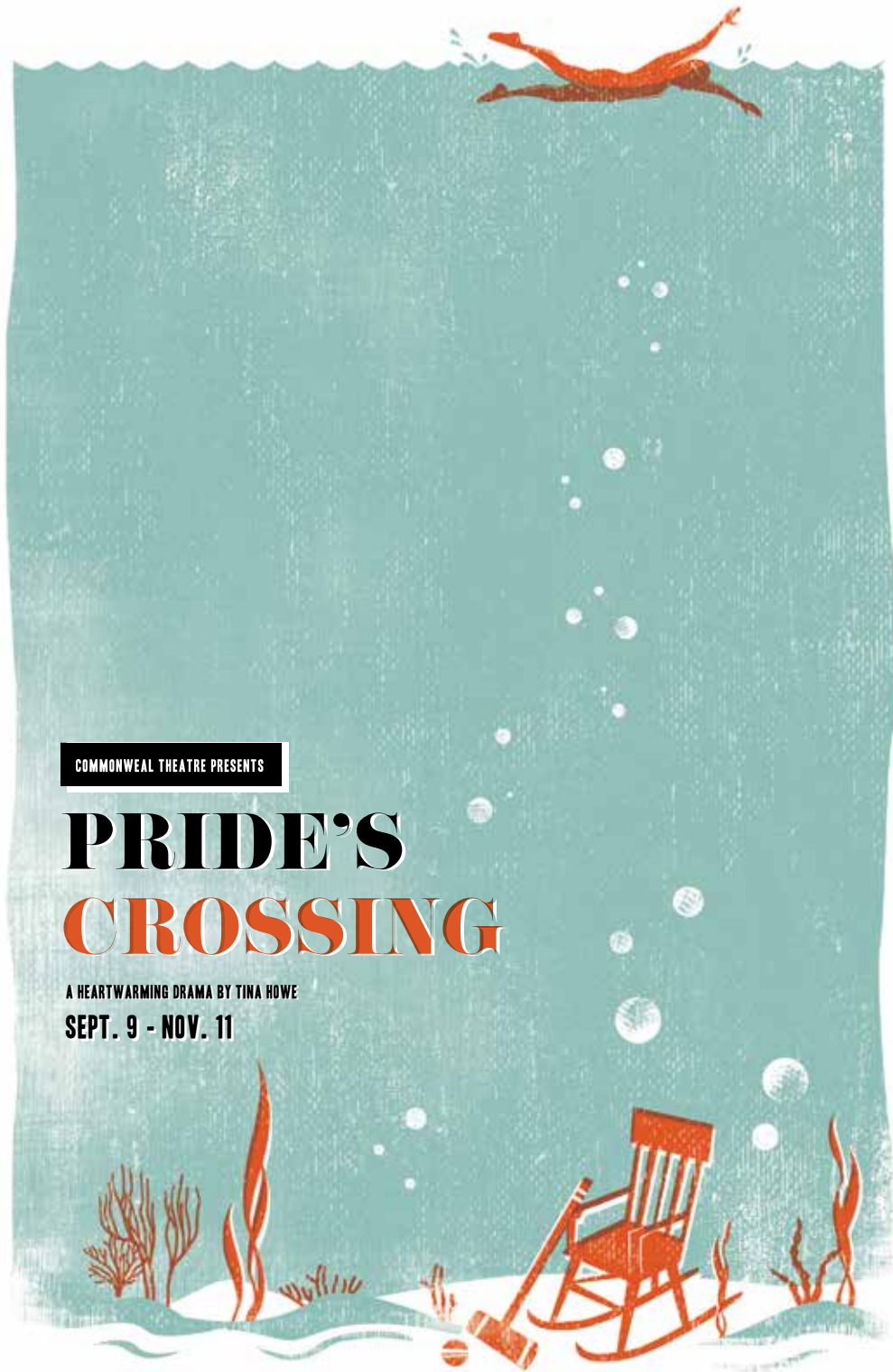


A Deeper Look



COMMONWEAL THEATRE PRESENTS

PRIDE'S CROSSING

A HEARTWARMING DRAMA BY TINA HOWE

SEPT. 9 - NOV. 11

Enhancement Notes for Commonwealth Theatre's production of *Pride's Crossing*. Some material in this guide comes from the Lincoln Center's *The New Theatre Review*, fall 1997, issue 17, and from *Playbill*, and from Diana Nyad's autobiography *Other Shores*.

COMMONWEAL THEATRE COMPANY

presents

PRIDE'S CROSSING

by Tina Howe

Director	Leah Cooper
Production Stage Manager	Thomas White
Assistant Stage Manager	Bailey Otto
Costume Designer	Annie Cady
Lighting Designer	Dietrich Poppen
Scenic Designer	Kit Mayer
Sound Designer	Matt Vichlach
Props Designer	Brandt Roberts

CAST

Mabel Tidings Bigelow	Adrienne Sweeney
Vita Bright, Phineas Tidings, Kitty Lowell	Miriam Monasch
Chandler Coffin, Mary O'Neill, Dr. Peabody	Jeremy van Meter
West Bright, Frazier Tidings, "Pinky" Wheelock, David Bloom	Ben Gorman
Gus Tidings, Anton Gurevitch, Porter Bigelow, "Wheels" Wheelock	Hal Cropp
Maud Tidings, Julia Renoir	Megan K. Pence
Mignone "Minty" Renoir, Pru O'Neill, Emma Bigelow	Abbie Cathcart

Chronology of Scenes & Settings

ACT I

- Sc. 1 1997, *Pride's Crossing*, Massachusetts, Mabel's apartment at the former Tidings's estate
- Sc. 2 1917, The Tidings's estate
- Sc. 3 1997, Mabel's apartment, next day
- Sc. 4 1922, Kitchen of the Tidings's estate
- Sc. 5 1997, Mabel's apartment, later that day
- Sc. 6 1927, the Tidings's estate

ACT II

- Sc. 1 1997, Mabel's apartment, four days later
- Sc. 2 1942, Boston, Mabel & Porter's town home
- Sc. 3 1997, July 4th, Mabel's apartment
- Sc. 4 1967, Boston, King's Chapel
- Sc. 5 1997, July 4th, Mabel's yard
- Sc. 6 1928, England, Shakespeare Beach, at the Cliffs of Dover

SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY

Pride's Crossing is a full-length play in two acts with six scenes per act, written by Tina Howe and first produced at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, CA, in 1997.

