

Ruthie

A drama in two acts, inspired by the
Old Testament *Book of Ruth*

By David Anthony Wright

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This play is dedicated to the memory of Charlie and Helen Wright, two of the greatest of the "Greatest Generation," and Ensign Carlton J. McLawhorn, USN (1953-1978) A brother forever...

STORY OF THE PLAY

A widow, Naomi, and one of her daughters-in-law, Ruthie, have moved to Naomi's hometown following the death of her two sons in WWII, one of whom was Ruthie's husband. Although Ruthie is the daughter of a wealthy and prominent family in another city, she wants to stay with Naomi out of love for her late husband and Naomi herself. Naomi accepts her Cousin Julius' offer of a place to live, and Ruthie accepts a job at his laundry and dry-cleaning shop. At her new workplace she meets Beau, a young Army veteran. Finding himself attracted to Ruthie, he tries to gently aid her in recovering from the loss of her husband. It's not until she finds out that Beau suffered his own grievous loss during the war that a relationship really begins. Things become complicated when Julius's entitled son, Junior, who has suffered his own loss, begins to inject himself into the couple's budding romance. A final confrontation between the two young men results in a just and satisfying conclusion. While not a religious play per se, this is a modern version inspired by the story of Ruth in the Old Testament.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

This show premiered at The Paramount Theater of Burlington, NC, in 2005. It went on to win the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theater's 2007 "Script Works" competition, receiving its professional premiere by SART in 2008. The cast of the original 2005 production, in order of appearance:

Susan WrightAlma Clayton
Sally FoxThelma Whitesides
John Michael Collier.....Julius Kingsford
Kathy Shields Collier.....Naomi McInnes
Susan SotoroffRuthie McInnes
Tripp YorkJunior Kingsford
Chip BarnetteBeau Stroud
Reid DaltonCoot Cameron
Gary Lefew.....Philo/Police Officer

The play was directed by the playwright. The Stage Manager was Sarah Phillips. Technical Direction by D. Lynn Grose. Set Design and Construction by Randy Phillips.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5 m, 4 w)

In order of appearance

ALMA CLAYTON: A friend of Naomi's. Mid 50s, short, a slightly befuddled widow.

THELMA WHITESELL: A friend of Naomi's. Mid 50s, tall, a high-strung widow, who, like Alma, lives a life centered around her kitchen, her church and gossip.

JULIUS KINGSFORD: A widower. Early 60s, owner of Kingsford Laundry and Dry Cleaning, successful business-type, a prototypical post-war "booster" and "take charge" person.

NAOMI MCINNES: A widow, late 50s. A strong and sagacious mountain woman who, despite her harrowing losses, has retained her sense of humor and optimism.

RUTHIE MCINNES: Naomi's daughter-in-law, 21. A refined and delicate beauty, remains loyal to her mother-in-law and her late husband's memory, a bruised rose.

JUNIOR KINGSFORD: Julius' son; 22. A sharp dresser and party type, dealing with his own loss and the career path his father has laid out for him.

BEAU STROUD: Route manager at Kingsford Laundry and Dry Cleaning, 24. Handsome, solid type, displays a maturity beyond his years forged by his experiences during World War II.

COOT CAMERON: Sales rep for H.M. Moss Company, mid 60s, the very essence of the traveling salesman.

PHILO LAWSON: Early 50s, a customer of the laundry, factory worker.

A POLICE OFFICER

NOTE: "WWNC Announcer" is a recorded voice. Philo and the Police office can be doubled.

This play is a work of fiction, inspired by the Old Testament Book of Ruth. All the characters are fictional. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

SET DESCRIPTION AND SET PIECES

Naomi's house: On the SL wall is a front door and US of the door is a small window with lace curtains. On the US wall are three doors: SL swinging door leads to kitchen; US to a closet; SR to the bedroom. The house is sparsely furnished; white sheets cover the furniture. There is a couch and coffee table CS. An upholstered chair sits to the DSR of the couch. SL and slightly DS of the kitchen door is the small round dining room table with four chairs. The chairs may or may not match. Behind it, a small China cabinet. At SR wall, a small table, upon which sits an old cathedral type radio. A Singer sewing machine is against the SR wall. No wall decorations or pictures. There is an oval braided rug on the floor. Several packing boxes lie around.

Kingsford Laundry: The customer service area is very simple with a wooden counter with a hidden shelf underneath open on the office side. On top of the counter is a ledger, an old-fashioned cash register or adding machine, and a 1940s-style Bell telephone. To one side is a shepherd's crook for hanging customers' clothes.

Woodland scene: Can be accomplished by apron / front of curtain lighting.

Julius' picnic: Can be accomplished by apron / front of curtain lighting. One production moved the action DS, between two poles holding a welcome banner. Balloons and patriotic bunding.

