

DIVISION STREET: AMERICA

By  
Steve Totland

Adapted from  
DIVISION STREET: AMERICA

By  
Studs Terkel

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by Steve Totland  
totlands@dogear.org

This adaptation of Studs Terkel's Division Street: America is meant to be performed by eight performers. Performers take the following roles:

Man 1: The Interlocutor

Man 2: Jimmy White, Lew Gibson

Woman 1: Lucy Jefferson, Lois Arthur

Woman 2: Florence Scala, Judy Huff

Man 3: Hal Malden, Tom Kearney, John Rath

Woman 3: Mrs. R. Fuqua Davies, Jessie Binford

Woman 4: Lily Lowell, Janice Majewski, Theresa carter

Man 4: Horton Blair, Kid Pharaoh, Stan Leonard

Setting in the play moves back and forth from The Interlocutor's office to various settings in and around the city of Chicago. It would be wonderful if the production could emphasize the difference between the time/space of The Interlocutor's office (garret room, winter, night) and the various configurations of time/space for the locations where The Interlocutor conducts his interviews.

Sometimes performers enact excerpts from the interviews "live" while The Interlocutor "listens" to them "on tape." When this happens, performers must keep in mind they are responding to, and interacting with, The Interlocutor, even though the performer playing this role is not present in the scene with them.

Persons from The Interlocutor's interviews frequently appear in his office with him. When this happens, it should be clear to audience members that these individuals access The Interlocutor's office by means of his imagination. They are not physically present in the office.

[1966. Winter. Night.

The Interlocutor's office; a comfortably worn garret on the third floor of a Victorian house in a comfortably worn neighborhood on Chicago's northside.

The Interlocutor at work; his desk covered with note cards, coffee cups, books, pens, pencils, legal pads. He reads from one legal pad, thinks, makes notes on another.

He moves aside books and papers to get to his tape recorder. He cues the tape, presses play.

As the tape slide up to speed we hear Jimmy say--]

JIMMY

(On tape.) . . . just an ordinary day?

THE INTERLOCUTOR

(On Tape.) Yes. What's a day like for Jimmy White?

JIMMY

(On tape.) I get up in the morning, most of the time I take a cigarette. After takin' a cigarette, I'm pretty sick then. (Laughs.)

[Jimmy enters on his bicycle. The performer's live laugh blends with, then overtakes, the sound of the character's recorded laugh.

The sidewalk near Cabrini Green.

Fall. Early morning. Crisp.

Jimmy is a bundle of nervous energy.

The Interlocutor stays in his office. He listens to Jimmy on tape, as he makes notes on a legal pad.]

JIMMY

(Speaking live.) I probably won't even want breakfast. I walk around a little. Talk to the lady in the cleaners. She ask me if I'm married.

JIMMY (CONT'D)

She know all the time that I'm not, but she just hold conversation. I come here to see who's in the neighborhood.

I ride bikes or something. You know, it's pretty childish. (Laughs.) But there's nothing else for a guy that's eighteen. You don't feel like bein' around a whole lot of guys that's younger than you all the time. You feel like goin' places and doin' things. Most people pattern their whole lives on the movies. They see a pitcher, Tarzan, Superman, and they try it. My dreams are usually a penthouse. I'm up on the last floor, I have all the money I want, I have all the pretty girls I want. In the movies they can get you all shook up, make you think how perfect marriage is. But then again, you know that it's not perfect, but you can still dream about it. Like myself, I'll come in, and she'll bring me my slippers. She's standin' there waitin' to kiss me. And she'll be preparing food and she'll say, "Jimmy, dinner'll be ready almost any time. Why don't you sit back and drink the beer and watch television for a while." Or, even read the paper or take out a book you like. And maybe you'll have kids. In marriage, kids suddenly spring up, you know. You don't be expecting it, but suddenly they spring up. Like my problem was, there was a restaurant and they always played music and I like to dance. Certain music makes you be in different moods. Music has a strange effect on people. Each day I'd start out for school, you know, in the morning. You'd say, "I'm going to school." But you wind up, here you are in the restaurant. I get on that bus and I'd be four blocks from home. All of a sudden you visualize the music. You start tapping your feet, you feet get itchy, you want to be there. You say, "Oh, I can miss the first period. What's that? They won't even notice I'm gone. But you really do be intendin' to go to the second class. When you get over to the restaurant, you start dancing. Pretty soon the whole day is gone. And here you are, you're saying, "Well, tomorrow for sure I'm going." And this'll continue and it'll continue and pretty soon here you are, you're out of school. And then there's the kids, they're smaller and smaller each year. You say, "Well, here I am. I'm eighteen. I'm older than these kids." And you gotta look for something to occupy your time. You're not in school any more, so what are you gonna do? And I'm thinking will I be like the rest of my friends-- standing all day by the tavern, waiting for somebody to buy a drink? Wastin' my days drinking wine?

THE INTERLOCUTOR

(On tape.) You worry about what's gonna happen when you grow older?

[Jimmy thinks. The Interlocutor presses stop before Jimmy can answer.]

