

AN UNLIKELY HERO

By Lawrence DuKore

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

I wrote AN UNLIKELY HERO because the title illustrated the roller coaster, the ups and the downs of Ulysses Grant. He was admitted to West Point not because it was a military academy but because he just wanted to be a mathematics teacher and West Point was tuition free, which spoke to his humble beginnings. He fought in the Mexican War but was against the war and had great respect for the Mexican people, making no attempt to hide his feelings. He loved his wife, Julia, to the end of his days and thanks to his friend, Samuel Clemens, wrote his autobiography to great artistic and financial success. Ernest Hemingway attributed his "simple" writing style to Ulysses Grant's memoirs.

It should be noted that early in his military career as a corporal stationed in Oregon, Grant he developed a serious drinking problem which did not endear him to his superiors. And which resulted in his dismissal from the army. As a poor civilian trying to raise a family, he sold wood on the streets of St. Louis and suffered frequent humiliations. But Grant remained dedicated to public service and was in the military reserve prior to the Civil War. And when that "war between the states" broke out, Grant rose through the ranks and became one of the generals, ultimately becoming President Lincoln's favorite commander. He was a no nonsense, no retreat leader which did cost his armies many losses but he did what had to be done, albeit with deep personal pain.

Grant was less successful as a two-term president, totally naive about Wall Street "financiers" and both he and the country lost heavily in the market place. . Nevertheless he remained a military hero and a popular president as a defender of Native Americans and a fighter for Reconstruction. He was first and foremost a moral leader, a defender of the people.

*Grant always believed in and fought the fight for E PLURABUS UNUM.
(Spacing is playwright's own.)*

AN UNLIKELY HERO

a one person / one act play

(inspired by the Memoirs of Ulysses Grant)

by

Lawrence DuKore

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THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

AN UNLIKELY HERO

Characters

Ulysses S. Grant age 63 years old; struggling against cancer

There are no realistic sets. Rather, the various scenes and playing areas will be indicated by lighting changes and minimal set pieces.

*Scene 1. The lights come up on a bare stage. In the center is **Ulysses Grant**, age 63 years old. The time is late morning in the winter of 1885.*

Grant is in the study of his Saratoga Springs (N.Y.) home in the foothills of the Adirondacks. On his head is a stocking cap. He also wears a muffler and a smoking jacket. Now he rises from his chair and walks, painfully and uncertainly, to his special high desk, which is like a lectern. He is

ill, a victim of cancer. Nevertheless, he manages to take a pencil and begins writing – or at least trying to write. Then he puts down his pencil, picks up a fly swatter and begins swatting at flies.

GRANT

Darn flies. Whoever heard of flies in the winter tune? Must be horse flies! I love horses but I sure hate horse flies. Get out of here! They must be Confederate flies – coming all the way up north from Fort Sumter. (*shouting*) Get used to it, you rebels! You lost the war and now you're trying to deconstruct Reconstruction. (*Swatting away*) Darn sore losers!

(He puts down the fly swatter, picks up his pencil and begins writing. Again he stops.)

GRANT (*to his audience*)

I'm not a writer but I'm trying to write my memoirs. Why? 'Cause we need the money, that's why. You think people want to read about me? Heck, I was president of these here United States. I was the commander of all the Union forces during the Civil War (*picking up his fly swatter*) which we won – although the Southern states won't admit it. (*Shouting*) Sore losers!

(He takes a cigar out of his jacket pocket, smells it lovingly and then puts it back in his pocket ... regretfully.)

GRANT

Sure wish I could smoke this sweet smelling cigar ... but my wife – Julia – she's got a nose for all my bad habits. She'd come running in here and snatch it away ... and for good reason. This darn tobacco is what brought on my throat cancer. So now I have to write my memoirs so we can pay the doctor bills. Okay, okay, okay. Where to begin? How about ... at the beginning?

(Sound cue: the neighing and the whinnying of horses.)

GRANT

Aint that the sweetest sound in the world? From the time I was a little boy, I've always loved horses, even wild horses. Never had fear of them! Always was a good rider. It was one of my outstanding accomplishments at West Point. God knows it wasn't my scholarship.

