

Annie Armstrong: Determined Servant

By Jacqueline Durham

SETTING

Stage left (*this is the right section as viewed by the audience*) represents Annie Armstrong's room and later her office. Stage right (*the section to the left as viewed by the audience*) and center stage represents other locations. It is of primary importance for the actors to make this distinction in their imaginations; however, partial dividers or folding screens may be placed, giving three actual semi-divisions to the stage. These may also provide storage for properties needed in scene changes. Do *not* sacrifice fast pacing for the setting of elaborate scenes. Fast pacing and continuous action are key elements in the play.

PROPERTIES

A small desk-type table and a chair should remain throughout the play at stage left. All other properties should be brought on as the actors move into position for the scene in which the property is needed. These should be removed by the actors at the end of the scene. If spotlights are available and the play is to be presented at night, more realistic scenes will be possible, but here again, fast pacing is more important than realism. Trust the imagination of the audience to follow the action. Whether or not spotlights are available, "set" one scene while the preceding scene is ending, so that the action can be continuous. Immediately following one scene, the character with the first lines of the next scene should begin speaking.

DIRECTIONS

Even though the audience may be able to see everything – all costume changes, every scene and property change, preparations to enter a scene – this will not detract from the scenes themselves. Place a screen on one or both sides of the stage behind which other characters can stand before entering and behind which properties may be placed until they are brought on stage. Do not worry that the audience sees part of the backstage mechanics; this technique is used frequently, even in the professional theater.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ANNIE ARMSTRONG

ALICE ARMSTRONG

MRS. ARMSTRONG, their mother

MRS. EUGENE LEVERING (Mamie) their sister

MARY, SARAH, and other young women

MISS M.E. MCINTOSH

MRS. JONES

PRESIDING OFFICER, FIRST LADY, and a small group of ladies at the organization meeting of WMU

DR. TUPPER, corresponding secretary, Foreign Mission Board

MRS. SCHIMP

SMALL GROUP OF WOMEN (same persons as those mentioned above)

MESSENGER

PRESIDING OFFICER and small group of women

WOMEN OF 1933

SCENE I

(Woman in modern dress – long skirt, blouse with puffed sleeve – walks to desk and chair at stage left. She begins to speak to the audience in a conversational tone. As she talks, she begins to alter her appearance with items which are in a drawer or on top of the desk. She ties a velvet or grosgrain ribbon around her neck, places a pin in the center. She puts on a wig of light to medium brown color which is shaped in a bun, perhaps with braids wrapped around it. She should time the passage which she is to speak so that her speech ends simultaneously with the change in her appearance. As soon as both are completed, she is ANNIE ARMSTRONG, and speaks ANNIE’S first lines in character.)

WOMAN: Annie Armstrong? She was a refined young woman from one of the finest families in Baltimore, but she was full of energy and possessed a determination which made her a powerhouse. She accomplished more concrete results than most women of the 1970’s would consider tackling – and that was a hundred years ago when women did not have the vote.

Annie Armstrong was carefree and fun-loving. It was not until the age of twenty that she joined Eutaw Place Baptist Church in Baltimore. She did not commit a limited part of herself to God – but every ability and every ounce of energy. That meant seeing what needed to be done and mobilizing the efforts of others to get it done – or doing it herself. She struggled with the decision to become a missionary in some foreign country. She was a lovely young woman and at least one proposal is a matter of general knowledge. It came from a missionary from

China. (*Her appearance is changed; the WOMAN looks down for a few seconds, then lifts her head and speaks.*)

ANNIE: “Thank you, sir. But I feel that there is some other special work for me to do.” That is what I said, God, and I meant it. But what is that special work? I’d feel a lot better if I knew.

(*MRS. ARMSTRONG walks across center stage toward stage left, calling to her.*)

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Annie. Annie Armstrong.

ANNIE: (*turns from desk toward her mother*) Here I am, Mother.

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Well, it looks like I’ll get to have a talk with my daughter for a change. Between the children in your Sunday School class and your visits to the Home for the Friendless and the trips way out to Bayview Mission, plus your work in the home mission society you’ve organized, I rarely see you.

