

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



EYES TO THE FLOOR

by Alana Valentine

EXTRACT

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This script is distributed by The Australian Script Centre
77 Salamanca Place Hobart 7004 Tasmania Australia
email admin@ozscript.org
www.ozscript.org
ph +61 3 6223 4675
fax +61 3 6223 4678

CHARACTERS

DANIELLA GREAVES	15, Hay inmate
JANE ROGERS	16, Hay inmate
EMMA ABBOT	14, Hay inmate
GWEN GILL	16, Hay inmate
FIONA HODGES	17, Hay inmate
MARJORIE LINNETT	17, Hay inmate
GUARD FUREDI doubles as: FH HAWKINS and: LENNY	A guard at Hay Minister for Child and Social Welfare
GUARD KAY	A recently arrived guard at Hay
Mr NAYLOR doubles as: FATHER	Superintendent at Hay

The play is set in the remembered past.

Eyes to the Floor

Writer's Note

It was when I began researching the stories of women who were incarcerated in the Girls Training School, Parramatta, formerly known as the Parramatta Girls Home, that I first began to hear stories of Hay. Women in their fifties, sixties, seventies and even eighties would sit across from me, having revealed the most gruesome and horrifying recollections of their time at Parramatta, and then they would say the word. Hay. After what I had heard it did not seem possible that there could be a place of which they had been more afraid, of which they spoke of in even more hushed and fearful tones. Some who had been there, others who had been threatened with the place and seen the effect on other inmates who returned to Parramatta. And where the stories about Parramatta had flowed out of them - jagged, brutal, struggling into the light often after many, many years of silence - the stories about Hay were harder to speak aloud. Often it was just a look of utter pain and despair, a quiet shaking of the head as if the horror of the recollection was just too incomprehensible, too appalling to form into syllables. But then these astonishingly courageous women, these women whom I have come to respect with such deep and abiding awe, these strong and beautiful survivors, gave voice to their memories and trusted me with their feelings and their stories. And a picture began to emerge of an injustice so grotesque that I could only sit open-mouthed and weeping that such treatment had been metered out to Australian children until as recently as 1974.

As with my stage play Parramatta Girls, the characters here are composites from all the stories I have been told by actual survivors of these two institutions, as well as from material on the public record in newspapers, the Senate report 'Forgotten Australians' and from interviews with counsellors and psychologists who treat the legacy of such incarcerations. All of the characters are fictional and do not represent any particular individual, but all of the stories are true and were drawn from one or another of the above sources. I would especially like to thank the former employees of the Hay Girls Institution who told me their own stories with candour and sincerity. I wanted to include their perspective because of the central thesis of this play, which is that a brutal state institution like this leaves a painful legacy, most especially on the former inmates themselves, but also on their families, the guards who were employed to work there, the town of Hay, and, in ways too numerous to calibrate, on the complexion of Australia's past and its future. I have profound admiration for the town of Hay for confronting and supporting this examination of old wounds and painful histories. I commemorate the women who died carrying the burden of a childhood broken by violence and abuse in institutions such as Hay. I dedicate this play to those working with Australian children today, under what must always be enormously difficult circumstances, to provide some better way forward for neglected and troubled young women and girls.

Alana Valentine
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1.

FIONA stands alone on stage. She holds a long lead with a single light bulb on it. She holds the bulb up to her face and then swings the bulb back and forth across her face. Finally she spins the globe in circles around her head.

FIONA Committal to an Institution. Fiona June Hodges. Born 22.2.1944.
Charge: Neglected and Exposed to Moral Danger.

JANE enters the stage. She too has a long lead with a single bulb and performs the same actions as FIONA.

JANE Committal to an Institution: Jane Dawn Rogers. Born 19. 6. 1945.
Charge: Neglect and Exposed to Moral Danger.

EMMA enters the stage. She too has a long lead with a single bulb and performs the same actions as JANE.

EMMA Committal to an Institution: Emma Abbot. Born 21.8. 1947.
Charge: Uncontrollable. Escape from Cootamundra Girls Home.

