

## **Lesson Plan and Full Script: *Votes for Women!* by Zachary Michael Jack**

*Votes for Women!* is a thirty-minute one-act historical drama written as part of the Forgotten Illinois series sponsored by the Illinois Humanities. The play endeavors to be as historically accurate as possible, drawing from and quoting primary sources from the votes-for-women movement in Illinois. It features the inspiring words and deeds of pioneering Illinois activists Virginia Brooks, Belle Squire, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

*Votes for Women!* is available royalty-free for use by Illinois nonprofits on written request to playwright Zachary Michael Jack at [zacharymichaeljack@gmail.com](mailto:zacharymichaeljack@gmail.com). Please include a brief description of your group or organization and when and where you plan to perform the play.

After reading aloud or staging the script that follows please take a moment to discuss the questions listed at the conclusion of the play. A full version of the opening night performance at Madden Theatre on March 2, 2019 may be streamed online at Naperville Community Television.

Enjoy your performance of *Votes for Women! A Historical Drama of Forgotten Illinois*. And thanks for keeping the memory of these intrepid social justice warriors alive.

VOTES FOR WOMEN!  
A Historical Drama of Forgotten Illinois

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CHARACTERS

REPORTER: 20s to 40s. No-nonsense Chicago newspaperman, with a heart. Could be played by a woman.

BELLE SQUIRE: Early to mid 40s. Chicago music teacher turned ardent suffragist.

VIRGINIA BROOKS: Mid to late 20s. Youthful Chicago suffragette and social justice warrior.

IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT: Early 50s woman of color. Well-traveled veteran of civil rights causes from Chicago to Memphis.

TIME AND PLACE: 1913, Chicago, IL, and later, Washington DC.

*Lights up far downstage right on REPORTER as he energetically scribbles notes into a reporter's notebook. He is dressed as one might expect...trousers, button-up collared shirt, waistcoat, cap, perhaps eyeglasses.*

REPORTER: *(Steps up on a small footstool and shouts as if a conductor. Hint of a Chicago accent.)* Allllll aboard the *Illinois Suffrage Special!* *(He punches the following line out into the air with gusto, as if were up in lights on a theater marquee).* "Lone male to accompany 150 women to Washington DC!" *(Jumps down from the footstool. When he hits the ground he is calmer, quite literally more grounded.)*

REPORTER: Sixty-five Illinois women payin' \$2000 each to ride the train to DC to march for a woman's right vote. They call it the *Suffrage Special*, and it's leavin' Chicago Union Station any minute now *(Beat as he checks his watch.)* The suffs wanna make double sure the President gets his marching orders on women's rights. They're calling themselves the "Army of the Middle West" and they're not kiddin'. *(Beat.)* Here they come now, marching up Jackson Street from the Art Institute. Every suffragette who's anyone in this city—hell, in this whole state—is catchin' that train. At the moment they're taking votes among themselves...just for fun...on everything from who is the best educated among 'em to who is the best speaker. That's Ms. Virginia Brooks, the "Joan of Arc" of South Chicago, actin' as master of ceremonies.

*(Lights down on REPORTER and up on fresh-faced youthful suffragette VIRIGINA BROOKS, standing far upstage center.)*

VIRGINIA: The ballots are in.... Belle Squire is voted our “most militant suffragette.”

*(BELLE SQUIRE enters, shakes VIRGINIA's hand.)*

BELLE: And who among you would deny the charming Miss Brooks here your vote for our “Best Reformer?”

REPORTER: *(To the audience.)* Belle Squire's got suffrage in her blood. She's a spinster music teacher who lives with her mom and four brothers on the Southside, down near Perry Street. You see Miss Squire walkin' up Wabash in her long dress and you'd think she was just some uppity high-brow downtown for afternoon tea, but you'd be dead wrong. She may teach piano for a living, but if you come between that sweet lady and a woman's right to vote, you're gonna get yourself knocked outa tune.

*(VIRGINIA and BELLE exit, setting the footstool down far stage left, where it simulates the steps to the train they are boarding. Immediately after VIRGINIA and BELLE have climbed the footstool to their exit, an older African American woman, IDA WELLS-BARNETT, enters directly upstage of REPORTER, crossing to stage left. She is dignified in her manner and only slightly in a hurry, though it's clear from the increasing urgency of the SFX that the Suffrage Special is about to depart.)*

REPORTER: *(To IDA.)* You better hustle, Mrs. Barnett, unless you want to walk to Washington! *(To audience.)* That's Mrs. Ida B. Wells-Barnett. She's toured all around England tellin' folks about America's shameful history of denying its African American citizens their God-given right to vote. *(Pause as REPORTER steps back up on his footstool, cups his hands, and shouts.)* “I vote for Ida Wells-Barnett as Bravest Soul aboard the *Suffrage Special!*” *(IDA, on the verge of boarding, turns around to blow REPORTER an appreciative kiss.)* I guess a man's vote shouldn't rightly count on a woman-only train.

