

THE TASMANIAN BOOK OF LIVING AND DYING

Mary Hudson Ewington © 1997

The intention of this play is to demonstrate the everyday dying and resurrection of the spirit. The events at Port Arthur (1996) affected the storyline, deliberately bringing in issues for teenagers and young people, but reflecting that our society encourages death by conformity, suppression of grief expression and by ignoring the young and old storytellers amongst us by not listening to our feelings.

This musical play uses song to express and echo the meanings within the scenes. The first act is full of disagreement and argument, building to a crescendo. Act 2, demonstrates ways through conflict, by listening, putting aside desperation and take turns in listening. The old woman unifies and symbolizes ancient ways of the wise female aspect of the psyche.

CHARACTERS.

Rialannah and Mirri Mirri, aboriginal sisters, tribespeople

Sonia young mother, children

Jess, street worker for drop in centre

Lisa, visitor to the centre.

Duncan, Madeleine, Jane, friends

Jo and his mates, young people in the mall.

Jack and Percy, convicts at the Salt Mines near Port Arthur.

SETTINGS.

Scene 1. Caves, bush wild seaside bush.

Scene 2. Small cottage home.

Scene 3. Street.

Scene 4. Port Arthur convict work camp.

Scene 5. Empty stage, no man's land, a fire glowing in the centre.

STORYLINE

ACT 1.

Scene 1. Two elders (aboriginal) women are left abandoned by the tribe. They lament their hunger. A storm rages, one woman dies. She, however, communicates to her sister that her spirit never dies.

Song. The spirit never dies.

Scene 2. A single mother looks after wild children. She complains and treats them badly.

Song. Your children, Chant. I know a young woman.

Scene 3. Teenagers hang out together, argue come to blows, girls watching unable or unwilling to help. Drugs, alcohol used.

Song. You're on drugs.

Scene 4. Two convicts are fatigued, exhausted ready to give up. What way out is there?

Song: Nelson Mandela's Speech.

Scene 5. All groups on stage arguing, build up to crescendo.

Song: Rainbow woman.

ACT 2.

Scene 1. Aboriginal tribe returns to find elderly woman dead, mourns.

Song. Changing woman.

Scene 2. Mother speaks to friend, takes timeout, listens to kids. They rest.

Song. My sister Annie. Thule Maman.

Scene 3. Teenagers question damage to each other, girls question. "Can't you guys communicate?" Also "Can't you girls take action?"

Song. Love devotion, feeling, emotion.

Scene 4. Men give up, collapse, get to talk and hear each other's distress. Listen and support each other. Rest.

Song. I'm your mother I'll watch over you.

Scene 5. All on stage, speaking in turn. Old woman enters, groups express their feelings to her, she responds, naming fear, hurt, isolation, ignorance. Centre stage group gathers round, coming together in the tribe.

Song. Home by the sea.

Final songs. Plus ca change, plus la meme chose.

ACT 1. SCENE 1.

Mirrimirri: We are left, no children stay with us, in our old age. They have gone hunting. Who knows if they will return?

Rialannah: Stay by me sister, we will find some roots, and though it is cold perhaps we can swim for some shell fish below this sea cave. The sun is warm today. Sea sounds.

Miir Mirri: I am so lonely for my tribe. My son the great leader has abandoned me and you his aunt too. Winter comes. Will we survive?

Rialannah: We can wait while the weather is fine. I have some furs to cover our old bones. We picked the best cave. The islanders do not visit this side of the channel, they have their own hunting grounds.

Fire crackles.

Mirri Mirri: Help me! I feel so weak. I can't see ahead of me. The day has become dark. My heart hurts. I can't go further. I am dying.

Rialannah: What spirit possesses you? I will not abandon you. The tribe may leave us but I won't leave you. Stay breathing, stay still. Rest. (Sings quietly).

Mirri Mirri: Help me, you are fading from me, Oh my family where are you?

Rialannah: Gone. They are gone who knows where. The wild devils, the possums growl at night. I shall protect you, don't fear.

Mirri Mirri: I will rest. (sleeps).

Rialannah: The wind rises, but I will climb to the top of the cliff to see if they are returning (wind sounds, waves roar.)

There is still no sign. They must have good hunting over on the far shore of this bay. The air is cooling, the sun going down. I must get back. I haven't any more food, but the fire still smokes.

(she returns to find M. has quietly dies in the afternoon.)

Rialannah: Uh, yay, uh yay. My sister (moans, cries, beats her breast, calls out.) They have left me, they have left the old women to their fate in the elements, but I know you are still with me. I can hear your voice speaking yet, I can hear that song you sang to me when we were small. We played by the sea, we dug in the sand, the girls swam naked in the warm water. We were not afraid to enjoy our home. Why did they leave us?

