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Australian Script Centre



# The Female Factory

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by Nick Enright

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EXTRACT

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**THE FEMALE FACTORY**

[a revised version of *First Class Women*]

by Nick Enright

Revised August 1997

**CHARACTERS:**

LOOBY  
ESTHER  
AGNES  
ABELIA  
JENNET  
STUMPY SAL  
SUSANNAH  
{OTHER CONVICT WOMEN}  
MRS JORDAN  
MRS FITZWALTER

MR JORDAN  
DR FIELDING  
PADDY HAGGERTY\*  
MR FITZWALTER  
REV. COURTENAY

\*In the first production of this play at Theatre Nepean, exigencies of doubling made it necessary for BELIA'S child [a girl, FLOSS, in *First Class Women*] to become a boy, PADDY; with some small cuts and adjustments to the text, a girl would work equally well and is in some ways preferable.

Some doubling of roles is possible. The play can be performed by a minimum of seven [or eight, see not above] women and three men.

My grateful thanks to Terence Clarke who directed this first production and provided valuable dramaturgical advice and encouragement.

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ACT ONE

ONE

*Dormitory. Night. A barred window. A locked door. Bodies stir, sigh, moan. LOOBY is drunk, asleep throughout the scene. She sleeps alone. There is a jug by her hammock.*

LOOBY

Cheerio my deario. Cheerio my...cheerio my darling. Cheerio...  
*[ESTHER climbs out of the bed she shares with AGNES. AGNES stirs. ESTHER waits till she is still, and climbs to the window.]*

LOOBY

Cheeeeeerio.....  
*[ESTHER removes two bars which are already sawn through.]*

ESTHER

Oh ho. Cheerio, my deario.  
*[She lights a candle and waves it in the window. ABELIA stirs. A child, PADDY, sleeps beside her.]*

ABELIA

Is that you, Esther?  
*[ESTHER blows out the candle.]*  
Who's out there?  
*[She gets out of her bed. ESTHER threatens her.]*  
I'll not be saying a word, Esther.  
*[ESTHER offers at her with a knife.]*  
I don't see nothing at all.  
*[She rubs her eyes. There's a low whistle outside the door.]*  
And you don't hear nothing, Esther.  
*[ABELIA covers PADDY and goes towards the door.]*  
You don't hear nothing. I don't see nothing. Don't you be waking the boy.  
*[She taps at the door and motions ESTHER to hide. The door opens. ABELIA slips out.]*

ESTHER

Oh, Belia, you fly old thing!

LOOBY

Cheerio, my deario.  
*[ESTHER takes up her bundle. She's on her way out. looks at AGNES, then wakes her.]*

ESTHER

Agnes? Listen.

AGNES

Are you sick, Esther? Have you got the fear on you?

ESTHER

Sssh! Hold your tongue and kiss me goodbye.

AGNES

Goodbye?

ESTHER

I couldn't go without I kissed my darling Agnes. I'd have kissed you sleeping, but-

AGNES

You're going away, Esther!

ESTHER

Always said I would, darling. Soon as ever I could. Look up there.

*[She points to the window.]*

Three months of nights it took me to do that. Thank God for old Looby's snoring.

AGNES

You're going to him, aren't you?

LOOBY

Cheerio, my deario...

ESTHER

Don't act surprised. He's my man. You don't mean any the less to me for that.

AGNES

But you'll be gone.

ESTHER

Don't make this hard, Agnes. Come on, kiss me long and deep.

AGNES

No.

ESTHER

You know how I like it. You know how I'll miss the warmth of you. One kiss and then-

AGNES

No. Is he out there now?

ESTHER

Oh, yes, he's out there now, my Stephen, out there with a horse. He's by them white trees beyond the ditch. I'll run to him. And he'll ride me off into the purple black night.

AGNES

Are you drunk? You must be, you'd never talk that way otherwise.

ESTHER

Drunk? My head's never been clearer.

AGNES

Then You're mad. You'll never be happy out there.

ESTHER

Oh, won't I?

AGNES

You'll always be a runaway. Always be hiding. And you'll miss me. You'll miss my stories.

