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Drought Breaker

by Linda Stainton

EXTRACT

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DROUGHT BREAKER

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Drought Breaker was first performed at the Lennox Theatre, Riverside Theatres, Parramatta, 20 September 2006 with the following cast:

LILLIE MARSDEN	Clare Pickering
MARY MALLOY, GRACIE	Maggie Scott
ADY	Amelia Kerr
GERMAN GEN, SPRUIKER	Gabrielle de Celis
JIM MARSDEN	Brett Jeffers
NOSEY PARSONS	James Hunter
EFFIE, MRS MAYOR	Debbie Mullins
MRS SPARROW, REVELER	Ali Aitken
NED, REVELER	Rattan Bhandari
REPORTER	Mitchell Bowker
MRS WASHERLY	Melissa Paris
MRS PYMBLE	Shondelle Pratt
MAYOR	Kenny Graham
REVEREND DALEY	Andrew Broderick
JEMIMA PICKLEBURY, SARAH, REVELER	Snezana Pajovic
LUCINDA	Glenda Simon
DR MCWATERS	Paul Newton
JOSEPH	Matthew Dennis

Directed by Elizabeth Ward, designed by Leone Sharp. Musical director: Craig Parris; light/sound designer: Larry Kelly; stage manager: David B Fowler. Produced by The Acting Factory Inc. Music and lyrics (except *Joseph's Song*) by Linda Stainton. Music arranged by Gavin Lockley. *Joseph's Song* lyrics by Linda Stainton, music by Linda Stainton and Gavin Lockley, arranged by Gavin Lockley.

CHARACTERS

DR H. DE MAJORS MCWATERS	Rainmaker, Irish
JOSEPH	McWaters' assistant
JIM MARSDEN	A miner, once a landowner, married to Lillie
LILLIE MARSDEN	Married to Jim
MARY MALLOY	Lillie and Jim's neighbour
ADY	Mary's niece
JEMIMA PICKLEBURY	Another neighbour
MAYOR	The mayor of Hades Crossing
MRS MAYOR	The mayor's wife
REVEREND DALEY	Local Methodist leader
MRS PYMBLE and MRS WASHERLY	Members of the Progress Committee
MRS SPARROW	Also on the Progress Committee
NOSEY PARSONS	Jim's drinking companion
GERMAN JEN	Pub proprietor
LUCINDA, GRACIE and SARAH	Indigenous women
REPORTER	From the local daily newspaper
EFFIE FONTAINE and NED	Citizens of Hades Crossing

Other citizens, onlookers and revelers.

The action takes place in the mining town of Hades Crossing, far west New South Wales, Australia, circa 1903.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE: A CITY IN CRISIS

Music. A nostalgic strain (WALTZ 1).

Lillie sits sewing on her front step, catching the last rays of a winter afternoon. In the distance a steam whistle blows, the signal for a change of shift at the mines.

Lillie pauses.

LILLIE The South.

Enter Mary Malloy.

MARY The South now, hear that? Soon as the Central went off, I thought, hello, what's this, the afternoon shift only went in an hour ago, and now here's the South, straight after. I've got a bad feeling, Lillie. Wait there.

Mary goes back out.

LILLIE Jim used to look like a cavalier in this shirt. Not much more than a rag, now. A few more stitches, another year's wear, that's how it goes.

Offstage a commotion as Mary calls to her neighbour down the street, demanding to know what's going on. A third woman comes running, shouting news. The women converge and continue their exchange, off (ad lib).

LILLIE Soon God will reveal his plan. Fate's winding up like a spring; these last few days have been so strange – so expectant – as if the very air is holding its breath.

Mary re-enters.

MARY They're shuttin' em down!

LILLIE *(with suppressed excitement)* Hallelujah!

MARY Mrs Hutton heard it off Elsie Biggs; her old man's just been laid off at the Central. Pumps have cut out. Reckons all of 'em'll go by tomorrow, even the biggie.

LILLIE For how long?

MARY What am I, God Almighty? 'Til it rains, I suppose!

Mary sits beside Lillie.

Me head's going round like a spinning top. What are we supposed to live on now? Air?

LILLIE We must be comforted by our faith, Mary, and pray.

MARY I knew this'd happen; saw it coming a mile. Them blasted managers, keeping the mines going like there's no tomorrow. Come here from their soft city jobs, wouldn't know if their arses were on fire! I told you Lillie, you better fill your tank up or you'll miss the boat.