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ACT I
Scene 1

(AT RISE: LIGHTS up full on the Naomi's house. February 1946, a Friday; around 8 p.m. Asheville, NC. After a brief moment, ALMA CLAYTON quickly enters from the USR door. She strips the furniture of the sheets and exits at the USR door. A moment. THELMA WHITESELL quickly enters from the USL door with a large bouquet of flowers. She places the flowers on the dining room table and exits by the USL door. Alma quickly enters, opens the USC door and goes into the closet, leaving the door open. Thelma enters from the USL door with a watering pitcher. She pours some water into the flowers. As she steps back to admire them, she closes the closet door with her foot. She then reenters the kitchen. A moment. Simultaneously, Thelma quickly enters with a load of towels, while Alma quickly comes out of the closet with a load of sheets. They nearly collide.)

ALMA: Thelma Whitesell, you are gonna be the death of me yet.

THELMA: *Me* the death of *you*? If you hadn't insisted on wringin' every bit of gossip out of Beulah Turner at supper, we'd have been here in plenty of time and wouldn't have to be rushing around so.

ALMA: I wanted to finish my last bite of pie.

THELMA: You wanted to get the last crumb of her story, which I know for a fact you'd already heard.

ALMA: Had not!

THELMA: Had, too! Mabel Hicks told you all 'bout it after prayer meetin' Wednesday night.

ALMA: Maybe so. *(Pause.)* But Beulah tells it so much better. *(SHE begins to giggle.)*

THELMA: You're right. She does. *(SHE giggles, too.)*

ALMA: We ought to be ashamed of ourselves. Gigglin' like a couple of schoolgirls. And here Naomi is, comin' back home to this place.

THELMA: We used to laugh so much, didn't we?

ALMA: Sure did. Naomi most of all.

THELMA: For the life of me, I don't see how she's survived it. Losing a husband and two sons, inside of two years. *(Pause.)* Don't seem right to me.

ALMA: Now, don't go questionin' the Almighty's plan, Thelma.

THELMA: I'm not questionin'. But you do have to wonder why He pinned a bull's eye on the heart of somebody like Naomi.

ALMA: Right many wonderin' that. The war took a heavy toll. Lots of folks in these hills don't have much left inside.

THELMA: *(Checking her pendant watch.)* They'll be here directly. *(Primps.)* How do I look?

ALMA: Very nice. *(Pause.)* For a woman of your age.

THELMA: Of *my* age? You're older than me, Alma Clayton.

ALMA: Am not!

THELMA: Are too!

(The front door opens. In steps JULIUS KINGSFORD with a smile and a bounce in his step.)

JULIUS: Right this way, ladies

(With a courtly bow, HE holds the door open. In walks NAOMI MCINNES, wearing a black coat over a black dress. Her daughter-in-law, RUTHIE, follows her. She is dressed in subdued colors.)

ALMA: *(Crosses to NAOMI, followed by THELMA.)* Naomi, sugar.

(The WOMEN exchange hugs. They break and step back from each other.)

THELMA: It's been too, too long, Naomi. You're lookin' so good.

ALMA: Isn't she now?

NAOMI: You girls never were good liars, but you're good friends for bein' here.

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NAOMI: *(Cont'd.)* Let me introduce my daughter-in-law. Thelma Whitesell and Alma Clayton, this is Ruthie McInnes.

RUTHIE: *(Offering HER hand to each LADY.)* Pleased to make your acquaintance. Mrs. McInnes has told me so much about you.

(The LADIES smile cordially, cross to couch, and sit.)

JULIUS: Let me take your coats, ladies.

(HE helps THEM with their coats and crosses to US closet. Naomi sits on upholstered chair. Ruthie stands close by.)

THELMA: *(Finally.)* We hope you girls will be very happy here.

JULIUS: Well, as they say, "Be it ever so humble..."

NAOMI: It's very nice, Julius. I 'preciate your makin' it available to us.

(SFX: There is a knock at the front door.)

JULIUS: That's probably the boys with the rest of your things. *(Checking his watch.)* 'Bout time, too.

(HE crosses to front door and opens it. BEAU STROUD and JULIUS KINGSFORD, JR. (JUNIOR) enter. Junior is nattily dressed. Beau is in a route man's uniform and is laden with several old suitcases and hatboxes. Junior carries only one small box. He twirls it.)

JUNIOR: Hey, Daddy! Sorry we're late. Had to stop and fill 'er up.

JULIUS: The car or your flask?

JUNIOR: Now, Daddy...

(HE tosses the small box up in the air slightly and catches it in his hand. NAOMI crosses to Junior and takes it from his hand. She cradles it.)

