SMILING IN PLACE
by Dale Dunn

“Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray.
‘Tis not the dying that hurts us so –
‘Tis living – hurts us more.
We are the Birds – that stay.”
-Emily Dickinson

Cast of Characters:
A Writer
A Student
A Soldier
Someone to read stage directions

Commissioned by Relative Theatrics, Anne Mason, Artistic Director
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You’re going to need just a few things from around the house for this – two face masks or bandanas (one for the Writer and one for the Student) and some pots and pans or a drum - anything you can bang on.

A STORM rages. Make some noise here! Thunder and lightning, lots of rain and wind and something banging up against the house - a loose shutter, maybe?

A WRITER sits in bed with a laptop. The rain intensifies. A huge flash of lightning followed by a clap of thunder.

A STUDENT staggers in.

STUDENT: What’s happening out there?

WRITER: They said it was going to be bad, but this is beyond, beyond.

Another flash of lightning.

WRITER: (counting to see how close the lightning is.) One, two, three...

A clap of thunder.

STUDENT: Jeez! It’s really close!

The student goes to the window, peers into the storm.

WRITER: You sleep?


Something bangs up against the house.

STUDENT: What’s that banging?

WRITER: I don’t know. Something’s loose out there.

STUDENT: What are you doing?

WRITER: Trying to write.

STUDENT: What’s the point.

The writer pats the bed. The student lies down. The writer reaches over to feel the student’s head.
STUDENT: You shouldn’t touch me.

WRITER: You feel a little warm.

STUDENT: I don’t have a fever. I just took my temperature with that thermometer thingy.

WRITER: Thank God.

STUDENT: I hate that thing. Makes me feel like I’m shooting myself in the head. Maybe that’s not such a bad idea.

WRITER: Hey!

STUDENT: It would be fast, at least. None of this suffocating to death.

WRITER: Breathe in.

*They both take a deep breath in and let it out slowly. They share a spritz of hand sanitizer.*

WRITER: Don’t use too much. That’s our last bottle.

*They take a long time rubbing the little blob of sanitizer all over their hands.*

STUDENT: I don’t want to be here.

WRITER: I know.

STUDENT: I mean, nothing personal but...

WRITER: I can’t imagine having to leave school and not see anyone or go anywhere...

STUDENT: Or do anything...

WRITER: You’re doing really well, you know. Five stars.

STUDENT: Count our lucky stars, you always say.

WRITER: Yep. We should count our lucky stars we have a place to be.

STUDENT: I know. I do. It’s just... I’m terrified.

WRITER: We’re going to...
STUDENT: What if I have it and don’t even know it, I don’t show any symptoms, and then you get it and get really sick and... you’re old!

WRITER: Hey! We’re going to survive this thing. We’re almost done with the quarantine. And then we can relax. Live a little!

STUDENT: Right!

WRITER: Go out for groceries!

STUDENT: Woo hoo!

A pause. The student lies prone. The writer stares at the blank screen.

STUDENT: (slowly) I dreamed I was on this ship, in the middle of the ocean. There’s a storm. Like this one. Huge waves are crashing over the side. There’s dead people lined up on deck, wrapped up, like ready to be buried. The ship tilts. All the dead people start sliding into the sea, their eyes wide open. All of us that are alive are screaming, trying to hold on. The wind is howling. There’s nothing to hold on to. We’re all mixed together. Chinese, Japanese, Italians, Iranians, Russians, Brazilians, Americans... dead and alive, sliding into the sea.

The writer reaches out to the student.

WRITER: Hold on to me. I won’t let you go.

They grasp hands.

STUDENT: Me neither. You.

Another flash of lightning.

STUDENT: One, two...

A rumble of thunder.

STUDENT: It’s getting closer! Maybe it’s the end of the world.

WRITER: It’s got to stop. Sooner or later. Right?

They drop hands and share a tiny spritz of hand sanitizer. After a moment, the writer begins typing.

