

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



# Virtually Ethel

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by Sara Hardy

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EXTRACT

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**Cast size flexible: 7 to 25 depending on doubling-up.**

Ethel has command of a group of 'Virtual Characters' who remain with her on stage the whole time. The Virtual Characters can create large group scenes (e.g. soldiers in hospital, Suffragettes in prison), they can create a sense of place (e.g. the environment of a wood). Individual Virtual Characters step forward to play named 'cameo roles with varying degrees of dialogue, these roles are:

**Female:**

Old Ethel - a composer, deceased.

Little Ethel

Young Ethel , Middle-Aged Ethel \*

Mrs. Smyth - mother

Queen Victoria

Baroness

Intendant's wife

Mrs. Pankhurst - Suffragette

Prison Warden

Vita Sackville-West - writer

Perkins - Ethel's house-keeper

\* 3 or 4 females can play Ethel at her various ages or it is possible that one plays all.

**Male:**

Tom Gate - presenter of the 'Significant Composers' CD-ROM package

General Smyth - Father

Herr Mottl, the conductor at the Karlsruhe Opera House :

Conductor - Dresden

Intendant - Karlsruhe

Intendant - Cologne

Conductor - Amsterdam

Conductors: Hamburg, Weimar, Wiesbaden

Henry Brewster - Ethel's dearest friend

Critics 1, 2, & 3.

Courtier

Sheep Dog

Editor

**Synopsis:**

Tom is demonstrating an exciting new Virtual Reality Experience in his 'Significant Composers' CD-ROM history series. Old Ethel, a strikingly peculiar woman 'drops-down' and disrupts everything, including Tom's neurons. Ethel and her gang of Virtual Characters attempt to challenge Tom's ideas with a demonstration of their own - 'The Life of Ethel' :- Ethel has composed major operas, served in World War I, been in prison and generally caused a fuss wherever she's been. But can Ethel prove herself 'significant' enough for inclusion in Tom's Read Only Memory?

The music of composer Ethel Smyth is an important 'character'. Specific recorded segments have been suggested in the stage directions. See back page for details of CD recordings and for the words and music for 'The March Of The Women' song.

## SCENE 1

[The scene is set for a promotional presentation: a lectern, table, and a display promoting *SuperRom*'s latest CD-ROM entitled:- **SIGNIFICANT COMPOSERS - THEIR LIVES THEIR WORKS**. The words *SuperRom* and '*Virtual Experience*' predominate. The suggestion of sophisticated computer technology in evidence.

There is a large viewing screen (a gauze frame) up stage centre lit with colour. ]

[Sound: A 'Classic Pops' compilation has been playing, this fades out as lights come up]

[TOM enters. He wears a SuperRom ID card, has a mobile phone; clearly loves the CD-ROM package. He holds up the CD-ROM, speaks directly to the audience]

TOM            On behalf of SuperRom it is my pleasure to officially welcome you to the launch of this fabulous CD-ROM package: 'Significant Composers - Their Lives, Their Works'.

I'm Tom Gate, and I'm here to introduce you to our wonderful Music History Series - all of course utilizing our new 'Interactive SuperKey', the SuperRom key that unlocks time and place. This is *the* Virtual Experience. Edutainment at it's absolute best.

You and I are here because we are music lovers. This is not a sales pitch, this is not about the latest computer tech wizardry. This is about celebrating classical music, celebrating composers and composition. With ease.

Let's think for a moment about what we might expect from this kind of package.

[Through the gauze screen, OLD ETHEL and then several other VIRTUAL CHARACTERS slowly begin to emerge, they are in a sort of glow]

When we think of History and Biography in relation to Classical Music what comes to mind? Or rather: Who? - any significant composer in the history of music will be in here. [Holds up the disc]  
But How? And there's the difference. At the touch of SuperKey you not only learn, you *experience*.

[Sound: MUSIC softly under:- the robust 'Gloria!' from Ethel Smyth's Mass in D (track 6) ]

**[Old Ethel holds a baton and conducts this music. The Virtual Characters are grouped in a formation, their arms held out wide, like a flock of gliding birds. The music gets louder]**

**[Tom becomes aware of an increasing disturbance somewhere as:]**

*: See Elgar's world not only from his point of view but enter his life, join him! That is the Virtual Experience. Work and play with your favourite composer, meet his friends, talk to his enemies - What the? - Excuse me.*

**[He quickly presses keys on his computer, things get worse; he dials his mobile phone. The CD-ROM still in his hand]**

We have a technical - Er - I'll have this under control in a-

**[Old Ethel walks down stage, still conducting. She wears a very old fashioned tweed suit (1900's), a three cornered hat, looks distinctly unkempt and not quite of this world - which she isn't. Attached to her is a very strange kind of 'Space Clock']**

**[The Virtual Characters behind Old Ethel are also not of this world. Like a wizard Old Ethel controls them with a wave of her baton i.e. they will move in and out of scenes as Ethel requires them. They may play characters or objects or be 'scene dressing', or simply be still]**

**[The music reaches a triumphant peak and she brings it to a close. Ethel smiles at audience, at Tom. Looks around in pleased amazement. Tom is frantically trying to get his equipment to behave, Ethel's 'space clock' BEEPS and Tom suddenly sees them all]**

Ahh!

**OLD ETHEL** Gosh! We made a perfect Astral landing!

**Tom** Wahh!

**Old Ethel** That was ripping good fun!

**Tom** Who?

**Old Ethel** Like skiing down the Matterhorn!

**Tom** You can't-

**[Old Ethel puts the space clock on the table]**

**Old Ethel** Virtual Space! What a concept. Same idea as Astral Travel you see? The angel's wing, the celestial highway. Terribly congested these days.

Tom           What the hell are you doing!?

Old Ethel     Mr. Tom Gate I presume?

Tom           You have to leave.

**[Old Ethel forcefully shakes Tom's hand]**

Old Ethel     Ethel Smyth. Composer. 1858 to 1944. Yes I am deceased. What you're seeing is a sort of virtual me! We're not really here - are we my dears?

**[The Virtual Characters smile enigmatically. Tom is in shock]**

**[Sounds come from the 'space clock']**

Tom           A nutter, a group of nutters. - What's this box thing - it's not a bomb!?

Old Ethel     Goodness no - that's my 'Space Clock'. Heavenly Technology.

Tom           You have to leave, now. Right? I'm about to start a presentation, a live presentation - see? **[indicates the audience]**

Old Ethel     Oh I know, it's terribly exciting and I'm totally prepared.

Tom           Prepared?

Old Ethel     All here in my Space Clock.

**[Sound: Space Clock beeps]**

Tom           Can you stop that thing beeping?

Old Ethel     I can turn it down for you. I think. Heavenly Technology, not my forte.

**[Old Ethel fumbles with the controls on her space clock - it makes a few soft beeps and a gear crunching sound - which makes the Virtual Characters jolt ]**

Tom           Never mind. Never mind. Look, I have to introduce my CD ROM. Leave immediately!

Old Ethel     Never! I have been preparing for this moment for a very long time.

Tom           I'll call Security. I'll call the Police.

Old Ethel     I am no stranger to the Police.

**[The Virtual Characters laugh]**

Tom           A crazy, a gang of crazies. Stand there absolutely quiet. Not a sound.