

Beverley Simons / PREPARING

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All inquiries concerning production of the play, in whole or in part, in any medium or by any group, amateur or professional, should be directed to the author at 5202 Marine Drive, West Vancouver, B.C.

The actress is wearing black tights and a bra under a loose, white ankle-length smock. The smock is held up by two removable sashes, perhaps lace or crocheted. At the opening they're worn cummerband style, flattening the actress' breasts. The first impression is of a short private school uniform.

Through the monologue Jeannie adjusts the smock, using the sashes as belt, veil, shawl, winding sheet.

A carved box sits on a make-up table. The box contains a mirror on a stand or with a handle, cosmetics, a blonde or platinum wig, dark glasses, an oversize, ornate perfume flask (used later as a whiskey flask), a small hat, and a plaque. Instead of a box Jeannie could drag an old trunk into place which would serve as a seat and/or table, as well as a storage unit. An additional chair and a stool may be used.

"Preparing" begins with the brash rebellion of early teens. As Jeannie talks, adjusts her dress, hair and make-up, she matures. But always present is her growing sexual power, her fear, her quick ironic mind, her candour. The monologue ends with the brash indifference of old age.

"Preparing" belongs to the actress. It could be done anywhere without special lighting: she could simply enter at the beginning and leave when she's finished, carrying the box under her arm. The shifts of emotion and time happen through her. If lights are used, when they rise, Jeannie is already there: no blackouts until the end.

Age transitions are not detailed in the script. They occur between and often within lines. i.e. Jeannie first appears, pigtailed, a fourteen year old schoolgirl. By page 18, when she describes other schoolchildren filing into church, she's nineteen.

It's important that the actress take her time in the opening sections, allowing the audience to adjust to her and to her transitions. If she enjoys herself the audience should find "Preparing" funny as well as satirical and painful.

The first object Jeannie takes from her box is a mirror. She observes herself in it without satisfaction.

JEANNIE: Do you know what I say? I say fuck 'em all. I didn't ask to get into this. But then neither did they, poor bastards. Duty, obligations, and all that shit.

I'm always having to get ready for something. As far back as I can remember. Even before. My mother says I had to be bribed to come out of her. I was three weeks overdue. But the way I figure it she must have made it so unpleasant I had no choice. Well, imagine, trapped in a leaking tube that closes in on you, closes and squeezes and pushes. Hasn't changed much. Even my conception. I was a last minute twitch before a snore on a rainy night. Which they both lived to regret.

Just once, I wish I could step outside of time where just once I could prepare myself, without being rushed, for . . .

She smiles.

. . . nothing, or . . . maybe something . . . important . . . when I find out what that is.

When I was a kid I used to go to bed in my clothes so I wouldn't be late for school. D'you know, I swear those sidewalks sprouted under my feet while I ran? Watered by me, of course. Peed my pants regular, every morning, trying to beat that nine o'clock bell. My parents are taking me out for dinner to one of those new restaurants. You know? Where the waiters pretend to speak French and my parents will pretend to understand. My father's accent would make you split. There's not a restaurant we've been to he hasn't sent back the first bottle of wine. Without even tasting it. From the "bouquet," he says.

Imitating her father, Jeannie sniffs from an imaginary glass, moving it back and forth under her nostrils. Then imitating her father's French accent:

"Cette bouteille de vin n'est pas assez bien." Shit! My father can no more tell the difference between one wine and another than my mother can identify French perfumes. But they're both authorities on everything.

Imitating her mother, a saccharine, over-articulated voice.

"Would you please wear makeup tonight, darling? I can't stand to see you looking so pale." Right.

Jeannie applies heavy blobs of makeup to her forehead, chin, nose, spots of red on her cheeks, a cupid's bow mouth.

How's that, mother?

With the palms of her hands, like a dog digging in earth, she pushes her hair forward until most of her face is covered.

Still, I'm looking forward to seeing them. I get scared sometimes. Living alone. When I stripped, unrehearsed, introducing a Shakespearean bump and grind iambic-pentameter-Lady Macbeth-in-the-buff . . .

As in a strip, Jeannie has rhythmically unwound her sash, which she uses erotically.

our professor had announced innovation; I innovated . . . opening night. "There," I thought, "that's the end of family." But it seems the old umbilical cord is intact.

Using sash.

I'll break it yet, even if I bleed to death. I've done everything I know they disapprove of. I've had more men than my mother has fantasies. The only thing that gets me through it sometimes is imagining her enraged face. And my father's.

I'll refuse to go into the restaurant tonight unless I'm on the arm of a wino. "Mother. Father. I'd like you to meet my fiancé. He may be 55 and smell, but he loves me." They'd paper him out, the way they always do. They wouldn't even see him. Who was it? Samson? I'd cheerfully pull this stinking mess down on all of us and weep for no one, not even the mice.