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GRANT

Funny thing is ... this here house is just north of Saratoga Springs. Now the spring waters won't cure my cancer but I'd sure love to get down there and have a look at those beauties over at the race track. I hear they've got some Arabian mares. Yes, sir! Nothing prettier than racing horses galloping at full speed – hearing them coming round the turn ...okay, okay, the memoirs!

(He takes a quick smell of the cigar and then picks up his pencil and resumes writing.)

GRANT

Chapter One! *(beat)* Now comes the hard part. *(Writing and talking)* When I was just starting out in the military, when I was a junior officer in Corpus Christi – that was in the Texas territory – I had this here horse ...

(He puts down his pencil)

GRANT *(shouting off stage)*

I've got writer's block. I need a drink. I mean, I need a glass of water. I need ...

(He sees a pitcher of water and a glass on a nearby table.) God bless my wife. She thinks of everything.

(Grant goes to the table, picks up the pitcher and pours himself a glass of water. He takes a sip and then returns to his lectern.)

GRANT *(remembering)*

So where was I? *(beat)* Corpus Christi, Texas! Oh, yes! I had this here horse blindfolded, bridled and saddled and when I was firmly in the saddle, I threw off the blinds, prodded his flanks with my spurs and was soon out of sight. For three hours I rode him over all kinds of ground, through field and stream, and when we returned to camp, that horse was thoroughly tamed ... and so was I! Those were the good times. The bad times came soon after: the start of the Mexican War – otherwise known as a land grab. We invaded Mexico. Why? 'Cause we wanted the Texas territory and New Mexico. New Mexico? Sands of enchantment! Nothing down there but sand, sand and more sand! That's why we went to war - killing thousands of innocent Mexicans – and for what? A lot of sand! *(Writing)* Yeah, I'll have to put that in my memoirs.

(Grant takes a cigar from his jacket and is about to light it when he looks around furtively for Julia – and then decides otherwise. He puts the cigar away.)

GRANT

I'm just smelling it! Woman, you can smell an *unlit* cigar at forty paces!

(He takes another sip of water.)

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GRANT

You got through two wars. You got through a bank failure. You'll get through this.

(From his pocket, Grant takes out two letters. He peruses the first letter.)

GRANT

From my bank! I'm broke. Dead broke! At my age, at 62 ... umm ... 63! Heck, at any age, that's a sin. And it's all my fault, which makes it not only a sin but a crime! (*remembering*) Okay, okay, my son committed the crime but it wasn't his fault. He didn't know the ways of Wall Street. Now Julia would say that I've always been too good-hearted – and not just with our boy.

(*Grant stops, puts down his pencil and looks out at the audience.*)

GRANT

My wife says I've always been too good hearted? (*shouting off stage*) Julia darling – Julia dearest – I was the commander of all the Union troops. Yes, me, General Ulysses Grant. Do you know how many young men were killed at Gettysburg ... at Vicksburg ... at Shiloh? And don't give me General Sherman's quote: "War is Hell." If war is hell, then your husband is the devil. Yes, I'm Saturn. I was responsible for the deaths of all those young boys.

(*He turns his back on the audience, trying to compose himself. Then he takes a sip of water and continues.*)

GRANT

And I don't have any illusions about my time in the White House. I know – I know - I know I never should have appointed my so-called friends to some of those cabinet positions. But they were pay backs. It was my way of saying, "Thank you." (*He laughs a dry laugh, pacing back and forth with unusual vigor.*) My wife kept telling me, "You should have just said 'thank you' and given each of them a gold watch. It would have saved you a lot of headaches." Julia was right. Heck, she was always more than a First Lady. She should have been the president.

(*He takes another letter out of his pocket.*)

GRANT

From the doctor: Dr. Meredith.

(*He weighs the envelope in his hand.*)

GRANT (*contd*)

Go on; open it, you durn fool.

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(*He places the unopened envelope on the lectern, viewing it like some enemy combatant.*)

GRANT

My wife thinks that I'm the most courageous man she's ever known. I don't know how many courageous men Julia knew but I'll bet she never knew Robert E. Lee. (*proclaiming*) Commander of the Confederate Army! When he surrendered at Appomattox, I couldn't help but

wonder what was going on behind that mask? Yes, he was gracious in defeat. Yes, he carried himself like a gentleman and the great general that he was, a hundred times greater than I ever was. He didn't have the equipment. He didn't have the supplies. He didn't have any money ... except some worthless Confederate money. But he put on a brilliant fight right up until the end. And when he unsheathed his sword – his “terrible swift sword” – when he laid it down ... I kept thinking, “Nobody on this earth likes to lose – whether you're gambling on a race horse – whether you're running for political office – whether you're courting the love of your life – if you lose, you lose. So do not cry about it. Do not whine about it. Do not lie about it. Do not make excuses. General Lee was a great general – a great man - all the way – and my hat's off to him

(Grant removes his cap and holds it high over his head.)

