

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



This Hospital is my Country

by Katherine Thomson

EXTRACT

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ELENA bursts into the room with her laundry trolley which is covered in zipped up canvas. She pulls a letter from her pocket, as if it's burning she puts it down. Looks at it. Doesn't want to open it.

ELENA Idiot. Idiot. Fool. One more second I could have missed her. One more second I would have been past. "Excuse me Maria". I say no, Elena. And she say Oh Yes Elena, I have a letter for you. Collect it when you're going home."... When she gives me this I shouldn't be looking scared. I shouldn't like ... I should say oh thankyou like it's group certificate come early not look like expecting anything wrong. She say to me - the new one she is the new administration she's been her three weeks she still can't find her way anywhere, she could get lost going to maternity. Where's maternity she asked Ivan in cleaning. You can't work in St Theresa's Women and Children's Hospital and not know where is maternity. Maternity is where everything begins! Maternity and linen services. She's such a brainiac this girl, but no-one's names she can remember. Everyone with accent she just calls Maria. "Excuse me Maria"... I say no Elena and she say oh yes Elena I have a letter for you. Collect it when you're going home." I say, no I take it now. She's going all right then... but take home and read, nice cup of tea, glass of ouzo eh. I see by your surname you're Greek. Her voice like running water, but pointy teeth smiling like she's giving you a curse. She doesn't even say what are you doing here, the linen services is closed for the day ... I need time to think. I should lock the door.

ELENA exits. Music.

MUSICIAN Ouzo. She doesn't drink. But open that letter,
Elena might wish she did.
Elena and this linen room,
Devoted and forty-two years entwined.
Here she'll tell you she found peace
But look at it another way. Here she made a
bunker. Here she thought she could dodge her
past.
Here avoid the dance of life.

Crashing sounds offstage as she jams the door.

MUSICIAN (cont'd) Not one person knows the shadow of her life.

But when they do, Elena, you'll be released.

ELENA returns. Energized.

ELENA Locked and jammed with the hundred kilo trolley. Like we used to do in the old days. The laundry days. All the laundry girls of St Theresa's. People say I don't like to visit hospital hospital smells bad, but beautiful smells too, you can follow the corridors with your eyes shut. Follow your nose you can make your way. Maternity all sweet and milk, kiddies play room finger paints the play-dough ... Too much to see here, every day. Ladies they come in to have their babies, go home out front door like float on clouds. Or little blond boy for one week he can't lift his head every day I say hello sweetheart, then you hear little voice please can I have ride on trolley. Yes, quickly don't tell nurse. Some children frequent flyers come in all their lives, watch them grow up. (pause) Or sometimes not come back. Or sometimes mothers they go home with no baby, just empty arms and a (tiny) wristband. And footprints for the memory. Sometimes they come back try again. (the door) I know how to jam a door. Jammed like the old days.

MUSICIAN And dam up the demons.

ELENA That door it stays locked until I open it.

MUSICIAN The demons dancing on the mountains.

ELENA Then she'll see, pointy-teeth. See you don't just give someone a letter, someone loves here St Theresa's. (starts picking up sheets) What a mess. This afternoon shift hopeless. The reason I come in tonight, it's emergency. I don't care overtime I don't even sign in, I don't care politics, it's nearly dark I'm in my garden and I see it pass the bottom of my street. The linen

ELENA (cont'd) truck. First time this week. I grab my coat, my hat come running to St Theresa's. Now we get some linen at last. Old days when laundry was here, right here at St Theresa's you can't run out of linen. Linen up to our ears and armpits a linen mountain. But since ten years ago where do you think our laundry gets washed and pressed and everything else. Not here where everyone wants it. Two hundred miles away. Over the other side of the Blue Mountains. All the hospitals in this city, everything goes there, comes back one week later. Old days when laundry here - you want sheets we do them for you straight away. So now one week wait. But not only that. The braniacs think this up in summer, they don't think about the rest of the year. All this week snow over the mountains. Snow and black ice, trucks can't pass. Sorry sister, no linen. And tonight I see the truck. Tonight they're so happy, I say paperwork later! Intensive care tell me Elena you work a miracle. No. The miracle is I can see loading dock St Theresa's from my front garden. Every day that makes me happy. Now she gives me this.

The letter. Elena puts it down. Stares at it. Builds into a panic. Her heart's racing. Breathes to slow it down.

ELENA Even the thought they send me from St Theresa's I can feel my heart beating in my throat. My head like... I always say, I never tell the other girls, I would like to die here in St Theresa's. This is where I could put my head down...

MUSICIAN Put your head down... crack your head against a rock ...

ELENA If I must leave better I never wake up.

A small souvenir from Greece.

ELENA Dr Josephson he knew. After you Dr Josephson, after you Elena we always say in the lift. Then he went on holidays, Dr Josephson, honeymoon to Greece. He bring me back a gift. He think of me on his trip. Elena I see the Caryatids in the

ELENA (cont'd) Parthenon, and I think of you. The Caryatids women holding the temple on their heads, without them the temple would crumple and fall down. Elena, same goes for you and St Theresa's. Where would you be without this place, says Doctor (correcting herself) No, he says where would this place be without you. Yes. Doctor Josephson. I don't know where he got sent. I don't know where he is.

Carefully replaces the souvenir.

ELENA Pointy teeth and all the new ones, they forget, linen holds this hospital. No clean linen you can't have patients, no clean linen you can't have nurses. Doctors they can't walk around treating only one another.

And out of the linen she finds the dress she wore to come to this country.

ELENA (in Greek) Where will I get a job, where is best place to look? St Theresa's OK I look there. Can you write down address. (in English) From first day, this laundry my spring. The spring to give me new life. (pause) It can't be time to go. It's too quick. It can't be time to go.

She picks up the letter again.

ELENA If I go home now what do I do. Tim next door ask him to read this letter, but Tim next door he's away. No. Stay here all night. Make pointy teeth tell me to my face. Not this. (the letter)

Zip. She unzips the trolley she wheeled in. And there, on a couple of dirty laundry bags is a fifteen year old girl, Ruby.

ELENA My God.

RUBY I'm not here OK.

ELENA My God.