

EXTRACT

BETHANY

Daryl Peebles

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BETHANY

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BETHANY

a one-act play for three women

by

DARYL PEEBLES

*“What men call gallantry, and gods adultery,
Is much more common where the climate’s sultry”*
[Lord George Byron in *Don Juan*, Canto I,V. LXIII, vii-viii.]

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Revised draft 6 October 2000

Synopsis:

Bethany is set in 1830 in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). It is the story of a young woman transported from England for a menial crime and now in the service of exploitative landowners in the new colony.

In her short life, many people in positions of authority, including her current employer, Mr Hewett, the landowner, have sexually abused Bethany. Now the landowner's son, approaching his mid-teens, is attempting to do likewise. The wife and mother of these unscrupulous men is either blind to their crimes or feels it necessary to protect them. She does so using the family's professed, but not practised, faith in God and adherence to His teachings.

The daughter of the landowners, Ruth, is treated little better than Bethany. She appears to be a bit "slow" and is the shame of the family; someone to be hidden away.

The play looks at the way three different women cope (or do not cope) with the abuses in their lives.

Characters:

Bethany Convict girl, now in her early 20s. Brought up in poor circumstances outside London and transported to Van Diemen's Land for a minor offence. Upbringing may have lacked any finesse but she is good-hearted and basically honest.

Mrs Hewett A harridan hiding behind a holy veneer as the wife of a Primitive Methodist free settler. Sees herself as a model of virtue and goodness but in fact is quite cruel, cold and unforgiving. Would like the world to see her as a fine pioneer of the new colony; one bringing God-fearing ways to the brutality and evil that actually exists.

As one of the new landed gentry, Mrs Hewett imagines her station being much higher than the truth of her situation dictates.

Mrs Hewett could be any age from late 30's upwards. She is the mother of several children, although only two, Ruth (her eldest, around 20) and Walter, a youth of about sixteen, are mentioned.

Ruth Around 20 years old. Initially Ruth does not say much and when she does speak, it is a slow, deliberate and laboured effort as if she may have some impediment. With the growing love of Bethany (and Tom), she is increasingly able to think rationally and is again learning to clearly express those thoughts.

Notes about *Bethany*:

The premiere performance of *Bethany* was at the Tasmanian Drama Festival, Deloraine, on Saturday 14 October 2000. It was directed for Razzle Dazzle Productions by John Xintavelonis. The cast featured Andrea Moody as Bethany, Judith Smee as Mrs Hewett and Rebecca Thompson as Ruth. The production won four awards; Best Original Script, Runner-up Best Actress (Judith Smee) and two Merit Awards for Andrea Moody and Rebecca Thompson respectively.

Scene:

A simple colonial kitchen setting. The only essential furniture is a wooden table and chairs and a copper, with fire under, for boiling clothes.

A dresser or sideboard could also be used. The table has an old Bible and a candle on it. A bucket or dish for fetching water is also in the kitchen.

Access to the outside is PS and OP leads to the rest of the house.

Situated DS on one side is an artist's easel placed such that an artist seated at it, would actually be off stage. The area around the easel should be capable of being illuminated separately.

SCENE 1

Mrs Hewett is standing OP, hands on hips, yelling into the house.

MRS HEWETT: *(screaming to offstage)*

You just wait until your father returns from Hobart Town, young man. We'll get to the bottom of this, even if he has to take your hide off with the whip.

I'll have no son of mine cavorting with the likes of her. The Good Lord will take a horrible vengeance on those tempted to such abominable sin.

(turns and storms back to CS removing an apron as she does so. She flings the apron onto the table, moves to PS and shouts)

Bethany Hopkins! Bethany Hopkins, you come here into this house this instant. You hear!

(storms back to CS and sits at table. She clutches the Bible to her breast with one hand and holds her other hand to her forehead. She mutters an unintelligible prayer. A timid knock comes from PS)

(shouts) Wait there and don't you dare move one inch. I'm talking to our Lord.

(more unintelligible mutterings finished with a loud "Amen". She rises and moves to PS)

Come!

(She moves back to CS followed by tentatively by Bethany)

MRS HEWETT: Sit!

(Bethany sits on the edge of a chair, Mrs Hewett hovering over her.)

MRS HEWETT: You are a whore and a harlot, Bethany Hopkins. Is this the thanks we get in return for our kindness?

BETHANY: Please, Ma'am. It ain't as it seems ...

MRS HEWETT: Not as it seems! It is as it seems, slut! All legs and thrashing about like ... like the pigs in the pen. Like two animals. Of course you ... you are nothing but an animal. A creature from the slums o' Thameside. A throwback with no fitter purpose on God's Earth than to be sent out here for your crimes and villainy.