*(SFX train whistle. REPORTER grabs his footstool and runs stage left. When he reaches the wings he puts his cap back on and mounts his footstool to call out his next lines as if a conductor hanging out the open vestibule of a moving train.)*

REPORTER: Alllllll abroad the Illinois to Suffrage Special! Diiii-rect to our nation's capital. This train is boooound for glory.

*(SFX of a train whistle and engine gaining speed as the lights dim before coming back up a moment later on VIRGINIA standing atop the footstool, this time far downstage center. The action is continuous. We are now on the Pullman car as it speeds through eastern Illinois on the way to Washington DC.)*

VIRGINIA: Ladies, Teddy Roosevelt may have had his bully pulpit in Washington, but we've got ours on a moving Pullman car. Let's give a hand to today's first speaker, President of the No-Vote, No-Tax League of Chicago, Belle Squire, speaking on the topic of what it means to be a Revolutionary Woman.

*(VIRGINIA exists stage left, clapping for BELLE as she goes. Enter BELLE, who stands atop the footstool, speaking forcefully as if addressing a large crowd.)*

BELLE: In 1776, while her husband John was in the Continental Congress, Abigail Adams wrote him...“Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention are not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion and will not hold ourselves bound to obey any laws in which we have no voice nor representation.”

So I say to you now, sister suffragists, if taxation without representation was tyranny in 1775, it is tyranny today. If no man was good enough to govern another without that other’s consent [then] no men are good enough to govern women without their consent today. *(A beat as she withdraws a letter from her pocket and holds it in the air.)* If you will permit me I would like to read you a letter I wrote recently to Mr. Harry A. Lewis, Cook County Attorney, on the matter of my property taxes. It is my “Declaration of Rights”:

*(She begins reading aloud.)*

“Sir, as head of her family, my mother has been assessed for personal property taxes.... I protest the double insult of being classed among the criminals, idiots...and incompetents of the state of Illinois by the government under which I was born and live, and then being forced by law to help support by my labor that government that so humiliates me. For this reason I absolute refuse to pay your tax bill.... Indeed, I call for the support of 1000 fearless women brave enough to refuse on moral or patriotic grounds to pay their personal taxes.... I refuse any longer to submit to that form of tyranny

REPORTER: *(Shaking his head in wonderment at BELLE’s chutzpah.)* Folks out East always say our men are hard-nosed, but let me tell ya, Chicago women are tough as nails. Everybody’s heard of Jane Addams over at Hull House and Mrs. Frances Willard, the Dean of Women up in Evanston, but Miss Bell Squire’s gotta be our best kept secret, suffragist-wise. How tough is she? Let me clue you in: she once threatened to sue the Republican Party for \$1 million for what she called “breach of promise” to American women. *(He chuckles a bit before opening a Chicago Tribune and reading directly from a story found therein.)* “County Treasurer William O’Connell declared yesterday the law would be enforced, and Miss Squire repeated her declaration that no tax would be paid by her. Mr. O’Connell has the alternative of backing up a wagon to Miss Squire’s residence and taking her property by storm against the attack of the militant suffragette...” *(Lowers his newspaper to speak directly to the audience.)* My editor down at the *Trib* told me to put that “militant suffragette” bit into the copy. I guess the prospect of women marchin’ in the streets has got Chicago men buying newspapers like never before. It’s like readin’ about a flood or a fire or one of our winter storms blowin’ in over Lake Michigan...some natural calamity bearing down on ’em that they’re powerless to stop.

REPORTER: *(Again summoning his “headline voice.”)* WOMAN DEFIANT TO TAX ASSESSOR...MISS BELLE SQUIRE REFUSES TO LIST HER PERSONAL PROPERTY...DEMANDS WOMAN’S VOTE FIRST. *(Resumes reading aloud from the newspaper story.)* “Miss Belle Squire, president of the No Vote, No Tax League, wrote a letter to

the assessors. It declares her intention of not apologizing for being a woman.” (*Beat, to audience.*) Imagine that...not apologizin’ for being a woman.

