

excerpts from *THE HOPE SLIDE*



Touchstone Theatre Production, Vancouver.
Actor: Leslie Jones



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The Hope Slide was first presented by the Tarragon Theatre, Toronto in March 1992 with the following:

Irene: Sarah Orenstein

Director: Glynis Leyshon

Set & Costume Designer: Sean Breough

Lighting Designer: W.F. Gosling

The Hope Slide takes place during one night in the Kootenays, a remote and mountainous area four hundred miles east of Vancouver, in 1990. During this night Irene travels from 1962 to 1967, from North Vancouver to the Doukhobor prison outside the town of Hope, from the turbulent Kootenays of the early sixties to the other side of Hope where a mountain collapsed in 1965.

The original set was a stylized interpretation of a burnt out school house, on a fairly steep rake with a scrim triangle dissecting the set upstage; Irene pushed against, played against this scrim during the three Doukhobor monologues. For Irene's final protest toward the end of the play we did use real fire — the flames came up through a grate upstage.

The running time is approximately eighty minutes. There is no intermission.

(Lights up on the adult Irene, thirty-seven years old. It is the middle of the night, in the Kootenays, January 1990. Irene is sitting in a comfortable chair, wrapped up in a quilt.)

My first version of girlie pictures were these grainy photographs of Doukhobor women that my brother cut out of the *Vancouver Sun* and kept in a drawer behind his socks. This long line of big bums and kerchiefs. We were United Church so all this was pretty exotic, sexy as hell. When I was very little I thought Doukhobor meant untidy but then I started thinking they were true heroes because they didn't send their kids to school and when they were really pissed off they burnt down the school altogether. School was always a horrible place for me. My marks were terrible; I had the attention span of a flea.

Wanna play teenager? This used to be my favourite game. We'd roll up our skirts, smoke cherry bark and run around kissing one another. Wanna play Teenage Doukhobor? It's the same idea only the one who's it has to take off her pants. I was a very religious child. I used to light kleenexes on fire and pray that Elvis would come, come to my house for supper. My parents would be out and all our furniture would be different.

In the seventies my friend Walter and I lived communally in the country and at first we attempted to organize our community on Doukhobor philosophy. We would have a meeting every Sunday, we would share household chores, men and women side by side and any money made outside our quarter section would go into a communal kitty. The system began to break down when none of us wanted to work at regular jobs, in fact none of us wanted to work period. Walter's definition of housework included braiding his hair. Walter was also completely in love with this really obnoxious guy called Peter who was one of our house mates. This divided us further. Then there was this poor cat who froze to death in a well, who later showed up as a shoulder bag and beret. This was a simpler time, a hopeful time. I was working with puppets — everyone was working with puppets — I still bought all my footwear at the House of Clogs.

January 1990 and I am travelling through Doukhobor country, through the Kootenays. I am a full-fledged actor, I am an actor on tour, solo, bringing my own one woman show to small places — three voices for the price of one. The characters I play were real people, ghosts I have stolen and made speak. Doukhobors. These are hard times and I am proud to be working. I am billeted with English teachers in interior towns; I eat surf 'n' turf with the head of the Chamber of Commerce. I arrive by bus, one a.m., exhausted and dying for a cigarette.

"I hope you like kids," a nervous mother asks me while handing me a towel. "Absolutely," which is true. "Our little ones are up pretty early." I assure her that I am both an early riser and a heavy sleeper — both lies.

I am exhausted but hyper, lying in a top bunk between Wayne Gretzky sheets — staring down at a No Smoking sign the size of my head. I climb down the ladder and into their strange living room. Through the window the great terror of mountains at night, a river beginning to freeze. I love my country — so beautiful and wild. My country is disappearing.

When the Doukhobors lived here they tried to create a heaven on earth. Forty of them living under one roof, families sleeping in long narrow beds, toe-to-toe. Everything was shared and because of this they prospered. As a girl they were heroes to me — model anarchists and rebels. Their expulsion from Russia I linked directly with my being expelled from Junior High School. Truant officers were the bane of their existence — well me too. I envied the Doukhobors many things but most of all I envied that they had a community.