ANNIE: (*teasingly*) You forget that I come to the infirmary to help you.

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Yes, and I appreciate it.

ANNIE: You know, Mother, you stay pretty busy yourself. (*She straightens items on the dresser.*) What is the foreign mission society doing now?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: We have a new project to help Brazil now. I think it is marvelous that you young women have taken an interest in home missions since the older women were already working in foreign missions. And I’m proud of the way you have led the group, Annie.

ANNIE: Thank you, Mother. (*Pauses*) But we really should all be working together on home and foreign missions. (*She puts her arm around her mother and they begin to walk off stage, toward center back.*) Some day – we will.

SCENE II

(*Young women sit in circle with sewing items in laps, stage right. ANNIE picks up a suit of clothing to have in her hand in this scene. There is a huge cardboard box in middle of the group of young women.*)

ANNIE: It looks like we are going to make it, and the Indian students will have proper summer clothing.

ALICE: Remember the day that letter came from Dr. Tichenor at the Home Mission Board? We thought 240 suits might be more than we could make.

ANNIE: *(As she talks, she folds suit, places it in box, begins to address the side of the box to: Levering Manual Labor School, Wetumka, Oklahoma, Indian Territory.)* And it would have been, if just the two mission groups here at our church had tried to do it.

MARY: Hasn't it been great the way the groups from all the churches in Baltimore have pitched in to help.

MAMIE: And some that didn't even have missions groups formed them just to help on this project.

SARAH: And I have a feeling the motto you gave us will stick, Annie – "Our Land for Christ."

ALICE: Our Land for Christ – humm. Maybe it will. *(Folds suit, places it in box.)* Anyway, if Annie has her way, this will be just the first of many projects on which we will work together.

ANNIE: Don't accuse me, Alice Armstrong. You believe just as much as I do that this job came our way to help the women in all the churches start working together.

SCENE III

(MRS. ARMSTRONG sits slightly left of center stage with needlework in hand or needlepoint before her. Free-standing placard at center reads "1881." MRS. ARMSTRONG begins to hum a hymn. ANNIE and ALICE rush in.)

ANNIE: Oh, Mother, they voted to do it!

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Marvelous, Annie. But with you pushing for it, how could they ever have refused? *(She hugs ANNIE.)*

ANNIE: *(ANNIE looks upward as if she see it written in the sky)* The Woman's Baptist Home Mission Society of Maryland. Just think, a statewide group!

ALICE: And you haven't heard the best news yet –

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Annie was elected president. Congratulations. *(Looks rather sad, picks up her needlework, address ANNIE solemnly.)* But you must remember to keep time for yourself, Annie. Don't get so busy that you don't have time for the two things you love most – people and the beauty of the world.

ANNIE: I won't, Mother.

SCENE IV

(ANNIE and ALICE exit stage center to stage left. A bowl of apples is on the desk. Two huge trunks are on the floor. Dresses on hangers are draped over furniture. Placard reads: "Late spring, about 1884." ANNIE sits on the other trunk thinking.)

ALICE: I intend to read all summer.

ANNIE: I will just walk in the cool woods and pick wild flowers.

ALICE: Oh, it will be heavenly to be out of the city for three months – and relax.

(ANNIE picks up an apple, bites into it, holds it out and looks at it.)

ANNIE: Alice, just think of the women who picked these apples (*motions to bowl of apples*), and all those at the market. How many of them are Baptist women – all over Maryland? Women who say "no" to a letter asking them to work together for missions. (*She picks up a dress, starts to fold it, but lays it down again.*)

ALICE: But a few of them have started mission societies, Annie, and have joined us in working for missions.

ANNIE: (*Picks up a letter, opens it, and reads aloud*) "We are sorry, but our women are not interested in forming a missionary society at this time." Very polite, but very firmly NO.

ALICE: Annie, you have written letter after letter. You will just have to forget some of the women until they are ready. You have done all you can.

ANNIE: But have I? (*She flings open the trunk on which she was sitting and begins to remove dresses and hang them on hangers.*)

ALICE: What have you made up you mind to do now, Annie Armstrong?

ANNIE: I'm not going on a vacation. I'm going to visit women in Baptist churches all over this state.