Jimmy disappears as The Interlocutor makes notes.

The Interlocutor changes cassettes, presses fast forward, presses stop, presses play. He picks up a legal pad, reads his notes for one interview as he listens to the tape of another.]

LUCY JEFFERSON

When I first came from Mississippi--

FLORENCE SCALA

I was born in Chicago--

LUCY

-- I was so young and innocent.

HAL MALDEN

I worked for three years for an insurance company.

LUCY

I was freer--

FLORENCE

-- and I've always loved Chicago.

LUCY

I was freer--

FLORENCE

I'm not sure any more. I love it and I hate it every day.

HAL

I hated that job so much that one Friday I took my check and went and cashed it and walked right out and got on a highway and hitchhiked to Mexico City.

LUCY

I was freer--

FLORENCE

I love the excitement of the city. But there's detachment, too.

[Lucy shares a knowing smile with Florence. (Aside from this one gesture, we should, at this point of the performance, have no sense that Lucy and Florence are in the same room during their interview.)]

LUCY

My superior once said to me, "Now Lucy, you sit here at this desk and answer the phone. And I think you should tell me what's going on because people here say things to you they wouldn't dare say to me.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Because, after all, you're just part of the furniture." Nobody noticed you then. Because there wasn't enough of us. That's why I can say I was freer when I first came to Chicago than I am now. Because you were there, but nobody bothered about seeing you. Now, when she said that to me I said, now here's the chance for all the hate in the world. But you know what really happened? I felt so sorry for the poor thing. Some Negro went out in the steel mill and he shot up a lot of people, and after that-- Oh, I tell ya, I'm very wicked..

After that I'd take her arm and say, (With an air of conspiracy.) "Miss Pruner, I want to talk to you about somethin'." And I slammed the door and she'd freeze. I wasn't going to do anything to her, but she. . . [Prolonged laugh.] I am just telling you how wicked I am. I'm an awful louse. Ladies aren't supposed to carry on like that.

THE INTERLOCUTOR

(On tape.) Like what?

LUCY

In that free way. But I do, because I like it.

HAL

I came back from Mexico City, and tried to make the nine-to-five bit again. But I couldn't. I felt lost. I was grouping around. That was about hour years ago.

FLORENCE

You don't really feel part of Chicago today, 1965. Not anymore. Not the way you did when I was growing up. I don't anyway.

LUCY

I worked at Wesley Hospital for about eleven years. It's a very fashionable hospital, Wesley. They call you by your first name, the students, everybody. This was the policy to keep the Negro in his place. But I happened to be the kind of Negro that became controversial, because I happened to read such things as The American Dilemma and I walk around with a book in my hand. I defied them in so many ways. I almost terrified them.

THE INTERLOCUTOR

(On tape.) What is it they're afraid of?

LUCY

This is what. You are breaking down this stereo thing that all Negroes are ignorant, they won't read, they won't do this, they won't help themselves. Once they see you're trying to do it. . . You see what? They're not really worried so much about the Negro, they're worried about themselves.

FLORENCE

When I was young, it was like I wore blinders. I wasn't hurt by anything. When you become involved, that's when you begin to feel the hurt, the anger. I grew up around Hull House. I knew people like Jane Addams and Jessie Binford--

THE INTERLOCUTOR

(To himself.) Jessie Binford. (Rummaging through his notes. Trying to connect this name with some part of his memory.) Jessie Binford. Jessie Binford. Jessie Binford. . .

FLORENCE

-- and you come to realize why they were able to live on.

[The Interlocutor stops the tape, silencing Florence. He takes off the head phones.]

THE INTERLOCUTOR

(To Florence.) Who's Jessie Binford.?

FLORENCE

Miss Binford worked with Jane Addams at Hull House. As kids we were do afraid of her. She had such dignity. She and I are friends, now. In the past four or five years we have become very close. She lived at Hull House right up to the very end.

[Satisfied with Florence's explanation, The Interlocutor puts the headphones back on his head, presses play.]

HAL

I joined the army in 1957. I had some ideas that maybe it was a panacea. I thought that a professional soldier was the ideal man. In twenty-four hours, I saw it wasn't what I thought it was going to be. It was just about like anything else I'd run across.

LUCY

I have learned that a Negro woman can do anything she wants to do if she's got enough nerve.. So can white man. But a white woman and a Negro man are slaves to this day.

HAL

I got out of the Army on Saint Valentine's Day in '58. I joined the American Nazi party in 1961.

FLORENCE

Sometimes as a kid I used to feel so ashamed of where I came from. I'd meet young girls from another background. Even the kinds of food we ate sometimes. . . we didn't eat roast beef, we had macaroni. My father was a tailor in a very poor neighborhood.

FLORENCE (CONT'D)

He never had money to send us to school; though we were not impoverished. Through my teens I was a volunteer at Hull House. That's where I met Eli Hulbert--

THE INTERLOCUTOR

Eli Hulbert?

FLORENCE

One of Miss Addam's nephews. He's the one who introduced me to the idea of city planning. He got me to see that we have a responsibility to make our neighborhoods a place people would want to live. He convinced me you could have a tree on the west side, see?

