

EXTRACT

# HOW TO SURVIVE AN EARTHQUAKE

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Christine Croyden

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## HOW TO SURVIVE AN EARTHQUAKE

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## **How to Survive an Earthquake**

First produced by Melbourne Writers' Theatre/La Mama in August 2013

La Mama Courthouse, Carlton

Melbourne

**Written by:** Christine Croyden

**Directed by:** Glenda Linscott

**Performed by:**

Stephanie            Jessica Gerger

Jane                 Sarah Plummer

Jake                 Andrew Robb

Soldier              Wayne Pearn

Mum                 Jessica Gerger and Sarah Plummer

Red Cross Dr.      Andrew Robb

**Sound Design and Original Music and Lyrics:**

By Dominic Buckham and Millie O' Sullivan

'In my head' M. O' Sullivan

'Wash me away' M. O' Sullivan

'I feel no pain' D. Buckham

**Set Design**            Emily Collett

**Lighting Design**     Jason Bovaird

## Synopsis

*How to Survive an Earthquake* is a non-naturalistic drama that revolves around sisters, Steph and Jane. Steph is a UN peacekeeper and trained nurse whose work has taken her to many war zones and trouble spots. She suffers from PTSD and has most recently been on a mission in Haiti, following the 2010 earthquake. She returns home on the eve of her mother's funeral to her estranged sister, Jane.

Steph and Jane fell out twenty years ago after Jane gave birth to a stillborn baby. Jane is divorced and has cared for the mother until her death. The action moves seamlessly from earthquake-stricken Haiti to suburban Melbourne with first and third world politics forming a subtext to the sisters' different lived experiences. Through a series of revelations the play develops into a complex study of betrayal – not only of the genetic and metaphorical sisterhood, but also of its ideals and principles.

**'Mother Nature – who by the by, is an old woman with some bad habits.'**

**George Eliot 1848**

## How to Survive an Earthquake

### Characters:

**STEPH** Mid forties, unconventional, unmarried, a nurse she works for the UN and travels all over the world assisting with various programs **Context symbol: Third world countries.**

**JANE** Early forties, divorced **Context symbol: First world countries.**

**JAKE** Forties, Jane's ex-husband. He is a travel writer

**MUM** Played by each of the sisters using a symbolic ream of diaphanous fabric. She is around seventy-five **Context symbol: Mother Nature.**

**SOLDIER** Forties, **Context symbol: Coloniser**

**RED CROSS DR** played by Jake

**SETTING** A living room/ a disaster zone – Haiti following 2010 earthquake.

**PROPS** Reams of diaphanous fabric used to symbolise the mother character, earthquake zone props, domestic props--books, bedding etc

**SFX** Thudding helicopter blades, overhead or landing. Sirens. A foetal heartbeat (Doppler). Dripping tap etc

## **SCENE ONE**

2010

*Soundtrack of Haitian disaster zone intercut with CNN news coverage as people enter the theatre. JANE is seated in centre of disaster zone and dimly lit with her domestic overlay. Soundtrack is interspersed with original music by The Berlin Sirens. It gradually becomes more chaotic until lights go down and there is the sound (and lights) of a jet landing. STEPH has landed in Melbourne she walks through audience into the set.*

*SFX rough, jarring sound on touch down then a busy airport.*

*V/O 'Flight BA87 from Port au Prince via Brisbane has now landed at Gate 5, would passengers please collect their baggage from carousel 2. Any unattended baggage will be.'*

*Lights up on STEPH.*

STEPH      *At Tullamarine I always feel empty... disconnected. After hours on a plane looking at the world from a wide angle — I land, and want to bring everything into close up...take it all in and fill myself, somehow feel myself...but it never happens.*

*SFX of a distressed crowd*

*As soon as I'm on the ground and lining up to go through customs... I'm back in a disaster zone; putting people into*

sections as to who is hurt the most... there're no bandages, no  
tourniquets. I'm on my own.

*She sees a child stuck amid the rubble puts down her hand luggage and  
rushes towards imagined child.*

*SFX a child crying in the distance*

Omigod!

*SFX of crowd pushing and shoving*

*She climbs over rubble and pushes through the crowd.*

Let me through. I'm a nurse. Yes, move please... Oui!

*She kneels down and applies pressure to the child's bleeding wound.*

I'm trying to stop the bleeding with my bare hands... the crowd  
is shouting and screaming and I can't understand what anyone's  
saying. They want me to pull her out.

*SFX An increasingly distressed crowd*

*(To a person nearby) Non, ce n'est pas possible! I need  
backup...it's too dangerous.*

All around jagged blocks of concrete... huge dice that tumbled  
forward, twisting metal, breaking glass and crushing bodies  
...piles and piles of bodies...bloating and blistering in the heat.  
Bodies...with hollow organs ruptured...bones broken...so many  
dead.

