

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Smoke and Mirrors

by Sue Murray

EXTRACT

© 2005 Sue Murray



This script is distributed by The Australian Script Centre
77 Salamanca Place Hobart 7004 Tasmania Australia
email admin@ozscript.org
www.ozscript.org
ph +61 3 6223 4675
fax +61 3 6223 4678

Roll up, roll up! Enter a death-defying circus world, where everything is smoke and mirrors, nothing is as it seems. This play explores the mind of an anorexic, where mirrors are twisted and skewed, where memories are dark, everything is inside out and upside down, where people, like Alice, run and juggle and struggle to stay in the same place. Once upon a time, there was a girl who looked into a mirror and was not there ...

CHARACTERS

- GIRL:** early 20s. Plays the girl at various ages, the Voice
- MOTHER:** 40 something. Plays: Mother, Ringmaster, Friend, Brother, Madame the ballet teacher, GP, Counsellor, Magazine Cover

Note: The Voice is like the GIRL's sleazy lover - aggressive, ruthless but seductive. Anorexics all have these voices, naming them 'Con' (for con artist), 'Anna' (for anorexia) or suchlike, and have a classic love-hate relationship with them. It would work well to indicate the Voice by having the Girl hold her hands, rigid and fingers splayed, either side of her head - very domineering - when the Voice speaks. A half-mask with a handle, perhaps like is sometimes used a masked ball, could be used instead. It is important to make the Voice loud. This is typical of the voices heard by anorexics - at times so loud they drown out the rest of the world.

As the play takes place within the Girl's mind, filtered through her memories, the rest of the characters are all played by one actor, and all come from the set itself, which is all part of the Girl's mind.

SET

Circus, circles, mirror images. Fragments from fairy stories, limbs of shop mannequins, enlarged strips of trashy magazine headlines, toys, clothes, huge, possibly distorted items of food and drink and much more are heaped around the stage: odd contents of the girl's mind. Circus props, equipment and sideshow signs are also scattered in the set.

Downstage centre is a large, golden frame - used mainly as a mirror, but it also serves other purposes.

A circus rostrum (round, painted garish colours) is upstage centre. The stage has a central ring, like a circus.

Possibly decorate the foyer in a circus theme, with laughing clowns, mirror mazes, fairy floss vendors and more. Perhaps also figures with cut-out faces, such as you find at Luna Park, with very fat bodies, glamour-puss outfits, clowns or strong men.

Perhaps also some sideshow distorting mirrors.

COSTUMES AND PROPS

All on stage, plucked from the detritus on stage. The GIRL starts out in bright, childish clothes but adds layers of baggy, drab clothes during the play.

MOTHER wears a basic outfit and adds whatever accessories are needed from items on stage.

ACT 1

Calliope music - a steam-driven carousel tune, starts.

Large gold frame downstage centre.

Spotlight on GIRL, who is turning in circles centre stage. She could be a ballerina in a music box. She is entranced, eyes shut, head back.

Music fades, or slows as if running out of steam.

GIRL stops, breathes deep, opens her eyes and wills herself to go to the mirror.

She finds it very hard to look into it.

Girl: Mirror, mirror on the wall ...

She can't continue. It is too painful. She turns away. She walks around the ring, looking at some of the props.

Girl: [*to the audience, as she picks up a doll's head from the props*] My first memory is - shards of sharp light, prised through tears. Of bars. All hard lines and angles. It's in black and white. And hot sobs of fury. And being alone. And being cold.

I've thought and thought about that memory. I think I was alone in my cot. Panda was on the floor, way below. Nobody came. I remember a big, round doorknob. It didn't turn. Nobody came.

Song by Karen Carpenter starts: 'Top of the World'

MOTHER emerges from the set, in leggings, tights and T shirt, and begins an exercise routine in front of the mirror.

The GIRL turns, startled, and watches for a moment, drawn to the memory of her mother.

Girl: *[to herself, or perhaps to the audience]* She was beautiful. So beautiful. She had - grace - and a smile that said 'secrets'. When I think of her back then, I think 'smooth' - everything about her was smooth, organised, sleek. I was all mess and muck. She was - smooth. She still tries to be, but the wear and tear of everyday life - and the pull of gravity - are causing cracks and sags and wrinkles. But I remember her then - so beautiful.

She reaches into the pile of props, pulls out a little girl's backpack and a soft toy, as her MOTHER examines herself in the mirror, patting her chin and smoothing clothes over her hips. Turns, trying to see her backside in the mirror

Mother: *[while looking at herself in the mirror]* Sweetheart, do I look fat in this?

GIRL moves toward her mother.

Girl: *[as little girl]* No, Mum, no. No. You look lovely.

Mother: *[holding out her hand]* Dance with me, my little princess?

The GIRL puts down her backpack and toy. They dance together as the song continues. - or switch to 'Rainy days and Mondays.'

