

Richard Woulfe

The brothers Wilde



THE BROTHERS WILDE

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PREFACE

The curtains open in the front room of a house, where Willy Wilde is living with his mother, Speranza, and his wife Lily. Oscar arrives alone, seeking shelter, just after an inconclusive trial in relation to his homosexuality.

The play explores the brothers' troubled childhood, and how they both ignored rather than worked through these emotional conflicts. One also glimpses a cross section of the *upper middle class* family *milieu* of the last '800, in particular how the sexual indiscretions of their father, Sir William Wilde, were never discussed within the family.

The two brothers are in a vulnerable situation. Willy has failed both as a barrister and as a journalist, and now seeks comfort from a bottle of whisky; Oscar has suddenly fallen from a successful playwright to being vilified in public, with the strong possibility of a prison sentence.

A derisive ballad (which was doing the rounds in Ireland while Willy and Oscar were both children) recalling the public disgrace of Sir William is a kind of tragic chorus which inexorably destroys the possibility of reconciliation between the sons.

Lily, Willy's second wife, is the only character who seems realistic about his predicament: while his brother and mother insist he must stay and fight to clear his name in court, she suggests that it is possible to leave the country.

The continuous interaction of pretence and the theatrical way of behaviour calls to mind "*The Importance of Being Earnest*" [*Honest*]. Indeed, specific lines from the play, which depict the relationship between the two brothers, Algy and Jack, are used. But one can also find ironic reference to the self-conscious rhetoric of Oscar Wilde's classicism, and from the dramatic poetics of *Reading Gaol*. As well as a return to the childhood innocence of the *Tales*, which Woulfe reminds us of in the story of a teddy bear!

Richard Woulfe is from Limerick (Ireland), but has lived in London for many years. In 1996 he wrote *No Smoke Without Fire* for radio. In 2001 a stage play of his, *Homehelp*, ran for three weeks at the White Bear Theatre – London. In 2011, *His Most-Obedient Servant*, was produced for radio by *The Wireless Theatre Company*. In 2012, *RTE Radio* (Ireland's national radio station) broadcasted *A muse is it I am?*, a play based in Trieste on the relationship between James Joyce and his partner/wife. Other pieces have been performed in London, Belfast and elsewhere.

Richard Woulfe often writes from a historical perspective, combining humour with a serious message. *The Brothers Wilde* falls into that category.

*Anyone can sympathise with the sufferings of
a friend but it requires a very fine nature to
sympathise with a friend's success.*

Oscar Wilde.

CAST

WILLY, Oscar's brother, aged 42.

OSCAR, Oscar Wilde, aged 40.

SPERANZA, His mother. In her 70's.

LILY, Willy's wife, aged 30.

SYNOPSIS

What happens when one brother is successful and the other isn't? And then the successful one suddenly and dramatically falls. This happened to Oscar Wilde, and on the night his second trial collapsed he went to his brother Willy's house.

Willy was two-years older, a qualified barrister (though he never practiced), and at one time a competent journalist. He also tried his hand at poetry. But Willy was lazy, drank heavily and leaned on his mother for financial support.

It is possible to sympathise with Willy's situation. He has been overlooked by the family, and was badly affected as a schoolboy by a scandal involving his father. Nonetheless, his refusal to face his past and his vindictiveness are not endearing.

Oscar meanwhile realises that his own downfall brings a parity of sorts. His disgrace can allow his brother to restore a sense of self-worth. As a result Oscar is willing to seek reconciliation.

There is a slightly unrealistic atmosphere throughout – an eeriness that suggests the event is only a fantasy of Willy's.

SCENE 1

A DARK LIVING ROOM, WITH SHABBY VICTORIAN FURNITURE. THERE ARE TWO EXITS, ONE LEADING TO THE FRONT DOOR. A BOX HAS WILLY'S COAT ON IT. IT IS POSSIBLE TO MAKE OUT THE IMPRINT OF A COUPLE OF PAINTINGS REMOVED FROM THE WALL.

WILLY IS SITTING DOWN, WRITING; WHISKY BY HIS SIDE.

WILLY. Tapping with his beak... against the pane... and fell down on the... on my threshold. He came tapping with his beak against the window-pane, and fell down on my threshold like a wounded... hm... hunted...like a hunted stag. SIPS WHISKY.
(FINISHES WRITING WITH A FLOURISH.) Give me shelter, Willy, let me lie on the floor or I shall die in the streets.

KNOCK ON DOOR WITH KNUCKLES.

OSCAR. (HUSHED, DRAMATIC, FROM OUTSIDE.) Willy.

WILLY. He's here.

KNOCK IS LOUDER.

WILLY. And wishes to come in.

OSCAR. Willy, let me in.

KNOCK IS LOUDER.