GRANT

Did you know that he was President Lincoln's first choice to command the Union Army? Hell, if all my West Point classmates and the cadets before me had joined the Union Army, the war would have been over before it began. *(He places the cap back on his head.)* Keep that cap on, Mister President. All you need is a head cold on top of the cancer. Okay! Back to work.

(He resumes writing; scribbling all of one sentence. Then he picks up the envelope.)

GRANT

Every time I won a battle, all I could think of – all I could see was the long gray line of dead soldiers – the boys I sent to their death. I was fearful of all the ghosts that would haunt me for the rest of my life. Yes! And they've *been* haunting me – day and night. Julia would go crazy if she heard me talking this way. She says, It's all those drugs you're taking! And I keep on insisting that I'm talking all those drugs to relieve the pain. *(beat)* It's not about the medication. I think maybe it's about trying to write these darn memoirs – and all the bad memories they're stirring up.

(He picks up the envelope.)

GRANT

Or maybe it's the letter from the doctor. *(Beat)* Maybe!

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(Grant takes out the letter and begins reading.)

GRANT

So now it's official. *(Reading)* “The tests prove conclusively... “*(to the audience)* The tests prove conclusively what Julia and I knew from the beginning. I've got cancer – cancer of the

throat ... from smoking all those cigars. Upwards of twenty a day! *(He holds up the doctor's bill.)* And here's a whopping bill to prove it conclusively! So send us to the poor house, doctor!

(Grant paces back and forth)

GRANT

So what are you going to do about it, General? Are you going to whine? Are you going to cry? Are you going to lay down your terrible swift sword?

(He crumbles the letter and the bill and is about to toss it in the trash basket. But then he straightens out all the papers neatly and returns them to the envelope.)

GRANT

I can't do anything about what's left of my health but I may be able to do something about our finances. What are my choices? We're living on borrowed money – and I'm living on borrowed time.

(He picks up a pencil and stares at his writing tablet)

GRANT

The editor of the Century magazine asked me to write a few articles for him. A *few* articles? Whoa there, Nellie! What we're *really* talking about is yours truly writing my memoirs for a magazine. And the question is: am I ready to put my immortal words on paper? More to the point: am I capable of putting my immortal words on paper?

(He paces back and forth, holding his writing table in front of his note.)

GRANT

Okay, General Grant: remember Bull Run? We lost that battle but we won the war. It took four years – it cost us thousands of lives – but we won; we finally won. And thank God for Gettysburg. *(beat)* Pencil! Paper! You men are my soldiers now. I'm enlisting you in the fight. This isn't for me. This is for my family.

(Grant hesitates, then clears his throat and begins writing. After a moment, he looks at what he'd been writing.)

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GRANT

Not bad. Then again ... not very good.

(He slumps over the lectern)

GRANT

I wish I could lie down. But There will be time enough to lie down. Come on, General ... giddyap!

(He slaps his thigh as if he's slapping a horse.)

GRANT

All right! *(reading)* "Man proposes and God disposes." How's that for an opening? I know; I know. It's kind of highfaluting. Doesn't sound like me at all!

(He walks toward the door.)

GRANT

(Shouting off stage)

Julia! Julia! Where are you? I haven't eaten all day. *(beat)* Where is that woman? *(Shouting)* Can you get me something? *(beat)* You can get me what's his name: the fellow who wrote HUCKLEBERRY FINN and TOM SAWYER. Yes, ma'am, you can get our good neighbor, the fellow in the white suit. And why does he wear a white suit in the middle of the winter? Oh dear God – oh dear Julia – I'm losing my mind. I can't remember names. *(beat)* Mark Twain! No, no, that's his pen name. *(beat)* I'll remember his name at three o'clock in the morning! But that's too late! I need him now. *(beat)* Sam Clemens! Good old Uncle Sam Clemens! Go over there and tell him that President Grant demands that he come on over and do some ghost writing for me. That's an executive order!

