

# **ERNIE'S PLACE**

## **By Matt Buchanan**

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ISBN: 1-60003-200-1

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## CHARACTERS

STELLA BARNES	Age 12
LOUIE BARNES	Age 10
MAX BARNES	Age 7
MOM	Their Mom
ERNIE	A homeless man*

\*The role of ERNIE has only one line, and is usually played by a stage manager or other crew member. It's important that whoever plays Ernie be able to make him real.

## PROP LIST

Large wooden box or trunk	Pith helmets
Milk crates	Butterfly net
Old mattress	Police tape
Battery-powered lantern	Battered fedora
Various outdoor toys	Battered teddy bear
Various handmade signs	Cigarette pack
Baseball	Old baseball glove
Chess set	Linens
Duct tape	Monogrammed work shirt "Ernie"
Old paper bag	Folded paper

## PRODUCTION NOTES

**COSTUMES:** Even though the action takes place over two days, there is no reason for the children to change costumes. They are dressed in simple playclothes—whatever children of similar ages wear in your community when they’re just messing about. Mom appears in work clothes—she probably works in an office—and in a bathrobe. Ernie should look like an authentic homeless man, not a cliché “bum.”

**SET:** The shed can be constructed fairly simply. All that is really needed is two walls and a door frame. It is covered with posters and signs, both homemade, and, if you can get them, real street signs, etc. In the original production there was a hidden trapdoor in the wall next to the mattress so that Ernie could roll quickly offstage during the short blackout between his discovery and the following scene, but this isn’t really necessary—it just shortens the blackout. The shed should take up at most half of the stage, so that there is plenty of room “outside” for the children to stage their fantasies. Various items like old tires, outdoor toys, etc., will come in useful when the children need to create things like the car and the operating table. If the budget is small, items in the fantasy may be mimed. Think slightly seedy middle class suburban backyard.

*Ernie’s Place*, under its original title, *I Remember Ernie*, was developed at the University of Texas and was part of the playwright’s Master’s thesis in Theatre for Young Audiences/Playwriting. The original production toured elementary schools in the Austin Independent School District in 1996.

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***AT RISE: The Private, Super-Secret Clubhouse of STELLA, LOUIE and MAX--a one-room outbuilding that may once have been a tool shed or some such. We can see the inside and the outside of the clubhouse. The clubhouse is covered with signs meant to discourage invasion. "No Grownups Allowed!"--"Private--Keep Out!"--"Members Only"--You Must be at Least This Short to Enter"--"Trespassers will be Eaten!"--etc. The door has been replaced with one that is too low for an adult to comfortably enter. Inside the clubhouse is a large wooden box (used for storage and as a table), a few milk crates (used for chairs), and a mattress for jumping on. The walls are decorated with New York Mets and Yankees posters and pennants, pictures of New York scenes, and other memorabilia of the city. Perhaps there are a few New York City street signs. The clubhouse is lit by a large battery-powered lantern. Outside the clubhouse is a suburban backyard, scattered with various crates and boxes, maybe an old tire, and some large toys--a bicycle, etc. When the play opens it is just growing dark. LOUIE and MAX play chess on the trunk. STELLA stands at the front of the stage shouting at the audience.***

STELLA: Go away! This is a private club, and nobody here wants to play with you! Go play someplace else! And stay out of our clubhouse! (*watches to see that the unseen invaders leave and then comes into the clubhouse*) Geeks.

LOUIE: Stella, why do you always do that?

MAX: It's your move, Louie.

STELLA: What do we need them for anyway? There's no cool kids here.

LOUIE: If you gave them a chance. . .

MAX: Louie!

LOUIE: All right, Max. There. Checkmate. Loser cleans up.

***(MAX cleans up the chess game. LOUIE picks up a baseball and begins to toss and catch it. During the following, STELLA rummages through the trunk for a large roll of duct tape, with which SHE begins taping over all the cracks and gaps in the walls.)***

MAX: You always win. I think you cheat.

LOUIE: I think you're just stupid.

MAX: Stella beat you yesterday.

LOUIE: I let her win.

MAX: Oh, I am so sure.

STELLA: You're both stupid. But then you are boys. One makes allowances.

LOUIE: Bite me.

MAX: Bite me, too.

STELLA: I rest my case.

LOUIE: Stella, what are you doing?

STELLA: I don't want anyone spying on us.

LOUIE: Who's going to spy on us?

STELLA: I don't know, Louie, but somebody's been in here. I can feel it.

MAX: Someone was eating my cookies again.

LOUIE: Don't encourage her, Max. Stella, you've been acting really weird ever since we moved.

STELLA: Well, excuse me! I can't get used to this place.

***(Pause. LOUIE tosses his ball.)***

LOUIE: Tomorrow's Saturday.

STELLA: Stunning observation. How does he do it, folks?

LOUIE: What are we going to do?

MAX: Let's go camping.

STELLA: Without Dad?

MAX: Let's go lion hunting.

STELLA: There's never any lions here. Last time we caught Mrs. O'Malley's cat.

MAX: Toodles.

LOUIE: Man, was that old witch mad.

STELLA: Not as mad as Toodles.

MAX: Let's do that again.

LOUIE: Let's play baseball.

STELLA: You got baseball on the brain.

LOUIE: Just 'cause you can't throw. . .

STELLA: I can beat the pants off you, and you know it.

LOUIE: Let's go over to the town field and play with a whole team. There's always kids down there.

MAX: Yeah! Let's do that, Stella!

STELLA: That field stinks.

LOUIE: You stink.

STELLA: ***(ignoring him)*** There's no buildings. The sun's always in your eyes.

LOUIE: Let's get some kids here and play. We've got trees.