LILLIE But the water restrictions ...

MARY Restrictions! No one cares about restrictions at a time like this! It's every yella dog for himself in this place.

Enter Ady.

ADY Auntie Mary, the boys have run off.

MARY Where to?

ADY I don't know. They threw stones at me every time I tried to follow.

MARY Did they just? Well, next time tell 'em I said they're to stay with you or else!

ADY But I wanna make rain, too!

MARY Eh? Who's making rain?

ADY Ned and Arnie and Johnny Webster.

MARY By God, I'll tan their bloody hides, I will! You dare follow them I'll tan yours, too! Don't think I don't know what they get up to with Johnny Webster. They'll be down one of the open cuts scrounging for old explosives and that. I'll make sure Alex hears about this, and I'll tell you what, if they come home in one piece they'll jolly well wish they hadn't! Say hello to our neighbour, Ady.

ADY Hello, Mrs Marsden. Someone's been stealing water from the school. There's cart tracks all the way from the tank to the school gate. Billy Bacon saw it.

MARY Stealing water from school children. Whatever next!

ADY Mr Anderson says it's low scum who won't pay for their own.

MARY That's enough!

LILLIE Someone who's worse off than ourselves, perhaps. We should try to think of them charitably.

MARY *(to Ady)* Go down the fowl-yard and see if there's any eggs, there's a girl. And change out of that pinnie; I can't be washing every fortnight any more.

Exit Ady.

Does the mayor have any idea what we people go through? No, I'll bloomin' well bet he doesn't, and what's more, I'll bloomin' well bet he doesn't give a fig!

LILLIE I'm sure the mayor's doing what he can.

MARY Oh come on, that's a load of old cow manure and you know it! Him and his la-de-dah coves on the south side. I'll bet his wife still has her washday every Monday, restrictions or none. The way she mollycoddles that man! Meanwhile, my Alex has to turn his shirt inside out every Sunday for church. It's getting so's even I can't bear to go near him!

LILLIE I know it's hard.

MARY Last time this happened they had us going with all this about the big new dam. Where is it now, just tell me that?

LILLIE What was it like?

MARY Who's to know? Bloomin' thing never got built.

LILLIE I mean, last time.

MARY Oh, dreadful. Awful. Can't hardly bring myself to talk about it. In the middle of summer it was. Old people dropping like flies. Fifteen men they found, dead in the scrub. Racing to find the underground lakes, see. This is nothing to how it'll get.

LILLIE Like the three in the fiery furnace!

MARY I had two in nappies, then, and bugger-all water to drink, let alone wash. Can you imagine it? The filth. The disease.

LILLIE Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednigo.

MARY I'm not up with the medical names. Typhus is what we called it.

LILLIE Though they were cast into the very heart of the furnace, their faith kept them unharmed.

MARY Ask poor Elsie Biggs. Her youngest died of it.

LILLIE The white-hot furnace prepared for them by King Nebuchadnezzar, who commanded that they worship a golden idol. When the three refused, the king had them cast in. But the more fuel was thrown onto the fire, the harder those holy men glorified the one true God, and when the king, all amazed, called them to come forth from the blaze, not a hair on their heads had been singed.

MARY Whose heads?

LILLIE This is a test, don't you see? The water famine is like the fiery furnace into which this whole town has been cast – and we must hold fast to our faith or perish!

MARY Stop jumping around like that, Lillie, it gets on me nerves. Be blessed if I can make you out sometimes.

LILLIE Yes, Mary, you will be! If only you'll listen.

Enter Ady, carrying an egg.

ADY Only one.

MARY Oh, wonderful! Now the hens have gone off the lay, see? The lead dust. They'll all be carked it by the end of the week.

LILLIE Mary, listen to me, listen! This is no time for doom and gloom, blaming this one and that. So the mines have shut down – good! So the reservoir's running dry – let it dwindle to the last drop. We'll be ready. Through all the horrors of the drought we'll sing praises to the glory of God, and when we emerge, unscathed and triumphant, watch how the godless fall to their knees in amazement!

MARY Oh yes, it's all very well for you to dance and carry on singing hymns, having a fine time of it. You don't have six children to look out for. *(to Ady)* Take it inside before you break it, and change that pinafore.

LILLIE I wish I did.

