

LYDA

A Play in Two Acts by:

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(Estimated Running Time: 1.5 hours)

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KEYNOTE DESCRIPTION: Fifty years before Ruth Bader Ginsburg (RBG), there was Lyda Conley-- the first indigenous woman attorney in the US and first to argue before the US Supreme Court. Based on true events in Kansas City at the turn of the 19th century; when suddenly a decades-old treaty between the U.S. government and the Wyandot nation is no more, Lyda Conley, armed with the law and a gun, engages in an unconventional and remarkable battle alongside her sisters to save their family's sacred burial ground. With fiery hearts and acerbic wits, the sisters dig in their heels to fight against the U.S. government, tribal leadership, and the erasure of a people.

CAST OF CHARACTERS
(Minimum 7 Performers)

LYDA CONLEY (LIDDY)	Youngest Conley sister, Wyandot and European heritage (female early 30s and early 50s)
HELENA CONLEY (BEAR)	Middle Conley sister, Wyandot and European (female mid-30s and mid-50s)
IDA CONLEY (EYES)	Oldest living Conley sister, Wyandot and European heritage (female late 30s)
NINA	Cousin to Conley sisters (Wyandot mixed heritage, female 20s-30s)

These supporting characters can be played by three interchanging males:

COUSIN JAMES / NEWSPAPER MAN / OTHER JUSTICE / HECKLER TWO / CITY WORKER (Note that Cousin James is of Wyandot mixed heritage, males 30-50s)

REPORTER JOHN / CHIEF ALLEN JOHNSON, JR / TOPEKA JUDGE / CHIEF JUSTICE (Note that Chief Johnson is of Wyandot mixed heritage, males 30-50s)

COMMISSIONER KAELIN / CIRCUS PERFORMER / ATTORNEY NIELSON / HECKLER ONE / REPORTER CAMBDEN (males 30-50s)

LIST OF ACTS & SCENES

ACT I

Scene 1: Waiting to Begin
Scene 2: Fixing
Scene 3: Contemplating
Scene 4: Preparing
Scene 5: Publicity
Scene 6: Green Corn Festival
Scene 7: Intimidation
Scene 8: Patriots
Scene 9: Headlines
Scene 10: Holiday
Scene 11: The Filing
Scene 12: Train
Scene 13: District Hearing
Scene 14: Back in Kansas City
Scene 15: Resourcefulness
Scene 16: The Cross
Scene 17: Painting

ACT II

Scene 1: Lyda Returns
Scene 2: Help
Scene 3: Consequences
Scene 4: It's Time
Scene 5: Alone
Scene 6: Before
Scene 7: Finally
Scene 8: Congratulations
Scene 9: Revelation
Scene 10: Changing Times
Scene 11: Next

AUTHOR STATEMENT

Using actors that identify as indigenous should be a priority in casting the relevant roles, as should use of an indigenous composer for any music. The Wandat language, spoken by the Wyandot, will need specific language training by an appropriate member of the Wyandot / Wyandotte tribe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ACT I

SCENE 1: WAITING TO BEGIN

Setting: Early spring, 1913, inside the Huron cemetery, which is overgrown. A “Huron Indian Cemetery” sign covered in vines indicates the place. A picnic is setup. Carnegie Library is barely visible through the brush. Various broken tombstones, and some unbroken ones are visible. Sister Sally's tombstone is not broken. JAMES is dressed nice in traditional Wyandot ceremonial accessories including a water drum. LYDA is dressed professionally and bundled, but notably wearing additional traditional Wyandot elements such as pouches and footwear. All sisters notably wear face paint marks that indicate their bear clan. The audience is the crowd at the cemetery though it should not be clear why they are there.

(JAMES softly drums a Wyandot water drum as IDA plays flute. The music is serious sounding. BEAR performs smoking-off cleansing ritual. REPORTER CAMBDEN is fiddling with his camera. LYDA watches them and the squirrels; she nods “Hello” to a few audience members.)

BEAR

Tižamêh¹ Hazu! (*gesturing to a tree*) Thank you, great cedar, for that which you give us.

(BEAR finishes ritual and then joins in playing rattle snake bones. LYDA bends down and makes a squirrel calling sound.)

LYDA

Come here my little friend. Ah very good. (*to the audience*) I do believe I know every last furball in here. Please, make yourselves comfortable. We'll begin soon - just as soon as the senator arrives. (*studying audience*) Hmm, so many faces I don't recognize. That's good. Welcome. Thank you for coming out on such a chilly day. Perhaps while we're waiting, I can show you around a bit. Folks keep asking for details about what's been happening here in Huron. (*gesturing*) You see our entire family is buried in here.