STUDENT: What are you doing?
WRITER: Writing it down.

_The Student sits up and leans in to see the screen. They lock eyes. Both of them pull a face mask or a bandana up over their nose and mouth. The Writer goes back to typing. The Student follows the words on the screen._

STUDENT: That’s not what I said.

WRITER: What?

STUDENT: THAT’S NOT WHAT I SAID!

WRITER: Yes, it is.

_The Student glares over the face mask._

WRITER: Close enough.

STUDENT: (Pulling away, taking down the mask.) You make me sound... terrified.

WRITER: (Also taking down the mask.) Aren’t you?

STUDENT: No! Yes! Maybe! But you can’t put that in there, people will....

WRITER: What?

STUDENT: Think I’m...

WRITER: What?

STUDENT: A mess!

WRITER: No one is going to think you’re a mess.

STUDENT: I am a mess!

WRITER: Everyone is a mess right now! Look at me! I haven’t gotten dressed in days! I can’t remember the last time I wore a real pair of pants or combed my hair!

STUDENT: Yeah, I wasn’t going to say anything...

WRITER: Hey! (smoothing his/her hair) Who cares what anyone thinks, anyway.
STUDENT: I do.

WRITER: You look very nice, by the way, from the waist up.

STUDENT: I have a Zoom class in 15 minutes.

WRITER: I admire your stick-to-it-iveness.

STUDENT: Whatever that is.

WRITER: You know what it is.

A pause. The writer goes back to writing.

STUDENT: Please don’t write about me.

WRITER: No one will know it’s you.

STUDENT: Right. (Pulling up the face mask, leaning in, reading from the screen.) There’s nothing to hold on to. We’re all mixed together. Chinese, Japanese, Italians, Iranians, Russians, Brazilians, Americans, Somalis... I never said Somalis.

WRITER: What? I can’t understand you through that thing.

STUDENT: (Pulling down the mask, moving away.) I never said Somalis.

WRITER: (Pulling down the mask, as well.) You didn’t?

STUDENT: No! I don’t even know where Somalia is.

WRITER: Yes you do. You drew an entire map of the world for your final in Geography.

STUDENT: In eighth grade!

WRITER: It was beautiful. I was amazed. All the different colors for the different countries. You even drew in the rivers and the mountain ranges. All from memory!

STUDENT: Just the major ones.

WRITER: It was a work of art.

STUDENT: It was a long time ago.

WRITER: Not that long.
STUDENT: Ancient history. Seems like that world I mapped was a completely different place.

WRITER: Doesn’t it?

*The writer goes back to the computer, cutting and pasting articles off the internet. The student leans in to read from the screen. They both pull up their masks.*

STUDENT: What’s all that?

WRITER: Just doing a little research. Plaguing.

STUDENT: Cheery stuff!

WRITER: Okay, I admit it. My ship is tilting a bit lately, like the one in your dream.

STUDENT: Yeah. And everyone is sliding into the sea.

WRITER: “We’re all in this together!”

STUDENT: If I hear that one more time I really might shoot myself in the head.

WRITER: Hey. (slowly) One thing I’m getting from all this reading I’ve been doing is that the human race is very resilient. We’ve been surviving pandemics and plagues for thousands of years. I never really thought about how hard it must have been every time this happened. Until now. When it’s happening to us. What is it that gets people through The Bubonic Plague, The Black Death, Cholera, Yellow Fever, Chicken Pox, World Wars, Financial Collapse, The Spanish flu, AIDS, Ebola, SARS...?

STUDENT: Okay! Stop! It seems like we would have figured it out by now.

WRITER: What?

STUDENT: How to stop a plague.

WRITER: You’d think, huh? We imagine ourselves so high-tech, so indestructible.

STUDENT: And then, bam. We’re locked up in our homes, hiding...

WRITER: Waiting for the storm to pass.

*The wind howls, the rain intensifies, the banging of the loose shutter, or whatever is, gets louder, too.*
WRITER: Put that… whatever it is, on our fix-it list.