Pride's Crossing tells the story of Mabel Tidings, an extraordinary ninety-year-old woman, and the saga of her life. Mabel is planning to host a Fourth of July croquet party for her friends because her granddaughter and great-granddaughter are visiting from Paris. She is taken back in memory throughout the play to significant events in her life, including her childhood in *Pride's Crossing*, Massachusetts, her unhappy marriage, and the day she swam the English Channel.

ACT ONE

Scene one begins with Mabel alone in her bedroom in the former coach house of her family's estate in *Pride's Crossing*, Massachusetts. The year is 1997 and Mabel is 90 years old. She plans to host an Independence Day croquet party for her closest friends. She misses the parties her family gave during her youth, and she wishes to relive the "old days" while her granddaughter, Julia, and great-granddaughter, Minty, visit from Paris. We meet Vita Bright, Mabel's live-in housekeeper, and Vita's delinquent son, West; we also meet Chandler Coffin, a lifelong friend of Mabel's.

Scene two takes us to Mabel's childhood (when she is 10), with her two brothers and her parents around the breakfast table. We learn Phineas is the family jewel, an Olympic diver and their father's favorite. Frazier, Mabel's other brother, feels left out and misunderstood by their society-conscious parents. At the end of the scene, Mabel confesses that her greatest wish is to swim the English Channel and be just like Phineas.

Scene three, back in 1997, introduces Julia and Minty, the only family still in contact with Mabel, arriving from Paris for their visit. Julia is very loyal to Mabel, the grandmother who raised her.

In **Scene four**, memories take Mabel back to her youth (she is now 15), when she would spend time in the kitchen with the cook and her daughter. They supported Mabel when her own family ignored her swims up and down the coastline by their house.

In **Scene five** (1997 again), Mabel is struggling with age and infirmity as she makes invitation phone calls from her party guest list.

Scene six (1927) brings the memory of a spirited family game of charades, during which Mabel finally reveals to her mother that she plans to swim the Channel—with or without her blessing. Mabel is a lovely young woman at this point, the object of at least two men's affections, and is literally testing the waters of independence.

ACT TWO

Scene one returns to 1997, with Mabel and Minty's late-night search for the croquet set for the party. Old Mabel and young Minty make a small connection, but an accident triggers an unpleasant memory for Mabel.

Scene two (1942) is Mabel's remembrance of an unhappy encounter with her alcoholic husband, Porter Bigelow, and his envy over her swim and his jealousy over her former love, the Englishman David Bloom.

Scene three returns us to the present, where we meet Mabel's lifelong friends as they prepare for the croquet party that afternoon. They are a lively bunch of nonagenarians who seem eager to hold onto their youth. Mabel happens upon the funeral service program for her late husband.

In **Scene four** (1967), Mabel recalls her husband's funeral. She is older and wiser now. At the funeral, she is reunited with her childhood friend, the cook's daughter, Pru, and sees a glimpse of the life she could have led.

In **Scene five** (1997), the croquet party takes place, filled with delight, but it crashes into chaos as Mabel, her body failing, goes into her final confused memory of the day of her Channel swim.

Scene six is set on the coast of England, at Dover. It is 1928 and Mabel is readying herself for her Channel swim with David Bloom, her lover and trainer, and a former Channel swimmer himself. It is at this critical moment that we are left, still hoping that Mabel finds true happiness.

End of the play.





THE CHARACTERS

Mabel Tidings	A ninety-year-old woman reflecting on her fascinating life, which included a record-breaking swim across the English Channel.
Phineas Tidings	Mabel's oldest brother, an Olympic diver, and their father's favorite.
Frazier Tidings	Mabel's second-oldest brother, second in everything behind his brother Phineas; a joker and an ally of Mabel.
Maud Tidings	Mabel's migraine-ridden mother; wants Mabel to grow up to be a perfect lady.
"Gus" Tilden Tidings	Mabel's controlling and biased father. He loves sailing and drinking, which proves to be his ultimate end.
Vita Bright	Mabel's present-day live-in caregiver and friend.
West Bright	Vita's delinquent son who lives with Vita at Mabel's.
Julia Renoir	Mabel's granddaughter, who lives with her French husband in Paris. She is still devoted to Mabel, who raised her.
Mignone "Minty" Renoir	Julia's young Parisian daughter.
Chandler Coffin	One of Mabel's lifelong friends, a poet and son of a noted poet, who has been in love with her since their youth.
Mary O'Neill	The Tidings family's Irish cook. She was one of Mabel's greatest supporters, even when Maud wasn't.
Prudence "Pru" O'Neill	Mary's teenage daughter. Mabel is envious of the relationship Pru has with her mother and the freedom she possesses.
Anton "Gurey" Gurevitch	The Russian conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. A friend of the Tidings family and a potential suitor to both Maud and Mabel.
David Bloom	A British obstetrician and Channel swimmer, and Mabel's true love.
"Kitty" Lowell	One of Mabel's lifelong, elderly friends invited to the croquet party.
"Pinky" Wheelock	One of Mabel's lifelong, elderly friends invited to the croquet party. Married to Wheels.
"Wheels" Wheelock	One of Mabel's lifelong, elderly friends invited to the croquet party. Married to Pinky.