BELLE: (*Continuing to read from her letter.*) “So long as the County of Cook, in the State of Illinois, United States of America, hands me a tax schedule on the grounds that I am citizen of Illinois and must pay my fair share...and then refuses me a ballot on the grounds that I am a woman...so long will I refuse. If, too, in the sight of the state only male brains are capable of solving intricate problems of politics and government, I decline to worry my female brain to solve the problem of how that government is to meet its bills. I was born a woman. No prayers will change the fact. And I refuse to apologize for being what I am, or to make excuses for the kind of body the creator gave me. Therefore I absolutely refuse to aid or support the government that dishonors and demeans my womanhood. (*Beat.*) Yours very courteously, Belle Squire.”

(*BELLE bows or curtsies to the audience, grinning with good-natured mischief.*)

REPORTER: Shoot, I don’t need to tell you who won that fight in the end, Mr. O’Connell or Miss Squire. Belle hasn’t paid a cent of property taxes in two years and she won’t...not until women get the vote.

BELLE: Our next speaker on the Suffrage Car will be none other than the young woman we recently voted our “best reformer,” Chicago’s own Virginia Brooks.

(*Enter VIRGINIA into the train’s “Speakers Car,” gesturing toward the audience as if acknowledging the applause of the suffragists packed into the Pullman to hear her. BELLE shakes VIRGINIA’s hand as BELLE crosses stage left to her exit.*)

REPORTER: Virginia Brooks once called us “The rottenest city in America.” Says she won’t stop until she’s held all the crooks and grafters and grifters and human traffickers run out of town or thrown in jail. They call her the Joan of Arc of the Calumet City ’cause when she hears of a young woman who’s been trafficked or abused or sold into some kind of economic slavery, she goes in there herself and pulls ’em out of harm’s way. She’s busted into the biggest bordellos and brothels and the dankest boarding houses, not to mention shut down half the taverns in Calumet, and she’s still in her twenties.

VIRGINIA: Ladies, let me share with you a heartbreaking letter sent to me recently from a worried mother in a little town in the southern part of Illinois with less than three thousand inhabitants. Here is what the letter said:

“Dear Miss Brooks:

I am writing to ask you to help me. Six months ago my...girl ran away from home. I guess she was tired of the farm, tired of washing dishes, tired of being cooped up in this small town, because in the note she left she said she wanted to see the city, the restaurants, the lights, the shop windows and the people. Two weeks after she ran away a postal came. Mary—that is her name—said she had found work in Chicago. She didn’t send her address. Maybe she thought we

would send after her. We've had no word since then. Miss Brooks, maybe you don't know what a mother's sorrow is. Day and night I am praying to God to send my Mary back to me. If I only knew where to reach her. The thought that maybe she is hungry, sick and suffering is breaking my heart. I am powerless to help her. Can't you do something? Can't you find her for me? I am sending you her picture, the one she had taken just before she graduated.

Signed,  
A broken-hearted mother"

VIRGINIA: For many months I had been receiving letters from mothers in all parts of the country asking me to lend my aid in locating their lost daughters. Most of the letters said that the girl had gone to the city and then nothing more had been heard of her.

Next morning at breakfast my own mother handed me a newspaper. On the front page was an account of a pretty girl's suicide in a South side rooming house. The description haunted me until I visited a Wabash Avenue morgue where her body lay, another girl adrift in Chicago taken tragically too early.

I have seen men held high in public estimation...use every technicality, every unfair advantage, to keep...scoundrels from the prison doors, until my righteous indignation has cried out, "There is no justice in the courts. The laws are framed to shelter thieves. I have seen the beginning of temptation come to young officers on the police force in Chicago....I have watched the indifference grow upon them as their hands seized upon tainted dollars....

Sometimes when I consider the task I have set myself in telling the conditions I have encountered in my investigations in and around Chicago my heart almost fails me and my spirit revolts. Will it do any good? I ask myself.

There are hundreds of girls in Chicago, now respectably employed, who have been dragged out of the jaws of living death by women whose work is done quietly and effectively. Many of these women are not known as philanthropists or crusaders. They try to keep out of the limelight so that they may be more effective in their work. It is to the indefatigable patience of these good women that so many girls are snatched from bondage, and brought from darkness—*(The lights dim.)* I believe we have entered a kind of tunnel, ladies. *(Lights flicker several times before coming back up.)*—back into light.

