hair.

SILENT SISTER: Young, beautiful, and carries a certain ease and grace in her movements. She is silent until the end of the play.

OLIVER: A king, full of ballast and bluster. Has often used Roland as an advisor, and then enlists him as a warrior, due to Roland's ability to eschew death.

CUTHBERT: A general in Oliver's army with whom Roland becomes friends. He is full of life and energy, and is very kind.

SUSANNAH: Roland's wife. She is gentle and kind and a great comfort to Roland. She dies young, in childbirth.

GUINEVERE: Roland's mother, who bears a great hatred of her son for being her only surviving child. This hatred manifests itself through a fierce over-protectiveness.

ELLEN (NELL): Roland's younger sister (though at the time, he is known as “Rowland.”) She is whisked away to the Dark Tower while playing a game with her brothers.

(Cont’d.)

YOUNG WART: Roland's (Rowland's) elder brother who attempts to rescue Nell from the Dark Tower but is taken himself.

NIMUE: A vision which has appeared sporadically to Roland since his sister's death. She is a vision of peace, rest and comfort that he does his best to ignore.

NOTE: The Silent Sister should bear a casual resemblance to Ellen. If necessary, Silent Sister can double as Ellen, Amber Sister can double as Guinevere, and the Dark Sister can double as Susannah.

SETTING

A marsh where the Dark Tower stands. The Dark Tower can be represented by three large self-standing windows, and a giant door. The windows should be large enough so that we see the entirety of the Three Sisters when they are in their windows. The giant door should be center, and the Amber Sister's window should be stage right of the door, and the Dark Sister and Silent Sister should be in windows that are stage left of the door. The windows are on levels, higher than Roland.

The area of the marsh should be represented by bold lighting. The lighting shifts when Roland travels through time. Be creative with the use of lighting. Don't feel the need to clutter the stage with furniture or too many props. This is a lyrical piece about characters, after all, and, in true Wilder-like fashion, should be kept simple and representational with more of a focus on storytelling than intricate set pieces.

See additional notes from the playwright at end of script.

The Dark Tower

(AT RISE: It is dark. SOUNDS of marsh wildlife may be heard. The LIGHTS slowly rise to half, and NIMUE is revealed. She is a beautiful lady dressed in white. She surveys the marsh but does not look to the Dark Tower. MERLIN, wearing a commoner's clothes and hat, enters SL, unseen by Nimue. Merlin plants himself stage left and looks at the vision of Nimue, strangely unimpressed. We hear the sounds of loud, dragging, limping footsteps coming from SR. After a few beats, ROLAND enters. He wears the garb of a warrior complete with cape and a royal seal on his chest. His clothes are soaked with blood. At his hip there is a small horn, opposite the side of his scabbard which contains no sword. Roland is weak and world-weary, carrying the weight of many burdens. And although he is quite ancient, he should not appear so. He should have the look of a young man who has seen too much and shared too little. After dragging/limping to CR, Roland collapses to his knees. Merlin may look at him with an amused curiosity. Nimue does not look at him right off. From his knees, Roland closes his eyes, and his lips begin to move in a silent prayer. Then, Nimue speaks, facing out.)

NIMUE: You, Roland, who have been traveling so long, can now make your silent a-men, for you have reached your destination.

(ROLAND can hear her, but only sees her faintly. NIMUE crosses to Roland and gently places her hand on his head. He closes his eyes once more)

NIMUE: *(Cont'd.)* Rise, Childe Roland, and blow your horn. It is time for you to go home. It is time for you to rest, my weary son. Rise and blow your horn. *(SHE exits SR.)*

(ROLAND keeps his eyes closed a moment. Finally, with a great effort, he opens his eyes and rises to his feet.)

(HE seems not to notice the great deal of blood leaking from his clothes, and he does not see MERLIN, who watches him from his perch SL. Roland takes the horn from his side and raises it to his lips.)

MERLIN: Making some music, are we? *(ROLAND is startled, and lowers his horn.)* This is a song I thought you would never play, ancient one. Or should I say, Childe?

ROLAND: *(Finally recognizing him.)* The magician. You are young.

MERLIN: *(Chuckles, crosses to HIM.)* No. I am older than you have ever seen me, though you have not seen me in quite some time. *(Beat.)* What brings you to this tower, Rowland? Oh, do forgive me. I did not mean to offend the great warrior by acknowledging the long forgotten “w” in your name.

ROLAND: Do not mock me, Sorcerer. I've no shame of my former name, or how it was spelled. I merely wished to blend as the years piled on.

MERLIN: And your connections became more of the Isle than the Highlands? Or was it the other way 'round? Difficult to keep track of such inconsistent history birthing mythology. I entreat your pardon.

ROLAND: Leave me.

(As HE raises his horn, MERLIN takes Roland’s arm and lowers it.)

MERLIN: I seem to recall a young man...

ROLAND: He is dead.

MERLIN: *(Continuing, nonplussed.) ...w*ho came to me, begging for the secrets to keep him from the Dark Tower. Or was it the mother who begged? No matter. And I do conjure that this same young man now stands before me, at the end of his journey. You do understand the outcome of blowing that horn, of summoning the sisters inside?

ROLAND: Yes.

MERLIN: And so my tutelage was all for nothing, eh?

End of Freeview

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