

MARTYRED: THE CHET BITTERMAN STORY

By Dan Neidermyer

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Just before dawn, January 18, 1981, 29-year-old Chet Bitterman was kidnapped at gunpoint in Bogota, Columbia, and held hostage for 48 days. Rebels demanded all Wycliffe Bible translators leave Columbia or Chet would be killed. Abducted from his wife and two toddlers, Chet had recently come to Columbia to live with a remote tribe and develop for that tribe their own language in written form. He would then translate the scriptures into that language. Chet's is a valiant story of courage and witness under vicious pressure, a story of caring for his kidnapers, concern for his family and true faithfulness to his Lord that ended in martyrdom.

SET

This play can be performed in any size, any type facility, with or without a stage. "Specific locations" are mentioned for the purpose of identifying locales of the play's action. Such locales can be suggested through the use of very simple set pieces such as a chair, a night stand, four folding chairs, etc.

PROPS

Small bedside lamp, rifles (used by guerrillas; optional), chair (in guerrilla interrogation cellar), piece of paper (used by Emilio), gun (used by Raul; can be a starter gun used at athletic meets), suitcase (used by Marsha), 2 telephones (used by Chester and Bernie), M-19 banner/flag (large piece of material made to appear as such).

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(7 M, 4 W, 2 optional roles, plus extras as desired)

CHESTER BITTERMAN, III: (“Chet”) 29-year-old Bible translator ministering in Colombia.

BRENDA BITTERMAN: Wife to Chet, daughter of Wycliffe Bible Translators missionaries in Colombia.

***ANNA RUTH:** Chet and Brenda’s 3-year-old.

***ESTHER ELIZABETH:** Chet and Brenda’s 2-year-old.

RAUL: M-19 captor/interrogator.

EMILIO: Raul’s fellow M-19 revolutionary.

BRAD: Wrestling buddy and friend of Chet.

BERNIE MAY: Missionary pilot for JAARS (Wycliffe’s Jungle Aviation and Radio Service) and U.S. Director of Wycliffe Bible Translators.

MARSHA: Friend of Chet at Columbia Bible College.

FRED: Fellow missionary in Colombia.

MARCIA: Another.

CHESTER BITTERMAN, JR.: (“Chester”) Father of Chet, late 40s to early 50s.

MARY BITTERMAN: Mother of Chet, also late 40s to early 50s.

EXTRAS: M-19 guerrilla rebels, announcers for “Radio Bogota” and “American Radio” (on tape/unseen), announcer for roller rink (on tape/unseen).

***NOTE:** The roles of “Anna Ruth” and “Esther Elizabeth” are optional, based on the availability of actresses.

NOTE: Please see end of playbook for the background story of Chet Bitterman.

PLEASE NOTE

The use of darkness is crucial to the play's developing action. To sustain the mounting tension surrounding Chet's capture and kidnapping, no "dead time" should occur between scenes. Rather, dialogue and action should continue as the lights fade to black. Also, during this blackness, the actor playing Chet can change various articles of clothing which assist in identifying the different time periods depicted within this play.

Two individuals can play the role of Chet Bitterman. One older-looking actor could play Chet during the interrogation scenes with Raul. A younger-looking actor could play the teenage and college-age Chet. The script is written for one actor, thus the clothing change suggestions. If two actors are used, the clothing suggestions continue to be appropriate for the younger Chet.

SYNOPSIS

Place: Most of the action takes place in and around Bogota, Colombia, and in several locations of Chet Bitterman's teenage and college life.

Time: Much of the action occurs between January 19, 1981, the day of Chet Bitterman's kidnapping by M-19 revolutionaries, and March 7, 1981, the day of his martyrdom, with several flashbacks into Chet's teenage and college years.

Scene 1: Mission guest house, Bogota, Colombia. Night, January 19, 1981.

Scene 2: A dark cellar in some nondescript building somewhere in Bogota. Four days later, January 23, 1981.

Scene 3: Family room in a neighbor's house, near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. During Chet's high school days.

Scene 4: Guerrilla interrogation cellar, January 23, 1981.

Scene 5: Campus of Columbia Bible College, Columbia, South Carolina. Start of Thanksgiving vacation, November, 1970.

Scene 6: Mission guest house, January 23, 1981.

NOTE: Within Scene 6, there is some action in another section of the staging area, designated as the home of Chester and Mary Bitterman, Jr., near Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Scene 7: Roller-skating rink, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Night, January, 1975.

Scene 8: Chester and Mary Bitterman, Jr.'s house, Morning, January 23, 1981.

NOTE: Within Scene 8, there is brief action in another section of the staging area, designated as Bernie May's office in Huntington Beach, California.

Scene 9: Guerrilla interrogation cellar. Morning of February 18, 1981, one day before M-19's deadline.

Scene 10: Mission guest house, February 18, 1981.

Scene 11: Guerrilla interrogation cellar. Night of March 6/morning of March 7, 1981.

Scene 12: Guerrilla interrogation cellar. Mid-morning, March 7, 1981.

Scene 13: Front of the staging area. Today.

NOTE: The play was written to be presented without an intermission to sustain the mounting tension of the imprisonment.

COSTUMES

The GUERRILLAS could wear ski masks and camouflage. CHET, BRENDA, and the OTHERS would dress in styles in keeping with the mid-to-late 1970s.

NOTE: Clothing is used to locate and identify specific periods within Chet's life. Such clothing can be very simple items such as a T-shirt and shorts, a bulky sweater, etc. If the character of Chet is played by just one actor, he never exits the staging area, thus clothing should be easy to pull on and off and placed in areas easily accessible in the dark.

SFX

A telephone (can be on tape)

Background music appropriate for a roller-skating rink

NEWS BROADCASTS

Throughout the play, news reports and bulletins update the audience concerning the guerrillas' demands, as well as actions being taken concerning securing the release of Chet Bitterman. These "broadcasts" could quite easily be taped or performed live, at the director's discretion. Similar suggestions are offered concerning Chet's comments that begin and end the play.

End of Freeview

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