They think we have no purpose, they think our stories do not help, but I can tell you the best place to find octopus my friend, I can find the lizards in the rocks, the roots and berries. I know the healing sharp taste of wild berries hereabouts. This is my land, even my tribe cannot take it away from me. I will stay here loved by my earth. I will talk to Mirri Mirri, she is still my sister, even though her body is resting.
(Cries, moans, sings, rocks herself.)

Mirri Miiirri: There's a huge space, large as this world and more.
I am on the cliff edge, I've just stepped out of the cave.
It was warm, round and encompassing.
Now I see the space of bish, brightness,
a blue sky stretching to the horizon,
Over Australian seashore, the bay's golden rocks and bushland soil.
Some wallabies, wombats, echidnas and possums, bush mice survive.

Kangaroo child bounds with the herd.
Light, sensitive, she startles delicately,
and glances as she leaps and flees from predators prowling.
She jumps as one mind-soul being.
She simply lives as nature's wild expression.
Soft black eyes open wide.
Almost receptive to the touch of my nose on hers,
I tentatively try to stroke her. She withdraws.

My kangaroos move with their mob.
Like my people they gather round the evening fire,
Sniffing each other and lightly moving near, the away.
They retire, reticent and suspicious.

Don't go animals, don't go.
I am alone, my spirit moves and speaks to the wind, waves and trees.
It streams across the vast bay, to echo on the other side.
Seat awhile, rest warmly, brown animals,
Breathe around me in the cold dark night.
I am alone with the sparkling stars, the breath of heaven, and the spirits.
I, Mirri Mirri swim as a soul out towards the vast infinity.

SONG: The spirit never dies.

I hear a distant drum beat, a heartbeat close to home.
Is it coming from within?
A heartbeat I don't know.
A troubled heart knows no peace, a darkened poisoned pool,
Of liberty now lost, upon the present soil.
Gird my heart beat strong and guide when eyes grow dim
And ears grow deaf with empty words,
When I know there's life within.

A gull finds sheltered sites, where birds can sweetly nest,
A mother craves her child now dead, in the land where life began.

From the troubled heart of Africa, Nicaragua's festering soil,
The turmoil strength of China, death crying out for more.

Gird my heart beat strong and guide when eyes grow dim
And ears grow deaf with empty words,
When I know there's life within.

Change is slowly coming, my eyes can scarcely see,
The rays of hope come streaming, through smoke about the lea.
The spirit never dies, though the troubled heart feels pain,
When the memory of the soul returns it will blossom once again.\

SCENE 2. Young mother with 2 or 3 children in kitchen.
(Crashing and banging, thumps of furniture, television background noise.)

Sonia: Why don't you children leave me alone! There's enough food, why don't you play outside? Go away. I am tired. Anyway where's your mum, Jason? she said she would be here at 10 o'clock. Forgot, that's right, forgot poor me. For Gawd's sake can't you change your own nappy you little brat?(baby cries.)
Look, I've had enough of this racket. (smacks baby, who bawls louder.)
And while you're at it, I'll do one for you too. (reaches nearest child and smacks legs.
All children bawl and scream.)

Ooah, I've got this lump in my boob. Bloody hell, why me? I spose I'll have to get it checked, well I can't this week, and then Fiona'll have to mind the kids, because Ron is too busy with the truck. I've got too much to do, I can't be sick, not now, with baby coming. Where is that woman!

CHANT: I know a young woman.

I know a young woman, she's dying of cancer.
She has young children, she's dying of cancer.
She lives in a new house, she's dying of cancer.
She has many friends she's dying of cancer.

Her husband he loves her, she's dying of cancer.
In mountain bush sunshine, she loves good rock music.
She misses her family, she's German by birth.
I care for her somehow, she's learning about death.

There but for God's Grace go I in health.
I've been very fearful of dying of cancer
Who knows? It may be I'm frightened of life!
I have the nurse stroke me, I have myself checked.

The disease, like spider, called dying of cancer,
It hovers above us, like a bad star form.
We wait for its clutches and hide us away.
We're so terrified of ever being born!

Oh where is the answer to living this life?
My sisters they love me we share a good laugh.
This feeling's the answer belief in today,
Let's kiss fuck snuggle, it's all part of the play.

I'm merely a woman, a powerful being,
I create and I heal, can't escape what I'm seeing.

Life causes life, and ends it in death,
So take a good gulp and breathe your last breath!
Now breath your first breath let it come from the body,
Escape to sky vastness, let's move on this journey.