STELLA : We're not playing baseball! I don't like the kids here. They don't play right! Besides, what's the point of having a Super-Secret club if it's not Super-Secret?

LOUIE: **(throws down his ball in disgust)** Just because you're bigger than us, you're always bossing us around! Ever since we moved all we ever do is hang around this place! This isn't just your club, you know.

STELLA: No?

MAX: No!

LOUIE: Mom says we need to make new friends. She says we're too dependent on each other.

MAX: You mother us too much, Stella.

STELLA: I do not.

MAX: Mom said.

STELLA: Who wants to make new friends anyway? I miss our old friends.

LOUIE: Forget your old friends.

STELLA: **(angry)** I don't want to forget my friends. Forget you! **(pause)** The kids here are all such nerds.

LOUIE: You're a nerd.

STELLA: That's it! **(pounces on LOUIE and starts to pinch and tickle him)** Stella is the boss of me! Say it!

LOUIE: Never! Get off me!

**(MAX jumps onto STELLA's back and tries to pull her off LOUIE.)**

STELLA: Come on! Stella is my Master and Lord! Stella is the boss of me!

MAX: Hang on, Louie! Hang on!

STELLA: You tried making friends here, remember? Who had to punch out Eric Meyers when he was taking your lunch all the time?

LOUIE: **(stops struggling)** That was a good one. I bet he doesn't try that again soon.

STELLA: Yeah. . .Hey! Nice try!

**(STELLA starts in on him again. MAX squeals and leaps into the pile. Soon all three children are laughing and rolling on the floor. MOM enters.)**

MOM: **(calling)** Max! Louie! Stella! It's late! **(knocks on the door of the clubhouse, then crouches and sticks her top half inside)** Hey! Earth to the Barnes kids! Oh, my gosh! There's a three-headed killer octopus in the shed! What have you done with my children?!

**(The children tumble apart. MAX shoves MOM out of the clubhouse.)**

MAX: Mom! You're not s'posed to come in here!

STELLA: Can't you read?

LOUIE: No grownups allowed. This means you, sweetheart.

MOM: Oh, pardon me, I'm sure. **(bangs on and then speaks through the wall)** It's awfully late! Don't you think you should be coming in soon?

STELLA: Not really, no.

MOM: It was a rhetorical question, smartypants. It's bedtime. Now!

**(MOM waits outside. STELLA gives LOUIE one last shove, and the children begin cleaning up.)**

MAX: What's "rhetorical" mean?

LOUIE: It means you may as well argue with a pile of bricks.

**(They begin to file out of the clubhouse. STELLA, as usual, is first. SHE bumps her head on the way out.)**

STELLA: Don't forget to turn out the light.

LOUIE: Yes, your highness.

**(MAX turns off the lantern. HE and LOUIE come out of the clubhouse and exit. STELLA and MOM lag behind. They are silent a moment.)**

STELLA: Mom, why did we have to come here?

MOM: Stella, we've been over this before. Now that Dad doesn't live with us I had to find a full-time job, and the best one was here in New Jersey. You need to leave New York behind you, Stella. That clubhouse is like a shrine to the city. Besides, this is a really nice town.

STELLA: **(snorting)** Yeah, right.

MOM: Stella. . .

STELLA: I don't want to talk about it.

MOM: Well, I do, Stella, do you have any idea how lucky we were to rent this place? We're in a nice neighborhood. You have your own room, a yard, your shed. . .

STELLA: No Dad, no friends. . .

MOM: **(growing angry)** You know, moving wasn't so easy for me either. I have friends in the city too. And I hate not being here all the time for you kids. **(puts a hand on STELLA's shoulder)** You might just like it here if you gave it a chance.

STELLA: **(bursting out, whirling on her)** What did you do to him, Mom? What did you do to make him leave?

**(This stops MOM for a moment.)**

MOM: Stella, it just wasn't working. These things happen.

STELLA: I don't care.

MOM: I'm trying to make it okay. You could try a little harder too. Maybe you should go into town and play with some other kids tomorrow.

STELLA: Mom, come on. . .

MOM: You might at least give Max and Louie a chance to make friends. All you ever do is play in that shed.

STELLA: It's our Secret Clubhouse. It's not a shed.

MOM: Well, sometimes secrets are not such good things.

STELLA: You don't understand! Max and Louie like our club! They need me!

MOM: All right, we'll talk about it tomorrow. It's bedtime. You and your brothers may be free as little birds, but now that I'm working, Saturday is the only time I can get any housework done, and I need to get some sleep. Are you coming?

STELLA: In a minute, Mom.

***(MOM exits. STELLA looks for a moment at the "You Must be at Least This Short" sign. SHE stands against the wall and carefully adjusts the sign so that it just reaches the top of her head. SHE exits. It is night now. After a moment, ERNIE slowly enters. HE is of indeterminate age, but certainly over forty, and HE carries his years heavily. HE is dressed in ragged clothes, a crumpled fedora, and an old raincoat. HE has not recently been near a bathtub. HE carries a greasy paper shopping bag full of his possessions. HE shuffles to the clubhouse, ducks his head and goes inside. HE switches on the lantern, hangs his hat on a nail, and sits on a crate.)***

ERNIE: Home, Sweet Home.

***(HE opens the trunk and removes a bag of cookies, which HE devours. HE carefully places his bag in the trunk. HE shrugs out of his coat, arranges himself comfortably on the mattress, covers himself with his coat, and closes his eyes. After a moment HE sits up and shuts off the lantern. HE lies down and sleeps. HE sleeps soundly and silently, lying on his side. The stage is dark. Time passes. It is morning, and grows light. We see ERNIE just where we left him, lying motionless on the mattress.)***

STELLA: **(off)** Last one to the clubhouse is a pregnant cockroach!

LOUIE: **(off)** No fair! You started first!

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