(LYDA points to headstones.)

LYDA (cont.)

Over there, that furthest grave is my father. Here's mother. This is our eldest sister Sally. Grandparents. Tis unfortunate the condition of the gravestones. Goodness knows how many times we've replaced them. This being a Wyandot burial ground, some people don't respect it the way they should. We'll right'em again though...bet your bloomers. Now what you don't see are the hundreds of others who are buried in here in unmarked graves, including many of our great Chiefs, as this was Wyandot custom. Why here you might ask? Why this particular location? Well in 1843 when the Wyandot were forced to leave Ohio and come here, things weren't as they

¹ Thank you (In Wendat)

anticipated. Rotten food aboard the steamers. No shelter or provisions upon arrival as promised. Hundreds of lives were lost, and folks had to be buried somewhere. Our chiefs, including my grandfather, chose this location -- as it is the highest the point in the area. If it weren't for that overgrown brush there, you'd be able to see clear across the river to Missouri. And then the new town they established, now we know as Kansas City, Kansas, (*gesturing*) sprung up all around the burial ground. Carnegie built his beautiful library over there, churches, the courthouse. What no one anticipated was this tiny two-acre plot becoming extremely valuable, nor the greedy vultures coming for the kill!

(Music continues through scene change but shifts to a more somber burial song.)

(END OF SCENE)

SCENE 2: FIXING

Setting: Flashback to seven years earlier, July 1906, inside the Huron Indian Cemetery, Kansas City, Kansas. A "Huron Indian Cemetery" sign indicates the place but is more visible with a lack of vines. A picnic is setup. The cemetery is less overgrown. The new Carnegie Library is visible through the brush. One new tombstone for sister Sally sits among various broken tombstones, and a few other unbroken ones. A storm is developing. The wind intensifies and the sky darkens throughout the scene.

(JAMES drums, IDA plays flute, and BEAR adds rattlesnake bones. LYDA enters, sets down a food dish and goes to Sally's new grave marker. LYDA is emotional as she admires the new stone. The others notice LYDA and stop playing.)

LYDA

(referring to grave) Looks lovely James. Thank you.

JAMES

Of course. Liddy, I'm sorry but I can't stay.

LYDA

No?

JAMES

Cattle came early. Slaughterhouse wants us there by two.

LYDA

Hmm. Still time for the blessing?

JAMES

If we get on.

LYDA

Well, let's.

BEAR

(abruptly) Now wait! Wait. Let me cleanse.

(BEAR retrieves a cedar twig, then breaks it up and puts it in a smoking pot, lights it, and smokes off Sally's stone. LYDA goes to inspect the new stone.)

IDA

Sure hope it lasts this time.

BEAR

(dismissive) Bah, spirits don't care. Sides, they'll smash it soon enough. *(to JAMES referring to LYDA)* What our youngest here fails to appreciate is that some depraved souls plunder simply for sport.

IDA

Not the point though.

LYDA

(changing tone to tease sister) Sport! Did she say 'sport'?

(LYDA and IDA look mischievous and BEAR knows what's going to happen.)

IDA

Bear trapping!

LYDA

Now that's a sport. *(to IDA)* Get the Bear!

(LYDA and IDA tickle BEAR.)

BEAR

(to IDA referring to LYDA) Get the Lid!

(BEAR & IDA tickle LYDA.)

LYDA & BEAR

Get the Eyes!

(LYDA & BEAR tickle IDA. All laugh. Clearly this is some joke they all know.)

IDA

No! Stop. Gotta pee.

(BEAR does her "signature" rattlesnake pee-dance with end hip bump with her sisters and they laugh.)

BEAR

Alright. Alright. Let me finish.

(BEAR continues smoking-off cleansing ritual as dialog continues.)

JAMES

(laughing) Somethings never change.

LYDA

Indeed.

JAMES

Hey what's this about Ben Longear? You defending him?

LYDA

Well, he admitted it.

IDA

Can you believe? His best friend!

JAMES

Too much whiskey they say.

IDA

Lousy excuse for killing him!

LYDA

He's very remorseful--

IDA

Still!

LYDA

And facing a sentence three times that of a white man.

JAMES

Figures!

BEAR

(interrupting loudly to the tree) Ah, Tižameh Hazu²! Thank you, great cedar, for that which you provide us. *(to the spirit above)* Oh Great Spirit may you hear the Bear calling. Rid all evil. Allow it to be carried away on the dark clouds! Okay James.