COMMON GROUND—WHAT'S YOUR VIEW?

We invite you to consider the topics below and discuss—either before the play, at intermission, or after the show. Join cast members at Encore afterwards, so we can all put our heads together—artist and audience alike. Continue your chat on your drive home, at work next week, or over coffee with friends. We'd love to hear your thoughts—share them on our Facebook page or email us at: marketing@commonwealththeatre.org.

Let's start the conversation:

-  If you could give one piece of advice to your younger self, what would that be?
-  On your 90th birthday, what do you think you will remember? Why do you think these things will stay with you; what makes these moments "stick?"
-  If there was one decision you made in your life that you could make differently, what would that be? If given the opportunity, would you take a "do-over?"
-  Mabel was very much shaped by the women in her life as she was growing up. Who was the most influential woman in your life? How did she help shape you?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Significant Events during the Play's Timeline

- | | | | |
|-------------|--|-------------|--|
| 1917 | The United States became involved in World War I; The Romanovs were ousted and the Russian Revolution began. | | Mead published <i>Coming of Age in Samoa</i> . |
| 1922 | Mussolini marched on Rome and formed his fascist government; King Tutankhamen's tomb was unearthed; insulin was isolated and used to treat diabetes. | 1942 | The United Nations was formed in Washington; <i>Casablanca</i> premiered; The Manhattan Project was established. |
| 1927 | Charles Lindbergh made his famous flight across the Atlantic; the first feature-length talkie was released; The Big Bang theory was proposed. | 1967 | The U.S.S.R. and the U.S. proposed a treaty; Thurgood Marshall was sworn in as the first Black U.S. Supreme Court Justice; the Beatles' <i>Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band</i> album released. |
| 1928 | The first of Stalin's Five Year Plans was imposed; Hoover was voted president; Penicillin was discovered; Margaret | 1997 | Hong Kong returned to Chinese rule; the Khmer Rouge released Pol Pot; James Cameron movie <i>Titanic</i> debuted. |



Charles Lindbergh and the *Spirit of St. Louis*, the plane he flew in the first transatlantic flight in 1927.



Shakespeare Beach, in Dover, England.

Swimming the Channel: Stats & Challenges

The shortest route across the Channel is between Dover, England, and Cap Gris Nez, France—more or less 21 miles.

The first crossing: Captain Matthew Webb, in 21 hours 45 minutes, on August 24, 1875.

The first female crossing: Gertrude Ederle of the U.S.A. on August, 6, 1926.

The most crossings ever: Alison Streeter, M.B.E. ("Queen of the Channel"), U.K., with 46 crossings.

The youngest swimmer ever: Thomas Gregory, 11 years 11 months, in 11 hours 54 minutes (a minimum age limit of 16 is now enforced).

The oldest swimmer: Roger Allsopp of Guernsey, aged 70 years 147 days, in 17 hours 51 minutes.

Fastest ever one-way solo swim: Trent Grimsey of Australia in six hours 55 minutes.

- **Weather:** It varies from day to day and often during a swimmer's crossing. Today's (8/29/16) wind speed: 6 Knots (6.9 mph).
- **Temperature:** July to September is Swim Season, when the average water temperature is 14-18°C (57-64°F). To prevent hypothermia, swimmers must acclimate to the water's temperature before they begin their swim.
- **Surf:** (as of 8/29/16) Wave Height: 0.5 meters/1.6 feet, wave period: 5.0 Seconds. It is impossible to predict surf conditions for the entirety of the swim, so swimmers must prepare themselves for varying conditions.
- **Sea life, etc.:** The water is too cold for sharks, but jellyfish are very common. The Moon jellyfish, Lion's mane jellyfish, and the Mauve stinger jellyfish (mighty sting and bioluminescent) are some of the many types of jellyfish that are typical to this area. You may also come in contact with seaweed and driftwood.

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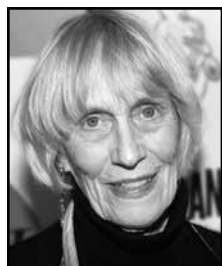
Longest ever one-way solo swim: Jackie Cobell of the U.K. in 28 hours 44 minutes.

A total of 1,341 swimmers have completed a total of 1,801 solo swims.

Average solo crossing time: 13 hours 24 minutes.

Fatalities: There have been eight fatalities in the history of Channel swimming since 1845.

- **Boats:** The Channel is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. On average, around 200 ferries and other vessels cross and 600 tankers pass through daily.
- **Fees:** In 2016, the base cost to swim is around £400 (~US\$528). This includes a one year membership to the Channel Swimming Association and official recognition and accompaniment by the C.S.A. during the swim.



Tina Howe on Playwriting and the Inspiration for *Pride's Crossing*

The lure of playwriting. We get to spread our fantasies all over the stage and then invite an audience in to share them. The power, the ecstasy. Think of it, you're one of two sisters—the ugly one who lives under the porch with the field mice. All your life you've dreamed of being someone—a pilot, a healer, a fabulous beauty. So you create a dazzling alter ego, hire the most radiant actress in the land and put her on stage. She breaks hearts and the sound barrier with a toss of her head. Everyone swoons, but no one more than you because you know your place is under the porch. With the field mice. Or maybe you transform someone else: a friend who's languishing in the hospital or an aging relative. You wrap a turban around their head and drop them in the middle of the desert to found a new religion. It's no wonder we call these labors "plays."

I'm always surprised when people ask if my plays are true. The joy of the theatre comes from knowing you're being tricked and surrendering to the deceit. In real life, Nora [in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*] wouldn't have the nerve to walk out on Torvald, just as Mary Tyrone wouldn't have the presence of mind to come down the stairs, trailing her wedding dress [in O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night*]. Characters on stage make entrances and exits we'd never attempt.