Jeannie hears something.

What's that? Don't come in! Oh, please, not them! Not yet! Look at me. I'm already turning into a guilty, apologetic, little girl. Why does their love make me so full of hate?

As she smooths on her makeup her face is becoming that of a young woman.

Last week I watched a line of six year olds filing into church in private school uniforms, singing Christmas carols . . . They don't have a chance . . .

She begins to style her hair in an upsweep.

Still, I'm not an organized revolutionary. I hate packs of any kind. I've seen them. I intend to shape my experience myself. No rituals, no history. I spring, fully developed, out of my own forehead.

She pulls the white smock over her head again. No longer a uniform. It becomes a wedding gown.

Then why are you preparing? Because you're a coward, Jeannie.

Hearing a noise.

What's that? You can leave. It's not too late. You'll never be able to stick it, one man for a lifetime. You'll be bored after the first month. Oh God, is he thinking the same? It's the only way to go into it, with a mature agreement to separate if one or the other . . .

Putting a belt over the dress.

White! Look at you.

Half laughing, changing to fear.

His eyes close up on me all the time. I'll belong to him. I never want to hold on to any one or to any thing . . .

As though at her wedding.

All those faces . . .

She puts the ring on her finger, then suddenly grasps at an invisible hand touching her dress.

Hands off, Mrs. Osgoode. It's Irish muslin, twenty dollars a yard. No, I am not pregnant and I hope you choke on the hors d'oeu . . .

Aware of the changes in her body: first the delight of early marriage; then her belt rises as her belly expands with pregnancy; she's interrupted by a pain.

They're starting. There it is again. It's come at a ridiculous time. I stink of spaghetti.

She sprays herself with perfume.

Poor Doctor. I'm sorry, but I haven't had a chance to . . . Mummy! It hurts . . . hold my hand. I'm scared. I'm not ready. I can't . . . make it . . . stop, you see. That's what's so . . . unreasonable.

She pulls the belt off. The maternity dress has become a hospital robe. Jeannie lies on the floor with her feet up on the stool as though in delivery room stirrups.

Here it comes. I have to push. HELP ME!

Jeannie is getting ready for bed. At home now, her children are asleep. Her terror fantasies have begun.

What's that? Isn't it stupid? I keep hearing noises. Since having the babies I can't help myself, I'm afraid to close my eyes. I imagine terrible things. You read in the newspaper about that man who just walked in and shot a whole family, while they were sleeping? For no reason. He went into a house, they were sleeping, and . . . What's that?

Afraid to turn her head, controlled by her imagination.

I can see him. He's wearing a brown suit, neatly pressed, and a hat, like a businessman. He has a gentle, sad face. At the top of the stairs now, behind me, but he doesn't come into my room. He's turning right, to where the children . . .

Her second fantasy of terror. "They" are society's threat, the ones with little to "hold onto" — the revolutionaries, the minorities.

Then there are the fires. I believe in the right of the individual, I always have, the need for society to change. By violence, if necessary . . . They sit in a circle in our backyard, laughing, smoking, singing songs. I avoid them. I pretend they aren't there. But I put tea and sandwiches out on the back porch. They send a representative. My husband is stubborn. He refuses to let them move in, so they . . .

Growing terror.

It's just a house. Let them have our house. But what about my babies? Stop it! *A scream.*

After a nervous breakdown, Jeannie is preparing for the neighbours.

Jeannie, stop it! It's only a dinner party after all. They won't notice you're grey. The colour has gone out of *your* eyes, not theirs. Lots of makeup, that's it. Maybe they won't notice it's a mask floating over a void.

Jeannie continues to put on makeup. Her face is beginning to show age and take on the quality of a mask, but her voice is painfully exposed, as a person just over illness, who has not yet had time to apply the social layers.

He's been so sympathetic. I can't really be angry with him. But his hands have become like the hands of my doctor. I don't want to be soothed. Not always. I want . . .

Her passion surfaces briefly.

I frighten him. No. No. He's been very kind. Like to a child, kind. His kindness chokes me. In the centre of it, like a stone in the centre of a delicate teacake, is his contempt.

She is changing her hairstyle.

How shall I make myself appear? What role shall I play today, when one half of me that's already begun to wither is about to be lopped off.

Jeannie takes off her wedding ring and drops it into the box. Divorce.

What face shall I put on?

From the box she lifts the platinum or blonde wig and pulls it over her hair. Then she takes out her dark coloured glasses which she plays with and occasionally uses. There is a new, sophisticated hardness in Jeannie. She has aged, yet her sexual power and her awareness of it has increased. Her voice has deepened. She is a queen bee who attracts but gives no honey.

