

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Ruysch

by Hilary Bell

EXTRACT

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CHARACTERS

Doctor Frederik Ruysch (60 years old)
Rachel Ruysch (10 years old)
Peter the Great (26 years old)
Vrouw Schrader
Midwife Kloos
Cook
Russian Workman

Suggested doubling:

Actor 1: Peter the Great/Cook

Actor 2: Vrouw Schrader/Workman

Actor 3: Midwife Kloos

Frederik and Rachel should remain constants.

SETTING

Amsterdam, 1698. Winter.

PROLOGUE.

FREDERIK, in a pool of light, sings.

FREDERIK

Rachel understands.
She has nimble hands.
She can work by candlelight
Long into the stifling night.
She makes no demands.
Rachel understands.

We begin to discern, apart, the faint outline of RACHEL.

Rachel is a child,
She is soft and mild.
Yet she has a devilish skill
Heightened by her own great will,
Mind, and nimble hands...
Rachel understands.

Now RACHEL is in a pool of light. She is hunched over, sewing.

Rachel understands how to slice an eye;
How to hang intestines out to dry;
Rachel can dissect a throbbing foetus,
Probe its little spine for myelitis;
And oh, my God, you'd not believe
Her lace-work on a corpse's sleeve.

FREDERIK's light expands enough to reveal he's suturing the belly of a naked adult corpse.

Rachel studies Greek.
Rachel works all week.
But upon the Sabbath day
I send Rachel out to play,
For a ten-year-old must rest from Ancient Greek and glands.
And Rachel, though reluctant, understands.

RACHEL throws down her sewing...

SCENE 1.

...and runs to FREDERIK, wrapping her arms around him as he works.

RACHEL

I'm here!

FREDERIK

Careful! How will I know if I've pricked myself?

RACHEL

You'll bleed. It's roasting in here, can't we open a window?

FREDERIK

I need the fire for drying out those arteries. You could turn them over now.

RACHEL

(doing so)

I wish you'd take that coat off, it makes me feel even hotter. Phwaw, something stinks!

FREDERIK

Does it, lamb? I dropped a jar of preserving fluid.

RACHEL

Sometimes I think you're *lucky*.

FREDERIK

Rachel, it's you who are blessed and I blighted. I'd give anything to be able to taste a baked egg again.

RACHEL

What about smelling it an hour later?

(giggles)

FREDERIK

That too.

RACHEL

If I couldn't feel anything, I'd roll in the snow from breakfast till bedtime.

FREDERIK

No you wouldn't – you'd have stitching to do. Would you cut this thread for me, sweetheart?

She does so.

RACHEL

Mr Van Brenk's in the courtyard with his cart.

FREDERIK

I asked him for a girl.

RACHEL

It's all swaddled up, but I saw an Utrecht apron under the cloth.

FREDERIK

Good! What's he want?

RACHEL

Two guilders, and he said no haggling.

FREDERIK

Well then he can keep it, damn swindler!

RACHEL

(making to exit)

I'll tell him.

FREDERIK

How did she die?

RACHEL

Gallstones.

FREDERIK

Gallstones? Rachel love, can't you go down and talk to him? In your sweet way?

RACHEL

I did.

FREDERIK

Offer him one guilder and a tour of the collection.

RACHEL

He's not interested.

FREDERIK

And a cup of chocolate.

RACHEL

He said to tell you she's fresh last night.

FREDERIK

Still fresh! ...Two guilders is what I get paid for delivering triplets!

RACHEL

(at the window)

He's wheeling it away.

FREDERIK

Call him back, quick.

RACHEL opens the window.

RACHEL

Mr Van Brenk!

FREDERIK

Alright! Van Brenk, come back!

(tossing coins)

Go on, snatch the food from my child's mouth. No tip! Wheel it into the kitchen – straight on ice.

A flurry of snow drifts in.

RACHEL

Look, snow!

FREDERIK

Greedy grave-robber.

RACHEL

(tasting it)

Is this what the sky tastes like?

FREDERIK

How would I know?

RACHEL

Does everything taste of embalming solution to you?

FREDERIK

Only because it *has* no taste. Or smell, or feel. Nothing does now, you know that. Those years of experiments even affected my hearing.

RACHEL

What?!

(giggles)

FREDERIK

But what I gained in scientific knowledge was worth it. Now, turn those arteries over again and then let's see what you've been sewing.

RACHEL

It's a surprise for the Tsar of Russia.

FREDERIK

Really? Rachel, how thoughtful!

RACHEL

I want him to like you.

FREDERIK

Well, he'll be here in two days' time. Have you finished all your other needlework?

RACHEL

Almost.

FREDERIK

Everything must be ready to present to him. The sale's almost finalised, he's approved the list, but of course he wants to see the collection with his own eyes.

RACHEL

And then everything will be gone.

FREDERIK

And my reputation will travel with it, to Moscow!

Pause.

RACHEL

Daddy, I've sewn for your artifacts a long time.

FREDERIK

Since you could thread a needle. Three or four.

RACHEL

I've made lace handkerchiefs for the severed hands and embroidered collars for the heads.

FREDERIK

You've strung beautiful little beaded bracelets for the wrists of the unborn.

RACHEL

Have I been useful?