There was a young woman who swam the English Channel in 1926. A *New Yorker* named Gertude Ederle. She was only nineteen and she beat every record on the books. Her time was an astonishing fourteen hours and thirty-nine minutes. This play is not about her, but it is inspired by my ninety-year-old Aunt

Maddy who never left home, never married and never swam a stroke. So, where's the truth?

For some time now I've wanted to write a play about the passion of old ladies. When men age, they just get older, but women become very powerful. It's the female thing: that we bear children and nurture the family. As time passes, the membranes between what we should do and what we want to do get thinner and thinner. There's no rage like old lady rage, just as there's no tenderness like old lady tenderness.

At the end of the 20th century, I wanted to celebrate the life of a woman who lived through most of it. I chose my Aunt Maddy because she grew up in a household where women were expected to live under the porch. It was a grand porch, but their place was definitely beneath it. With the field mice. Some women managed to scramble free, but most didn't, so this is a replay for my beloved aunt. This time she rises like a phoenix above the porch, the house, shoreline and all.

There's something very perverse in me that loves trying to do the impossible and put things on the stage that are very hard to stage and that maybe people haven't seen before. And I have this impulse to see how far the form can take me. Because I think of all the arts, the theatre is the most conservative, because you have that ghastly problem of having to sell all the tickets every night.

The tools I handle are words. They may be unappreciated or misunderstood, but they tell us who we are.

December 1, 2003

Gertrude Ederle, the First Woman to Swim Across the English Channel, Dies at 98

By RICHARD SEVERO



Gertrude Ederle, who was called "America's best girl" by President Calvin Coolidge in 1926 after she became the first woman to swim across the English Channel, died yesterday at a nursing home in Wyckoff, N.J. She was 98.

Ederle was a symbol of the Roaring 20's, a decade given as much to heroics as to materialism. For a time, her accomplishment put her in the public's affection at the level of Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Bill Tilden and Red Grange.

Ederle did not sustain the lofty place in history of another hero of the 1920's, Charles A. Lindbergh, who crossed the Atlantic a year after her historic swim, or of the golden athletes who appeared regularly before the public and kept their fame alive. But her feat, which she did only once and under horrendous conditions,

made a memorable contribution in an age when many found it difficult to take female athletes seriously.

They had to take Ederle seriously, because she beat the records of the five men who had previously made the swim from 1875 to 1923.

Years later, after other men and women had successfully swum the Channel, Grover A. Whalen, New York City's official greeter, said that of all the celebrities he had welcomed to town, he could not recall one that made the impact of Ederle at her homecoming.

Ederle was born Oct. 23, 1905, in New York City, one of four daughters and two sons of Henry Ederle, a butcher and provisioner, and his wife, Anna. Her father owned a summer cottage in Highlands, N.J., and she learned to swim on the Jersey Shore.

She called herself a "water baby" and said that over the years, she was "happiest between the waves." But she developed a hearing problem when she was 5, after a bout with the measles. "The doctors told me my hearing would get worse if I continued swimming, but I loved the water so much, I just couldn't stop," she said.

In the early 1920's, as a competitive swimmer, she set women's world freestyle

records and American freestyle records for various distances from 100 to 800 meters. In a single afternoon in 1922, she broke seven such records at Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. Between 1921 and 1925, she held 29 amateur national and world records.

In what might have been an anticipation of her Channel swim, she swam more than 16 miles through tricky currents between the Battery and Sandy Hook, N.J.

In 1924, she was a member of the United States team that competed in the Olympics in Paris. She won a gold medal as part of the 400-meter freestyle relay, and she won the bronze medal in the 100 and 400 individual freestyle events. It was no small accomplishment. She was swimming with an injured knee and, together with the other female athletes from the United States, she had an added handicap of fatigue. They were put up in hotels far away from the center of Paris because United States officials did not want them contaminated with what they saw as the city's bohemian morality. Ederle and her teammates had to travel five to six hours each day to practice in the Olympic pool.

After Paris, she began to

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focus on the English Channel. The first person to swim it was Matthew Webb of England, who in 1875 made it in 21 hours 45 minutes. Of the four other men who succeeded before Ederle, none were faster than 16 hours 33 minutes. One swimmer, Henry Sullivan of the United States, required 26 hours 50 minutes.

Ederle first tried to swim the Channel in 1925. The Women's Swimming Association provided the financial backing. But after she swam 23 miles in 8 hours 43 minutes, the people in a boat who were supposed to look after her thought she might be unconscious in the water. Somebody yelled, "She's drowning!" and they touched her, which immediately disqualified her.

A perturbed Ederle insisted that she had not been drowning at all, only resting, and that she could have easily continued. "All

I could wonder was, 'What will they think of me back in the States?'" she said. She vowed to try it again and told her father and everyone else involved that no matter how she looked in the water, she did not want to be touched.

She decided not to ask the Women's Swimming Association to back her a second time and raised the needed \$9,000 herself. With the help of her sister Margaret, she designed a two-piece bathing suit that would not drag in the water, yet would be "decent in case I failed and they had to drag me out," she said.



Gertrude being coated in grease for her Channel swim by her trainer, Bill Burgess.

Shortly after 7 a.m. on Aug. 6, 1926, Ederle, smeared with sheep grease, waded into the English Channel at Cape Gris-Nez, France. She could see a red ball on the French shore, a warning to small craft to avoid a sea that promised to be very choppy. "Please, God, help me," she said.

For a while, she said she sang "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" to the rhythm of her stroke. In the boat that moved with her, the

crew occasionally held up signs, which said things like "one wheel," "two wheels," enumerating parts of a car, because she had been promised a red roadster if she was successful.

