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Dramatic Publishing

SELKIE: Between Land and Sea

By
LAURIE BROOKS



Dramatic Publishing

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Selkie: Between Land and Sea was commissioned and premiered in 2005 at the Coterie Theatre, Kansas City, Mo., producing artistic director Jeff Church, executive director Joette Pelster.

The Company

Granpda Kip Niven
Elin Jean Heidi Stubblefield
Tam Doogin Brown
Margaret Vanessa Severo
Duncan Charles Fugate
The Red Magdelene Vick
The Black Akilah Knight

Artistic and Production Company

Director Scot Copeland
Choreographer Jennifer Martin
Scenic and Properties Designer Russell Ferguson
Costume Designer Georgianna Londre
Lighting Designer Art Kent
Composer/Sound Designer Paul Binkley
Production Stage Manager Amy M. Abels Owen
Stage Manager Carol Branson
Technical Director, Master Carpenter Brian Busch
Scenic and Costume Design Intern Laura Sirkin
Production Assistant/House Manager Abigail MacLaren

Special thanks: Kansas City Art Institute and David Kiehl

SELKIE GIRL

CHARACTERS

ELIN JEAN	16
GRANDPA	mid-50s
MARGARET	mid-30s
THE RED	a selkie
THE BLACK	a selkie
TAM	16, a traveler
DUNCAN	late 30s
THE ARL TELLER	an ancient selkie (played by MARGARET)

SETTING

The play is set on the wild, rocky coast of the Orkney Islands, north of Scotland, in the mid-nineteenth century. On stage there is a fiddle, a rocking chair, a hidden selkie pelt, and rocks that lead to the sea. During the underwater sequences the selkie clan may be portrayed imaginatively with sound and lights or the scenes may be directed toward the audiences as if the selkies are among them.

Song: “Margaret’s Lullaby.”

Music by Paul Carrol Binkley, lyrics by Laurie Brooks.

(See page 60 for melody lines.)

Optional incidental music on CD is available directly from the composer at paulcarrolbinkley.com.

GLOSSARY

aisins – the eaves of a house, especially the angular space between the top of the sidewall and the roof

baffin – a severe drenching or dunking

bairn – a child

bannock – a round, flat griddle-baked bread made of oat or barley meal

bawkie man – boogie man

bonny – pretty

bulder – to talk in a nonsensical manner, to bluster

byre – barn

croft – a farm by the sea

darn – to conceal or hide

foreswifted – in a hurry

foy – celebration, party, feast

gully – a knife used for cutting fish

hover – to pause, wait a while

Hoy – one of the Orkney Islands

ill-bisted – testy, cross

Kirkwall – the largest town in Orkney

limpets – a kind of shellfish

Midsummer – June 21st, the first day of summer

peat – compressed earth used for fuel

Peedie Buddo – a term of endearment

selkie – the common or gray seal

selkie folk – selkies said to take human form on the land

silted – to hunger excessively, to want

skelly – adjective that describes the sky when it is covered
in bright, glittering clouds

skerrie – a rock covered by the sea at high tide

skirly-wheeter – a bit of skirt, an attractive girl

St. Magnus – the patron saint of Orkney

stunder – a whim or impulsive decision

Tam – Orkadian pronunciation for Tom

voe – a protected inlet

All definitions from *The Orkney Norn: A Dictionary, History and Etymology of the Orcadian Dialect* by Hugh Marwick, The Oxford University Press, 1929.

ACT I: ON LAND

Fiddle music.

GRANDPA plays his fiddle, then ends the tune. Throughout the play, GRANDPA watches, inside and outside the story as it unfolds.

GRANDPA. There was always the sound of the wind... (*sound of the wind*) and the sound of the sea... (*sound of the sea*) aye, and the selkies singing (*sound of the selkies*). And on cold nights, gathered round the peat fire there were stories. Have you heard them, the stories of the selkies, seals that change into beautiful women on Midsummer's Eve? Perhaps you have heard them and thought, what a bulder of nonsense. But know this, there are mysteries in this life that we can only dream of. The stories of the selkies are true. How do I know? Because my granddaughter was Elin Jean, the selkie girl.