STUDENT: Roger.

WRITER: *(reading from the internet)* “In 1665 During the Great Plague of London, Warders were sent around to identify the sick and lock them up them in their homes with their whole family for 40 days.” Quaranta giorni. Quarantine.

STUDENT: Quaranta giorni.

WRITER: “They’d paint a red cross on the door and post a notice that read: “LORD HAVE MERCY ON US!”

STUDENT: *(louder than either of them were prepared for)* “LORD HAVE MERCY ON US!”

A flash of lightning and another loud bang, different from the loose shutter, an explosion, the bigger the better, followed by a clap of thunder.

A SOLDIER from 1918 appears in full combat gear, complete with tin helmet, rifle and a gas mask hanging around his neck. He’s covered in mud and is a bit hard of hearing, having just dodged a shell that took out his trench-mate as well as the hearing in his left ear. He coughs and tries to brush off some of the grime.

*The Writer and the Student secure their masks and recoil.*

STUDENT: Oh shit.

WRITER: Stay back!

SOLDIER: *(Not hearing)* What’s that?

*He coughs again.*

WRITER: STAY BACK!

STUDENT: SIX FEET! SIX FEET!

SOLDIER: What? I… can’t hear a thing!

*The soldier shakes his head and tries to knock the ringing out of his ears.*

WRITER: KEEP YOUR DISTANCE!
SOLDIER: Okay, okay! Keep your pants on! You really don’t need the masks. I’m not contagious anymore.

WRITER: I don’t know who you are or how you got in here, but you need to leave! NOW!

SOLDIER: Calm down! I’m here to help! I’m fully recovered! People were dropping like flies all around me. We had a number of cases in our outfit.

STUDENT: You had COVID?

SOLDIER: *(not hearing or understanding)* What’s that?

STUDENT: COVID-19!

SOLDIER: Is that what you’re calling this one? That’s a terrible name. It’s got no ring to it. Ours was called the Spanish Flu.

*The Soldier stomps his feet like a Flamenco dancer and does a turn, creating a good cloud of dust around him. Everyone coughs.*

SOLDIER: It was spreading over the entire world just like this, whatever you call it, CO...

STUDENT: COVID-19!

SOLDIER: Terrible! In my day, we were advised to keep our windows open to prevent pneumonia.

STUDENT: How does that work?

SOLDIER: *(not hearing)* Maybe you should crack a window!

WRITER: IT’S POURING RAIN!

SOLDIER: Ahhh, a little rain never hurt anyone! This storm will pass!

*He opens a window, the wind howls, some rain blows in and the shutter, or whatever it is, bangs, even louder.*

SOLDIER: That’s better! Gotta keep the air moving through! I came down with it while I was stationed in France during The War, oh, late October, 1918. I started to feel the aches coming on and then the fever... I wish this ringing in my ears would cut it out!

*The Soldier jumps up and down on one foot and pounds his head like someone trying to clear water from his ears.*
STUDENT: *(quietly, to the Writer)* Should we call the police?

WRITER: *(quietly)* I don’t think they’d believe us. Do you think he’s dangerous?

STUDENT: *(quietly)* Can’t tell.

SOLDIER: *(not hearing)* What’s that?

STUDENT: WE’RE TRYING TO DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT TO CALL THE COPS!

SOLDIER: The cops! We don’t need any police here. I’ve got this! You’ll see! So, where was I? Oh yeah, I was feeling pretty peak-ed, so I went to see the company doc. He wanted to evacuate me to the base hospital but I wasn’t having any of those shenanigans. I’d heard about the way they lined everyone up and let them cough all over each other until they all died in their beds. No thanks.

STUDENT: Roger that.

SOLDIER: *(not hearing)* What’s that?

STUDENT: I HEAR YOU!

SOLDIER: Good! I seem to have lost all of the hearing in this ear!

WRITER: Wait...