*(The lights slowly dim into BLACKOUT.)*

## Scene 2

*Lights up on REPORTER sitting alone at what looks to be a table in the dining car of the Suffrage Special later that same night. Beside him sits an open bottle of liquor. He is visibly more weary and disheveled than when we last saw him.*

REPORTER: Now you take your average Pullman car stuffed to the gills with guys, and you'd have enough cigar smoke and cheap liquor to choke a horse. But the Suffs are giving speeches instead of drainin' beers, and I, for one, will be there to hear every last one of 'em. (*Gestures with a nearly empty whiskey tumbler.*) Now if you're a black woman like our Ida B. Wells-Barnett you'll get your turn at the bully pulpit, sure, but ya mostly gotta give your speeches to your own kind, or else late at night to people like me...people whose job it is to listen. (*He chuckles ruefully and throws back a final shot.*) Truth is, Mrs. Barnett is as fine a writer as any newspaperman in Chicago, bar none. Before she came up North she edited her own newspaper down in Memphis, and published a handful of books. Trouble is, some of the big-wigs at the national suffrage association don't want a smart, literary black woman fightin' for their cause, lest she (*Beat for air quotes.*) "damage the cause" in the eyes of white Southerners.

I s'pose I can see why they'd be scared. Mrs. Barnett knows a dirty little secret...that the Land of Lincoln has been mighty cruel at times to our citizens of color. But you're better off hearin' it straight from her than you are from me.

*(He turns in his seat to listen. Lights up on IDA WELLS-BARNETT at the "bully pulpit" downstage center where she stands atop the footstool used in earlier scenes.)*

In June 1893...one of our largest cities was startled with the cry that a white woman had been assaulted by a "colored tramp"... After he was arrested the alleged victim did not see him to identify him—he was presumed to be guilty....The mob gathered, went to the jail, met with no resistance, took the suspected man, dragged him out tearing every stitch of clothing from his body, then hanged him to a telegraph pole....Not one of the dozens of men prominent in that murder have suffered a whit more inconvenience for the butchery of that man, than they would have suffered for shooting a dog.

Illinois, which gave to the world the immortal heroes, Lincoln, Grant and Logan, trailed its banner of justice in the dust—dyed its hands red in the blood of a man not proven guilty of crime.

The lesson this teaches and which every African-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give. When the white man...knows he runs as great risk of biting the dust every time his African-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life. The more the African-American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged, and lynched.

The flower of the nineteenth century civilization for the American people was the abolition of slavery and the enfranchisement of man. Here, at last was the squaring of practice with precept, with true democracy, with the Declaration of Independence, and with the golden rule. The reproach and disgrace of the twentieth century is that the whole of the American people have been permitted a part to nullify this glorious achievement, and make the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments to the Constitution playthings, a mockery and a byword; an absolute dead

letter in the Constitution of the United States. One third of the states...have made and enforced laws which abridge the rights of American citizens. Although the Constitution specially says no state shall do so they do deprive persons of life, liberty, and property without due process of law.

Ladies and...*gentleman* (*A beat as she acknowledges REPORTER, the sole male aboard the train*), with no sacredness of the ballot there can be no sacredness of human life itself. For if the strong can take the weak [one's] ballot when it suits his purpose to do so he will take his life also.

*(Lights down on IDA, who freezes in the climactic moment of her speech, coming up again on REPORTER.)*

REPORTER: Some folks say the motion of a railcar traveling through the night'll rock ya to sleep like a child in its mother's arms. (*Small pause she takes a final drink directly from the bottle*) Not me. You hear a speech like that and you gotta be a hard-hearted son of bitch not to lay awake thinkin' about the injustice of it.

If that doesn't trouble your dreams, Chicago, I don't know what will.

*(He gets up from the table and turns off a lantern or lamp to signify the end of the day.)*

*(END SCENE. BLACKOUT.)*

Scene 3

*Lights up on REPORTER far down right, in the same position as when the play began.*

REPORTER: Let me tell ya that train was hot with controversy by the time it steamed across the state line into Indiana. *(Small pause as he once again summons his "headline voice")*. "Suffrage Party Splits Over 'Miss.' Belle Squire Starts It." "Illinois Delegation at Odds Within Hour After Train Leaves Chicago Her Insistence on Addressing Spinsters as 'Mrs' Roils Both Maids and Matrons."