ALICE: How will you go?

ANNIE: By train, by horse and carriage, by buggy.

ALICE: You can't go alone.

ANNIE: I've talked about it some. I think there are two or three other young women who would go with me.

ALICE: Then I'm going too. So Mother won't worry about you.

ANNIE: Alice, you know I'd rather have you with me than anyone else. But both of us can't go; somebody has to care for Mother.

ALICE: All right. But the society has not money to pay for such a trip.

ANNIE: I will pay my own way. And so will the others.

ALICE: *(Looking intently at her sister)* You really intend to give up your vacation in the mountains you love to traipse all over Maryland – to places where you probably won't even be welcomed.

ANNIE: When I've talked to them face to face and I have told them about the needs and what we can do, then – if they don't want to work for missions, I will know I have done all I can.

SCENE V

(MRS. ARMSTRONG and ALICE stand near the edge of stage right, turned obliquely, looking into the distance for the train.)

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Isn't it almost time for the train?

ALICE: Any minute now. Oh, it will be great to see Annie.

MRS. ARMSTRONG: I have really missed her. I only hope she got on as well as her letters indicated.

ALICE: There it comes!

(Sounds of a train if possible, moving closer and coming to a stop. Place a set of lightweight steps a few feet in front of MRS. ARMSTRONG and ALICE. ANNIE steps up on these, then walks down them. If desired, paint a large piece of cardboard to look like the side of a train with a metal railing and steps and place this between the steps which ANNIE descends and the audience.)

ANNIE: *(Rushing down the steps, she hugs both women)* Oh, it's good to see you!

MRS. ARMSTRONG: You look well. But a little thin.

ANNIE: I'm fine. You both look rested and radiant.

ALICE: Well, don't wait. Tell us about your trip.

ANNIE: There's so much to tell. Many of the women are eager to help – so concerned about missions. (*They walk slowly, arching toward the back of stage and approaching "home" at center stage.*) They have little to give, of money, but they want to give what they have. (*She pauses a moment pensively.*) But in many places, the men are so opposed to it.

ALICE: Why? They're Christians too, aren't they?

ANNIE: You probably understand it better than I, Alice. You read and keep up with these things. They think it is part of woman's suffrage.

ALICE: I suppose that is true. Many men are suspicious of any effort like this among women.

ANNIE: We really were frightened once this summer. We were in a small mining town. They had just had a strike. The people were in terrible circumstances. The pastor said he thought they would be interested any other time, but he didn't even encourage us to speak to them.

ALICE: Did you?

ANNIE: Well, we were there. And it wasn't time for our train. (*She looks slightly exasperated.*) Oh, of course, we did. (*ALICE and MRS. ARMSTRONG laugh.*) Every time we walked down the street we could hear the men mumbling about not having enough money for food.

ALICE: Did they come to the meeting?

ANNIE: The building was almost full – of men and women. They listened intently, but when it was time to discuss it, dead silence. Not a word was said.

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Oh, Annie, my poor dear.

(*ALICE pretends to open door. They step into "living room" at center stage.*)

ANNIE: (*Begins to untie and remove her hat. They remove gloves, hats, during following dialogue*) The pastor explained to us how much stock the women put in what the menfolk think. As we walked toward the train, we were followed by a small group of men. They scowled and mumbled. I confess, I was scared. We wanted to run, but we forced ourselves to walk. I don't mind telling you, I was relieved when that train actually pulled away.

(*MRS. ARMSTRONG sits, so does ANNIE. ALICE reaches for a small stack of letters and hands them to ANNIE.*)

ALICE: These letters came for you.

(ANNIE looks through them, pulls out one and stares at it.)

MRS. ARMSTRONG: What is it Annie? What's wrong?

ANNIE: It's – from the little mountain town I just told you about. (*She opens the letter. Two one dollar bills fall out. She picks them up, looks at them astounded, then reads the letter aloud.*) "Miss Armstrong. Sorry we could not make up one of them missionary groups. Thank ye for coming out here. We listened to ye with our hearts, and we want to do something. Hope this will help a bit." (ANNIE drops her head, holds letter softly to her heart.)