The GIRL dances with her feet on her MOTHER's feet. Then they dance off, with the mother occasionally checking her own appearance in the mirror. The GIRL exits. The MOTHER scoops up the Ringmaster's top hat and whip.

Mother: *[as Ringmaster, listening to the music, leaning against the side of the mirror]:* Ah! The honey-smooth voice of Karen Carpenter. Dead at 32. Anorexia. Karen was on top of the world, ya woulda thought. Ya never know what's behind the mask, eh?

Music changes to circus music. She starts striding confidently around the ring, and speaks up and out to the audience, real and imagined. Images of circus acts are flashed up on a screen behind the set.

[as Ringmaster] Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls - welcome, welcome, one and all! Tonight we will thrill you, chill you, dazzle and delight you. Our maestro Mesmer will open your mind and turn you upside down and inside out. The contortionists will turn themselves upside down and inside out. And ladies and gentlemen, tonight for your entertainment and amusement, we are proud to present the one, the only Anorexia the Magnificent - a magician who can pull more than the wool over anybody's eyes - making you - and you - and you disappear!

So roll up, roll up, it's almost Showtime, folks. This is your life - or it could be. *[grabs a mirror from the props pile and uses it to flash*

light out into the audience] We take your dreams, desires and destiny and reflect them back to you bigger and better than ever - but be warned - our mirrors are magic - full of tricks and mischief!

She exits as the GIRL enters. She puts on a tiara or other dress-up item and picks up a doll. She plays with this for a little while.

Girl: *[to the doll, as little girl]* and if you're a good girl, you can go to the ball, Cinderella. *[to the audience]* I'm a good girl. I am, I am. I'm Mummy's little princess. And Daddy's little Tiger. My Dad is one of the most important men in the whole world. He goes to work to make sick children better. He has to work very, very hard because there are lots and lots of sick children. Sometimes Dad gets home after my bedtime and he goes to work before I get up! But sometimes he reads me bedtime stories. *[as Girl imitating Dad]* So Tiger, what shall we read tonight? *[as little girl]* Um - Snow White? Or um - oh, oh - Little Red Riding Hood!

MOTHER enters and picks up a very large storybook. She sits on the circus rostrum and opens the book. The GIRL snuggles in beside her.

Mother: *[opening book]* The Ugly Duckling. Once upon a time there was a mother duck ...

Girl: When will Dad get home?

Mother: Oh sweetheart, he's on call tonight. He'll be home as soon as he can.

[*reading*] There was a mother duck who ...

Girl: But he promised he'd tuck me in tonight.

Mother: Sh! [*reading*] Who was sitting and hatching her eggs. She sat on those eggs for a long, long time. She watched all the other birds swimming and flying about and having fun. She said

[*as mother duck*] 'When will my babies ever hatch?'

[*as mother*] A long-legged stork, who had flown all the way from Egypt, strode past.

[*extravagant Egyptian accent*] Patience, Mother Duck. Good things come to she who waits.

[*as mother*] And the stork stretched his wings wide and flew off into the wide, blue sky.

[*as mother duck*] That's find for your to say - I suppose your wife's back at the pyramids hatching your next broo ...oooh! oooh!

GIRL gets up and starts acting out the story. A screen drops down in front of the mirror and becomes a shadow puppet screen. The girl uses soft toys, simple puppets, or even just her hands, to help portray the different characters. She herself comes out as the ugly duckling.

Mother: [*continuing, as mother duck*] Who do we have here?

[*as mother*] Three ducklings hatched out of their eggs, one, two, three.

[*as ducklings*] 'Quack, quack, quack. Hello, Mama.'

The last egg, the biggest one, didn't even have a crack in it. The mother duck stood up and looked at it and said

[*as mother duck*] Oh, hurry up, you great lump! Oh! Oh! Yes! A crack! A beak! A ...what?

Girl: [*as ugly duckling*] Honk! Hoooooonk! Mama!

Mother: The Egyptian stork flew in again and said

[*Egyptian accent*] Whoa! That's one UGLY duckling!

[*as mother*]. But the mother duck hugged the ugly duckling and said

[*as mother duck*] But you are beautiful - on the inside! Follow me, children.

[*as mother*] All the farmyard animals laughed at the strange, ugly duckling with her long neck and her big feet as she waddled behind the other ducklings

[*as ducklings*] Quack, quack, quack ...

Girl: Honk!

Ballet music starts - from *Swan Lake*.

The GIRL stops being the ugly duckling and puts on a tutu, trying as a little girl to dance like a beautiful ballerina. A telephone rings upstage in the mess. The MOTHER closes the storybook, puts it down and goes up and answers the phone. The music stops but the GIRL keeps dancing. The MOTHER hangs up and comes down to the GIRL.

Mother: That was Daddy. He said to give you a goodnight kiss. Get ready for bed now, sweetheart.