OSCAR. Willy, it's your brother.

WILLY. My brother who's not been to my house in two years. SIPS WHISKY.

KNOCK IS LOUDER.

OSCAR. Willy, unlock this door, I know you are there.

WILLY. He missed my wedding yet what is that to Oscar. Sends a telegram "Darling Willy – I do hope it works better second time round".

KNOCK IS NOT SO LOUD.

OSCAR. We must not wake mother, Willy.

PAUSE.

Oh, Willy, do answer.

KNOCK IS NOT SO LOUD.

OSCAR. I have nowhere else to go, Willy.

WILLY GOES TO THE DOOR, WHISKY IN HAND.

KNOCK IS NOT SO LOUD.

WILLY DOWNS HIS WHISKY. HE OPENS THE DOOR.

WILLY. Oscar. Well, well.

OSCAR. Willy, why did you wait so long in opening? This is intolerable. COMES IN.

WILLY. Whatever's the matter, old chap?

OSCAR. This is intolerable, Willy. You know what a day I have had.

WILLY. The result was inconclusive. I heard.

OSCAR. Heard? You were there. And extracted at least two five pound notes from my counsel. Not that you once thought of coming over to offer me support.

WILLY. Nowhere else to go? No hotel willing to accept you?

OSCAR. You'd have me in a hotel? Your brother?

WILLY. No friend to take you in, no accomplice in the *demi-monde* of paper-boys, stable-boys, telegram boys, luggage boys, and heaven-knows what other boys you were so eager to associate with?

OSCAR. The lawyers will go for a discharge but I don't see how. I expect a re-trial.

(LOOKING FOR COMMON GROUND.) Willy, what have I done?

WILLY. You don't know?

OSCAR. Mother. Connie. And my two boys. What will it do to my two boys? I cannot talk about this with anyone but you. You remember my bear?

WILLY. Pardon?

OSCAR. (TAKING COAT OFF.) You do. You must. When you were young. I gave it to you.

WILLY. A bear?

OSCAR. Afterwards I remembered how much I liked it and the enormity of my sacrifice and we'd joke so. Whenever we quarrelled, "give me back my bear", I'd say, "you don't deserve my bear". Remember, Willy.

THE DOOR IS BANGED – SHOUTS OUTSIDE OF "COME OUT WILDE", "SODOMITE", "POSEUR".

WILLY. Who's this?

OSCAR IS SILENT.

(GOING TO DOOR.) Ruffians – what do you think you are doing?

(OPENS DOOR.) I see you – I shall have the police on you.

OSCAR. Please, don't call out the police.

WILLY. (SHOUTING.) I'm not one to forget a face – how dare you interrupt the peace of a law-abiding gentleman.

CLOSES DOOR. COMES BACK.

Who are those roughs? Do they belong to Douglas?

OSCAR. No, not dear Bosie.

WILLY. Or his father, Marquis of Queensbury? What's this "dear Bosie"?

OSCAR. Willy, give me shelter, say you will. Where can I place my coat?

WILLY. Will you stay and face the music?

OSCAR. What?

WILLY. I've heard you plan to flee the country – promise me you'll remain and take whatever the law throws at you.

OSCAR. I've no such plans.

WILLY. You've not answered the question – I demand an assurance you won't abscond – you're a gentleman and you will face the music.

OSCAR. Oh, Willy, will you never lose your training as a barrister – say I can stay with you and that makes me happy. GIVES COAT TO WILLY.

WILLY. Well... for tonight. (PUTTING COAT ON BOX.)
I can surely put my brother up for one night.

OSCAR. Do you not have a coat-stand?

WILLY. That bail you were given... what time was it?

OSCAR. Time?

WILLY. I've never heard of bail been granted later than early afternoon – for a start the magistrates have all gone home. (LAUGHS.) Where have you been from the time you were released until now?

OSCAR. I hope you do not make it a condition of my staying here that I need account for my every movement.

WILLY. You tried to stay in a hotel at first but were denied entrance. Those roughs pursued you from door to door and in doing so frightened each and every hotel manager. My deductions are correct.

OSCAR. Willy, I pay the rent for this house. I send it to mother and she gives it to you.

WILLY. Nonetheless I'll allow you stay. Here.

OSCAR. Here?

WILLY. The couch. Should suit your purposes admirably.

OSCAR. I'm to have no privacy? There are other rooms...

WILLY. My wife and I require all other available space.
(AS THOUGH A SUDDEN REALISATION.) You've not met my wife.

OSCAR. I've heard your wife is very dear – her name's Lily.

WILLY. Never mind your "very dear" – this room, take it or leave it.

OSCAR. Willy – you sound like a tradesman. Earlier also you said «face the music.»

WILLY. Is that a refusal?