I have a community now, I have the theatre and my community is under attack. The Minister of Revenue has just suggested a more "hands on" approach to funding the arts. I suggest we all lay our hands directly on the Minister of Revenue. But this is nothing compared to the real enemy.

The moon is full, the stars close and sharp looking, metallic, explosive. I prop open the sliding glass door so that I can sneak a cigarette. The air is very cold and clean. I am tired and I realize stupidly that I am down here because I am afraid to sleep, for the first time in years I am afraid of the dark. No more. No more funerals. Although I know many young men who look ahead with remarkable bravery, for many of my friends hope has become a threatened species, with a bowed head and awkward feet, cold and trembling. Terrified.

(Irene lights a candle and speaks in the voice of Mary Kalmakoff, twenty-four years old, 1965)

I am pushing out against something. It is thin but tough — a strong piece of skin or good cotton sheet. And then I am through, above the buried car. I see my friends beside it — blood-spattered and still. I have special sight: I can see through the dark, the snow. It is three a.m., January, and we were driving through the mountains. Avalanche I am thinking now, this is an avalanche because snow has come right through the roof, filled up the convertible. Everything is still. I push through the rocks and snow and boulders of ice as though they are air. Travel through all this cold like a vein of boiling water. My skin should be scraped raw but it is clear, white and warm.

Stupid. I am pushing the wrong way, a stupid little mole that means to rise up and out of the mountain but instead aims for the heart, the centre of the earth. Then suddenly I am in the air again and tumbling down, the mountain tumbles with me and I understand what has happened, the mountain has cracked — its whole face and front side fallen, buried the road and the valley, left the mountain half-gone and naked. It seems fetal, ridiculous, unborn. I understand now too that I am dead and never to be found. Lost outside the town of Hope. Me. Mary Kalmakoff, twenty-four years old, unmarried. Employee of the Penticton Fruit Growers. Religion — Doukhobor.

(Irene is fifteen, a few months later, she is talking to her truant officer.)

First off I want it made perfectly clear that reporting to you, Miss Toye, a truant officer-slash-psychologist, is a complete violation of my rights and all I hold sacred and dear. The form in front of you was signed under duress, a condition of my being allowed back in school that I was forced to agree to. I was backed into a corner, the pen practically jammed into my hand. Although I am not against education per se I believe attendance should be voluntary; cramming something down one's throat is hardly the way to inspire learning.

My understanding, Miss Toye, is that I am to report to and talk to you, my truant officer-slash-warden, personally once a month and that if I am absent from school without a phone call and note from my mother or the queen mother or God himself then I am going to be expelled again. I agree to these conditions although it is with a heavy heart that I am agreeing. I also agree to keep my clothes on at all times, even in gym class I will wear my shorts over my stupid dress to avoid causing any further rioting amongst the members of my class. But although I am no longer allowed to protest publicly, I want you to know Mary Kalmakoff, Harry Kootnikoff and Paul Podmorrow are still heroes to me, unsung martyrs whose song I intend to keep alive come hell or high water.

These were real people who died an unjust and horrible death. How'd you like a mountain to fall on your head Miss Toye? Or a bomb to explode in your lap? How'd you like to go on a hunger strike to get publicity but once you died nobody paid attention? The newspaper didn't even say it was sad. And this is absolutely the saddest thing that I think has ever happened but I do digress.

I would like you to write down right now that I, Irene Dickson, am absolutely thrilled to be back in school and that the idea of doing grade nine all over again is extremely exciting to me. I am turning over a new leaf, knuckling under and disappointment is no longer a part of my life. I see this September as a new starting point on the rocky and difficult road of the life of Me — Irene Dickson. You got all that?

What are you writing down? Everything on the form in front of you is totally true Except the part about my parents being divorced. It was an experiment I devised to see if people treat you any better if you come from a broken home. They don't. My parents get on like a house on fire, always have. The part about future occupation is true: dancer-slash-actress-slash-mayor of a great city. Present occupation: spirit wrestler. Meanness and forgiveness are growing inside me at an equal rate and creating an unholy war.

If you're going to write stuff down about me I think it is my right to see it Does it say there I have these theories? I.e. — last year I predicted North Van was going to slide into the ocean and settle like Atlantis under the Lions Gate Bridge. I also have several theories on hitch-hiking, sex and friendship, drunken boys, the end of the world and, of course, the Doukhobors. Take your pick.