*(Lights down on REPORTER. Spot up on BELLE, who stands atop the footstool down center in the Suffrage Car.)*

BELLE: I would like to know why women who are working for equal rights have not the right to take the title 'Mrs.'.... When a woman reaches years of maturity she has a right to this title even if she is not married. Here we are, sixty-five women spending \$2000 to go to Washington to gain equal rights. Here is a right that can be had for the taking. It does not cost a cent. I move we adopt the following resolution: *Resolved: That every unmarried woman over eighteen years of age adopt the title 'Mrs.'*"

*(Lights back up on REPORTER, who clears his throat as if to interrupt.)*

REPORTER: Well, you can imagine how Belle's resolution went down with the married women on the train...like a ton of bricks. One of the married ones pipes up to say she objects to maidens taking the hard-won title 'Mrs.'... "parading on women's preserves," as she puts it. I'm tellin' ya those suffragettes can turn a phrase better than most of us newspapermen when the spirit moves 'em. *(Beat.)* That dinner car was already boiling over when Virginia Brooks stirred the pot even further.

*(Enter VIRGINIA down center to stand beside BELLE.)*

VIRGINIA: "We've had too much discrimination between the sexes. I vote that unmarried women take the title "Mister."

REPORTER: Damned if she didn't bring the pot to a screamin' boil. Eventually they simmered down and called for a vote of all the unmarried marchers in the car, askin' if they preferred the traditional *Miss* for unmarried women. *Miss* won with eight votes, followed by four votes for *Mrs.*, and two votes for *Mister*. *(Small pause.)* Well, after my article on the "Mrs." controversy ran in the *Trib*, the letters poured in from women all across the Midwest. Here's one from Anne Heblet, who writes... *(Small pause as he retrieves the letter from his back pocket.)* "Allow me to suggest to Belle Squire that instead of adopting the title 'Mrs.' she instead use the title 'madam.'.... Madam furnished a dignified address to a stranger, which no other does, a thing which makes for politeness. By all means let us confine 'miss' as a title or schoolgirls.... Let all address each other as Madam and the reform is accomplished."

Maybe the ladies have good reason to cry foul. A man is a Mr. his whole life.... There's no way to tell from his callin' card whether he's single, married, divorced, or widower. Why

should an unmarried seasoned woman like Miss...er...I mean *Mrs. Squire*...have to share a title with a schoolgirl in pigtails?

*(END SCENE. BLACKOUT.)*

Scene 4

*Spotlight up on REPORTER, this time far downstage left to signify the change in setting. The train has arrived and we are now in Washington DC on the evening before the historic women's march. Down center we see two women in silhouette, frozen in their respective poses. One appears to be in the midst of delivering a passionate speech.*

REPORTER: Tomorrow's the Women's March on Washington, 1913, the stuff of men's dreams (*Beat.*) and nightmares. 5000-women strong marchin' up Pennsylvania Avenue. Just about every state in the Union's got a contingent steamin' in. Illinois got an army of 65 marching women, with—you guessed it—Belle Squire and Virginia Brooks front and center in another controversy, this one involving their good friend Ida Wells-Barnett.

Here's the scoop: Grace Trout, the president of our state suffrage association, comes running into the room saying that some of the women from the Southern states have refused to take part in the women's march if a "negro women" like Mrs. Barnett is allowed to walk with the Illinois delegation.

I can tell you Virginia Brooks was having none of what Mrs. Wilbur was serving.

*(Lights down on REPORTER and up on VIRGINIA BROOKS and IDA WELLS-BARNETT down center, who unfreeze as they deliver their respective lines.)*

VIRGINIA: It's entirely undemocratic! We have come down here to march for equal rights. It would be autocratic to exclude men or women of color.... We should allow Ms. Barnett to walk in our delegation. If the women of other states lack moral courage, we should show them that we are not afraid of public opinion. We should stand by our principles. If we don't the parade will be a farce.

IDA: I shall not march unless I can march under the Illinois banner. When I was asked to come down here I was asked to march with the other women of our state, and I intend to do so or not take part in the parade at all.... Either I march with you or not at all. I am not taking this stand because I personally wish for recognition. I am doing it for the future benefit of my race. It is time for Illinois to recognize the colored woman as a political equal.

REPORTER: You could hear a pin drop after Mrs. Barnett was through. Then Belle Squire, who's been sick as a dog since the *Suffrage Special* pulled into DC, speaks up from her chair in the back of the room.