Fourteen hours 31 minutes later, a world record, Ederle reached Kingsdown on the English coast. If she had been able to swim in a straight line, it would have been a 21-mile trip. But the sea was so rough, she swam no less than 35 miles. Ederle always held that her record was never broken, even though in 1950, another American, Florence Chadwick, swam the Channel in 13 hours 20 minutes. That was in a relatively calm sea, Ederle said, so it was not a fair comparison.

She was not prepared for the ticker-tape parade that New York gave her through its financial district on Aug. 27, 1926, in which an estimated two million people turned out and chanted, "Trudy! Trudy!"— even though her family had always called her "Gertie." She had to be rushed into Mayor Jimmy Walker's office in City Hall when exuberant crowds stormed the doors. She was also not prepared for the adulation she received in the weeks to come, when somebody wrote a song titled, "Tell Me, Trudy, Who Is Going to Be the Lucky One?" Men were proposing to her by mail almost every week.

[Continued next page.]



The ticker-tape parade in NYC.

Coolidge invited her to the White House, called her “America’s best girl,” and said to her, “I am amazed that a woman of your small stature should be able to swim the English Channel.” It was a curious observation; Ederle weighed 142 pounds and soon became an adviser to a manufacturer of dresses for large women.

She was invited to join a touring vaudeville act, and there were reports that she earned \$2,000 or \$3,000 a week. She went to Hollywood and made a 10-minute movie about herself, for which she was paid \$8,000. Various groups wanted her to speak, and the marriage proposals kept coming.

“I finally got the shakes,” she told an interviewer years later. “I was just a bundle of nerves. I had to quit the tour and I was stone deaf.” The hearing problem she had since childhood was made much worse by the Channel swim. Ederle had what was later described as a nervous breakdown.

Her encroaching deafness made her shy away from people. In 1929, she was “practically engaged” to one man, and suggested to him that it might be difficult being married to a woman who could not hear well. He agreed and vanished. After he left her, she said: “There never was anyone else. I just didn’t want to get hurt again.”

As the years passed, the public made fewer demands on her. The proposals stopped.



Giving technique lessons to Hollywood star Bebe Daniels for *Swim, Girl, Swim*.

In 1933, she slipped on broken tiles in the stairwell of the apartment building in which she lived, injured her back and was in a cast for four years. Doctors told her she would neither walk nor swim again, but in 1939 she appeared in Billy Rose’s *Aquacade* at the New York World’s Fair.

Over the years, it sometimes seemed that journalists alone remembered her, and they wrote articles commemorating the 5th, 10th, 15th, 20th and 25th anniversaries of her Channel swim. She always obliged with an interview but de-

tested the articles that tried to make her pitiable. “Don’t weep for me, don’t write any sob stories,” she told *The New York Times* in 1956.

When World War II began, Ederle took a job working for an airline at La Guardia Airport. She checked flight instruments used by airplanes and loved the work, she said. She quit after the war, when told she could keep the job if she moved to Tulsa, Okla.

For many years, she taught swimming to children at the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York. She did not know sign language but was able to demonstrate to them in the water what they should know about swimming. Her own deafness continued to worsen.

Although she claimed she had saved and invested well, she never made the huge amounts of money that came to celebrities in later generations. She earned some money in the 1950’s lending her name to a bacteria-free swimming pool, but her income over the years was modest.

Ederle lived for many years in Flushing, Queens, with two female companions. She is survived by 10 nephews and nieces.

“I have no complaints,” Ederle told one interviewer. “I am comfortable and satisfied. I am not a person who reaches for the moon as long as I have the stars.”

POEMS & SONGS REFERENCED IN THE PLAY

"The Tyger" by William Blake, 1794

King Lear by William Shakespeare,
c. 1605

Richard III by William Shakespeare,
c. 1592

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

"Sailing to Byzantium" by William Butler Yeats, 1926

Doctor Faustus by Christopher Marlowe, c. 1588

"Pied Beauty" by Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1877

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"The Jabberwocky" by Lewis Carroll,
from his 1871 novel, *Through the
Looking-Glass*, a sequel to *Alice's Ad-
ventures in Wonderland*

Othello by William Shakespeare,
c. 1603

The Lord's Prayer

"Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" by Lord Byron, 1812-1818

Paradise Lost by John Milton, 1674

"The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

"Antonio's Amorous Complaint" from *Don Quixote* by Miguel De Cervantes

"A Foggy Day (in London Town)"
by George and Ira Gershwin

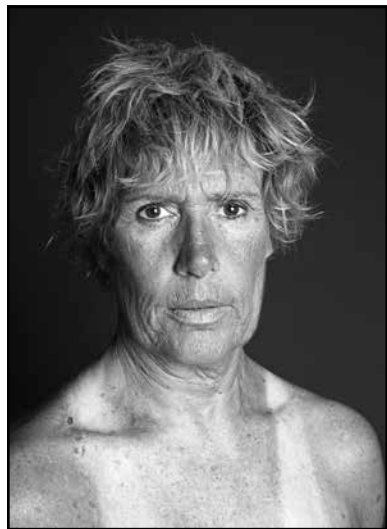
"You Are My Lucky Star" written for the 1936 movie *Broadway Melody of 1936*,
but most remembered today from the movie *Singin' in the Rain*

A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!

Marathon Swimming

An excerpt from “The English Channel,” a chapter in Diana Nyad’s 1978 autobiography, *Other Shores*.

Diana Nyad held several world records in marathon swimming, including swimming around Manhattan Island in 1975, swimming from Bimini, Bahamas, to Florida (102 miles) in 1979, and becoming the first person confirmed to swim from Cuba to Florida, in 2013, at age 64.



Diana Nyad in 2014.

August 5, 1976.

I was wedged into one of British Airways’ economy seats, happily accompanied by my two closest friends, who were to act as my trainers, and by an American film crew of seven. We were off to make, assist and record history. I was

attempting to become the first woman to complete the double crossing of the English Channel. The swim would be from shore to shore, followed by the permissible ten minutes’ rest, and then back again. This was to be one of my toughest moments, and as the date was set for August 15. I had ten days to gather all my assets to a pinpoint focus on the Channel.