OSCAR. Did I say I would refuse?

WILLY. Speak plainly. Take it or leave it.

OSCAR. (PAUSE.) I'll take it.

WILLY. You can leave if so desired. I won't have my hospitality questioned.

OSCAR. Thank you, Willy.

WILLY. My name on this house – I could as easily put you out again (TAKES COVER OFF SOFA AND SHAKES IT.) I remember your first play. Vera – Vera and the Nihilists... or was it Vera and the Anarchists?

OSCAR. Nihilists.

WILLY. (SHAKING COVER.) All about Russian revolutionaries and terribly seditious and how the Czar's about to be murdered and how love and loyalty arise in the most unlikely of places. Then the Czar was murdered. Not to your words but on the streets of St. Petersburg. Needless to say, we couldn't go off to see it – not with the Czarina's sister's married to our Prince of Wales. What is it your pithy aphorism – life imitates art, but here life is unaware of art's very existence. HANDS COVER TO OSCAR.

OSCAR. I'll go to sleep, Willy – I will speak to you in the morning. And mother.

WILLY. As you please. (GOES FOR A DRINK.)

OSCAR. On the couch.

WILLY. What we agreed.

OSCAR. In front of me.

WILLY. (POURING DRINK.) The very one you're looking at.

OSCAR. (STARTS MAKING BED.) Goodnight.

WILLY DRINKS.

OSCAR. Willy.

WILLY. A drink you require?

OSCAR. No, I have had a long day.

PAUSE.

Can you...?

WILLY. Is the bedding not to your liking?

OSCAR. It is adequate.

WILLY. There is a cushion you can use also.

OSCAR. Thank you.

WILLY. Perhaps you are unused to making your own bed?

OSCAR. Are you going to stay in the room?

WILLY. Pardon?

OSCAR. I need to undress.

WILLY. A little thing like a man naked is not likely to upset my applectart
– haven't I seen you fully in the buff on many is the occasion.

OSCAR. When we were children, Willy.

WILLY. What's with you you're so uncomfortable about the thing? Are
you all like that? Why in God's name did you get up to what it is you
got up to? You so intelligent, Oscar.

OSCAR. Willy, I'll answer in time, please allow me rest.

WILLY. Say whatever you like but my vices at least are decent.

OSCAR. (SUDDENLY RILED.) Decent? You decent and I not? Not I
who committed a crime but the society which condemns me. My love is
entirely natural and in ancient times venerated above all others.

WILLY. I hope you didn't say that to the magistrate.

OSCAR. When is it we two fell out?

WILLY. Pardon?

OSCAR. Your anonymous review...«The play is a bad one but it will succeed.»

WILLY. I had a regular feature then on both *Vanity Fair* and *The Daily Telegraph*.

OSCAR. «The author people's his play with male and female editions of himself, and from their 'little lips' we seem to feel the breath of his own beautiful voice. The duchess and the duke, the maiden and the master, the loafer and the libertine all exhibit a curious propensity for parroting his own paradoxes.»

WILLY. The exact words you remember?

OSCAR. «No faults of construction, no failure of interest, no feebleness in character drawing, no staleness in motive, will weigh in the scale against the insolence of its caricature. Society loves best those who chaff it most, and society will rush to see Lady Windermere and will cringe to be tickled by the fan. When they are sitting in the theatre they will laugh because their enemies are ridiculed, and when they come home, they will ridicule the author.»

WILLY. The review was anonymous – you do not know it was me.

OSCAR. Was it you?

WILLY. I gave you your first break. *Vanity Fair*.

OSCAR. I do so much dislike the word "break".

WILLY. You were nothing in London till I gave you a break.
(CAMP.) «On the first night, from where I was sitting, I could see nothing of the steps of the minuet. Its possibly graceful movements were eclipsed by the conductor's head and those of his fatally obvious attendant fiddlers.»

OSCAR. (LAUGHS.) I wrote that – Willy, I'm sorry. So sorry, Willy.

WILLY. (SERIOUS.) Bonhomie – how I describe my sweep. Such and such excels in the role of... We marvel at the irresistible performance by...

OSCAR. I was young then.

WILLY. Willy is a friend to actors and managers. Good friend to the actor Charles Brookfield.

OSCAR. (SHAKEN.) Brookfield?

WILLY. «He has already made his mark in many a quaint character part and many a queer old man on these boards, and now he ventures to walk alone – managerially.» What does that mean? «There is the bearing of the Duke of Wellington in his make-up, which is rather odd for a man of fifty-six.» What in God's name does that mean? In any case, the man was then in his twenties.

OSCAR. His demeanour I am referring to.

WILLY. Should he be more in your vein, that's what you're implying? Charles Brookfield is a friend of mine.

OSCAR. You did not say, Willy.