*(Lights up on BELLE.)*

BELLE: If you're forced to walk in the colored delegation at the back of the march, Mrs. Barnett, I'll walk at your side.

VIRGINIA: *(Walking upstage right to BELLE's side)* And I will join you.... I think it would be a disgrace for Illinois women to let Mrs. Barnett march alone when the parade is intended to show a woman's demand for the great principles of democracy.

REPORTER: That's what I mean when I say Chicago women got more steel in 'em than half our skyscrapers. It's one thing to stand up to a mob of men who think women oughta stay home in the kitchen, but it's another thing to stand up against your sister suffragettes when they're on the wrong side of history and democracy. *(Small pause.)* Whatever unity there was in the room looked like it was gonna fray like a piece of yarn until Belle reminded the whole lot of 'em what they'd all come for.

BELLE: Ladies, man has forgotten, if indeed he ever knew or realized it, the part that woman had played in the ages far behind them, that he had indeed usurped her superiority, claiming her inventions as his own, not understanding that she was the mother of industry, the mother of civilization, the great conservator of life and progress, the mother of humanity itself.

*(BELLE stands and walks slowly downstage, speaking as she goes. VIRGINA walks alongside, looking anxious, as if she suspects the ailing BELLE might topple over from the exertion.)*

Despising, glorifying, bewailing, belittling, or ridiculing the strength of the weakness which drew him to her, he has despised her, maltreated her, enslaved her, loved her, fled from her, hated her, cherished and sometimes worshipped her; and, in his supreme egoism, in the all-sufficiency of his own rights and his own reasoning, he conceived in the early days the idea that she was created expressly for him, for his use, his comfort, by an all-wise and beneficent God.... Perhaps it was in the nature of things, or in the order of nature, that he usurped all sorts of authority, domestic, political, ecclesiastical, moral, and civil. In his superb conceit he designated the Creator of the universe as "Father," and limited the Great Unknown to his own sex alone.

Tribe, nation, empire; chieftain, king, emperor; democracy, aristocracy, republic; freeman, master, slave; lord, serf; monogamy, polyandry, polygamy, concubinage, and monogamy again, in outward form at least. Everywhere there was a thirst for power, some imposition of authority, divine or human. Everywhere the human mind was chained, or an effort made to chain it; and allegiance was demanded from those below to someone or something above: to king, noble, priest; to lord, knight, master; to husband, father; to State, to Church.

The Hebrew name Jehovah is said to have been originally a double-sexed word, meaning *father-mother*.... Ladies, that government is best that unites the wisdom of women with the wisdom of men.

*(END SCENE. BLACKOUT.)*

Scene 5

*Spotlight up on REPORTER far down left. He speaks the notes he his making in his reporter's notebook out loud to the audience.*

REPORTER: March 3, 1913: the day of the first mass women's march on Washington DC. Picture it...trains rollin' into DC's Union Station every five minutes from all across the nation. 150,000 folks arrivin' today alone, an estimated 100,000 of 'em to witness the women march into history.

It's two o'clock on the dot and two of the most important members of the Illinois delegation: Belle Squire and Mrs. Ida Wells-Barnett, have gone missing. Word on the street says Belle's too sick to join the march and Ida...well her exact whereabouts are anyone's guess. I wouldn't blame her a bit if she skipped out. Think about it... Back home in Chicago the Alpha Suffrage Club—the only African-American suffrage club in the nation—spends months raisin' enough money to help Ida travel the 750 miles from Chicago to Washington, then, when she gets here the women at national headquarters tell her she can't march in the Illinois contingent on account of how her skin color will damage the national cause.

*(Enter VIRGINIA stage left. She is clearly anxious and appears to be urgently looking for something.)*

VIRGINIA: I will not have one of our delegation having to march alone as if she were in disgrace. I'll find Mrs. Barnett and Mrs. Squire.

REPORTER: Right then Mrs. Squire shows up, so sick she's gotta almost drag herself to the start-line. When Miss Brooks sees Belle she practically tackles her she's so happy, and the two of 'em march side by side down Pennsylvania Avenue like sister soldiers in the suffrage Army of the Middle West.

*(BELLE and VIRGINIA link arms and march across and around the stage side by side, in lockstep.)*

They've marched like that for no more than a few blocks, when Ida leaps out of the crowd and steps right into the marching column beside Mrs. Squire and Miss Brooks. *(IDA enters from stage right, linking arms with both BELLE and VIRGINIA, their march continuing with even greater pride and purpose now. IDA is positively beaming.)* It was as if the three of 'em had planned it all along *(Beat for a wry smile.)* and they had.

