

The Gathering Storm

A WWI drama by

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Spotlight Publications

The Gathering Storm

CAST (in order of appearance)

The Narrator

The Worker

The Worker's wife, Martha

The Recruiting Sergeant

The Aristocrat

The Aristocrat's Mother

SET - composite: two rooms, a rostrum, and a trench

TIME – 1914

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Scene 1

The staging should be simple for this 'stylised' play. Raised areas to depict the two 'family' acting areas, the Aristocrat's house should be centre, in front of the trench. This is covered up with a cloth painted to look like the Aristocrat's room, so the audience does not see it until the scene change. The Narrator should start on the highest part of the set for the opening speech, after the introduction. There needs to be an obvious definition between the two sets of 'couples', but at no time should they become stereotypes. As the curtains open the cast are standing in a line down stage, lit only so their faces show clearly. After each person has spoken they turn and look at the next speaker

Narrator I am the Narrator and I am also the Captain.

Worker I am the Worker.

Martha I am the Worker's wife. *(She turns back at smiles at him)*

Sergeant I am the recruiting Sergeant.

Aristocrat I am the Aristocrat.

Mother I am his Mother but I know what you're thinking. I look too young!

Aristocrat Mother!

Blackout

Music: (all the music in the play should be from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony)

They go to their respective areas and sit unlit until their scenes take place.

A spot comes up on the Narrator, on the highest part of the rostrum. The speech should be done as if reading from a pulpit. The speech is taken from French socialist leader Jean Jarre's appeal for peace to five hundred representatives, from all over Europe, in Basle cathedral in 1912

Narrator I think of the words, which Schiller inscribed at the head of his beautiful 'Song of the Bell'. "I summon the living, I mourn the dead, I break the thunderbolts. *(Pause)* I summon the living to resist the monster which would ravage the land. I mourn the countless dead now buried in the east, whose rotting stench fills us with remorse. I will break the thunderbolts of war now hurtling across the sky. Let us all be committed to the salvation of peace and civilisation". *(Music underplays the next part of the speech)* What will the future be like when the millions now thrown away on the preparation for war are spent on useful things? To increase the well-being of people, on the construction of decent houses for workers, on improving transportation, on reclaiming the land. The fever of imperialism has become a sickness; it is the disease of a badly run society, which does not know how to use its energies at home.

The lights change

The Narrator moves DC

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was a time unlike any other. A time of war. The Great War. It was not called that then of course. That epithet has been added with perspective. *(Pause)* Was it just a war? Or was it a just war? Can there be a morally just war? Certainly all the nations involved thought they were fighting a just and defensive war. *Jus ad bellum*, the justice in going to war, oh there was that all right, all the 'justice' you wanted. *Jus in bello*, justice in the conduct of war, now that was a different story.

Lights change, music

He stands DR and watches the next two scenes

Scene 2

The lights come up L on the Worker and Martha

Worker Martha, Martha, have you heard?

Martha Yes, I've heard. It's all I've been hearing. I've had people back and forth all day telling me how exciting it all is. *(Pause)* But do you know I can't claim to be that interested.

Worker This is it, Martha, the big one. There'll be mass mobilisation.

Martha So you'll be off to enlist then?

Worker What?

Martha You'll be enlisting then?

Worker I suppose so.

Martha Only suppose? You're not sure?

Worker Yes I'm sure. I think. I don't know if I have a choice, do I? I can't help feeling it's all a bit pointless. I know I shouldn't think like that but I can't help it.

Martha You're right, you shouldn't, it's no way to talk. Actually it's not like you to be so negative, not like you at all. *(Pause)* What about loyalty? You're always going on about loyalty among the workers at the factory. So what about some loyalty to your country?

Worker I have no doubt where my loyalties lie. It's just that I don't feel that this is my war. I'm just an ordinary man, a factory worker. Like thousands of others. What do I know about war? It's the people in power who want conflict, but who will have to go and fight their dirty little war for them, eh? The ordinary working man that's who.

Martha *(quietly)* Maybe sometimes you have to fight for what is right.

Worker But is this war right? My life isn't being threatened. The international brotherhood of workers will be pitted against each other, just to satisfy the needs and whims of the government and the controlling classes.

Martha I don't think this is the time for ideals to get in the way of duty.

Worker Don't you see? If all the working men in Europe downed tools and said 'no', this war couldn't happen.

Martha It's not very likely is it?

Worker Probably not. But it's not such a crazy idea either.

Martha I think you should keep your ideas to yourself for the duration. Not everyone will understand you. Your political beliefs could be misconstrued by some to be a confession of cowardice or even worse Bolshevism.

Worker I don't want to hold back my thoughts. It's a free country, isn't it? I want to tell every one, I want to shout it from the rooftops. *(He shouts as if at a window)* Do you hear me? You down there. Do you hear me? This is not our war. Not mine, not yours, it's the government's. This is not our war.

Martha For God's sake will you stop shouting! Calm down. What will the neighbours think? They already think you're mad, I'm sure. *(Pause)* Anyway, before you get carried away on this idealistic fantasy, spare a thought for me.

Worker What do you mean?

Martha Just think about it. If you don't go and fight, you'll be thought of as a coward and could be locked up for being a 'conchie'. And I would be alone. We've the baby due in three months; I don't want to be alone. Having to cope. Alone with shame of everyone knowing that my husband didn't go to war. They won't care about the reasons. It'll make my life hell. The gossiping, the backbiting, they're bad enough around here with out you giving them further reason to criticise me. *(Pause)* So you see you have to go. You've got to enlist so I can hold my head high and say that my husband, my husband has gone to war for his country's sake. For my sake.

Worker Don't you think you're being selfish? This is bigger than just 'what the neighbours will say'. It's a war that will envelope the whole of Europe.

Martha I'm not the one who is being bloody selfish. Take off your blinkers for a moment and think about me, think about your little baby.

Worker But it's the principle of the thing.

Martha Principle! You can't live on principles! You can't eat principles! Climb down from the moral high ground and start seeing life as it really is. *(Silence)* Ooooooh God grant me the strength to live with this man! *(Pause)* But you do what you like. Make a stand. Don't go. Stick by your principles. See if I care. *(Pause)* I'll still love you, you know that don't you?

Worker Of course I do.

Martha Come here, look at me. Look at me. I'm six months pregnant and I'm sitting here peeling bloody potatoes in freezing cold water. Do you know what I've been doing all day? Washing clothes. Other people's. Other people's dirty washing. Look at my hands. *(Pause)* This is my lot. We're poor, we can't afford principles.

Worker I believe what I believe.

Martha What you've been fed, you mean.

Pause

Worker Credit me with a little more intelligence than that, Martha.

Martha I do. I'm sorry, I'm exhausted. *(Pause)* You see this baby?

Worker Yes.

Martha That's the future. Our future.

Worker Do you think so?

Martha I'm sure of it. I have to be. There isn't anything else.

Worker Oh Martha.

Blackout. Music

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Plot Summary

The First World War seen through the eyes of three combatants: a worker, an aristocrat, and a recruiting sergeant. We see them in three stages: before the war, in their domestic situation, in training, and finally in the trenches, when the worker cracks under the strain.

A powerful drama which focuses on the idealism pre-war, and contrasts it with the reality and horrors of the carnage.

Duration: approx. 35 minutes