...Okay, don't take your pick. Wanna talk about sex? No problem, anything goes here, I am an open book. Perhaps you are under the mistaken impression, along with the rest of this place, that Walter Dewitt is my boyfriend. That Walter Dewitt and I are doing it. Well we're not. I do not see Walter in that way. He is my friend, my best friend, as a matter of fact, my only friend. You know Walter. He is very skinny and very bright, highly goofy. And, like myself, highly persecuted, my tribe. Walter and I believe friendship is the absolute highest state of being. (*pause*)

I like your hair. I believe women should have long hair, another one of my theories. In pre-historic times our hair was long so that babies, our babies, could hold on while we ran through the trees being chased by God knows what. Babies are born knowing how to hold but now have lost it and have to be taught. No. They come out knowing but forget and have to be taught. I don't know. But something has happened with babies and their ability to hold on in this century.

I don't mean I don't ever think about sex. I think about it often. Perhaps constantly. Not the actual act of sex which is as yet unknown to me but I do think of my policies regarding sex. I.e.— do everything

but, you know, as many times as you want with whoever you want, just KEEP YOUR HYMEN INTACT. When I first learned of my hymen and the importance of keeping it untouched, in place, I imagined this big shield I could hold out and ward off guys with, rather like a Viking would have. It's a great word hymen — hymn and amen and hyena all rolled into one. This big bouncy kangaroo thing that laughs its guts out. I mean I know it isn't that and I know it isn't something that you carry with a spear but I used to also worry that my time will come, I will meet HIM and it will be perfect and holy and wild but ... what if my hymen didn't break? What if guys just sort of bounced off it? This tough old piece of skin pulled tight as a drum, a bongo drum barring the way to heaven. What if it leaves men in pain, pain is something they cannot bear nearly as well as us. They also have a great deal of trouble touching their own eyes.

Don't write that down! Just write down stuff like I am knuckling under. I love that kind of crap. I am knuckling under. I know, I know. Our time is up. Tell me about it.

(Irene is fifteen, talking to her truant officer, one month later)

"Lighten up. These are the best days of your life." My friend Stan is always saying stuff like that to me, stuff designed to make me feel better that usually makes me feel like jumping off the nearest roof. Stan is the daytime security guard at the Marine Building which means he does zip. He is supposed to rid the building of kids like me but he doesn't. You know the Marine Building, right downtown, very old and sort of like the Empire State Building, like King Kong's going to be up top waving someone like you, Miss Toye, around in his fist. I consider its lobby to be my second home, my home away from home, my sanctuary. Stan is sixty-seven and used to be a farmer so he knows a thing or two about force-feeding. Stan believes, no matter what, the government should've kept Paul Podmorrow alive. I don't know. I mean Stan

is no intellectual but I do grant him his point of view.

Do you have a problem Miss Toye? Exactly what is your problem ...? One day. I only missed one day of school. And I didn't DO anything. I'm trying to come clean here. I just hitched overtown and hung out with Stan at the Marine Building, end of story. When the strains of life and grade nine are too much for me, to the Marine Building I go. I am trying to explain to you, Miss Toye, some of the issues with which my mind grapples — life and death issues. Grapple, grapple.

And sometimes these issues keep me away from school and I don't like it any better than you. I was NOT running away again. I learned my lesson last year. I do not run away anymore. I face the trials of life head on. Even when I am deserted by all, I stand my ground. Antlered and weary, Irene Dickson, that is me.

Stan thinks I'm seventeen and that I'm a junior temp secretary for MacMillan Bloedel just up the street. I have no idea why I'm such a liar. I just am. I told the guy who gave me a ride home that I'm the youngest ever law student at UBC. I mean THE TRUTH is a very important issue to me but I mean in a general sort of way.

Okay, alright, I want to get this out. I also want you to swear yourself to secrecy, undying secrecy, Miss Toye. Agreed? I lied to you and everyone else about living with the Doukhobors. I didn't actually live with them. I just sort of visited last summer. Briefly. Very briefly. I went all the way up there, to the Kootenays, eight hours in a semi but the Doukhobors were not all that happy to see me. Or to be more precise they ordered me off their land which is a complete joke because they aren't supposed to own it in the first place.