(He straightens his jacket, adjusts his scarf and cap – and begins writing again.)

GRANT

I don't need Sam Clemens. I write very well. I just have to leave out all that nonsense about ghosts. *(beat)* Can't help it! Ever since the war, I've been living with ghosts.

(He begins writing and reading his words.)

GRANT

"Although frequently urged by friends to write my memoirs, I had determined never to do so but then my son's business partner did some double bookkeeping, which resulted in the loss of my entire investment. I had made it the rule of my life to trust a man long after other people gave him up. That's one of the reasons I was such a lousy businessman."

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GRANT *(reading and writing)*

"Maybe that's why I found a home in the army. But the cancer is something else. Army can't help me on this one."

(He reaches into his jacket for a pillbox. He puts a pill in his mouth and washes it down with water. Then he raises his glass to the audience.)

GRANT *(toasting)*

Here's to happy, healthy days ... in the next world

(He takes another sip)

GRANT

These darn pills won't cure the cancer. But it does alleviate the pain.

(Again, he resumes writing and reading his words.)

GRANT

"I've been facing death all my life: in the Mexican War – in the War Between the States. I was always at my best in wartime – before and during a battle."

(He has a coughing fit.)

GRANT

I'm a dying man with a magazine article to write and a publisher breathing down my neck. He has given new meaning to that term, "deadline".

(He goes to the window and looks out to the porch.)

GRANT

Well, I see where we have some activity on the front porch. There's Julia – but who's that fellow she's talking to? Is he wearing a long black, hooded cape – and is he clutching a scythe?

(Grant moves closer to the window and looks out.)

GRANT

No, he's wearing a white suit and he's got a cigar in his mouth. *(beat)* Good! Now we can both have cancer of the throat. It may be more meaningful when two men can share the experience.

(He waves to Clemens)

8

GRANT *(contd)*

Good morning, Samuel. Or good afternoon. Or good evening. Please don't bother to come inside. I don't want you to catch the Bubonic Plague or the Black Plague or – God forbid – a common cold. Nothing common about you, Mister Clemens!

(Grant returns to his lectern)

GRANT

As usual, my good friend, your timing is impeccable. I'm writing my memoirs for a magazine. You've been down that road, haven't you? Well ... money is money. Yes, money is definitely money. And I know what you're going to say: I shouldn't use the word I'm defining as part of my definition. But money is definitely money. It isn't horse manure. Pardon my language but I can't stomach people who make simplistic statements: "Money is money." What else should it be?

(He resumes writing)

GRANT

It should be a lifeline ...Mister Clemens.

(Grant returns to the front window and "mimes" opening it. The sudden chill forces him to pull his scarf tightly around his neck.)

GRANT

So how're you doing? You're a good neighbor and I thank you for dropping in but I'm trying to write a magazine article. However, I fear they pay me with wooden nickels.

(He listens to Clemens, trying to make out what his friend is saying)

GRANT

Speak up, man! It's bad enough I can't ride my horse anymore but now I can't hear anymore. Julia has the sweetest voice in the world but I need one of those durn listening horns to enjoy her singing. So please, my friend, speak slowly and loudly for this dottering old fool.

(He listens intently.)

GRANT

You are commanding me to get started and write my memoirs in a book - and not in some two-bit magazine! Sam - come on - two bits are two bits.

(He moves closer to the window)

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GRANT

You want me to write my memoirs in a book? Heck, I think maybe I can handle a skinny magazine ... but a book is heavy lifting. Lots of pages between those hard, hard covers!

(He moves even closer to the window, buttoning his jacket against the cold air.)

GRANT

You're saying that I'll go down in history as the most underrated president we've ever had? Don't flatter me with words. I know I was a darn good president. And yes I know that I was a better general. And I sure as heck know that I was a lousy businessman. But Century Magazine made me an offer. If I write my memoirs, I'll receive a ten percent royalty. No advance. No guarantee.