SCENE VI

(ANNIE, ALICE, MISS M.E. MCINTOSH, and MRS. JONES are at stage right in a hotel room. A free-standing placard, slightly to left of their location, reads: "Richmond, May 1888.")

ANNIE: Well, this is it.

MISS MCINTOSH: Yes, we've waited and worked three years since the proposal was first made, and today's vote will decide.

MRS. JONES: Do you mean this is the third time that the woman's auxiliary has been proposed to the Convention?

ANNIE: The third time.

MRS. JONES: But why?

ALICE: You should have been in Baltimore two years ago, Mrs. Jones. Our cousin, Joshua Levering, made the proposal. We thought it would be accepted, but one elderly gentleman spoke in support of the motion. He said (*she mimics*), "The Convention should welcome the rising power of Southern women as a force for missions. We should . . . take hold of – but cautiously – this great power." It was the way he said "cautiously" that did it. It didn't pass.

MRS. JONES: What did you do?

MISS MCINTOSH: We went back home to our respective states determined to work harder. That's what we did. Annie resolved to bring together the home and foreign mission groups which had always worked separately.

MRS. JONES: How did you do it?

ANNIE: I simply joined both and worked from within.

SCENE VII

(At center stage, as the other scene ends, a woman raps on podium. Women are sitting in chairs with backs to audience. The four women from Scene VI move from stage right and take seats as presiding officer speaks. ANNIE sits in a low chair at rear of group, nearest audience, in a diagonal position.)

PRESIDING WOMEN: Upon the nomination of Miss Annie Armstrong, Miss M.E. McIntosh of South Carolina has been elected president of the new Woman's Auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention.

(MISS MCINTOSH walks quickly to the podium. The women applaud as she goes.)

MISS MCINTOSH: Thank you for your confidence. We have waited a long time for this moment. I am convinced that we are ready to move ahead rapidly. The officers we select today to do the day-to-day work of our organization will determine to a large extent our success. The post of corresponding secretary is the most important post to be filled. Do I hear nominations?

FIRST LADY: I nominate Miss Annie Armstrong of Baltimore. *(From this moment, the talking is in pantomime. First a hand goes up in the group, seconding the nomination, the MISS MCINTOSH talks in pantomime, until ANNIE has completed the following speech.)*

ANNIE: *(Remains seated; softly)* Is this it, God? Is this the task you have had waiting for me: to lead women and girls to see the need for missions and to take the lead in supporting a strong missions program in this country and around the world?

(The entire group of women with hands raised in a chorus of . . .)

WOMEN: . . . Aye!

SCENE VIII

(The office of DR. TUPPER, corresponding secretary of the Foreign Mission Board, stage right. DR. TUPPER sits behind desk; ANNIE sits slightly to one side. A sign on the desk reads: "Corresponding Secretary, Foreign Mission Board.")

DR. TUPPER: I'm glad to see the way the woman's auxiliary has moved these first few months, Miss Armstrong.

ANNIE: Well, to be honest, Dr. Tupper, the missionary prayer cards helped the women concentrate on the same mission field at once.

DR. TUPPER: (*Reflectively*) Hmm. Not bad. Did the ladies get the feeling of working together?

ANNIE: In fact, right after we organized, Dr. Tichenor asked for our help in building a church in Havana, and we decided to try it. The women have responded beautifully to the building of the church in Cuba, and, now, we would like to offer them a special opportunity to help in foreign missions.

DR. TUPPER: Is that right? Well, I can give you the area immediately – North China. We need to send additional missionaries to help Miss Lottie Moon and Mrs. T.P. Crawford. You have read their letters?

ANNIE: Yes, indeed. And I agree. The conditions there need special attention. In one of her letters, Miss Moon even mentioned the week of prayer and self-denial which the Methodist women have. We can fuse the two ideas. The women will have a week of prayer and then take a Christmas offering, and the very first one can be sent to help the work of Miss Lottie Moon in North China.

DR. TUPPER: How will you promote such a project, Miss Armstrong?

ANNIE: We will send letters to all the societies in the churches throughout the Convention – and copies of Miss Moon's letters for inspiration. And we will include individual envelopes for the offerings the women wish to make. I have a volunteer helper and no typewriter, but I have this (*holds up her right hand*) and bottles of ink!