Change, moving like winds, blow us apart and together.
I'm with you, your with me, spirits now and forever.

YOUR CHILDREN by Kahlil Gibran.

Your children are not your children,
They are the sons and the daughters of life's longing for itself.
They come through you, they are not from you,
And though they are with you, they belong not to you.
You can give them your love but not your thoughts,
They have their own thoughts, they have their own thoughts.
You can house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in a place of tomorrow,
Which you can not visit, not even in your dreams.
You can strive to be like them, but you cannot make them just like you.
You can strive to be like them, but you cannot make them just like you.
Sonia: Bloody hell, they leave me alone with this mob and go off for some lovely
supermarket shopping. You can't even take the pram in there anymore. And that
bloke at the counter. I know he hates little kids, he's always telling them to be quiet. I
told him a thing or two last time. How can they shut up? I can't be quiet!

SCENE 3:

A street drop-in centre doorway. (City sounds)

Jess: What are you doin' here?

Lisa: I want a score. Got any?

J. This is a drop-in centre, not the street.

I need something. I had a blue with me boyfriend. Anything'll do. Got to get rid of
this headache.

J. ant a cup of coffee? Tho that's drugs too I suppose. (cup sounds.)

Lisa Come on. Tell me who's got some speed or anything. I just want to get out of
this.

Jess. What's going on lisa?

Lisa: Grass'll do anything.

Jess: I could see consuelo, she knows the street action. On second thoughts that's only
adding to your habit. What's got you into this state?

Lisa: He beat me up. (pauses, rolls cigarette.)

My little girl'll be OK. If Krisha can get a sitter, we can do some together. Takes away my stress, you know?

Jess: What about the kids? Where are they?

(Lisais preoccupied.)

Lisa: I'll be OK. I'll find some stuff and drop it and everything'll be OK.

Jess: I'm too old for this. I did try to smoke some stuff once, but I couldn't get into it. I laughed too much. My son asked me what I was on and I told him I hadn't drunk anything. I think he was embarrassed because we were drumming and singing, making a loud noise. (chuckles).

Lisa: Well I'm off. I can see Krisha. She's the one who got us into this in the first place. I'll hang out with her a couple of days, until Deane cools down then go back to his flat.

Jess: Looks like you've been through a lot lately.

Do you really want to do it all over again? What about your daughter?

Lisa: What about her? Who cares? She'll be OK. with that Krisha for a few days. It's Deane I want. He's mad. Crazy enough to do himself in. But I can cure him. I can help him. I know what it feels like to be the pits. I'd better go.

Jess: (sighs) Call back again, Lisa, the door's always open. Where did she say she lived? Better tell the child health worker, not a lot I can do.

Song: You're on drugs, don't know what to do

You're taking drugs, don't know what to say,
There's a wall between us, has been here all day.
Don't know how to get through, maybe the same for you.
Leave me as I am, you don't even know my name.

I hate to admit, I'm not going nowhere,
Feels bad to let you see, the large gap inside of me,
The wind echoes through, I've got no protection,
My parents left me alone, to self destruction.

I'm taking drugs, I don't know how to say it,
When you transgress me, I feel so betrayed.
We're the same you and I, taking drugs to numb our feelings,
Just to get by, to help us feel we're dealing.

My drug maybe	food,
“ “ “	sex,
“ “ “	dope,
“ “ “	alcohol.
“ “ “	whining,
“ “ “	fighting,
“ “ “	money,
“ “ “	work!

One way or another, we're on drugs you and I,
Feel what the feelings are, you don't have to die.
In this moment you're alright, in the instant you got craving,

Call to yourself, "I'm alive! - and I'm breathing!"

My drug may be -changed into love,
Laughter, hugs, singing, drumming, party time,
Reiki, meditation, fun, dance, music,
Poetry, creation, spontaneity, let's dance!

Second Group chats. Mall voices in background.

Duncan: So girls, I'll see you this week. You've got a good dress on Madeleine. Hm. I like that particular turquoise. Made some jeans myself a couple of years ago. Started selling them to skaters. Our logo was "Think".

Madeleine: Oh cool. Jane did you see Duncan's jeans? (giggles, flirts).

Jane: (Ruffles his hair) What's the fabric?

Duncan: Heavy denim. Got it at Cheap Frills.

Madeleine: I like them baggy myself. (they all laugh).

Jo: (Jumps up and approaches aggressively).

Hey yous, me mate told me you was saying stuff 'bout me. I'll bash you in the face.

Duncan: We were just talking clothes. Wouldn't bother talking about you. (Turns away.)