² "Thank you Cedar tree." In Wandat language.

JAMES

Tsatrihú?taht qmękyuhkwah a?wakqhsúhtahs³ Today we give thanks to you, Great Spirit, as we gather to remember and honor the life of our dear departed Sally, eldest of the four Conley sisters. We recall her kind nature and infectious laugh. Entering the spirit world as a girl of only...*(forgetting her age)* Um. Um.

BEAR

Seventeen.

LYDA

Sixteen!

BEAR

No! Seventeen!

IDA

Sisters!

LYDA

I remember because I had just turned ten! Then *(looks up)* poof!

JAMES

Seems like yesterday.

IDA

(emotional) One year to the day after mother.

(NINA, pregnant, rushes in, trips, and stubs her toe startling sisters with her dramatic entrance.)

NINA

(interrupting) Ouch! Blazes! Oh God, sorry!

JAMES

Sister!

BEAR

Careful cousin!

LYDA

You okay?

NINA

Oh, thank goodness you're still here!

³ Listen up. Everyone. I show you my face. (In Wandat)

IDA
You shouldn't run!

LYDA
What happened?

NINA
Oh, my heart is so heavy!

IDA
What?

NINA
Telegram from that new Senator, Paloma, to that, that...horrible, arrogant Commissioner.

BEAR
Yah?

NINA
Something about a sale of Huron Cemetery.

IDA
(gasps) Uh!

BEAR
Fox!

NINA
And removing the graves as soon as possible!

IDA
No!

BEAR
Over my dead body!

LYDA
You sure Nina?

NINA
Saw the telegram myself! Oh, you should've seen that cock-eyed Commissioner all puffed up like a rooster flaunting his feathers.

IDA
(to Lyda) But they can't, right?

JAMES

There's a treaty!

(LYDA contemplates and begins packing up her belongings to leave.)

LYDA

(frustrated to the heavens) TODAY of all days!

IDA

How could they even think...Nobody has a right to do such a thing.

NINA

Those protest signs are still in my barn.

BEAR

Traps is what you need for greedy rats!

LYDA

(loudly interrupting) Okay, okay! Let's calm down. First, we need to see...I'll go find out what happened.

JAMES

I should go with you.

LYDA

No, no. I'll be fine. You need to go to work. *(to BEAR and IDA)* You'll stay here though, right?

BEAR

Let'em DARE try touch a grave.

IDA

(to Lyda) Godspeed Liddy.

NINA

Watch your back Sweet Pea!

JAMES

I'll walk with you.

LYDA

PLEASE *(to Bear)* don't do anything rash while I'm gone!

(END OF SCENE)

SCENE 3: CONTEMPLATING

Setting: A few hours later still in the Huron cemetery.

BEAR

(sighing) Those poor stallions are suffering, while I just sit here.

IDA

She shouldn't have gone alone. And look at that sky.

BEAR

I'm gonna have to come back.

IDA

Maybe I should go find her.

(LYDA rushes in very upset.)

BEAR *(cont.)*

Finally!

LYDA

(to IDA) Your friend John still work at the Post?

IDA

Believe so.

LYDA

We'll need him here first thing in the morning!

IDA

(gasping) Oh no.

LYDA

Sure enough, they did it. Weasels passed a law that voids our treaty.

BEAR

Knew it!

IDA

How? Without anyone knowing?

LYDA

Not only that, it gives the Oklahoma Wyandotte the right to sell Huron.

IDA

They wouldn't dare!

BEAR

Don't bet your britches. Greedy hogs! None of'em give a squat about tradition anymore.

LYDA

And they're talking about moving the bodies to Quindaro cemetery.

IDA

Oh, I need to sit! *(to Lyda)* Please tell me there's something legal you can do?

LYDA

Maybe, but it'll take time. Foremost, we musn't let them dig up these graves.

BEAR

Not on my watch!

(BEAR turns to leave.)

IDA

Where are you going?

BEAR

Home! Pa's shotgun'll be something they'll listen to!

IDA

Bear, no! It's not...Christian!

BEAR

As if what these swine are doing is!

LYDA

Bear, Ida makes a point. We mustn't come over like savages. We need folks supporting us.

IDA

We'll protest! I'm sure the ladies at church would help.

(BEAR ignores and starts again to leave.)

BEAR

Great! Church ladies with signs.

LYDA

(very concerned) Bear! Wait! Seriously, we can't risk it. I might need to take legal action and if someone gets hurt --

I'll handle the musket! –

BEAR

Sisters!