And if that's not enough to bring His horrible wrath down upon your sinful head, you wantonly try and corrupt my son. My own flesh and blood.

BETHANY: It ain't true, Ma'am ..

MRS HEWETT: *(cuffing Bethany)* Do not interrupt, girl.

My boy, barely sixteen years and you, thirty if a day ...

BETHANY: Twenty-three, come November ...

MRS HEWETT: *(shouts)* Quiet. You are in enough trouble without speaking out of turn.

(threatening) When the master returns from Hobart Town, he will give you such a flogging as you'll wish your mother had killed you at birth.

BETHANY: But I have done nothing wrong

MRS HEWETT: I saw with my own eyes. Rutting! So don't you compound your sinning further by your lies. The Good Lord will have you suffer ...

BETHANY: I was taking a piss

MRS HEWETT: *(cuffs her again)* Hold your tongue, harlot!

BETHANY: *(stands to confront Mrs Hewett)* I was taking a piss and your boy .. your precious Walter, was hiding in the hedgerow. Hiding there to look upon me as Nature called.

MRS HEWETT: Enough!

BETHANY: No! You speak of truth. I'll tell you a truth you don't want to hear!

(Mrs Hewett takes a swipe at Bethany who ducks. They chase around the kitchen, Bethany desperate to tell the story of the earlier event)

BETHANY:

“I can see your thatch,” he said from the thicket.

“I can see your thatch and now I’m going to enter your cottage!”

MRS HEWETT: *(angry)* Enough, I said!

BETHANY: I told him “No!”. I picked up my skirt and ran for the house.

He caught up with me at the bottom of the lane. Threw me to the ground and tried to mount me.

(she chokes back her tears) Tried to rape me!

Where was your Merciful God when your own son tried to have me by his force?

MRS HEWETT: *(stops, stunned)*

How dare you question me! How dare you speak of my Walter spying in such a lustful way. Oh, no. We know the true story, you trollop. It’s you! You who have brought your wicked ways into this house. You who would try to lure my son into the sins of the flesh. The whoring that had you sent from England should have stayed there! Not brought into this God-fearing home.

It’s just as well I came upon you both in time.

BETHANY: You came only when I screamed. Would I have screamed if I had started it?

MRS HEWETT: Screams of delight!

BETHANY: There was no delight. I screamed and scratched and bit. And try as he might, he did not get his piece anywhere near mine.

He spilt it! Look! Here on the hem of my dress!

(She picks up her hem and thrusts it as far as it will reach into Mrs Hewett’s face)

Your son’s seed. That’s about as close as he got

(quietly)

.... unlike your husband!

MRS HEWETT: What was that?

BETHANY: Nothing, Ma’am.

MRS HEWETT: Nothing indeed! You mentioned my husband. What of him?

BETHANY: I said “Don’t tell him”, Ma’am.

MRS HEWETT: And why not? You have sinned against God and acted against our good grace. You have lured our own flesh and blood into the ways of the Devil and you plead that I not tell my husband.

BETHANY: You haven’t listened to a word I have spoken, have you? I tell you, I am the innocent ...

MRS HEWETT: Enough! I will hear no more of this. Now sit!

(Bethany hesitates, then sits)

I **will** tell my husband and he will punish you as he sees fit. It’s back to the women’s prison for you, no doubt.

BETHANY: To pay again for a crime I have not done!

MRS HEWETT: *(shouts)* Quiet!

(Mrs Hewett stands over Bethany, lecturing her)

You have chosen to ignore our God-fearing ways and our wise counsel. You have chosen to stick by your own creed, the creed of the corrupt. The word of the Devil.

MRS HEWETT: God be praised that this colony has people like us. Sent to tame the savages and lead those who have sinned, to the light of His salvation. But if you choose not to hear, then you deserve His wrath. And until His judgement day, you will suffer the wrath of those of us chosen to lead.

BETHANY: *(thumps the table and stands to confront Mrs Hewett)*

So! I will suffer the wrath of your husband for something I had no say in. Your husband! Your good, God-fearing husband ...

MRS HEWETT: Aye! And don’t you doubt a word of it!

BETHANY: Your husband who sometimes gets up from his knees after praying at your bedside and steals into my chamber in the dead of night to do to me what your son couldn’t ...

MRS HEWETT: Enough of your lies ...

BETHANY: Your merciful husband who like many others thinks that to tame the natives of this land is to round them up and shoot them like so many animals.

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