GWEN enters the stage. She too has a long lead with a single bulb and performs the same actions as EMMA.

GWEN Committal to an Institution: Gwen Gill. Born 9.3.1945.
Charge: Uncontrollable. Escape from Cootamundra Girls Home.

MARJORIE enters the stage. She too has a long lead with a single bulb and performs the same actions as GWEN.

MARJORIE Committal to an Institution: Marjorie Linnett. Born 6.11.1944.
Charge: Uncontrollable and Exposed to Moral Danger.

DANIELLA enters the stage. She too has a long lead with a single bulb and performs the same actions as MARJORIE.

DANIELLA Committal to an Institution: Daniella Andrea Greaves. Born 14.5.
1946. Charge: Uncontrollable and exposed to Moral Danger.

FIONA General Comment: Last Saturday afternoon it became apparent that Hodges had assumed leadership of the girls and the recreation period was very disturbed by her/ Girls who previously were conforming satisfactorily became troublesome.

JANE Home situation: The home is a fibro-lined tin shack in a poor state of repair. Home contains two tiny rooms,. One is a kitchen where the father sleeps, in the other room, Jane, Louise and baby shared one bed/ 3 younger boys share second bed and two eldest boys share third bed.

5

- EMMA Home situation: Emma had been removed from home when father charged/ with shooting uncle in the thigh.
- GWEN Home situation: Became a ward of the state at 6 months old. Was living with a foster family, the Anthony's who commented that her behaviour whilst in the home could not be faulted/but her behaviour outside was most undesirable and they had not been able to control her.
- MARJORIE Home Situation: Father still caring for large family of brothers and sisters after mother died of cancer one year ago. Father seems to have taken to drinking after this event/eventually being jailed for fighting.
- DANIELLA Home Situation: Daniella lives in desperate poverty in Surry Hills, Sydney.
- FIONA Although the crisis has passed the influence of Hodges is such that it will be several weeks before the effect/ of her time in the main institution is erased.
- JANE There is a bare minimum of furniture. Mrs Rogers has applied for a Housing commission home/ and lives in hopes of getting it.
- EMMA Emma was being housed at Cootamundra Girls home then, with two other girls/ jumped a goods train and was carried as far as Narrandera before being apprehended by the local police constable.
- GWEN Gwen was being housed at Cootamundra Girls home then, with two other girls/ jumped a goods train and was carried as far as Narrandera before being apprehended by the local police constable.
- MARJORIE Three youngest sisters placed in an orphanage by sister-in-law and Marjorie was employed in a factory at 13 / when subsequently charged with neglect and exposed to moral danger by sister-in-law.
- DANIELLA She has been treated for repeated sexual assaults at a young age one of which resulted in a pregnancy and the birth of a child who has been adopted out.
- FIONA Recommendation:
All begin their lines in unison.
- FIONA That Fiona June Hodges be transferred from the Training School Parramatta to the Institution for Girls, Hay. Transfer Order herewith for Ministers signature.
- JANE Jane has been repeatedly reprimanded for language infringements at Parramatta and transferred to Hay on 26.10.61. Transfer order herewith for Minister's signature.

6

- EMMA Transferred to Parramatta and thence to Hay for repeated charge of refusing duties. Transfer order herewith for Minister's signature.
- GWEN Transferred to Parramatta and thence to Hay for repeated charge of refusing duties. Transfer order herewith for Minister's signature.
- MARJORIE Committed to Parramatta by Sydney Children's Court and transferred to 'The Institution for Girls, Hay' for repeated self-mutilation. Transfer order herewith for Minister's signature.
- DANIELLA Committed to Parramatta by Sydney Children's Court and transferred to Hay after repeated 24 hour detentions for violent, uncontrollable behaviour at Parramatta. Transfer order herewith for Minister's signature.
- CHORUS All the actors in unison begin to say 'Choo Choo, Bum Bum', as a chanting rhythm. The chanting becomes quicker and more insistent and cross fades into...
- S/FX The sound of a train.

The actors run past FIONA with their lights, as if lights passing outside the window and the chanting continues. The other girls force FIONA to drink largactyl. She staggers around, disorientated.