SCENE IX

(Between Scene VIII and this scene, powder the wig which ANNIE is wearing. If possible, begin to have sounds of a moving train as MRS. SCHIMP and ANNIE take positions at stage right, as if on a train. Place two chairs side by side, facing center, in which the ladies should sit very erect. If desired, paint a large piece of cardboard to give the appearance of the side of seats on railroad passenger car.)

ANNIE: Almost 4,000 miles of trains, carriages, and wagons over rough country, Mrs. Schimp, and you are still as energetic as when we left Baltimore.

MRS. SCHIMP: You can't get a good Swiss down. But I will be glad to relax at home for a while.

ANNIE: So will I. And to be with Alice – I know she gets lonesome now that Mother has died.

MRS. SCHIMP: There won't be much relaxing for you, if you do all the things you have been talking and planning for since we left Indian territory.

ANNIE: After visiting the missionaries, I realize that we can't do enough for them.

MRS. SCHIMP: Makes me wish I had several inheritances to give away.

ANNIE: You gave the one you had, Mrs. Schimp, and it must make you feel good to know it is being well used as loans to new churches.

MRS. SCHIMP: After seeing the dugouts where the missionaries often live while their homes are being finished, I rather wish I had given the money for faster building of missionary homes. But they *are* appreciative of a place to do their work. (*They sit silent for a moment.*) How about your other purpose for this trip, Miss Armstrong? Do you still feel it is that important to start missionary societies in churches in the west?

ANNIE: More than ever. That will not always be rough country. It is the foundation of the future. Fifty years from now, these will be leading states in our denomination. Missions awareness must grow everywhere churches grow.

SCENE X

(As other scene ends, ALICE enters "living room" at center of stage with needlework in her hand. She sits and works. ANNIE enters from stage right.)

ANNIE: Oh, Alice, I'm glad you are here. I need to talk with you. (*She looks agitated and worried.*)

ALICE: Go ahead, and let me help carry it. It looks mighty heavy on you.

ANNIE: You now when I first started making long trips, the Home Mission Board wanted to pay my expenses –

ALICE: (*Smiling*) Yes, and I remember very well that your answer was an adamant "NO." but with a promise to let them know if it were ever needed in order for you to do the work properly.

ANNIE: And when my travel increased, I did let them pay travel expenses. But I will not accept a salary! And the Mission Boards have voted to pay me a salary.

ALICE: You know they had good intentions, Annie.

ANNIE: Yes, but I want to *give* my time to God's service – for missions.

ALICE: I know how you feel, Annie, but I can understand their position. After all, it is like a full-time job. And the Board's secretaries have probably heard that our personal income has dropped.

ANNIE: Perhaps I should have taken that position I was offered – to head that printing company. Then they would know I had plenty of money and we wouldn't have had all this talk about a salary. (*The word seems distasteful to her.*)

ALICE: Well, after all, it isn't all decided yet. The women will have to vote on it, because our constitution does not provide for any salaries.

ANNIE: (*Relieved*) I knew you would know what to say. Of course, they will. I shall simply write, expressing my feelings to the women.

SCENE XI

(A crowd mills around at center stage. The ladies wear hats. MRS. SCHIMP stands near center. ANNIE approaches her from the side.)

ANNIE: How's one of my favorite people?

MRS. SCHIMP: Feeling sharp enough to tell by looking at you and by the tone of your voice that you are ready to go again.

ANNIE: You know me too well, Mrs. Schimp.

MRS. SCHIMP: I'm getting a nickname you know – "Miss Annie Armstrong's chaperone."

ANNIE: Do you mind?

MRS. SCHIMP: Of course not. Where to this time?

ANNIE: If I can get over the language hurdle – to Mexico.

MRS. SCHIMP: I notice you never have trouble with the language when you pitch in to help the missionaries with the children who come to the missions.

ANNIE: But that is different.

MRS. SCHIMP: I know. You love the children, and you forget that you can't speak the language.

(The group remains assembled, talking quietly as ANNIE moves to back of stage and into her room at stage left.)