SOLDIER: I asked the doctor for some aspirin and scrounged myself a bottle of whiskey. I’d found an old blown-up piano in the woods, so I told my buddy Joe, another fella from Montana – we’d managed to stick together through thick and thin, best horseman I’ve ever known – I told Joe where to find me if the outfit decided to head out, and I took my bedroll and I crawled in there where I could be out of the rain at least. I stayed there asleep all that night, the next day and the next night. Every time I would wake up, raging with fever, delirious, I’d take a big swig of whiskey and a couple of aspirin tablets. When I woke up on the second morning, the whiskey bottle was empty, the aspirin was gone and I felt pretty good! I crawled out of that poor old piano and after a good breakfast, I was fit as a fiddle!

WRITER: Oh my God.

SOLDIER: I think it was mainly the whiskey. Good thing, huh? Neither one of you would be here, otherwise.

WRITER: Oh my God.
SOLDIER: You don’t recognize me. Maybe because I’m so young, and handsome! You only knew me as an old man!

WRITER: Grandpa?

STUDENT: What?

WRITER: It’s Grandpa!

STUDENT: Grandpa’s in Florida!

WRITER: Not your Grandpa. My Grandpa. Your Great-Grandpa. He was a lieutenant in the cavalry, stationed in France, during World War I.

STUDENT: On horseback? No way.

SOLDIER: At your service!

WRITER: I’ve been reading his diaries - that story about the whiskey and the piano, it’s in there! Grandpa, what are you doing here?

SOLDIER: (not hearing) What’s that? I wish you would take those masks off. I’m having a little trouble hearing!

The writer pulls down the mask.

WRITER: GRANDPA! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

SOLDIER: You tell me! I was reliving those last days in France. It was November, 1918. I had finally recovered from that nasty flu. It was raining cats and dogs, just like it is now! You couldn’t tell the thunder from the shells bursting all around us. We couldn’t believe they were going to keep it up to the bitter end. Armistice Day was right around the corner, scheduled for 11 o’clock on the 11th, isn’t that nifty? But none of us were running the army.

STUDENT: (not understanding) What’s that?

SOLDIER (not hearing) What’s that?

STUDENT: (pulling down his mask) WHAT’S ARMISTICE DAY?!

SOLDIER: You know! When everyone lays down their arms and calls it a day! What are they teaching you kids?

STUDENT: Nothing. It’s all online.
SOLDIER: *(not hearing or understanding)* What’s that?

STUDENT: NEVERMIND!

SOLDIER: All righty then! My last post was on the banks of the Meuse-Argonne River...

STUDENT: I know where that is!

SOLDIER: Good for you! I was slogging through the rain and the mud with Joe, the fella I mentioned earlier. We were heading towards an Armistice party one of the boys had drummed up. I had a bad feeling about it all, you know, celebrating before it was really over, but we had a little whiskey between us and we were singing our song. I felt a funny itch, a tingle, a tickle, somewhere deep down, in my soul, maybe. I grabbed Joe and we hit the dirt. A shell whizzed right by my ear and the whole world exploded!

*Another sound effect, please, of a shell exploding, good and loud.*

SOLDIER: Yeah. Like that. I lay there and thought I was dead but then I realized I couldn’t be dead if I was thinking I was dead and then I heard, far off, someone yelling, calling me, maybe. calling out: “LORD HAVE MERCY ON US!”

STUDENT: That was us!

SOLDIER: And I heard this terrible noise!

*Another sound effect, please, a whoosh of wind strong enough to propel someone through time and space.*

SOLDIER: Yes, just like that! And, here I am! And here you are! We can all count our lucky stars. Except Joe. He wasn’t so lucky. He went home in a box on Armistice Day.

STUDENT: Jeez.

SOLDIER: *(not hearing)* What’s that?

STUDENT: JEEZ!

SOLDIER: Gee Whiz is right! But you know, the last thing, the last moment for him was, well, it was happy, anyway. I told his momma that when I visited her after I got back to Anaconda. We were smiling and we were singing that song we always sang together when we needed a little cheering up, you know the one...