FIONA I am scared to death
And wish that I could sleep.
The rocking of the train lulls me
Dulls me.
Between stations there is time
Expressed in forward motion
And there is
Gentle
Fragmental
Sleep.
My limbs are heavy with it
My eyes droop
How delicious is the oblivion of dreams
Those palaces of imagination
How I long to slip into the silk of rest
Of sleep
Of glorious rest
But now I feel the train lurch
A sign flashes by
Narrandera
And I am being
bundled into a truck
It is close, it is airless
Again we lurch
And I feel the speed increase

7

I cannot rest
I cannot sleep
The speed increases
They do as they please
They do as they like
And still the pace
Escalates
Even more
Even more
I am lost.

FIONA finally falls to the ground and all the other characters leave the stage.

2.

SUPERINTENDENT NAYLOR, in a suit and tie, stands beside the fallen FIONA. He kicks her, casually, and she groggily wakes up. She looks up at him.

NAYLOR Rule Number One. Don't look at me. Don't ever look at me. I repeat. Don't ever look me in the eye.

FIONA gets up onto her feet, she is unsteady but looks at the ground.

NAYLOR Do you understand?

FIONA Yes.

NAYLOR Right. That is called a bounce.

FIONA A what?

NAYLOR A bounce. You'll have no sweets with your dinner this evening.

FIONA For what?

NAYLOR For looking me in the eye.

FIONA (Looking up) I didn't.

NAYLOR meets her eye.

NAYLOR That's half your dinner this evening gone.

FIONA looks at the ground.

NAYLOR Am I making myself understood?

FIONA Yes.

8

NAYLOR Yes, who?

FIONA Yes, superintendent.

NAYLOR There was a girl brought in yesterday, name of Jane Rogers.

FIONA Sir.

NAYLOR She lost both her dinner and her sweets last evening.

Pause. FIONA continues to look at the ground.

NAYLOR She was given bread and water and put in isolation for 24 hours.

FIONA looks up. NAYLOR meets her gaze.

NAYLOR Once more and you will be put in isolation yourself.

The tough nut almost cracks. Her chin wobbles but she doesn't cry.

FIONA I'm sorry, sir.

NAYLOR Yes, I'm sorry too.

FIONA stands, eyes still to the ground.

3.

GUARD FUREDÌ blows a whistle.

FUREDÌ All rise.

The girls who are all on stage together, or all in the separate cells, rise from their beds.

Their clothing is passed to them through a flap which is then relocked.

In perfect unison, the girls get out of bed, take off their nightdresses, fold them, tie them with tape and place them with their reading matter on the bed. They get dressed and then stand at the head of the bed.

All the cell doors are opened and FUREDÌ inspects the beds for tidiness.

The girls, without exception, have their eyes to the floor.

FUREDÌ Kneel.

The girls, simultaneously, kneel.

GIRLS Our Father,

Who Art in Heaven,
 Hallowed be thy name,
 Thy kingdom come,
 Thy will be done on earth
 as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread
 And forgive us our trespasses,
 As we forgive those who trespass against us
 Lead us not into temptation
 But deliver us from evil
 For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
 For ever and ever,
 Amen.

FURED I Stand.

The girls, in unison, stand at attention, facing the bed.

FURED I Gear up.

The girls pick up their nightwear, night can and reading material.

FURED I Move.

The girls move to the cabin doorways.

FURED I Daniella Greaves.

DANIELLA Yes, Mr Furedi.

DANIELLA goes to her locker, place her night attire on the shelf and picks up her comb and toothbrush. She then moves back to the cell door.

DANIELLA Reporting back to you Mr Furedi.

FURED I Marjorie Linnett.

MARJORIE Yes, Mr Furedi.

Marjorie goes to her locker, place her night attire on the shelf and picks up her comb and toothbrush. She then moves back to the cell door.

FURED I Fiona Hodges.

FIONA (Quietly) Yes, Mr Furedi.

FURED I What?

FIONA Well you know who I am, don't you?

FURED I That's 20 minutes of practices, Hodges.