JULIUS: Naomi, you remember my son, Julius Kingsford, Jr.—

JUNIOR: It's a true delight to see you again, ma'am.

NAOMI: Junior.

JULIUS: And her daughter-in-law, Ruthie.

JUNIOR: *(Crosses to HER and takes her hand lightly.)*
Another true delight, to be sure.

(RUTHIE nods her head but seems uncomfortable as HE continues to hold her hand. She pointedly withdraws it. Seeing this, JULIUS clears his throat.)

JULIUS: And this is my route manager, Beau Stroud.

BEAU: *(With a nod.)* Ladies.

(RUTHIE and BEAU look at each other briefly.)

RUTHIE: I'm sure we'll be very happy here. You're very kind, Mr. Kingsford.

JUNIOR: That's "Cousin Julius," cousin. We're family, you know.

(RUTHIE looks at NAOMI, puzzled.)

NAOMI: Eli was Julius' third cousin.

THELMA: Don't take much for people to claim kin around here.

JUNIOR: For a fact. Some folks 'round here got family trees with no limbs on 'em. *(To RUTHIE.)* So, you're from Charleston?

RUTHIE: Yes.

JUNIOR: Know why people from South Carolina are like people from China?

(RUTHIE shakes her head no.)

JUNIOR: *(Cont'd.)* 'Cause they both grow rice, and they both worship their ancestors.

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(HE laughs loudly. THELMA and ALMA join him but cease when they see no one else laughing.)

JULIUS: Gotta run. Six a.m. comes mighty early, you know.
Right, Beau?

BEAU: Yes, sir.

JUNIOR: Too damn early, if you ask me.

(JULIUS clears his throat again and points to the door.)

JUNIOR: *(Cont'd.)* My apologies, ladies. *(To RUTHIE.)* I do hope you won't be a stranger. *(HE chuckles again and exits.)*

BEAU: Ladies. *(HE starts to exit, then turns to NAOMI.)* Oh, Mrs. McInnes. I put those nails Mr. Kingsford said you wanted in the window there.

NAOMI: Thank you, Mr. Stroud.

BEAU: Well, good night. *(Exits.)*

JULIUS: *(To RUTHIE.)* When you get settled in, we'll talk about that job at the laundry.

RUTHIE: Thank you, Mr. Kingsford.

JULIUS: "Cousin." Cousin Julius. *(To NAOMI.)* Seein' that sewin' machine reminds me you were right handy with a needle and thread, Naomi. My alterations lady's up and had another baby. I could use some help. You could work from right here.

NAOMI: That's very kind of you, Julius.

JULIUS: Don't mention it. *(With a tip of his hat.)* 'Night, all. *(Exits front door.)*

ALMA: We'd best be off, too. Naomi, if there's anything...

NAOMI: We'll be fine.

THELMA: *(To RUTHIE.)* Anything.

RUTHIE: Thank you, Mrs. Whitesell.

ALMA: Revival starts Sunday, Naomi. You girls plan on joinin' us, you hear?

NAOMI: Ruthie attends the Episcopal Church, Alma. She may not be ready for a Baptist revival meetin'.

RUTHIE: I'd be pleased to go, Mrs. Clayton.

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THELMA: We'll pick you up at six. Don't want to miss the song service before the preachin' starts.

ALMA: *(To herself but heard by all.)* You don't want to miss the latest news flash from Beulah Turner.

THELMA: I believe we were just leavin'....

(The WOMEN glare at each other, remember where they are, and then smile at NAOMI. They exit.)

NAOMI: Ruthie—

RUTHIE: Mrs. McInnes, we've settled this.

NAOMI: But look at this place. You've known so much better in your life. You deserve better than this. What would your parents say 'bout their daughter workin' in a laundry?

RUTHIE: Mrs. McInnes—

NAOMI: Don't think I'm not grateful. But if you went back to Charleston, I'd feel no less so. Your sister-in-law stayed there. And she's gonna always be a part of me. It'd be the same for you. You loved my son, and Lord knows he loved you. But he's gone and he ain't never comin' back. You're young. Your parents have money. Got your whole life in front of you. Why not start out fresh, among people you know? Your friends...

RUTHIE: *(Crosses to NAOMI, taking her by both hands.)* Don't ask me to leave, Mrs. McInnes. I want to go wherever you go. Wherever you live is fine with me. Your friends will be my friends. Baptist Church, Episcopal Church, it doesn't matter to me. There's nothing for me back in Charleston. Truth to tell, there never has been. Never. I just want to be where you are. Don't make me leave you. Please.

NAOMI: *(Looking around the living room.)* But what would your family say if they saw this?

RUTHIE: You're my family now.

NAOMI: *(A pause. A smile.)* And you're mine.

(NAOMI opens the package she has been cradling and removes two gold star emblems.)

End of Freeview

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