IDA

Then it's me not you.

BEAR

(louder) Sisters!

IDA

(snapping) What?

BEAR

What if they come at night?

IDA

(looking up) Spirits'll protect us!

BEAR

(Beat to consider.)

LYDA

(pondering) You know, what we need is a little *(gesturing)* ah...shelter thing.

BEAR

(agreeing) Hmm.

LYDA

Just something simple, you know? Four sides. A roof. Door.

BEAR

Little slits to see out.

LYDA

Exactly.

IDA

(incredulously) You can't be serious!

LYDA

(to IDA) Bear built that chicken coop.

BEAR

James has piles of wood.

IDA

I'm not sleeping in here!

LYDA

With family and friends, I bet we could get something up right quick! Maybe I could even work in it!

IDA

Lordy Liddy, how long you thinking this will last?

LYDA

Well, the greater ruckus we create now, the sooner they'll back down. But they must know we're serious!

BEAR

(sarcastically) Hence the church ladies!

LYDA

(to IDA) Listen, you go talk to John.

IDA

(stammering) But –

LYDA

Tell him we need him here first thing. Early!

IDA

But...what about work?

LYDA

This can't wait.

BEAR

That's sure as sin!

LYDA

I'll see if Nina can teach my telegraph class...

IDA

Well after tomorrow, I work every day. And you know that curmudgeon will never let me off

–

LYDA

(thinking) I better ask her about teaching Sunday school too—

IDA

(suddenly realizing) Oh dear! We forgot choir practice –

LYDA

Oh and the committee meetings—

BEAR

(suddenly realizing) Blasted, I forgot the stallions!

IDA

I'll run to church.

LYDA

I'll start gathering...

BEAR

Meet you at Jame's.

LYDA

Yes. Right. We'll need his cart. I'll bring the horse, and ah *(still planning)*... food, blankets...
(to IDA) Oh Ida, ask the Reverend about using the outhouse.

(IDA looks appalled.)

LYDA *(cont.)*

You want to try for home?

IDA

(out loud to self) Can only imagine what Luke will say about all this.

(Flash of lightning.)

LYDA

(to BEAR) Hey be careful! Looks like funnels forming.

BEAR

Spirits are angry! Cursed be the devils that dare trespass upon these sacred grounds!

(END OF SCENE)

SCENE 4: PREPARING

Setting: Early the next morning inside the Huron cemetery. A simple fort is about complete.

(BEAR works on the fort. IDA paints a sign.
LYDA prepares her remarks. NINA enters
carrying food, clothes, and a tarp.)

NINA

Howdy Ho!

IDA

Smelled you coming!

NINA

Hot potater and bean casserole awaits your tummies.

LYDA

Find the tarps?

NINA

Yep. And here's some dry clothes.

LYDA

Thanks.

NINA

Course now it stops raining. Where's James?

BEAR

Slaughterhouse.

IDA

Was here all night, bless his little heart.

NINA

Can't believe y'all created this masterpiece!

IDA

(to Bear) Show her your hands.

(BEAR shows NINA her bloody hands.)

NINA

(aghast) Oh my! And no hesitations about sleeping in here?

Ah fiddly foo. With family after all.

BEAR

Speak for yourself.

IDA

(LYDA prays as she holds the cross on her neck.
REPORTER CAMBDEN enters.)

NINA
Hey! Who's that?!

(IDA waves. REPORTER CAMBDEN waves
back.)

(*disappointed, under breath*) Daw gum! And the church folk aren't here yet!

IDA

(*finishing*) Amen.

LYDA

(*to IDA regarding sign*) You done?

BEAR

your hounds.

IDA Almost. Hold

(LYDA holds her bible as she speaks. IDA finishes
up painting a sign.)

Good morning ya'all! Ida!

REPORTER CAMBDEN

Hi Cambden. John couldn't come?

IDA

(BEAR locks the gate.)

Naw, son's sicker than a sinner. And sorry to say, I won't be able to stay long. Mayor's
daughter's getting hitched today.

REPORTER CAMBDEN

(REPORTER CAMBDEN extends hand to
LYDA.)

Hi. Cambden. You the Bear?
REPORTER CAMBDEN (cont.)

No. I'm Lyda Conley.
LYDA

Oh yes, yes. The little lady lawyer.
REPORTER CAMBDEN

(*offended*) She's licensed to practice law in two states.
NINA

(*to NINA*) YOU must be the Bear?
REPORTER CAMBDEN

Oh heaven's no. (*referring to BEAR*) She's the bear.
NINA

(*correcting sternly*) Helena Conley!
BEAR

(BEAR angrily chops a piece of wood with an ax.)