(He mimes opening the window all the way)

GRANT

I know that people pay good money to hear you lecture. But I'm paying with my life. *(beat)* What's that you're saying? *(beat)* Century Magazine would make the same offer to some Comanche Indian. *(beat)* What's that? I should be receiving either 20% of the retail price or 70% of the profits. I know that I am the most simple-hearted of men. And I'm probably the deafest of men but what was that? Come on, Sam, stop blowing cigar smoke in my face. Take the cigar out of your mouth and speak slowly and distinctly. *(beat)* You will give me twenty percent of all book sales? Julia ... how about that? *(beat)* You're saying ... seventy percent! I love it! A bidding war for poor little old me! *(loudly)* Man proposes and woman disposes.

(Grant actually looks rejuvenated as he walks sprightly – almost dancing around the room.)

GRANT

Julia darling, you're too smart and too tough for old Sam Clemens. Our neighbor is prepared to give your husband a substantial advance. He's going to give me more money than I've ever seen in my life, not counting the money I pissed away down there on Wall Street.

(He turns to the audience)

GRANT

My son's business partners ... but you know the story: double bookkeeping and all that. And all that was my entire fortune. But I like all this talk about money. It's giving me an appetite. Julia, how about cooking a nice hot lamb stew for dinner? And I'm sure our benefactor would like to join us.

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(Grant moves close to the front window)

GRANT

How's that, Mister Clemens? Speak up! *(Listening intently)* You are prepared to pay me good money to write about my life ...including my love letters? What's that? Speak slowly ... and loudly. *(Listening)* We'll split all the royalties: fifty – fifty! Do we have a deal? I see you're

nodding your head. And you'll make out a check ... an advance against royalties. Hurray for the red, white and blue! It looks like we have a deal! Okay. I'll try to justify your faith in me. Now get to work, Mister President. Start writing!

(Grant closes the front window and goes to his cabinet where he takes out a cloth covered manuscript. He then returns to his lectern)

GRANT

I have a confession to make. I did keep a journal during the War Between the States *(beat)* Is that what I'm going to call it: "the War between the States?" It was a rebellion; a failed rebellion by the slave states against the federal government. And some of the slave states were up north; right up here. Oh yes, there were free slaves up here – but there were also ... slaves. So ... you may ask ... why not refer to it as a "civil war"? That's what students of history call it. That's what teachers of history call it. *(He looks through his journal)*

GRANT

Well ... in point of fact, there was nothing civil about it. And there was nothing civil about *me*. You know what the Bible says: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." Well, the Bible didn't get that one right. *(Beat)* He just "taketh away."

(Re-energized, Grant returns to his cabinet and takes out another cloth covered manuscript.)

GRANT

I may be losing my mind ... but I'm not completely lost. I did keep a diary during my two terms of office. Julia was allowed to read some of my diaries and she gave them high praise – which meant a lot to me. She told me that more writers, should learn to write simply. I told her that I was a simple man – and that wasn't false modesty. I meant it then. I mean it now. I just hope that what I set down is accurate. Otherwise, you folks will be accusing me of being a writer of fiction! *(beat)* Nothing make believe about my life.

(He returns to his cabinet for a third time. With some effort, he reaches down to the bottom drawer, takes a bundle of papers and carries them back to his lectern.)

GRANT

My life was the real thing. Heck ... someone had to live it! Someone had to do it!

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End of Play

AUTHOR'S BIO: As a very young screenwriter, Lawrence DuKore began his writing career with the Richard Pryor film, GREASED LIGHTNING, which was produced by Hanna Weinstein for Warner Bros. His television play, A MISTAKEN CHARITY was produced by Lindsay Law for PBS/American Playhouse and was nominated for a Writers Guild of America award for best dramatic writing. He is a member of both the HB (Herbert Berghof/Uta Hagen)

Playwrights Foundation and the Actors Studio Playwrights/Directors Workshop. Most recently, his play, STAINED GLASS, premiered off-Broadway at the award-winning Metropolitan Playhouse. And his Latino comedy, SUNSHINE, just had a successful 3 week run off off Broadway at Teatro LATEA.

Hello:

I want to work with an active company that loves the history of theater as well as American history as well as an unending passion about humanity in all its forms.

I have that passion and I want to share it with a company that's committed to humanity and decency and love.

WHY I WRITE

I write for many reasons: Let me count the ways. I want to share a profound experience or a rich emotional experience or a funny experience with whomever will read or (hopefully) see my work. I write because I want to change a deeply troubling experience into a hopeful experience. I write because I'm angry at injustice. I write because that's who I am and that's what I do.