That's when my life changed. I got involved. I started talking to people like the banker, and the social worker, and the Board of Trustees at Hull House. And I suddenly realized my inadequacy. I couldn't understand their language. So I went back to school.

HAL

I never wore a Nazi uniform.

[Hal's statement takes The Interlocutor by surprise. He removes the headphones and begins speaking to Hal directly.]

THE INTERLOCUTOR

Even once?

HAL

No, I never did. I didn't feel I had the right to.

FLORENCE

I used to idolize people. Think they were smarter and could never make a mistake. This is one thing that lots of people who come out of poor areas don't have. Not to be afraid to say something even though it may be way off base. I did this many times and I'd just be embarrassed. But Eli Hulbert kept saying it makes no difference. Just keep at it. I began to lose the feeling of idolatry I had about people.

HAL

I've always been very sensitive about having something I don't feel I have the right to have. I've always felt that I was, somehow, awkward or clumsy or something. That I was inept. I don't think I am now, any more than anyone else is. And if I am, so what? But I did wear an olive suit and a white shirt and a black tie. I just happened to have one. Maybe I was trying to wear a uniform without really wearing it. I laugh at some of the funny things I used to take so seriously.

FLORENCE

Like, in the early sixties, the city realized it had to have a branch of the University of Illinois. One of the mayor's advisors, a man who was a member of the Hull House board, suggested they build the University in our neighborhood. The area around Hull House..To him we were disposable.

A member of the Hull House board took me to lunch a couple of times at the University Club. Me! My husband said, "Go. Go have a free lunch and see what she wants." What she wanted was to dissuade me from protesting. "There was no hope,": she said. I had a high regard for her. I thought she would fight the people's fight, but she was elected to convince me not to go on. I could see that she allowed me to be just so friendly, and there was a place beyond which I couldn't go. There was a difference between us. There a was place beyond which she wouldn't go, either. See?

HAL

I didn't make speeches because I didn't feel I had what it takes to get out there. All I did was anytime someone came to town, I would put them up with me.

FLORENCE

One board meeting. . . poor Miss Binford. We came with a committee and a plea. Miss Binford was in her late eighties, you know. Small, bird-like in appearance. She talked about principles that must never waiver. No one answered her. Or acknowledged her. It's as though we were talking to a stone wall. Then they voted and they decided to demolish our neighborhood.

LUCY

The white man has set his woman up on a pedestal. He's trying to prove to her how superior he is. Truly, he's not superior, he's just another little boy. She has to stay there if she wants to be anybody. If she ever learns anything and strays, she's an outcast. Me, you know what I can do? I can do any cotton pickin' thing I feel like doing.

THE INTERLOCUTOR

A white woman is more a slave than you?

LUCY

Oh, by all standards. The black woman has to have nerve, though. She has to have experience. And she needs a little education to go along with it.

HAL

One thing everyone seems to have in common was a terrible frustration. There were really no happy people in this thing. Someone always had some kind of bug. They have this enemy called, "They." You ask one of them who "they" is, they'll say, "Well, the Jews." You say, "Who?" "Well, you know." If you say, "No, I don't know. Tell me.," they become very frustrated.

HAL (CONT'D)

They get agitated and they say, "Hell, you wouldn't believe it if I told you."  
 "They"-- the Negro, the Communist. . . "They" is someone who is keeping them from their rightful place in society.

When I came to jail here everyone knew who I was. I was whacked a few times by some Negroes. I honestly thought I was going to be killed. I thought when night comes, I'm going to get my throat cut. I stayed up all night, just expecting any minute for it to happen. A Negro man came over. We talked a few minutes and he left. And nobody bothered me. A few days later, I found out it was Big Tom. Somebody told me, "He runs the place here. If you're alright with him, you're alright with everybody." All the guy did was come over and ask me if I still felt the way I did. I told him honestly I didn't. My whole system of values was shaken up. I didn't know what the hell I believed in, but I didn't feel that way about anybody any more.

Getting out of jail was like coming into the world again. I believed with all my heart there had to be something more to the world than what I had found so far. I found people who were willing to accept me. I got a job tending bar in Old Town. I met Little Brother Montgomery. I got to hear him every night and play poker with him. Of course, they were of all races and all religious backgrounds. I didn't know until the end of the summer that these people knew about me and they hadn't said anything.

I don't know if this had anything to do with it or not. I met a Negro girl and really fell in love with her. She taught me a lot. She showed me another society that I didn't know anything about. She had never really met a Southern white. I think we taught each other about different kinds of people.

THE INTERLOCUTOR

What was her name?

HAL

(Cautious. Afraid withholding information violates the terms of their agreement.) I'd rather not say.

THE INTERLOCUTOR

Oh.

HAL

If that's alright with you.

THE INTERLOCUTOR

Of course.

HAL

She's never done anything wrong. I don't want her name getting mixed up in anything I've done.

THE INTERLOCUTOR

I understand completely.

End of excerpt.