But I just keep banging on the door. I am crying and making a fair amount of noise. Probably when they can't stand it any longer, they do let me in.

They are not proper Doukhobors. They are eating canned ham and watching *Car 54* on television. The world is full of phonies. These

particular phonies have phoned the police to come get me.

I spend a terrible night in the home of the chief of police of Grand Forks. We're eating breakfast; the whole family is exhausted because I was awake the whole night and not exactly quiet about it. Despair is far too quiet a word for how I usually feel.

"Hey, you wanna see a real Doukhobor village?" The police chief is tapping me on the shoulder. And I say okay, that'd be alright, I'm pretty excited even. So off we go.

We drive for half an hour; very pretty country, snow-capped mountains etc., you expect to see Heidi and the whole gang around every corner. I am thinking of turning myself over to the Doukhobors, seeking asylum, as they say. He parks the car in the middle of nowhere.

There is a gnarled old orchard and part of a barn. "Right up there," the chief points. A chimney, the black foundations of a house. "Used to be forty or more all crammed together under one roof, kids, husbands and wives; everyone married to one another and switching around" There is fireweed everywhere, other black marks on the ground that must have been woodsheds, stables The horseflies are glinting like fish and biting me. It's a stupid place and it's horrible, too quiet. It is the saddest and stupidest place on earth.

Sometimes I live in the country
Sometimes I live in the town
Sometimes I get a great notion
To jump in the river and drown

God I hate that song. *Goodnight Irene, Irene goodnight, goodnight Irene*. It is the most depressing song ever written but most of the world is nuts about it including my mother. How'd you like to be named after the most depressing song ever written, except even worse no one knows it's depressing, they sing along like it was *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*? No one ever pays attention to anything. Undoubtedly everything you are currently writing down is unimportant.

Irene goodnight, Irene goodnight
Goodnight Irene, goodnight Irene
I'll see you in my dreams

My parents come that afternoon to pick me up. They're not angry, it's way worse than that. They're just VERY DISAPPOINTED. They have brought Walter with them as a way of cheering me up.

He has this little booklet thing with him on the Hope Slide which he must've bought on the way up. He reads to me from it: "When Bill the trucker kissed his wife goodbye that cold and dark January morning, he took a bag lunch of corned beef on brown, his favourite, and said see you later. Little did he know that tonnes and tonnes of rock would cut short his journey and his life."

Well the real thing is even worse than the book. We stop to look at it on the way home. The road just stops and there's this huge pile of rocks and mashed up trees. You can't imagine it. It goes on for miles. But the worst part is the mountain that fell down, highly unnatural, like this big foot just kicked its face off.

Walter finds it all fascinating. "This is the end, this is the beginning of the end," I tell Walter. "Irene give it a rest." Walter is sifting through the rocks and explaining — "There were two small earthquakes creating a crack in the surface. It is an act of nature. It doesn't MEAN anything."

"Mary Kalmakoff is buried here. She might be right under our feet." Walter is ignoring me. "Hers was the only body not found. Don't you find it rather interesting that ten miles on one side of Hope is the prison built specially for the Doukhobors, the place where Paul Podmorrow starved to death. And here, ten miles on the other side of Hope, a mountain falls down and a Doukhobor girl is buried, don't you find stuff like that incredibly weird?" "Not particularly," Walter tells me.

"Did you know the Doukhobors don't seek converts? They don't care

who you are. They just want to be left alone. Walter! I'm talking to you. I'm trying to tell you they didn't want me, I wasn't allowed in, and I want in, somewhere I want to be right in the middle of something. I feel as though all great events in history happen just before I arrive."

"You could never be a Doukhobor anyway," Walter tells me. "Why?" Walter is carving his name into the rock, sometimes I really hate him. "Because, Irene. You're just too bossy." I promise then and there never to speak to Walter Dewitt again for the rest of my life. But on the other side of Hope, Walter starts talking to me:

"We will build a city. A great and wonderful city. A dome will protect us from the elements, from war, from all possible danger." And then Walter looks out the window and he sees that city. I can tell by his face that once again he is seeing what's invisible to me. What is it? What do you see?

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