Madeleine: (sighs) You still playing drums with that band?

Duncan: Not any more, but I still thrash pretty well. (Smiles big smile, she smiles back.)

Madeleine: there's a rage on at..

Jo: I said I'll hit you for insulting me. (moves in)

Duncan: Well sorry, but.

(Bang. Jo hits Duncan on the side of his face. Duncan does not fight back).

Jo: (To mates). See he's wrong, he did laugh at me. (Smashes Duncan & shakes him, mates join in)

Jeff: Look out.

Ron: Let me get him.

Duncan: Hey, leave me..

Others: Let's do him. I'll take that grin off yer face, you bastard. Yeah get him, he smiles.

Girls: (Moving away) Oh look out. Call Jerry, quick.

](Duncan falls to ground. Boys kick his face and back.)

Duncan: Uh.

Jo: That'll do for the bastard, for laughing at me.

Duncan: Aah.

Girls: (Moving back) Oh Duncan how are you? You look awful. They really got stuck into you. Here where's my hanky. Oh your eyes. Your lip's bleeding, swollen. Lie still I'll get some water.

Duncan: Woah. Have they gone?

Jo & gang: Bloody poofter, talking to them girls.

Duncan: get me home. I feel sick. (staggers to feet, Madeleine helps).

Song: Return to innocence.

Love devotion, feeling, emotion,
Don't be afraid to be weak,
Don't be too proud to be strong,

Just look into your heart my friend,
That'll be the return to yourself,
The return to innocence.

Oh, yah, yah ,yah, oh, yah, yah ,yah
Oh, yah, yah ,yah, oh, yah, yah ,yah,
The return to innocence.

And if you wander far to left,
And you must and start to cry, be yourself.
Don't be afraid believe in destiny,
Don't care what people say,
Just follow your own way.
Don't give up and miss the chance,
To return to innocence.

Oh, yah, yah ,yah, oh, yah, yah ,yah
It's not the beginning of the end,
It's the return to yourself,
The return to innocence

SCENE 4:

Two men crack rocks, wielding hammers, stomping at the workface. Wooden trollies roll towards them from time to time. The whip sounds, men's muffled voices in the distance.

Jack: Me back , me achin Back. (breathes and tries to straighten.)

Percy: Hey mate gimme that hammer, will ya? You won't last long if you don't keep going. Overseer'll be by here in a minute. Time for gruel. I've got to get some today. Look. Move out of the way! (shoves man aside.)

Jack: Watch it sunny. You came here after me. I know all the ropes of this little place. This salt mine'll be pretty cosy for us if we can get on his right side.

Percy: You just hand me the bag, will you?

Jack: Like I said, if I didn't have this aching back, if my legs stood as they used to, I'd be at the head of that line across the bay.

Percy: You ever thought you could get out?

Jack: Not with them dogs going for you. I can't swim me boy. There's sharks in the bay they say. Plenty of convicts disappeared over at Eagle Hawk Neck.

Percy: I used to have a little wife back home. She looked after the children, but I couldn't feed the lot on potatoes only. I got the idea one day I could nab a sheep. Feed everyone near the fields in one easy go, but some fool scared easily and told the runners.

Jack; now you're here for life isn't it? Just when you want to watch the children grow. My pretty Selina and Polly. The best girls in the world. (Drifts into daydream.)
(Whistle sounds)

Jack: How long I can go, I don't know. Oh, if I could just sit down, oh me aching foot. Not that one stupid. The other one the log rolled on. They won't even let me into the prison hospital. You should hear the tales. Seems they go mad in solitary. Just one moment, just to catch my breath, that's all I want.

Percy: I said move on man!. Do you want to get us put there, like Sykes? He yelled and swore at the overseer, one too many times. Lashes so his back was raw for weeks. Still has to work.

Jack: There's this strange fellow up in the yellow house on the hill. He came from Ireland they tell me in the mess. Political prisoner. He lives alright. Political my foot. (yelps). If I could get up to his cosy house in the sunshine, I'd give him some work to do. Us poor lags die here.

Percy: Look, I'll have to pass that bag up to the top, they're waiting with the trolley. How we can get back to Port Arthur this afternoon without food I'll believe when I see. One heave. Come on man, you can help me with the bag.

Jack: Here I can stand this end, but you know I'm not a strong man. (coughs)

Song: Nelson Mandela's Speech (extract)

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate,
Our deepest fear is that we're powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant?"

But, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small does not serve the world.
Don't shrink so others won't feel insecure.

We are born to make manifest the glory of God.
It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone.
As we let our own light shine, we give other people
Permission to do the same.