When the march is over the national suffrage organizations are miffed by Belle's and Virginia's slight of hand but it's too late. It's *(Pause for emphasis.)* history.... I guess what I mean to say is history has a way of comin' for us even when we try to plug our ears and run from it. Belle, Virginia, and Ida opened their ears and their hearts and met it head on. We are the Land of Lincoln, after all, and that's a title to live up to, especially when the way forward looks dark or uncertain.

Afterward the whole shootin' Illinois contingent gathers on the National Mall, whoopin' and hollerin' and makin' sure they give credit where credit is due. They pass a resolution

thanking the Ohio and Baltimore Railroad for providin' the Suffrage Special. Then, just when it looks like they're done giving thanks, they issue one more resolution, and this one...this one gets me right there (*A beat as REPORTER pats his heart.*)

BELLE: "Resolved: The Illinois delegation thanks the *Chicago Tribune* for spending a special representative to Washington."

(*BELLE, VIRGINIA, and IDA face REPORTER, clapping for him.*)

REPORTER: A journalist prides himself in stayin' neutral, but spend a few days with women like these, and you can't help but feel the angels of your better nature spreadin' their wings (*Long circumspect pause.*) I'm proud to say I was a man among marching women.

(*END SCENE. BLACKOUT.*)

Scene 6

REPORTER: Almost four months have passed since Belle, Virginia, and the rest of the Illinois delegation made headlines at the women's rights march in Washington. And every blessed day since Ida's been fightin' to remind the racists and sexists in the statehouse down in Springfield that true justice must be color-blind; Virginia's enrolled herself in college for the Fall, though it hasn't stopped her from rescuing more of her girls adrift in Chicago.

And Belle Squire.... after she and Miss Brooks locked arms with Ida and marched down Pennsylvania Avenue into the history books, she marched herself into the pages of the *Tribune*, too, writing a piece for us on how she'd rather have a vote than a husband:

*(Lights down on REPORTER far down left and up on BELLE far down right, who holds a copy of the Chicago Tribune spread wide in her arms. Lowering the paper so the audience can see her eyes overtop of the broadsheet, she reads aloud.)*

BELLE: I want a vote; it's more dependable than a husband. A vote is always an asset, for it represents dignity and power. A husband often robs a woman of these. A vote is more necessary to a woman than a husband. It raises her wages, her dignity, and her position in the political world as well as in society. It makes her a formidable power to be reckoned with. On the other hand when a woman acquires a husband her wages may be considerably lessened and her position in the world appreciably lowered.

I am sure I could manage a vote much easier than I could a husband.... The vote is always a good thing to have. *It* does not deteriorate in value.

*(BELLE freezes momentarily. Lights back up on REPORTER who is now seated in a chair down center. As he begins speaking BELLE moves to a position directly behind him, as if looking over his shoulder. Enter VIRGINIA, who does the same, followed by IDA.)*

REPORTER: Not long after Belle's piece ran in the *Trib* I'm with the suffragettes to watch Governor Dunne sign the Illinois Suffrage Bill into law.... June 26, 1913, 9:54 a.m. The suffs dance a jig right there in the Governor's Office, no foolin'.

*(Behind him VIRGINIA breaks into an improvised jig as BELLE and IDA clap in time, egging her on. The dance stops abruptly as the REPORTER continues his narration, with the three women locking arms again in solidarity as they listen.)*

With one stroke of his pen the Governor makes Illinois...not New York or Massachusetts or Pennsylvania or any of the proud old colonies out East, the first east of the Mississippi River to grant women the vote, all 1 million 500,000 of them...mothers and daughters, granddaughters and grandmothers, nieces and aunts, finally emancipated. In signing the bill Governor Dunne says, and I quote: "I put aside absolutely all questions of politics in signing this measure. I signed it only because I believed it to be right. I am happy in the thought that I have done what my conscience dictated." A politician with a conscience...now there's a headline worth writing.

When word reaches Jane Addams at the international suffragette conference in Budapest the delegates there break out into wild applause. Others openly weep. The whole world cheers for the Land of Lincoln. In the pages of the *Trib* Marion Walters writes, "Illinois' victory will

push the woman's suffrage movement forward in every country in the world where the women are working and waiting to have...justice accorded them by the men.”