WILLY. Charles is respectable and will resent terribly your imputations – whatever they might be. Whether you like it or no, you're a man with a wife and two children and I caution you to act responsibly. Do you get my meaning? Do you now?

OSCAR. Charles Brookfield is helping the prosecution prepare a case against me. There's a noise...is it?

SPERANZA COMES IN.

WILLY GOES TO HER.

SPERANZA. He's here. Oscar.

WILLY. Mother, it's late. It's best wait till morning.

SPERANZA. I will see my son. Oh, Oscar.

OSCAR. Mother.

SPERANZA. (EMBRACING OSCAR.) Whatever have they done?
You're pale.

WILLY. Mother, it's late.

SPERANZA. You will stay and fight?

WILLY. Oscar's a gentleman and will face the...

SPERANZA. If you stay, even if you go to prison, you will always be my son. It'll make no difference to my affection. But if you go, I'll never speak to you again.

OSCAR. Mother, I may have to go.

SPERANZA. No. You can't. What would your father say?

OSCAR. What is it to do with father?

WILLY. Oscar will face the-

SPERANZA. Ssh! I faced the jury.

OSCAR. It wasn't the same, Mother.

SPERANZA. That Travers woman... her allegations... so sordid...

WILLY. We never mention that woman.

OSCAR. Mary Travers said father took advantage of her during an operation.

SPERANZA. Your father was a renowned oculist, knighted for his work.

OSCAR. Were those allegations true, Mother?

WILLY. We do not mention Mary Travers-

SPERANZA. Ssh! I wrote to her father requesting no such slanders be repeated. Content I was to leave it at that. She took my letter and bore it to court.

WILLY. She was awarded one farthing. One miserable farthing.

OSCAR. That means she won.

SPERANZA. Hired the best counsel she did – a friend he was to the Wildes – very good and dear friend to me.

OSCAR. He didn't pursue the case thoroughly?

SPERANZA. (SHOUTING.) No, No.
More thoroughly than if he were my most bitter enemy. He wanted his name in the newspapers.

WILLY. I remember the case.

OSCAR. So do I.

WILLY. I was twelve and I was at boarding school.

OSCAR. I as ten and at the same boarding school.

WILLY. We were the closest of brothers.

OSCAR. Very.

WILLY. We told each other everything.

OSCAR. I never mentioned the trial to you.

WILLY. But you did.

OSCAR. We never spoke of our father.

WILLY. Did we not?

OSCAR. The other boys in my class did though.

WILLY. Not directly.

OSCAR. Directly.

WILLY. Not to my face.

OSCAR. You were popular – you were good at sports.

WILLY. I could still try my hand at Cricket.

OSCAR. You were one of the most popular boys in school.

WILLY. And a more-than-adequate oarsman, I tell you.

OSCAR. It was good to be brother of one of the most popular boys.

WILLY. Some say I take after my father.

OSCAR. His name was William.

WILLY. Sir William Wilde.

OSCAR. He worked hard.

WILLY. He was popular.

OSCAR. Successful.

WILLY. A literary man. Collector of myths and sagas. A gentleman.

OSCAR. Our father, do you think he...

WILLY. What?

OSCAR. He opened her eye? Wilde's incision.

WILLY. That refers to his skills as an oculist.

A GROUP OF BOYS CHANT THE FOLLOWING. (ONLY
HEARD MY WILLY.)

«An eminent oculist lives in the Square
His skill is unrivalled, his talent is rare,
And if you listen I'll certainly try
To tell how he opened Miss Travers's eye.»

WILLY. When I was twelve... a group of boys... I told them to stop...
desist.

OSCAR. It must have been difficult for you, Mother.

SPERANZA. You are Wilde and you will overcome this minor difficulty.

OSCAR. Father never spoke of the trial.

SPERANZA. We will write of these times – and how we defied them –
Willy, you a book, Oscar can pen a satire. Write of how we defied the
courts. How Oscar is prepared to stand in the dock for truth and
honour.

OSCAR. And his sons never knew the full truth.

SPERANZA. It bodes well to have my two distinguished sons shaking
hands again. Stay in this house as long as you wish. Willy, offer your
brother a drink, Lord knows you down enough of it yourself.

WILLY. It is a small house, mother.

SPERANZA. What?

WILLY. Of course I would like Oscar to stay...

SPERANZA. Oscar can help you to write that book. Get him a pair of
pyjamas. What are you drinking, Oscar?

WILLY. But we have to consider the practicalities.

SPERANZA. Get him a drink. Now.

WILLY. The last bottle... Yes, mother. Oscar, name that poison, whisky
or whisky? I could certainly down a small one myself.

SPERANZA. It is great you are back, Oscar. We shall smite their forgeries.

(BEAT.) The brothers Wilde.