ESTHER

I shall at that. I'll miss all kinds of things, eh? But we'll see one another again.

AGNES

When? When, Esther?

ESTHER

Don't cling on, Agnes. Some day, somewhere we'll hook up.

AGNES

Not if you go. If you go, you take my life with you.

ESTHER

Gammon. You'll soon be pals with someone else.

AGNES

There is no-one else for me.

ESTHER

Easy to say now. You'll pal up with Looby Loo, she thinks the world of little Agnes.

AGNES

I'll have no-one near me but you. I'll talk to no-one.

ESTHER

You sound like the girls in your tales. All life-and-death and broken hearts. The world don't work on feelings.

AGNES

Then why are you going out there?

ESTHER

Because out there is freedom.

AGNES

Then we'll go together.

ESTHER

No. He's my man and I am for him. And don't tell me You're for me, for it don't mean the same, whatever we've said and done in here. Now leave off. I said leave off, damn you...

*[AGNES holds her.]*

AGNES

I must come with you.

ESTHER

Are you deaf? I'm going to my Stephen.

AGNES

He's not worthy of you.

ESTHER

How could you know that?

AGNES

Let me come with you, Esther. You'll have the two of us then.

ESTHER

No, girl, if you bolt, you bolt on your own. But be warned, they'll catch you in no time, without you got a horse like Stephen. I'm off.

AGNES

I'll make a noise.

*[ESTHER tries to stop her mouth with a kiss.]*

No. There'll be no more kisses. I'll cry out. I'll bring Jordan.

*[They struggle. ESTHER draws her knife.]*

ESTHER

Leave off, Agnes.

*[AGNES comes for her. She cuts AGNES'S hand.]*

I told you, leave off.

*[ESTHER escapes through the window. AGNES writhes on the floor. Her hand bleeds.]*

LOOBY

Cheerio, my deario.

*[PADDY wakes up and cries out.]*

PADDY

Mamma! Mamma! My eyes are stuck down. Mamma?

*[AGNES stands, staunching the blood, and watches out the window. Then she goes to her hammock.]*

LOOBY

Cheerio, my dearie, cheerio, my dear...I'm off...

PADDY

"What shall we say the kingdom of God is like? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground...."

*[AGNES crawls into the hammock.]*

LOOBY

Off to London town...

## TWO

*Assembly. Morning.*

MRS JORDAN

I have a letter here from the Chairman of the Board of Governors. Mr Fitzwalter is not well pleased. The Governors have set up two workrooms. Mr Fitzwalter sends the flax. He sends the wool. Where is the woollen cloth, he says. Where is the linen? Your cloth is poor in quality, poorer in quantity. The Board cannot press the Colony for more funds to keep you all. The Factory must pay its way. If your labours cannot help to feed you and your children, then the belt must tighten. This is not my decision. It is the Board's decision, conveyed to me in Mr Fitzwalter's letter. Rations will be reduced until you pay your way in the world. Three-quarter rations for the First Class, half rations for the others. There are absences from morning prayers. I speak to the wardswomen. If there be any of your number who hide themselves in privies and dark corners to evade their duty, warn them. Warn them not only of the peril to their souls but of the delay they may cause to their own promotion. If women of the Third Class seek to reach the Second Class, they will work and pray. If the Second Class women seek the First, they will do likewise. And if the First Class women seek service in the Colony, they will be as diligent at prayer as at work. And now we will pray.

*[JORDAN lowers his head.]*

This morning you will pray for the soul of Esther Parkin. She has not been recaptured. She has never been seen on the river. She will have escaped into wilderness, have spent weeks without food and shelter in a harsh and barren land. Esther Parkin will be dead. Do not be tempted to follow her unhappy example. May God have mercy on her soul. Dismiss. Work hard for the restoration of your rations.

## THREE

*Dormitory. Early morning. The window has been boarded up. A bell sounds. JENNET dresses, then rouses the others. LOOBY and STUMPY SAL sleep together. There is a jug beside them.*

JENNET

Looby. Looby. Come along now, Looby, look lively. You ain't drunk again, Looby? You and that other great lump. Get up. And get her up.