SCENE XII

(As scene begins, stage left ANNIE is dressing or standing in front of “mirror” putting hair in place. Fire alarm bells begin to ring. She sniffs, runs to “window” at edge of stage left, looks out.)

ANNIE: Alice!

(ALICE runs in, sees ANNIE, joins her at “window”.)

ALICE: What on earth is wrong?

ANNIE: Baltimore is on fire. Look at the flames!

ALICE: The sky is glowing – it must be really huge.

ANNIE: It seems to be in the center of town.

ALICE: And spreading in every direction. I hope Mamie and the children are safe. *(Doorbell rings. They go into “living room” at center stage and pretend to open door. Young MESSENGER enters.)*

MESSENGER: I’ve just come from your warehouses, ma’am. I’m afraid I have bad news. They are burning and will be totally ruined.

ALICE: Thank you for letting us know. *(MESSENGER exits.)* I’m afraid we will find ourselves in poor financial condition when this is over.

ANNIE: But it is far from being over. *(She looks out living room window.)* The city looks like an ocean of flames now.

(MAMIE LEVERING enters. The three sisters hug each other.)

MAMIE: It’s unbelievable. So much fire!

ALICE: We don’t really know how bad it is.

ANNIE: *(Picks up a wrap from a chair)* I’m going down to check on the missions offices and the reading rooms. I want to see for myself just how bad it is.

MAMIE: There will be no streetcars running, Annie.

ANNIE: Then I will just have to walk. *(She moves immediately toward rear of stage and then to stage right for next scene.)*

MAMIE: (*Looking after ANNIE*) The woman's auxiliary losses are going to be small compared to the rest of Baltimore.

ALICE: I know – and Annie knows it also. It is just that it was money which had been given, and that small amount was desperately needed.

SCENE XIII

(Several women are seated, facing a podium at stage right. ANNIE stands at podium.)

ANNIE: That, ladies, gives you a little idea of what it was like in Baltimore during the fire. It was horrible. And the losses were terrible. Our building was not destroyed completely as so many were. The literature for the week of prayer and the special offering for home missions, the leaflets for the church building loan fund were all at the printer's shop which burned. The bank in which our funds were deposited was burned. But God guided us, and together, we overcame mountains of difficulty. The materials were reprinted and somehow mailed on time. Your societies all over the country rallied to the need and gifts were larger than ever before. Our proud city of Baltimore has survived and is rebuilding – and the things that you have supported and worked for have survived, also.

SCENE XIV

(Side view of chairs facing a podium at stage right. Women are seated. ANNIE and ALICE enter and sit on back row of seat farthest from audience, so that when ANNIE stands to face presiding officer she will be turned slightly toward audience. ANNIE hobbles slightly from rheumatism. Placard reads, "1905".)

PRESIDING OFFICER: (*Begins immediately as other scene ends*) As the Christmas season approaches, let us prepare ourselves to pray diligently for foreign missions and to give generously to the Christmas offering so that more work may be done.

ANNIE: (*Raises hand*) Madam President.

PRESIDING OFFICER: The chair recognizes Miss Annie Armstrong, our former corresponding secretary.

(ANNIE stands. The women turn to look at her.)

ANNIE: This Christmas offering was started in the first year of our union's life. Miss Lottie Moon's letters from China urged women to devote a week to prayer and to follow it by sacrificial giving for the birthday of Christ. The first offering

was used to send two young ladies to Pingtu [*ping-doo*] so that Miss Moon could leave for a long overdue furlough. This offering should be named for her – it should be called the “Lottie Moon Offering for Foreign Missions.” (ANNIE *sits. Women applaud spontaneously.*)

PRESIDING OFFICER: You see, when a woman is given to having good ideas – she never stops having them.

SCENE XV

(WOMAN *in dress of 1930's stands in center stage, looks forward as though addressing someone at a meeting. Placard reads, "1933".*)

WOMAN: Madame President, when a woman is given to having good ideas – she never stops having them. Annie Armstrong has been a woman like that. She had the vision of what women could do in missions and played such a large part in shaping our union, and in beginning so many of the things we do even now, I think the annual offering for home missions should bear the name of Annie Armstrong.