It was a night flight; I’ve always admired people who could sleep sitting up, but I’m not among them, so I dug into the corner of an Adidas bag for Channel swimming literature. “The Channel Swimming Association Handbook” was a bit dry. The list of attempts, successes and records was better; to date only 20 percent of the 1,100 who had attempted the crossing had succeeded

Through the Channel Swimming Association, the body of officials that organizes, sanctions and records Channel swims, I had prearranged to be piloted by a veteran Channel fisherman named Heath. If most of the stories told could be believed, success was often as dependent on the boat captain as on

the swimmer. Evidently, an experienced and interested pilot could guide even the poorest of swimmers across, whereas the best of swimmers could be thwarted in crossing attempts by the inept navigation and bad judgment of an inexperienced one. I was most anxious to meet this Heath.

We took a bus to the next town, wound our way through the cobblestone streets to the wharves and pounded on Heath’s door. It opened shortly, a voice with a very strong accent announced

“Auw’t beck,” and the door was shut again. We traipsed around to the back to find Heath, an almost archetypical old salt, toothless and quiet, with most of his eleven children on the lawn nearby. Introductions went around; my group and his group stepped aside and we held our first meeting, Heath and I, standing arms folded amidst the laundry hanging in his backyard. I trusted him implicitly

[After four days of delay] I knew my moment would come the following day. Apprehensive about the delay, not having swum for five days, perhaps not as thoroughly peaked as the few days before, I was up again. The film crew was to be on the pilot’s boat in the harbor at 9:00 a.m. They would taxi over to Shakespeare Beach, where my trainers would be greasing me. Departure time was set for 10:30, one hour after high water. I downed as many carbohydrates as humanly possible throughout the day—spaghetti, toast and honey, bowls of cereal, baked potatoes. I soaked in a hot bath, tried to relax with a full massage and had ten hours of uneasy sleep. At 7:30 a.m. I was dressing for the preswim meal when the phone rang. Heath—bad weather. Christ, off again. This procedure was to continue in much the same fashion for the following four days. An afternoon forecast at 2:00 would give a tentative go-ahead for the next day, the 6:00 p.m. report would boost my hopes further, but then Heath’s call would come through in the morning, canceling day after day, chance after chance. Indefatigable faith began to waver and the physical peak was definitely slipping from its solid groundwork. You can’t entirely forgo swimming for ten or twelve—or who knows how many—days before the chance comes; but you can’t swim much either, because you may be alerted that you’re going off in a few hours and every ounce of reserve will be needed. After passing days and weeks in frustrated waiting, countless swimmers have done a decent training swim in an effort to regain both a mental and

physical edge, only to learn the weather has changed and they are scheduled to go that evening at midnight.

The spring tide beginning to roll, the wind coming at force 2 to 3 from the east, August 24 wouldn't present the glassy mirror of all swimmers' daydreams, but it was an opportunity nonetheless, and we marched determinedly down Shakespeare Beach after the customary ritual of much food and little sleep. With the understandable fear in the back of my mind that the whole thing would be called off at the last minute, I was pensive and took a few minutes for my final meditation. Heath contacted us from the boat on the two-way radio—the swim was on. I was to be greased and waiting for the observer's signal at 1:00 a.m. (An observer is provided by the Channel Swimming Association to officiate a swim,

It is a singular feeling to stand naked below the towering Shakespeare Cliff in the middle of a cool English night and sense the rubber gloves slapping pounds of thick grease on your smooth skin.

to clock the exact time, and no swim is recognized without one.) I pulled down my suit, and with the aid of an onlooker's flashlight, my two trainers began greasing my torso. It is a singular feeling to stand naked below the towering Shakespeare Cliff in the middle of a cool English night and sense the rubber gloves slapping pounds and pounds of thick grease on your smooth skin. My concoction was 90 percent lanolin, 10 percent paraffin. Some swimmers add silicone fluid as a water repellent; some of the heavier ones have used axle grease; some stick to wool fat, or lanolin by itself; and some go with only Vaseline. If the truth were known, except for the prevention of chafing at the neck, under the arms and between the legs, there isn't a grease made that will serve its intended purpose of keeping in the warmth, keeping out the cold. For me it has become a psychological crutch to know that before a cold-water swim I will start off with six extra pounds of blubber,

even though the bulk of it thins and washes off within the first hour.

Heath's boat came within sight at 12:45 a.m.; a rubber inflatable was sent in for the trainers and cameraman; the observer gave the arm signal to begin at 1:03. I stumbled over the rocks at the water's edge, slipped into the cool sea and began stroking. I remembered all the preparations I had made for the thirty-hour swim. I thought of the quick feedings every hour on the hour that would be goals in themselves. I focused on the format of chants and songs I had organized to preoccupy myself during each hour—numbers to count, numbers to reach by the feeding. This hypnotic technique was designed to keep my concentration intact for as long as possible; the isolation and the monotony and the extreme fatigue all seem to eat away at mental control, and when the mental control goes, the will goes and you're through.

From the onset to the first feeding I counted strokes, or each time the left hand entered the water. Eighteen hundred strokes was the goal. The wind coming from the east and my head turning to breathe in almost the same direction meant that I occasionally swallowed water. But during the first hour there were far too many gulps. Stroking 1,797, 1,798, 1,799, 1,800, 1,801—the trainer's whistle and feeding time. I veered toward the boat, gradually approached the starboard, and reached up for the cup, which was extended to me in a small pan attached to a wooden pole. I would fish into the pan, grab the cup and down the twelve ounces of hot Sustagen (a hot chocolate with tremendous protein, salt, mineral and glucose levels) in less than twenty seconds.

