

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre

The Woman of March the First

by Lissa Benyon

EXTRACT

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CHARACTERS

Vera Nikolayevna Figner: aged 29, eldest child of a minor provincial noble, studied medicine in Switzerland.

Sofia Lvovna Perovskaya: aged 27, from an aristocratic Petersburg family, (Sonia) trained as a midwife, paramedic and teacher.

Gesia Mirovna Gelfman: aged 26, daughter of a Jewish merchant in a southern province, trained as a midwife.

ACT ONE

Light is used to create a feeling of prison, with each woman in a clearly different space. Vera's monologue encompasses years, Gesia's months, and Sonia's a single night.

SONIA: Sofia Lvovna Perovskaya. Arrested ten days after the assassination of Alexander the Second. Condemned to hanging as a tsaricide.

GESIA: Gesia Mirovna Gelfman. Arrested two days after the assassination of Alexander the Second. Condemned to hanging as a tsaricide. Found to be pregnant. Sentence commuted to life imprisonment.

VERA: Vera Nikolayevna Figner. Arrested two years after the assassination of Alexander the Second. Condemned to hanging as a tsaricide. Sentence commuted to life imprisonment...
Life amidst deathly stillness. Stillness.

SONIA: The night is so white and long, it spools out into a single thread that goes on forever. If only I knew. If someone came and said:- "It's alright. You actually needn't worry, because I'll tell you a secret. The night is going on forever. The morning will actually never come."

GESIA: A woman undresses me while the doctor turns his back. I stand naked. Do I suffer? No. Am I ashamed? No. I won't die till it's born, then we'll see. I'll promise myself a treat then. I'll just fade away in my own blood, with any luck.

SONIA: I can't really die in this way. I can't, because what can you do? There are your hands, I can't understand it. Don't you want to...? What stops you from reaching up and grabbing, tearing the rope away. And your feet, the desperate search of your feet. And who's to know. I've never seen it. If someone could bring me a book with a description that would say it's not as bad as I've come to think. Oh God. I know it. Things come out. There are orifices in the body, and something...

Blood. The head, my head, does my head fill with blood and burst? Oh God. What is it that finally makes the body die from this treatment?

VERA: Talk. I don't talk now. When it is necessary to move my lips, I have to summon all my strength of will. Singing is forbidden here. Singing? But who would ever think of it?

GESIA: The midwife is spreading out a piece of cloth to catch my mess. Nikolai! Is still in prison. Or dead. I've heard nothing but moans from my cow belly for months. Rope my legs up and pull. Reach your hand in and grab its head. Put it in a dress and pretend I'm not a cow on a sack in a stall. Charge! Drop it on the floor and let me lick it clean, then see if it will walk. Is it a pig? I think so. Or a potato. Or a lump of wet fat that moves. Or a dead fruit crawling with worms. Surely my calf can't still be alive?

VERA: A visit from mother. Mother? I... W...? Mmm, ... I can't think of what to say. Mother? I... the other day. You see, outside my window... I can climb up, you see. Because my bed... and look at... through the bars, there. Please, go away, Mother. I have not the strength.

GESIA: They have taken my daughter away, and inside my breasts the milk keeps throbbing up. I can't get rid of my milk. My milk for my little girl. My daughter cried all night long. My little girl cried all night long.

SONIA: I'm searching for small things of concrete comfort. If I listen. If I lie down and it puts me to sleep. If I imagine heaven. If I pray. If I grip. If I pace. If I sit. If I cry. If I call Andrei. Andrei. In another part of the prison. Feeling like this? Andrei, sing! Sing! If I clutch the song with my heart. If I sing it. If I sing it.

She sings a haunting, mournful Russian folk song. This might be picked up at other times during the play, just hummed, a snatch at a time under people's breath during quiet moments. Now, it could carry through till Sonia's first line in the next scene, when she breaks the tune abruptly.

GESIA: Your daughter is dead. I have no daughter.

VERA: Tell my mother. Tell her not to grieve. Tell her that no matter what they do to me, I shall remain the same.

Scene change. The women are making bombs in the living room of Vera's Petersburg flat. It is cluttered. It is night-time, the night of February 28th 1881. Vera snips the tops and bottoms of old round kerosene cans into jagged zig-zags, with a pair of tin snips. Gesia makes plugs out of pitch for the two test-tubes. Sonia is covering the base of another can with hessian and pitch.

GESIA: Vera, do you hear?

The women stop work for a moment. Perhaps someone moves to the window.

VERA: Yes.

SONIA: Like drums.

GESIA: Yes.

VERA: It's a cart on the cobbles in Telezhnaya Street.

SONIA: Perhaps.

GESIA: It can't be thunder can it?