*(She calls)* I need water! *(Addressing different people in the crowd)* Does anyone have water...un caraf d'eau? Je vous en prie Madame...d'eau pour l'enfant!

SFX CNN news montage runs underneath dialogue:

*Rescue workers struggled to clear rubble and bodies from the streets of Haiti's "flattened" capital, where a government official said the death toll from Tuesday's 7.0-magnitude earthquake may exceed 100,000.*

I'm pressing so hard blood is seeping from between my fingers...if they don't get here soon this child will ...I've got to get her out...stones falling...the earth opening, a phantom swamp welling up beneath me.

*STEPH tries to pull the little girl out of the rubble.*

*SFX siren from an ambulance*

*PAUSE*

*Lights change. She gets up slowly and looks around disorientated*

I'm never where I am and I'm never on my way anywhere in real time. *(She feels her arms)* Always my body doing its best without me... ...rewind ...replay...stop.

*PAUSE*

If only I could find the right angle ...the right perspective.

People race to claim their bags and between the cases and packs I see dusty, black limbs wedged into earth and rubble ...partly swallowed and covered in flies ... going around and around in front of me.

*She lifts her bag off the baggage carousel and walks outside to begin to look for a taxi.*

*SFX traffic and shouting*

Outside looking for a taxi ... I'm flagging down cars in a street to take people to hospital...carrying them across the road... faint with the tropical heat.

*(To herself)* Boil your water, don't dehydrate... take your malaria pills.

The Base is safe. The Base is safe.

*SFX CNN news montage:*

*Some aid groups with offices in Port-au-Prince were also busy searching for their own dead and missing. Sixteen members of the United Nations peacekeeping force in Haiti were killed and as many as 100 other United Nations employees were missing after the collapse of the mission's headquarters in the Christopher Hotel in the hills above Port-au-Prince.*

*V/O            This is our final call for flight 415 to Canberra. Passengers please proceed to Gate 17*

*She stops abruptly and looks around realises she is in the airport and is jolted back to present.*

STEPH        Once I'm through the electric glass doors my hands start to  
shake.

*STEPH sees her sister JANE in the distance.*

JANE        Steph I'm over here!

STEPH        She's waiting for me. I feel a tremor. I'm stuck here... and  
they're still pulling people out from under the rubble... she's  
been grocery shopping at Coles. How can I do this? What can I  
say to her?

*BEAT*

The only thing keeps her awake at night is worrying about  
whether the neighbour's dog has shat on her nature strip ...or  
whether she remembered to deadlock her front door.

How I'd love to put a spigot in her pathetic privileged anxieties!  
Show her life...let her see what bombs and bullets and rocket  
attacks do to people. Witness half what I've seen... feel half of  
what I've (*felt*)...what I'm up against every day.

SFX CNN

*People were digging through the rubble with their hands on Wednesday,  
looking for survivors or bodies, CNN's Anderson Cooper reported from Port-*

*au-Prince. Other correspondents in Port-au-Prince and its suburbs reported whole blocks of collapsed buildings, with dozens of bodies piled in the streets.*

*STEPH looks at her sister.*

Standing there as if she has the weight of the world on her shoulders... probably stressing about how much the car parking will cost.

*Jane begins to wave frantically.*

JANE                    Steph...I'm over here...can't you see me...HERE I'm, across the road!

STEPH                  She's never met a burned out French soldier...or heard a woman scream for her child, never had a policeman hold her back and say, 'Just stay here... you've done your job now. Just stay here.'

JANE                    What on earth are you doing?  
  
Don't stand there like a stunned mullet. Hurry up...I can't come to you...I'm in a loading zone!

*STEPH takes a deep breath, picks up her bags and walks towards her sister.*

**SCENE TWO**

*Both sisters on stage, they are facing each other in the living room of their family home.*

JANE                    When I saw you I wasn't sure...your hair is...

STEPH                  Darker.

JANE                    Yes, and the way you've had it cut

STEPH                  Looks like yours?

JANE                    It does

STEPH                  You know what they say about copying.

JANE                    Remind me

STEPH                  The highest form of flattery.

JANE                    Really. I haven't seen a hairdresser in over a year

STEPH                  You can't tell.

*PAUSE*

STEPH                  So...is everything ready to go for tomorrow?

JANE                    Still a bit to sort out

STEPH                  What can I do to help?

JANE                    Nothing.

STEPH                  Must be something?

JANE                    /It's all under control

*STEPH takes off her jacket*

JANE                    What are those bruises on your arms?

STEPH                  Nothing. I had a fall

*PAUSE*

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