Tossing the cup to the wind, turning again toward France, I began the second hour's counting, the goal being to hit 225 complete "Row, Row, Row Your Boat"s before the feeding whistle. Only seconds later I vomited heavily, losing the benefit of the first feeding, and as the end of the second hour approached, I was in deep trouble. "Row, row, row ... life is but a dream," 220, " ... life is but a dream," 221, the whistle. I took the second cup of chocolate and began vomiting and dry-heaving for twenty minutes, treading water, knowing I couldn't even touch the boat for support. The fifteen people on the boat became alarmed; they tried to communicate with me, tried to suggest ways to combat the

nausea. Panic also stirred in my heart—the end was near.

Within minutes I was lying on the deck, wrapped in blankets. Voices at once barraged me with sympathy. Never mind, just bad luck; the Sustagen was too rich to mix with salt water; not such a great day anyway. But I closed my eyes and cried tears for the death of a love that was once the core of my universe....

Only your motivation will actually get you there. If you want to touch the other shore badly enough, barring an impossible situation, you will.

My moment of soul-searching had arrived, I suppose, and as our boat slowly puffed back to England and waited two hours to clear immigration, I was enormously depressed. After we docked, we loaded our van and squeezed in; no one spoke as we drove the fifteen minutes back to the hotel. ... Almost feeling guilty, I told [my friends] that seasickness didn't induce my defeat. I had been seasick a dozen times before, and seasickness doesn't make a champion quit. I said that although physical strength, a fine pilot, efficient trainers, blood sugar replacement and so forth all help you across, only your motivation will actually get you there. If you want to touch the other shore badly enough, barring an impossible situation, you will. If your desire is diluted for any reason, you'll never make it. I said I was like a fighter who was still good, who still made the right moves and who still enjoyed being called the champ, but who just didn't want to take any more punches. The thrill wasn't what it used to be; it had been fading for a couple of years, and if a thrill is no more than a memory, however wonderful, it has no place in the present. I regretted that I had to discover this truth now instead of a month earlier, when I could have analyzed my feelings at home. But I supposed it could have only been discovered swimming again, seeking the thrill again. The group thanked me for sharing my thoughts with them, and we went upstairs.

Dawn broke. I took a bath and swabbed myself with alcohol in another futile attempt

to remove the grease. I tried to sleep, but I was anxious, my heart was heavy. I had failed, given up. I had been weak; I hadn't been disciplined enough to make myself do it just because I said I could and would. I felt somehow guilty. Perhaps I had learned a prime lesson for the future—that it was time to move on to something new, but I was still here, there was time to do it right, to leave the old with a grand success instead of a failure.

There were many arguments the next day. Friends said it was a masochistic sport in the first place; wanting to do it again was my intellect speaking, while my words the night before in the foyer came from the heart. Was I really going to do something now that I definitely didn't want to do? I who always bragged that I never, never do anything I don't want to do? Yes, I was. Just this once more and I would go home a winner. And they were with me; the whole crew stayed and believed with me again. The slight change in motivation would make this swim the most difficult of all. It was not the pure desire to win, to finish; it was more the loathing of the self-respect I would lose if I quit.

I asked Heath that night if he would take me again. "Very good swimmer. Of course I will." ...

August 30 was a retake of August 24. Same breakfast, same people doing the same jobs, same fears and nervousness, and once more confidence and desire. The starting time was now 3:30 a.m. and I was again nude on Shakespeare Beach. Other swimmers set off at approximately the same time; from the first stroke I felt fantastically smooth and powerful. Eighteen hundred strokes, first feeding. Two hundred and nineteen "Row, Row, Row Your Boat"s, second feeding. Thirty-five "Frère Jacques"s (sets of English, French and German), third feeding. I was making splendid headway, I was optimistic and in control, the people on the boat were happy and with me. My only worry was that the seas were beginning to rise; I was thrown about more and more violently and progress was coming to a gradual halt. Two hundred and two "Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better"s, and I came in for the fourth feeding. Cramps in the left groin from kicking so hard to catch a breath amidst the waves. I knew that the weather was going to beat me this time. Another fifteen or twenty minutes of trying to straighten my left leg, trying to fight the swells, and that was it. The first time

I defeated myself; this time I was had by a greater force than anyone could battle. On the boat I learned that the other swimmers were also out. The wind was now at force 6, all the landlubbers had been violently sick and I saw from a better vantage point that the Channel was a mass of breaking whitecaps. There was no guilt or depression this time. August 30 was without a trace of doubt my mental and physical best. Everyone knew it, and we all talked jovially on the way back to shore. The film crew thought that with a statement from me they could salvage something, although it would not be the film they set out to make. They would head back to New York. My two friends and I decided to go to Paris to throw away the rest of our money

[After the trip] we all knew that I was going back to Dover. We embraced, they flew back to the United States, and I would not be defeated by the English Channel. Still not having slept for some forty-eight hours except for naps on the train, I went straight to Heath I asked the observer's daughter to be my trainer, found someone willing to grease me on the shore, and set about regathering new gear, this time at my own expense. Grease, thermoses, Dynamo (a glucose drink that seemed to settle with the salt water better than the rich Sustagen), rubber gloves, towels and blankets, biscuits, ginger ale. I found a wonderful bed-and-breakfast in Dover, checked into an attic room and tried to catch up on some sleep. It was difficult. I was worried, almost desperate to finally tame this Channel and be done with it. I became more and more nervous each day. Heath didn't call when he said he would, the air and water temperatures were beginning to drop, I wasn't sleeping well and I was losing weight. In five days I read *All the President's Men*, *Watership Down*, the murder case of *Mary Bell*, and Thor Heyerdahl's *The Ra Expeditions*.