(Sounds of the selkies moaning, the wind, the sea blend into sounds of ridicule, taunting, cruel laughter. ELIN JEAN enters, running.)

VOICES (*OFFSTAGE*).

I warn you once I warn you twice.

I warn you out the glowrie's eyes.
Hie thee lass that swims in the
sea. Stay away from thee and me.
Misshapen, evil, misbegot, go back
to the sea where you belong.

ELIN JEAN. Please, stop.

VOICES (*OFFSTAGE*).

Selkie girl, selkie girl, where'd
you come from, selkie girl?
Show us your hands. Show us the
claws. Show us the horns that grow
on your palms.

(*Laughter. TAM enters.*)

TAM. Leave off now, lads. She's protecting her own.
That's only natural.

ELIN JEAN. Get away from me.

TAM. You've no right to be mucking about in our busi-
ness, selkie girl. You made me lose a skin.

ELIN JEAN. Good. I hope you never kill another selkie as
long as you live. How can you be so cruel?

TAM. Cruel, is it?

ELIN JEAN. Aye, and heartless.

TAM. Heartless?

ELIN JEAN. Aye, and savage.

TAM. All the Orkney folk hunt the seals.

ELIN JEAN. It's wrong to kill defenseless creatures. I
don't care what you say.

TAM. I say the selkies are greedy. If we didn't kill the young ones, they'd eat all the fish. And with no herring we'd starve.

ELIN JEAN. We could eat bread and vegetables. We are the greedy ones, killing the selkies to have the herring for ourselves.

TAM. Greedy, is it?

ELIN JEAN. Don't enough selkies die in the cull? A hundred pups murdered in a single day. Why don't you call it what it is—the kill? *(She turns to run and falls.)*

TAM. Be careful on these rocks, selkie girl. I've fallen myself many a time and have the scars to prove it.

ELIN JEAN. Leave me alone.

TAM. If you like. For now. Safe home, bonny girl.

(TAM exits. ELIN JEAN looks after him.)

LIGHTS CHANGE.

GRANDPA plays the fiddle as MARGARET enters. ELIN JEAN rises from the sea and dances to GRANDPA's music—a wild dance of her own design that is free, elemental, original. As GRANDPA ends the tune, ELIN JEAN leaps into the air and lands gracefully on the ground.)

GRANDPA. Well done. There's none can dance the music to life as yourself.

MARGARET. Aye. She's the gift in her, our Elin Jean.

ELIN JEAN. What does it matter if no one sees it?

GRANDPA. Perhaps some day. Just you wait.

ELIN JEAN. Waiting for this, waiting for that. When will all the waiting be over?

GRANDPA. When you're stone dead, buried in the ground
and cold as the fishes.

MARGARET. Then you're wishing you had the waiting to
do.

ELIN JEAN. Sometimes I have the strangest feeling, walk-
ing through the days sleeping-like.

MARGARET. One day you'll wake up and everything will
be different.

GRANDPA. Worse is more likely.

MARGARET. And where were you this morning, Elin
Jean? Your fither was looking for you.

ELIN JEAN. Nowhere.

GRANDPA. You're a mite damp for nowhere.

MARGARET. With a fine nest for the birds in your hair.

ELIN JEAN. It goes all far-flung-like when I'm dancing
wild.

(MUSIC.

MARGARET combs ELIN JEAN's hair and sings.)

SONG: "MARGARET'S LULLABY"

(see end of script for melody)

MARGARET.

VOICES WHISPER WITH THE WIND,
OF PLACES YOU HAVE NEVER BEEN.
SINGING SONGS OF EBB AND FLOW,
OF PLACES YOU WILL SOMEDAY KNOW.
SELKIES GLIDING IN BETWEEN,
TIDES THAT PLAY UPON THE SEA.
CALLING YOU TO COME ALONG
BECKON YOU TO SING THE SONG.