Not everyone's happy, of course. Illinois women can now vote in presidential elections, mayor, alderman and just about every local office you can think of, but they still can't vote for Governor, State Representatives, or Congress. Mrs. Squire declares she won't pay a dime of property taxes until the women of our state have more than “half a vote,” and she sticks to it, whole-hog.

Many years from now, when the great state of Illinois celebrates her Bicentennial, I expect there'll statutes of Belle Squire and Virginia Brooks and Ida B. Wells Barnett standin' right alongside the Great Emancipator's down in Springfield. And if there aren't...why then, maybe we need the women of the future to take a cue from Belle and stop paying their taxes. *(Beat.)* After all, justice is due them, don't you think?

*(He tips his cap to the three suffragists and to the audience, then exits left out of the spotlight that falls on BELLE, VIRGINIA, and IDA. They stand, arm-in-arm, as if posing proudly for the future statue the REPORTER dared imagine. After a long pause they march downstage center together, to bow as one to the audience.)*

END OF PLAY

## Post-Performance Discussion Questions: *Votes for Women!* by Zachary Michael Jack

*The discussion questions that follow were inspired in part by those raised in two public talkback sessions held at Madden Theatre at the conclusion of the March 2 and March 3, 2019 performances of Votes for Women! in Naperville, Illinois.*

- 1) The Greeks considered *pathos*—strong feelings elicited in the hearts and minds of theatergoers—to be a vital mode of persuasion in theater, debate, public oratory, and beyond. If audience members could be made to truly feel, they reasoned, they could be more readily persuaded toward the good and virtuous. Where in the play *Votes for Women!* did you feel the most empathy for the activists? What other emotions did you experience as you performed or viewed the play?
- 2) Virginia Brooks, Belle Squire, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett worked together to earn the vote for Illinois women, but they were very different people with different personalities, methods, and individual passion projects. Which of the three featured suffragettes did you most relate to and why? Is there anything about their cause, or the method of their activism, that you disagreed with?
- 3) In 1913 Belle Squire famously called for one thousand brave women to refuse to pay their state taxes until Illinois women had a say in their own representation. Had you been a man or woman alive in 1913, do you think you would have answered her call? Why or why not? Under what circumstances do you believe civil disobedience like Belle's to be justifiable?
- 4) At the conclusion of the play the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reporter who converts to the cause suggests that if there aren't statues of Virginia Brooks, Belle Squire, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett alongside Lincoln's in Springfield when Illinois celebrates her Bicentennial in 2018, it might be time for Illinois women to rise up once again. Do you agree that the founding suffragettes have mostly been forgotten? If so, what is the evidence of that neglect? What could Illinois cities, towns, and neighborhoods do to better reclaim and celebrate the memory of these brave women?
- 5) Finally, one of the stated goals of Illinois Humanities' Forgotten Illinois program is to bring obscure but important Illinois historical figures back into public view via media-friendly storytelling methods. What other Illinois historical figures or movements do you feel are overlooked? Why do you think citizens today would do well to remember them?

**Production Notes: Votes for Women! by Zachary Michael Jack**

REPORTER.....Giuliano Catalano  
BELLE SQUIRE.....Katie Rose Ford  
VIRGINIA BROOKS.....Claire Nelson  
IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT.....Ariana Burks

Stage Manager: Kenny Miller  
Production Designer: Destany Hahn  
Production Supervisor: Dr. John Warrick  
Directed by Benjamin Paynic  
Written by Zachary Michael Jack

**Acknowledgments**

Special thanks to the Theatre Department at North Central College for their support of *Votes for Women!*, to Illinois Humanities for sponsoring the Forgotten Illinois program, and to NCTV and the IRIS Center at Southern Illinois University for documenting and preserving this performance in honor of the Bicentennial and Women’s History Month. For historical accuracy, and where possible, the dialogue of Belle Squire, Virginia Brooks, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett has been sourced from their own words as they appeared in *My Battle with Vice* by Virginia Brooks, *The Woman Movement in America* by Belle Squire, and *The Red Record* by Ida B. Wells, and from quotes appearing in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* prior to 1914. Portions of some historical quotes have been shifted chronologically or otherwise edited, reordered, or recombined for the most compelling staging possible. The playwright is pleased to make *Votes for Women!* available royalty-free to qualifying Illinois nonprofits in hopes of keeping the memory of these brave activists alive and accessible to all. Contact the playwright at [zacharymichaeljack@gmail.com](mailto:zacharymichaeljack@gmail.com) if you are interested in performing or staging *Votes for Women!*