(*amused*) Well I'll be! Didn't know a girl could do that!
REPORTER CAMBDEN

Oh honey, they built this whole wonder overnight.
NINA

Impressive.
REPORTER CAMBDEN

In the rain no less!
NINA

Fascinating. Mind if I take photos?
REPORTER CAMBDEN

Shoot away, Sweet Pea. Right, Liddy?
NINA

Please.
LYDA

Fort Conley, I presume?
REPORTER CAMBDEN

I like that.

BEAR

And you're all Indians right?

REPORTER CAMBDEN

We are Wyandot. Yes. And—

LYDA

Yeah, see, John filled me in some bout what's happening but can't say I really understands it all. But y'all believe you have some sort of legal right to be in here?

REPORTER CAMBDEN

Yes, this is a sacred Wyandot burial ground. Protected by the 1855 Treaty between the US Government and the Wyandot tribe.

LYDA

Oh that's good! Don't move.

REPORTER CAMBDEN

The new law allowing the sale of Huron is illegal! And unconstitutional. Not to mention immoral!

LYDA

(patronizing) Right.

REPORTER CAMBDEN

(yelling referring to sign) Ready!

IDA

(IDA passes sign to BEAR, who begins to hammer up sign.)

So, something I'm confused about --

REPORTER CAMBDEN

(yelling regarding sign) Bear wait! Can't hear the man.

LYDA

I's told it's the Wyandot who will get the money from the sale of this land. That not right?

REPORTER CAMBDEN

Well, IF the land were to be sold, perhaps some money would go to the OKLAHOMA Wyandotte, but certainly not to any of us here in Kansas.

LYDA

REPORTER CAMBDEN

Oklahoma Wyandotte?

BEAR

(to IDA) What hole'd he crawl out of?

IDA

Bear!

LYDA

That same 1855 Treaty attempted to lure Wyandots to live down in Indian Territory. Now Oklahoma, you know. Government men dangled dollars and land. Some went. But our folks were skeptical of another treaty--

BEAR

Happens when you've been plowed under a few times.

LYDA

Indeed. So they remained in Kansas. Then later, the US government only "officially" recognized the Wyandotte people who had moved down to Oklahoma.

REPORTER CAMBDEN

(amused and getting it) Oh okay. I see. So now that this land's worth a buck, them *(exaggerating)* Oklahoma Wyandotte don't give two hoots about keeping the cemetery!

BEAR

(sarcastically) Now the ole clock's ticking.

REPORTER CAMBDEN

Slay the fox and strip the fur!

NINA

(offended) Careful there, that FUR is our family!

BEAR

Woe to the first man who dare tries to steal a body!

LYDA

(to BEAR regarding sign) Go ahead sister!

(As BEAR nails up the sign, a CEMETERY WORKER enters with supplies followed by the COMMISSIONER.)

IDA

(yells out warning) Bear!

CITY WORKER

Morning. Best you go ahead and open this.

LYDA

We will do no such thing! You should be ashamed of yourselves.

COMMISSIONER

(arrogantly) Well good day. You must be the Conley sisters.

LYDA

Indeed. And you?

COMMISSIONER

I'm Commissioner Kaelin. And I'll makes this simple for you lovely, ah ladies. *(Very nonchalant)* My men have legal right to begin work here. I demand you unlock this gate. *(More forceful)* At once!

LYDA

How dare you attempt to steal our beloved! Tis beneath all shrouds of dignity!

COMMISSIONER

(to WORKER) Go ahead. Break it!

(BEAR pulls out a hidden musket and takes aim at the WORKER.)

BEAR

Hold it right there you heinous hog!

(WORKER stops. EVERYONE shocked. REPORTER CAMBDEN hurries to set up to take a picture of BEAR with the gun.)

LYDA

(horrified) Bear!

CITY WORKER

Whoa! No need...

IDA

(scared) Oh Lord!

BEAR

I have a right to shoot burglars who trespass --

LYDA

(nervously) I'd listen to her. No need for anyone to get hurt.

COMMISSIONER

Continue!

(BEAR cocks the gun.)

BEAR

One more move and this bullet goes in your backside!

(WORKER looks at BEAR, looks at the COMMISSIONER, who nods, and then WORKER make a move. Lights out as BEAR fires a shot. EVERYONE screams.)

(END OF SCENE)