On September 5, I called the Coast Guard myself and couldn't believe my ears. Force 1 to 2, westerly, for the early evening, probably continuing through the night and not building up again until midday of the 6th. I was frantic. I would not spend one more restless night and take a chance on the weather changing drastically. I called Heath immediately to tell him I wanted to leave on the 10:30 tide that night. It was 2:00, so there was ample time. The first mate, one of his sons, said that was okay, but to be absolutely sure we should wait for the 6:00 p.m. forecast.

They would phone me at 6:10 in any case. My hands were shaking, my head was pounding. I felt tremendous pressure, all self-imposed. I was down to 127 pounds, but I was determined to make this swim. I couldn't sleep, so I stared out the attic window at the white cliffs of France, the first time the weather had permitted me to see them. Though twenty-one miles away, they seemed close enough to touch; the water was like a millpond.

“No swim tonight. Bad weather.” “You're insane!” I screamed, losing control. “The weather couldn't be better!”

I steeled myself, thought that the third time is the lucky one and went downstairs to wait for the word. They were late in calling, as usual, but this time I became furious. How could they be so inconsiderate as to leave me pacing, worrying, wondering with only four hours to prepare? I called the Coast Guard, who reconfirmed the earlier forecast: it was to be beautifully calm all night. At 6:40 I called Heath and aggressively told his son I would be on the beach ready to go at 10:30. He interrupted, “No swim tonight. Bad weather.” “You're insane!” I screamed, losing control. “The weather couldn't be better!” He said the old man wasn't going. I hung up and stormed outside.

After cooling down I phoned them back. I argued that this was a business arrangement, that I was paying them to do a job and they were obligated to take me. He said the truth of the matter was that old Heath wasn't feeling so well, and he never liked the night swimming anyway. I could barely think, I was so upset and annoyed. I said again that I was going that night, not the next day, and asked if I would have to get another captain in that case. He said he supposed I would.

There was one skipper with a good reputation available, Burt Reed, who said he would be glad to escort me. He agreed that it was a perfect night, so he would do his best to round his crew up, although it was dangerously short notice. I tried to eat a high-calorie meal about three hours before take-off, but it wouldn't stay down. Reed kept calling to report that he hadn't found his crew yet, but it

was still not an impossibility. I felt feverish and ill. Finally at 9:00 he called to say we would have to wait for the morning; he had done his best and that was all he could do.

I fixed my eyes on the delicious flat calm,

“Second hour, ‘Row, Row, Row Your Boat.’ I began to tremble and just told myself, ‘It’s not so bad, you’ve been cold before, keep swimming.’ Third hour, ‘Frère Jacques.’”

beginning to feel somewhat fatalistic about the whole thing, and spent one last distressed, sleepless night. Two of the film people, having heard that I was back and trying again, returned to help. It was a welcome diversion; I briefed them and we set off at 11:00 the next morning.

A new boat, new pilot, no experienced trainer; nonetheless, everything was going well. I started on time; the weather was good, although nothing like the night before. During the first hour’s counting, I noticed that the water was remarkably colder, and of course my weight loss hadn’t helped on that score. First feeding down and I felt fine. Second hour, “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.” I began to tremble and just told myself, “It’s not so bad, you’ve been cold before, keep swimming, keep swimming.” Third hour, “Frère Jacques.” The trembling increased to shaking; I pictured the sun at my solar plexus, a Tibetan meditative technique, trying to feel the warmth move to the limbs. Fourth hour, “Anything You Can Do.” As I reached for the fourth feeding my hand was shaking too wildly to grasp the cup, so I skipped it. I found out later that everyone on the boat feared for me at that fourth feeding; they told me my skin had been bluish, and they knew that even will power couldn’t fight the cold. Fifth hour, “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” Chilled to the bone, I was quickly losing touch and my concentration was fading. I couldn’t count very well and I kept forgetting what I was doing. I thought birds were dive-bombing my cap and goggles; I frantically waved them away. Suddenly, I heard many long pulls on the police whistle accompanied by frenzied shouting; I stopped

to look, and surprised and bewildered, I found the boat on my right instead of my left. How did it get over there without my seeing it? Why were they so upset? They were yelling, but I couldn’t hear their words. I don’t remember much after that. They say I took another feeding and began swimming again, and about forty-five minutes later I started going under. Evidently, they were to me within seconds. I was hauled into the lifeboat, and as they were transferring me to the fishing vessel, I came to and realized what had happened. My body was jerking uncontrollably; they covered me immediately and two of the crew pressed their bodies to me in an offer of the best heat available. One of the mates got some hot bouillon down my throat, and within an hour the trembling began to subside. The captain kneeled beside me and comforted me with a warm hand and large smiling blue eyes. He said I was a good swimmer—I had done ten miles into mid-Channel in a bit more than four hours; I would have reached France in a very short time, indeed; if I put some weight on, I was sure to have a good crack at the record next time; he would be only too pleased to escort me on that occasion; yes, he would.

Unfortunately, the Channel was not a glorious success to be tallied up for the record along with my many other crossings. It was a defeat. Once I weakened mentally, once the weather wouldn’t permit success, and ironically, the villain I had originally feared and had set out to vanquish—the cold—was my ultimate downfall. I realized that it is mechanically so easy to walk away from victory swelling with pride and optimism, believing unswervingly in yourself. Walking away from defeat the same way is a true challenge. A champion rekindles enthusiasm, regains confidence, and is willing to set difficult goals for herself again, even after defeat.

Late evening, September 7. British Airways from London to Kennedy. My pulse is racing, my adrenaline is pumping, I am smiling uncontrollably and I can’t possibly sit still. Push-ups in the aisle, hyped conversation with anyone and everyone. I feel ecstatically free. The words I am known for quoting to interviewers are flashing through my mind. Life is passing me by. There isn’t much time. I have some seventy-five years to live and a third of them are behind me. I feel pressured to do everything, to know everyone, to explore every potential, to press every extreme, high and low. My fervor is renewed.