(ELIN JEAN sings along.)

ELIN JEAN & MARGARET.

LISTEN, LISTEN TO THE SEA;
THERE IS ANOTHER LAND FAR BENEATH.
AWAKEN, AWAKEN FROM YOUR SLEEP;
TO THE MYSTERIES WAY DOWN BELOW.

(End song.)

MARGARET. Eyes green as the sea and thoughts twice as deep.

GRANDPA. A brown-haired lass there's none so fair,
neither golden nor black locks can compare.

ELIN JEAN. Don't be saying that. You're only feeling
sorry for me.

GRANDPA. I like rhyming is all. I meant you no disrespect.

Eetam peetam punkin pie,
popa larum jinkum jie.

ELIN JEAN. Grandpa! Day after day I got to hear the others
saying hateful rhymes about me.

GRANDPA. Don't pay attention to the others. It's the inside
of you that matters.

ELIN JEAN. No one cares about my inside. They're too
busy gawking at the outside.

MARGARET. People's afraid of what's different. Fearing
what they don't understand.

ELIN JEAN. None of the others wants to be with me.

GRANDPA. I do.

ELIN JEAN. But you're family. You've got no choice but
to be with me. It's the others. I wish the others liked me.

GRANDPA. The lads and lasses'll take notice of your dancing this night at the Foy.

ELIN JEAN. Grandpa! I can go? I can go to the Foy?

GRANDPA. You're fifteen now, are you not? It'll be a celebration like none before. The torches of heather lighting up the beach, the dancing and singing until dawn. And one young lass, proclaimed by all as the finest dancer in Orkney. I can see the looks on them. Eyes wide as saucers with the surprise. And Missus Muir saying, Look! Have you ever seen the like of the dancing? More wondrous than the skelly sun hitting the cliffs of Hoy. Who is she, that bonny lass? And me, saying proud-like, who else? That's my granddaughter, Elin Jean.

ELIN JEAN. Oh, Grandpa, will the others like the dancing?

GRANDPA. As sure as you're standing there.

ELIN JEAN (*whirls about*). I'll dance! I'll dance at the Foy!

(*Enter DUNCAN.*)

DUNCAN. What's this?

ELIN JEAN (*freezes*). Nothing, Fither.

DUNCAN. Hover you now, lass. I'd be having a word with you. (*He caresses MARGARET.*) Pale as the winter sky and twice as lovely.

MARGARET. A lie is harder to tell in the long haul than the cruelest truth.

GRANDPA. The truth! There's a slippery fish. Just when you've caught it up, it slides away from you.

(During the following, ELIN JEAN tries to sneak away.)

DUNCAN. I only know what my eyes tell me. And my heart. You're bonny as the first time I laid eyes on you. A warm fire, a good stew, and yourself. Altogether what this crofter needs. Working each day I'm only waiting for evening to be home with you...and Jean. *(He sees ELIN JEAN escaping.)* Jean! Come here, lass. James Leslie saw you today swimming out beyond the voe. I've told you and told you. Even the finest swimmer in Orkney must respect the tides. They can change in a peedie minute and pull the strongest swimmer down into the blackness. Only a fool attempts the sudden tides beyond. Is drowning what you're after?

ELIN JEAN. I know the tides.

DUNCAN. And you know the price the sea demands from those who take their living from it. The sea will give up its treasure for the table, seaweed for the garden and seal oil to light the cruisie lamps, but she will take her reward.

GRANDPA. Duncan, enough.

DUNCAN. It is not enough. Do you wait for the day when you find her body washed up on the shore, blue and white with death? Or worse, never found for proper burial? Eaten alive by the fishes and the trows? Answer me, Jean, why do you swim out beyond the voe?

ELIN JEAN. Something pulls me down to the beach and into the sea.

DUNCAN. I'll not stand for it. I'll not have you risking your life when the fog rolls in and you cannot see beyond your nose. None of the others would dare swim in

these waters. You must leave your childish play behind for your own safety.