SONIA: No.

VERA: It is just a cart.

SONIA: The sound is almost gone now.

GESIA: It must be late already.

VERA: After one.

SONIA: Mmm.

VERA: I'm aching all over.

GESIA: Tea?

SONIA: I'm floating on tea.

VERA: I'll have some. Something different for my hands to do.

Gesia pours tea from the very plain samovar.

GESIA: I like it for an excuse to stop. On the printing press it's the only thing I can think of. Can I get you some tea, Mikhail? Tea Olga? Tea? Tea? Dozens of cups a day.

SONIA: Oh! The middle of the night! The middle of the night!

VERA: Sit down, Sonia.

SONIA: I can't. I haven't slept for days... Better keep going.

VERA: Better not. Lie down.

SONIA: Gesia, how are you? Aren't you calm? How lucky you are to be so calm!

GESIA: I don't think it's calm. It's... I can't feel anything, but is that calm?

SONIA: The night of the Imperial Ball, just before it's time to leave home. Any ball! I have that feeling again.

GESIA: Is this right, Vera?

She is unsure about how much of the white mercury fulminate powder to pour into each test-tube.

SONIA: (following her own train of thought) I wasn't allowed to sit down in case I crushed my dress. I had three spare pairs of gloves left with one of the servants.

VERA: I'm not sure, I'm not sure. I feel there must be more of a secret to it. How important are the exact proportions?

SONIA: I simply couldn't understand how anyone found someone to marry there!

VERA: I have no idea. It's like something in church. Getting the words wrong in a prayer, lighting a candle in the wrong way. Perhaps the sky will fall in if we spill the mercury fulminate.

GESIA: Mercury fulminate! I think I'm afraid even of the name. How can these powders explode?

VERA: We don't know if they will. They've scarcely been tested.

SONIA: (her attention drawn to the conversation again) The bomb-throwers practised today in the grounds of the Smolny Monastery.

VERA: Successful?

SONIA: They said so. They were wildly enthusiastic, the way they are wildly enthusiastic about ridiculous things now. Mad plans for uprisings amongst the military. I hate their moods.

GESIA: There's a spot in the top of my spine that's burning.

VERA: Shall I rub it for you?

GESIA: No. It'll be alright.

VERA: (to Sonia) Don't think of it.

Sonia speaks as if the audience is having a moment alone with the character's thoughts.

SONIA: Andrei is alone tonight in his cell. Is he asleep? I'm sure he's not. I'm sure he's not. He's said nothing to them, of course, nothing at all, not even his real name. It's night. Why does everything have to happen at night? Everything important that's ever happened to me it seems to have been at night. No, what a stupid exaggeration...

(aloud) I wish I wasn't here.

VERA: Have a rest, Sonia. I've told you again and again. Please lie down.

SONIA: It's not that. It's just... couldn't someone give me a better body, just for tonight? We are making bombs to assassinate the tsar. We are making bombs to assassinate the tsar. I can't stop listening. I feel my ears straining. The muscles around my head are all tight.

VERA: Don't think about the police.

SONIA: I'm not just thinking of the police. Someone running up the stairs with news, or bleeding. Someone escaped, perhaps.

VERA: Sonia...

SONIA: No, not Andrei. It's not Andrei. It's everything that's ever happened. In the moments when we sit here quietly, the most

stupid things repeat themselves in my mind.

VERA: I hope everyone else is asleep. Mikhaylo...

GESIA: And the rest of the cheese shop party.

SONIA: Mikhaylo will sleep for twelve hours tonight. He'll decide he has to preserve his strength for the attempt tomorrow, he'll flop down on his bed and fall asleep.

VERA: I couldn't. I could not! Even if there wasn't this to do, I'd be awake all night.

SONIA: Oh, I remember him before Moscow. I saw him sitting at the table an hour before the tsar's train was due. He got through a whole loaf of bread, a pound of sausage and a bottle of red wine. I was so tense I could barely speak, and he! I could not believe my eyes, and what did he say? "It is imperative that I be in full possession of my physical and mental reserves for the task ahead."

GESIA: It's lucky the cheese shop tunnel is finished. If it had taken much longer to dig, Mikhaylo would have been too big to fit down it.

VERA: My hands are getting sore.

GESIA: Let me do it for a while.

VERA: No, I've got the knack now.

SONIA: Time for more tea, don't you think?

VERA: Yes, lovely, and bread too.

SONIA: Cheese?

She prepares a quick snack.

VERA: There's still some left?

SONIA: Yes, little bits from the cheese shop that Anna didn't think were good enough to sell.

VERA: Anna! You know, it's lucky we didn't go into the cheese trade with the aim of making a profit.