MARY Every day the mines are closed puts us behind a week, and who knows how long this'll go on. Even the blackfellas can't coax rain outta this sky. You hear 'em of a night, wailin' and clappin'?

LILLIE It's in God's hands now.

MARY What about these rainmaker chaps, then? What's to stop 'em giving one of them a go?

LILLIE *(her exuberance checked)* You don't believe they can do it?

MARY Look at that one they're on about in the papers. Brings the rain down with cannon fire or some such.

LILLIE Is he a God-fearing man?

MARY What am I, his mother? All I know is he broke a ten-year drought in Africa, single-handed. Reversed India's whole mongoose cycle.

LILLIE No man can do the Lord's work except through Him, and who claims otherwise is a – a false prophet.

MARY Call it a gift, then.

Ady begins performing her own version of a rainmaking ceremony, using the egg.

MARY Our Uncle Egbert on me mother's side, he had the gift. No matter what territory you put him in, off he'd go with his boar's tusk held out like this, and wherever he stopped, dig deep enough, you'd find water. A man like that, now; he'd be worth his weight in gold.

LILLIE Is that any way to measure a man's value? In gold?

MARY Oh for heaven's sake, Lillie. Why must you always see the worst in everything?

LILLIE No. I see the good, the good! I see the wisdom in all God's actions. Mary, I know now why I was brought to this town. It's my mission to show people the truth. Forget the rainmakers. The lesson is there in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. Adhere to the one God Almighty, Lord of creation, and He will deliver us from pain!

Ady's bustling play suddenly ceases. She's had an accident with the egg and guiltily tries to conceal the mess in her pinafore.

Pause.

From the outskirts of town comes the Muslim call to prayer.

MARY Come on, Ady. Better stir ourselves or our lot'll be screaming like their throats've been cut. Hurry up, girl, what are you doing?

Ady is lost for an answer.

MARY Answer me when I speak to you.

An uncomfortable pause. Ady finally stands up, revealing the mess.

MARY You silly girl! What did I tell you? Look what you've done. Well, you can just wear it like that, and serve you bloody right!

Ady bursts into tears, runs to Mary and buries her face.

MARY Look out! Now you're getting it over me! Oh, Lillie, what's to become of us?

LILLIE Be consoled, Mary. God won't abandon his children in their time of need.

MARY *(to Ady)* There, there. We'll see it through, we always do. We pull together in this town. Best place in the world, this. Doesn't matter who you are, where you're from – we don't stand on ceremony here. We stick together and make the most of things. Go inside, Lillie, it's getting chill.

Mary and Ady go out.

LILLIE Never mind, Mary, don't despair. God has a plan for us all.

Music (WALTZ 2) – brighter, more hopeful – as Lillie gathers up her sewing and exits.

Then, as if a door has been opened on a noisy party, the waltz becomes the honky-tonk strain of ...

SCENE THREE: GERMAN JEN'S ALE HOUSE

The cellar of an ale house. Jim, steering a piece of wire shaped like a water diviner, leads on a clamorous gaggle of inebriated revelers.

German Jen makes futile attempts to contain the proceedings.

JIM Aha! We're close! There's underground supplies here somewhere. *(stalks round the cellar)* Follow me, lads. She's never let me down yet. What? *(steers the 'diviner' straight into Nosey)* False alarm! Nosey's just pissed himself in the excitement. Wait. She's onto the home stretch.

Cheered on by his mates, Jim rams the diviner into a barrel.

JIM Eureka! Liquid gold!

Cheers. Jim stands on barrel. Cries of 'speech!'

JIM As saviour of this great city of ours, I humbly accept the ten thousand quid bestowed on me by your gratitude, and would like to say, 'I never did it for the money!' (*cheers, etc.*) But, seriously, friends, listen to me I have the solution to this diabolical predicament.

DRINKING SONG

JIM Today we saw the mines dry up
A bitter pill to swallow
To lose our jobs is hard enough;
The worst is yet to follow
Alas, this proves our darkest
And our driest hour of sorrow
For today the mines dried up –
'Twill be the breweries tomorrow!

– And why?

'Cause no one gives a damn
Not one lousy bastard gives a damn!
A dam's the very thing we need
Oh surely friends, you must concede.
For damless, friends, we're doomed
Left high and dry, marooned
But never fear, we'll teach 'em dear