

## **Journey of a Story – Synopsis**

The film opens during rehearsals for a play. At the helm is a young theatre director, Laurence Burton. Laurence has decided to put the life of renowned New Zealand WWII POW and novelist William Brown on the stage as his first major project.

As part of his research he asks William to come to the theatre and share some personal insights into his life story.

In flashback, William shares with Laurence details of his marriage to his love, Lily in 1938. The following year the couple welcomes the birth of their son James. But this celebration is overshadowed by the arrival of WWII and the New Zealand involvement. The actress playing Lily in the stage production becomes fascinated, partly as research for her character and partly out of genuine interest, and sits in on William's story telling.

Soon William is sent overseas and Lily is left to fend for herself and their young son.

Not long into his tour of duty, William is forced to abandon his bombed ship along with a number of other men. They make their way ashore in Greece, only to be captured by the enemy and sent to a Prisoner of War Camp in Austria.

Returning to the present day in the theatre, William reflects on how difficult it was for Lily being left at home with their young son. Letters are exchanged between the husband and wife, but because of war, these fragments of communication are all they have. This period of Lily's life is played in detail in front of the elderly William on stage.

After three years of hard labour on a camp farm, William and his Australian friend Jack enter into a daring escape which results in William receiving devastating leg wounds. William and Jack are taken in by a sympathetic Austrian family who hide them under their floorboards. It is here they spend the remaining months of the war.

Theatre director Laurence takes advantage of breaks in William's story to fill in some of the details – both factual and emotional – that he thinks will help him make a better stage play.

The town where William and Jack are hiding is eventually liberated by advancing American troops and William is able to return to New Zealand. However, due to the prolonged period in a cramped space and little medical attention, he is left with limited mobility.

Elderly William watches with some discomfort as a scene is played on stage of his return to Auckland in 1945. Unable to walk himself into his own home, William meets the son who has never known him. Now back home with his family in New Zealand, William struggles to adjust to family life. His disability means he cannot work, which means Lily must still 'bring home the bacon'. William falls into a deep depression that is only heightened when the family is forced to sell their home and move in with Lily's parents.

This sequence of the story is played out in shifting time frames between the play unfolding in rehearsal in the theatre, and flashbacks from William and Lily's point of view.

Three years elapse and William is still depressed. His relationship with his wife is strained at best. The happy times he has are spent with his son James and writing in a small notebook. It is in this notebook that he is able to articulate his feelings about the war and life after. However, Lily cannot cope with the dramatic change in William, and after an angry outburst Lily sends him to live with his

brother, Thomas. Only months later, Lily's mother dies. William cannot help but feel responsible for the added pressure.

Laurence, essentially a scholar of William's life through his research for the play, senses a pivotal point in the story. Knowing that a single person in William's life at that point was attentive and vigilant enough to realise William's potential, Laurence asks William if he would care to take a look at the scenes involving the medical officer, Dr Pike.

The scene plays out on stage, with William looking on: at the war office, William is talking with his Dr Pike, who senses that all is not well. After some discussion it comes out that William gets much enjoyment from his writing. Dr Pike becomes alert to the fact that this diversion for William could be of major benefit to his recovery and encourages him to take up his pen in a more structured and positive way.

William's return to something of his former self means that he is able to go home to his wife and child. Although relations are still strained, William's life starts to resemble something of normality. William's confidence is bolstered once he appreciates that his son James looks up to and admires him.

Returning to the present and the theatre, elderly William relays to Laurence that his life was finally getting back on track. Seizing the opportunity, since he has all his actors ready, Laurence calls for the second sequence involving Dr Pike to be played out for William's approval.

Cutting to the stage, another meeting with Dr Pike and William is played out. Despite initial misgivings – punctuated with attacks of self-doubt, William gathers enough confidence to show his manuscript to a publisher on Dr Pike's polite but firm insistence.

Dissolving from the stage into a flashback, the story continues with an invigorated Lily submitting William's manuscript for 'The Dark Winter' to a local publisher. The action returns to the present, where elderly William and Laurence have escaped to the local RSA for a quiet beer after the strain of a day rehearsing in the theatre. William continues to relay how agonising it was in the weeks after submitting the manuscript, waiting to hear back from the publisher.

Finally, William hears that the manuscript has been accepted. The news helps to bring Lily and William's relationship back to where it was all those years before. William delivers a moving speech at his local bookstore where the launch is held, in front of a group of close friends and family.

Time then shifts forward ten years to another book release. William has obviously become well known and successful over the subsequent years.

Back at the RSA, Laurence is growing satisfied that he has heard all he needs to know from William to direct a compelling and moving play. During the previous two days of story-telling, the two have grown close. However, one thing is still bothering Laurence – how did William overcome his physical disability? Through some miracle or self-help cure? Elderly William capitulates and adds an addendum to the story of the night of the first book launch, discovering that the strongest bonds 'tying him' to the chair were psychological.

A few days later, we see another elderly man in a rest-home reading a newspaper. The headline reads 'Noted New Zealand author cancels biographical play'. Arriving at William's doorstep a few days later clutching the newspaper is none other than Jack. Jack berates William for selfishly canceling the play because of the recent and tragic death of James. William is stubborn, but both men have been friends for sixty years and Jack isn't leaving without a fight. Jack argues that the performance of the play is the most grand tribute a husband and father could give to his family.

Relenting, William pays Laurence one final visit and agrees to allow the performance to go ahead. The curtain rises on opening night. Many Returned Servicemen are present, along with William and Laurence. The night is a success.

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