ELIN JEAN. I had to swim out beyond the skerry.

DUNCAN. Had to? What were you thinking, lass? That's near a mile out to sea.

MARGARET. The selkies were calling her. The Red and The Black.

ELIN JEAN. They came back, Mither, just as you said they would.

MARGARET. Aye, at Midsummer's tide.

ELIN JEAN. One red as the sun going down, the other dark as peat. Noses lifted straight out of the water like they was looking for something.

DUNCAN. There are hundreds of selkies in the voe this time of year, alike as one another.

ELIN JEAN. I knowed them straight away and no mistake. I saw their eyes up close. Human eyes, they were. They were crying.

DUNCAN. Selkies crying. What a bulder of nonsense. It was only sea water dripping.

MARGARET. Selkies cry as humans do and for the same reasons. Longing for what's been lost and cannot be found.

(SILENCE.)

DUNCAN. What's to be done with you, Jean?

ELIN JEAN. I try to stay on land, Fither, but then I'm aching for the feel of the water and the pull of the waves.

DUNCAN. Listen well, lass. I'll stop this, if I have to lock you away. Do you hear me?

ELIN JEAN. Don't lock me away, Fither. Please, don't lock me away. (*She takes hold of DUNCAN's shirt. He sees her hands. She hides them.*) It was the Midsummer sun and the calm of the water fooled me. I'll not be forgetting again.

DUNCAN. Show me your hands.

MARGARET. Duncan, come have your ale. I've fresh baked bannock. You must be hungry.

GRANDPA. Aye. I'm thirsty as a land-locked fisherman. All the world looks brighter with a full stomach and a pint.

DUNCAN. I'll not be dissuaded. I'm waiting, lass. (*Pause.*) Give them to me! (*ELIN JEAN reveals her hands.*) Webbed. They've grown webbed again. (*He takes his gully knife from his belt and sharpens it. The knife on the strop makes a shushing noise that mingles with the sound of the selkies keening.*)

MARGARET. It's no good to cut them.

GRANDPA. Leave her hands alone. There's naught to be done for it.

MARGARET. Aye. They'll only grow back like always.

ELIN JEAN. It doesn't hurt too much, Mither. (*She bravely holds out her hands.*)

GRANDPA. That pony'll be wanting to be fed.

MARGARET. Don't run from it, Pa. There's those here who need your help.

GRANDPA. Don't cut her, man. You cannot change what nature has meant to be.

MARGARET. Even if you cut her hands clean off she'll never be like the others.

DUNCAN. Who will she be like then? She's fifteen now, time to think of making a good marriage to a crofter

with land, home and hearth. She'll need more than a dowry to fetch a husband.

MARGARET. Let the future be taking care of itself.

DUNCAN. You'd have me do nothing? I cannot bear to hear the others laugh and make sport of her. I will not stand idle, seeing her married to some tinker like that dirty Tam McCodrun. Not even a sturdy tub for washing or a strip of land to keep his family fed. Is that what you'd be wanting for our Elin Jean?

MARGARET. I've heard tell of one who lost his reason for love, of a crofter who took a stunder to love a lass with naught but herself to offer. And that was enough.

(SILENCE.)

ELIN JEAN. Cut them, Fither. I want to be like the others.

DUNCAN. That's a good lass. Hold your hand steady. Steady now.

ELIN JEAN. Cut them!

MARGARET *(pulls away DUNCAN's hand)*. No! Cutting her hands will not keep her from the sea. You cannot shape her into your dreams of what's to come or cut her to fit you like a bit of cloth. Look at her. Can you not see she's bonny as she is?

DUNCAN. There, there, darling one. Don't cry. I cannot bear to see you cry. *(ELIN JEAN quietly picks up the knife and examines it.)* I'll not cut them. I'll not cut them.

ELIN JEAN. Then I'll cut them myself!

(ELIN JEAN slashes her hand. MARGARET screams. The selkies echo the sound of the screams.)