*He breaks into song.*
SOLDIER: *(singing)* PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES IN YOUR OLD KIT BAG AND SMILE, SMILE, SMILE!

SOLDIER: You know that one?

STUDENT: No.

SOLDIER: I’ll teach it to you. It’s pretty simple, really.

* * *

If you don’t know it, the tune can be found on the internet – just Google “Pack Up Your Troubles.” It’s by George Asaf and Felix Powell and there’s a few YouTube versions, with various lyrics. Or, you can just make something up!

SOLDIER: Now sing with me: *(singing)* PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES

STUDENT: You’re kidding.

SOLDIER: *(not hearing)* What’s that?

STUDENT: WE DON’T SING!

SOLDIER: What do you mean, you don’t sing? That’s your whole trouble right there, you gotta keep singing if you’re gonna make it through anything like this. Now sing! Sing! It’ll do you a world of good!

SOLDIER: *(singing)* PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES

WRITER/STUDENT: *(singing hesitantly)* PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES

SOLDIER: *(singing)* IN YOUR OLD KIT BAG...

STUDENT: *(not understanding)* What’s that?

SOLDIER: *(not hearing)* What’s that?

STUDENT: WHAT’S “YOUR OLD KIT BAG”? 

SOLDIER: You know, your mess kit: plate, fork, knife, spoon. So you can eat!

STUDENT: Oh.

SOLDIER: Everybody now! *(singing)* PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES
WRITER/STUDENT: *(singing, a little louder this time)* IN YOUR OLD KIT BAG!

SOLDIER: That’s it! AND

ALL: *(singing)* SMILE, SMILE, SMILE

SOLDIER: *(singing)* LIFE’S TOO SHORT TO LET YOUR SPIRITS DRAG

WRITER/STUDENT: *(singing)* LIFE’S TOO SHORT TO LET YOUR SPIRITS DRAG

SOLDIER: *(singing)* SMILE BOYS, THAT’S THE STYLE!

WRITER/STUDENT: *(singing)* SMILE BOYS, THAT’S THE STYLE!

SOLDIER: WHAT’S THE USE OF WORRYING?

STUDENT/WRITER: *(singing)* WHAT’S THE USE OF WORRYING?

SOLDIER: *(singing)* IT NEVER WAS WORTHWHILE!

STUDENT/WRITER: *(singing)* IT NEVER WAS WORTHWHILE!

SOLDIER: *(singing)* SO

ALL: *(singing)* PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES IN YOUR OLD KIT BAG AND SMILE, SMILE, SMILE!

SOLDIER: Wonderful! Now we’ll add a few steps, anything will do, and we’ll have a good start on a whole new lease on life. Here we go, everyone up.

*Everyone, as able, stands in a line to do a jaunty jig while singing together.*

SOLDIER: All together now, from the top!

ALL: *(singing and dancing)*

PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES IN YOUR OLD KIT BAG
AND SMILE, SMILE, SMILE!
LIFE’S TOO SHORT TO LET YOUR SPIRITS DRAG
SMILE, BOYS, THAT’S THE STYLE!
WHAT’S THE USE OF WORRYING
IT NEVER WAS WORTHWHILE!
SO, PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES IN YOUR OLD KIT BAG
AND SMILE, SMILE, SMILE!

SOLDIER: And *that* is how you get through it. Okay?
WRITER/STUDENT: Okay!

SOLDIER: Okay! I think I’m done here! Looks like that storm is going to let up! Carry on!

   *Another time-traveling whoosh of wind, the Soldier salutes and disappears.*

WRITER: Thanks Grandpa!

STUDENT: Yeah! Thanks!

WRITER: That was...

STUDENT: Pretty cool. Gotta Zoom!

   *The Student heads off, whistling our song. The Writer smiles and goes to the laptop to write it down. The rain has let up. Is that the sound of birds chirping?*

END OF PLAY