As we liberate from our own fears,
Our presence grows to liberate others!
As we liberate from our own fears,
Our presence grows to liberate others!

SCENE 5:

All groups on stage, airing their grievances.

Ria: (moaning, crying for her sister) My sister, where are you now? Can you not hear me? Who will speak to me, who can I tell of my sorrow? Hear me spirits. Hear me!

Sonia: Take that you cow! My mother smacked me and I'm doing just the same. No treats for you. What? You want a lolly? Who cares if all your teeth drop out of your head. I couldn't give a stuff. I had to fight and you've got to fight too. Go on, hit each other. (Cries.) There's no-one around when I want you here. Tony's gone. Annie's never home. Just because she got that job she keeps it all to herself now. The snob. Thinks she's too good for me. I'm just a mum.

Madeleine: Duncan's hurt, can't you do something Jane? You're going home now? I need you here, don't leave. Phone your mum or dad. Just try. Look he's gone unconscious again. Get some-one. I don't care who!

Jane: I've never been in a place like this before. I can't do anything.

Mad: Here's fifty cents. Find a phone. Go on. You've got to.

Jane: I'm scared. They'll get me if I go round that corner.

Mad: Come on then, I'll go.

Gang: Here she comes. Let's give her something to think about. You girls aren't too hot, looking after a wimp like him. (wheels screech)

Mad: (screams).

Jane: Let's go, we've got to get to the phone. You keep an eye out. (dials) Hello, police, there's been a big fight in the mall. Someone's unconscious. Can you help?

Lisa: (moans) Where am I? Krishna what are you doing down there? Krishna? Wake up! I tell you get up! Krishna, Krishna. Your little kid wants you. He's vomited all over the couch. You gotta clean it up. Krishna? Where's the number that old woman gave me? (Rifles through bag). Hurry. Looks like she's out to it. Hope the trip's a nice one. It's getting cold here. Jeez. I want something to eat. They'd have some soup there anyway. Krishna!

Krishna: (Moans)

Lisa: Will you listen to me? How am I going to feed you and here? Anyway where's Zoe? Where did you put my kid? I can't find her anywhere. It's bloody late, and I want to get to the flat. Deane'll go spare when he finds out we scored and he didn't. Krishna are you listening? The mess here, I can leave, but where's Zoe? Shut up Kane.

Kane: Mummy, mummy, wake up. Food mummy.

Lisa: No sign of Zoe. Quick where's that number?

Jess, I've got to tell you I'm here. Can you come round. Now!

Percy: No Sir. He just dropped. Alright I can lift him. He's pretty lightweight. Why he had to go I don't know. I thought we were doing alright. Simply keeping out of sight helps in the mine. Oh, it's bright out here. This bush gives me nightmares, and where are those black men? Hope the soldiers shot the lot of them. Jack might survive, but I don't like his chances.

Overseer: move on you scum.

You should keep your place. Maybe you can have his ration for the day. Hurry or I'm giving it to some-one else.

Percy: Let me go. I have to pass here.

Overseer: Faster man.

Percy falls. Drops Jack. Hits his own head.

Overseer: Faster, move along. You'll lose your rations at the barracks after five o'clock. (trolley sounds).

Put him on the trolley.

Percy: Help me with Jack here. Jack, you'll be alright. Stay still.

Overseer; Look out they are moving. Run, you men, run. We've got a long way to get back.

(All sounds mix louder..)

SONG Rainbow woman

Rainbow woman, why do you feel so blue?
Rainbow woman, why do you want to cry?
Rainbow woman, where the hell are you?
Rainbow woman, why do you want to die?

Well I been sittin doing nothing here all day,
Drinkin wine, can't think of nothing to say.
Them white girls they ignore me in the park,
Them white girls, so white they shine out in the dark.

Well the summer makes me want to sing,
Red and yellow blossoms bursting everything.
I fall down, my head goes in a spin,
Rainbow woman, help me through this thing.

Rainbow woman, why do you feel so blue?
Rainbow woman, why do you want to cry?
Rainbow woman, where the hell are you?
Rainbow woman, why do you want to die?

When you feel down, when you feel all alone,
Hundredth monkey she jump up straight from the stone,
Million women dancing round with you,
Rainbow women, every colour every hue.

Rainbow woman when you feel blue,
Cry rainbow curtains wash the grass green too
Rainbow woman we're here on the ground.
Rainbow woman just you look around.

Rainbow woman, why do you feel so blue?
Rainbow woman, why do you want to cry?
Rainbow woman, where the hell are you?
Rainbow woman, why do you want to die?