Not that I mind rushing. Not for my youngest. He's always been the sweet fool of the family. But I do mind being reminded of my age in such an obvious way. Can you believe this is the last university graduation I'll have to go to? Don't worry, I don't intend to weep. The face won't alter to embarrass them. I've learned not to pour too much enthusiasm into such occasions. It makes the children nervous. They've had their spontaneity knocked out of them by Doctor Freud. Still, I can't complain. I've done alright. My son-in-law "manages" my business affairs . . . with the same restraint I use on my affections. We understand each other. My daughter jealous? Perhaps. But she can't afford to show it. At last I've found the balance I've been looking for between being too involved and not involved at all. It turns out that I am the businessman in the family. Why? Because I treat it as a game, which it is. I never did take property seriously, human or otherwise. Keep it fluid. Keep it moving. You only get burnt if you try to hold on. Did I tell you the alimony payments were reversed? I've never enjoyed signing cheques quite so much since. But he'd changed. Pity I couldn't have

mailed them through a time slot to that "kind" man who left me for my "own good." I was the only one at his funeral, which I paid for, of course. The children stayed away for political reasons. He was a bastard, but he'd had a part in giving them life. I'll remember their absence. He looked shrunken. I kissed him. "Get up and run now." That's what I said to him. Then *I* left.

Jeannie puts on lighter lipstick and applies makeup to the lines in her face as though to erase them, but in fact the actress is accenting her age. She pulls out the perfume flask which now contains whiskey, and a bottle of pills. She shakes several pills into her hand and washes them down.

Would you believe it? Me? Kept awake at night about how to help them survive? I'm on the phone endlessly. When I'm not playing tiddlywinks with their books, I'm playing mamma to those quarrelling fools who think they run our local institutions.

She checks her watch and puts on a small hat.

God knows what decisions they'll reach if I'm late. It's Symphony this afternoon. Yes, I'm on the boards of the Art Gallery, The Theatre, the Symphony, the Opera, as well as countless societies for human reform. Don't ask me what their names are, they change all the time. The latest, what's it called . . . the League for the Reinstatement of Capital Punishment. I'm a liberal, small l, always have been, but those people *want* to be terrorized a little. And likeminded persons must be deterred. It's for their own good. Not that we ever get any gratitude. We're obliged to lead. It's our tedious responsibility. And if we make some small profit out of it, well, why not? I'm not popular, but then again I never have been. What I say is . . . if you want to be a fat cat, grow claws. I've been attacked publicly. Oh yes, because I believe in running the Arts like a business. Well, they are, aren't they?

Putting on long, white gloves.

I was in one step ahead of the rest of them, my only sin; the first to recognize the value of old buildings to the community. My buildings now. I've opened an art gallery in one of them. It was sold to me by an old fool on the condition I use it for theatre; but there's no money in that. So many dollars per square foot, that's what I charge the artists rent. Depends on the size of the picture; depends the cost. Miniatures may be back this season. I promote economy in the Arts.

Jeannie takes a small can from the box and sprays her face as if to fix her makeup, but the spray is a white powder. She has become an old woman. Her voice is thin and clear, her body tough and straight. She ages as she speaks.

If they sing Happy Birthday to me I shall tell them all to shove it. I've become a fad among my grandchildren, increasingly so as I become less interested in them. I've published how I intend to leave my money so I wonder why they keep bothering me. Hoping I'll change my mind, I suppose.

She sings.

Happy birthday to me . . . Hmmmmmmmmm. Could you ever have been floating around inside another woman's belly? Your nose is running again, Jeannie, and if you were honest . . .

She wipes her nose.

you'd admit you've just peed your pants. It seems that our lives are tied to liquid. We're born in liquid, we become fertile with liquid, we conceive in liquid, we age seeping liquid, and we die when the liquid leaves us. I drop scales now like an old fish.

From the bottom of the cosmetic box Jeannie pulls out something the audience is not yet able to see. It's a plaque.

They're naming a new theatre after me. How do you like that? When the lizards take over the world again, they'll crawl over the bones of my building. The local art institutions managed to join together, for once in their history, to give me this.

Now she holds up the plaque. Jeannie is unmoved.

Predictable, isn't it?

She leans the plaque against the box.

It makes no difference to me what they do. Fuck 'em all. One of the children hanged himself, the youngest one, the sweet fool of the family. The others are all very successful, even happy. Or so they say. Preparing for the future. Probably at home now making lists of questions for me. My advice. I only allow them in every three months. Keeps them eager, thinking I don't want them. And I don't. Fuck 'em. All. I've never cared for establishments or institutions, but it seems I've spawned one. Hurry, old woman, you're always late. For what?

Jeannie goes to the mirror and looks into it. She places the mirror face down back into the box. Slowly Jeannie walks stage centre. With a simple gesture she covers her face and head with the shawl. The dress, hanging loose, has become a shroud. If a spot is used, the light travels from Jeannie to the plaque which rests like a headstone against the box. Her preparation is over.