LOOBY

I bain't drunk, Jennet Trumper.

*[PADDY gets up and rubs his eyes. He shakes ABELIA.]*

JENNET

I smell the rum on you. You spend your days drunk, Looby, you won't ever find a master and a mistress.

LOOBY

Won't never find a master and a mistress nohow.

JENNET

Stumpy. Stumpy Sal. *[To LOOBY] Get her up.  
[She goes to AGNES, shakes her awake.]*

JENNET

Donohue.

PADDY

*[To LOOBY] Mumma don't wake up.  
[JENNET goes to ABELIA. AGNES rises slowly.]*

JENNET

Abelia. Abelia Haggerty.

PADDY

Mumma?

LOOBY

Good morning, Agnes. How be you, Agnes? You be good, this morning?

JENNET

*[To LOOBY] She hates the stink of you. Abelia, come along. Mr Jordan'll be on his way by now.*

LOOBY

Come here, Agnes. You got a blackhead coming up on your forehead.

PADDY

Mumma?

LOOBY

Come here to Looby. I can squeeze it out between my two thumbs. Come along here, and I'll do that for you, Agnes.

JENNET

Abelia Haggerty, I believe you've been at the rum, too.  
*[ABELIA gets up. She picks at her eyes, which are gummed up with conjunctivitis.]*

ABELIA

Such a dream I've been having.

JENNET

Stumpy. Stumpy Sal.  
*[ABELIA dresses PADDY.]*

ABELIA

Such a dream it was.

LOOBY

Agnes? Do you smell the rum on me? I won't drink it no more if you don't like the smell.

JENNET

[To STUMPY SAL] Get up, you hear?  
[She starts to prod SAL.]  
Get out.

[LOOBY puts her thumbs to AGNES'S forehead.]

ABELIA

I'm standing there in my naked skin in front of a great dark door -

LOOBY

There it comes.  
[AGNES registers no pain.]

JENNET

Get out of there. I've had a bellyful of you.

SAL

Had a bellyful of you, Jennet Trumper.  
[She drags her to the ground. They struggle.]

JENNET

Mr Jordan! Mr Jordan?

LOOBY

Now I'll wipe it clean for you.

PADDY

Will you take me to the pump, mumma?

JENNET

Get off me! Mr Jordan!

SAL

A bellyful of you. Head in the air, telling the world your shit don't stink.

LOOBY

Let her up, Sal. She'll have you punished.

JENNET

I shall. Mr Jordan! [to SAL] I warn you.

SAL

You warn me. First to put your hand up after Esther went. "I could be wardswoman."

LOOBY

Sal, you heard her. She'll have you put in the hole. She can.

SAL

She can, she can. She can do any sodding thing she likes. "Get in. Get on. Get up. get out."

JENNET

Get off!

*[She throws SAL off and overpowers her.]*

You will never do that again.

*[JORDAN comes in.]*

Good morning, Mr Jordan.

*[SAL struggles]*

Will you fetch the jacket, sir?

JORDAN

Go down, the rest.

*[He runs out. LOOBY shepherds AGNES out. ABELIA goes with PADDY.]*

SAL

So bloody excited, aren't you, Jennet Trumper? Rest easy, you'll be dead one day.

JENNET

Not half so soon as you, Stumpy.

*[JORDAN returns with a straitjacket.]*

JORDAN

We'll take her to solitary.

SAL

Ain't afraid of you, Jordan. I've killed rats twice your size. With these bare hands.

*[She attacks JORDAN. He gags her. Together they truss her.]*

JENNET

I want to show you my slate, sir. I have all my letters now. I write all the sentences the Reverend Courtenay gives me of a Sunday.

JORDAN

Very good, Trumper.

JENNET

I was hoping you might oversee my reading, if you could ever find the time.

JORDAN

You read your Bible passages with Mr Courtenay.

JENNET

We go ever so slow sir. And he has so many to help, I don't get the good of him, though I want it more than most. Under your guidance I might learn quicker.

*[SAL is trussed.]*