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Elsewhere in Elsinore

The Unseen Women of Hamlet

Tragedy by Caleen Sinnette Jennings
(in association with William Shakespeare)

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Elsewhere in Elsinore

The Unseen Women of Hamlet

Tragedy. By Caleen Sinnette Jennings (in association with William Shakespeare.) Cast: 17w. May be doubled to 14w. What are the women of Elsinore Castle doing while Hamlet plots revenge? *Elsewhere in Elsinore: The Unseen Women of Hamlet* is a play in verse which explores the lives and motives of Ophelia and Gertrude. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* takes on new dimensions as we meet the other women of Elsinore Castle: the ladies-in-waiting, seamstress, washerwomen, maids, as well as wives and girlfriends of the play's male characters. When Ophelia comes of age she stumbles upon a pagan ritual in the forest. She is shocked to discover the participants are the women who raised her: her nursemaid, cook, parlor maids and washerwomen. They urge Ophelia to heed the ghost of Lady Hilda, Ophelia's mother, who appears with compelling prophecies. Ophelia cannot see her mother's ghost and rejects the women's rituals as witchcraft. When her tutor, Gruen, tells Ophelia her mother's story, she vows to avenge her mother's death. In another part of the castle, Queen Gertrude very much sees the ghost of Lady Hilda and is shaken by her prophecies. She enlists the aid of her ladies-in-waiting (fiancées to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern). The murders of King Hamlet and Polonius force Ophelia and Gertrude to protect themselves from each other and from everyone else, while the peasant women of Elsinore labor hard to keep the castle intact. Ophelia's journey empowers, transforms and enlightens the women of Elsinore. *Area staging. Approximate running time: 90 minutes without intermission. Code: E51.*

Cover photo: Katzen Studio Theatre, Washington, D.C., featuring (l-r) Hillary Billings, Tina Steier, Amanda Scheirer, Anjali Bean, Taryn Olsen.
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ELSEWHERE IN ELSINORE

The Unseen Women of Hamlet

By

CALEEN SINNETTE JENNINGS



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(ELSEWHERE IN ELSINORE: The Unseen Women of Hamlet)

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This play is dedicated to

Nora Heflin and Joan Rike,
dear friends and reading buddies for 45 years

and to

Dr. Jeanne Addison Roberts,
esteemed Shakespeare scholar, teacher, mentor, friend.

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Elsewhere in Elsinore premiered at the Cyrus and Myrtle Katzen Arts Center, American University, Washington, D.C., April 2007.

Queen Gertrude Maggie Pangrazio
Lady Hilda Liz Ennis
Ophelia Shalia Sakona
Gruen Leah Riklin
Frieda Elise Berlohr
Liad Genika Simon
Elspeth Amanda Scheirer
Nardeth Tina Steier
Berthe Cassie Hannan
Jorgan Leeanna Rubin
Anatha Anjali Bean
Enon Meredyth Pederson
Dakin Hillary Billings
Tava Ezree Mualem
Livey Katie Lock
Dun Taryn Olsen (and Meghan Clark-Kevan)

Director Caleen Sinnette Jennings
Movement Specialist Joel Ruben Ganz
Costume Designer Barbara Tucker Parker
Stage Manager Aubrie Fennecken

Special thanks to: Antoinette Doherty, Cara Gabriel, Carl Jennings, Karl Kippola, Gail Humphries Mardirosian and Carl Menninger.

Elsewhere in Elsinore was performed on the stage of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C., June 2007. It was directed by Caleen Sinnette Jennings with the following:

Gertrude	Kimberly Schraf
Lady Hilda	Aakhu Tuah Nera Freeman
Ophelia.	Paige Hernandez
Gruen	Holly Twyford
Frieda	Deidra LaWan Starnes
Liad	Antoinette Doherty
Elspeth	Cam Magee
Nardeth.	Elisha Bartels
Berthe	Cynthia Rollins
Jorgan	Miyuki Williams
Anatha	Jessica Frances Dukes
Enon.	Amanda Thickenpenny
Dakin.	Maconnia Chesser
Tava.	Therese Allen
Dun	Caren Anton
Livey.	Thembi Duncan
Director	Caleen Sinnette Jennings
Stage Manager	Caroline Jane Angell

Special thanks to: Janet Alexander Griffin and Folger public programs staff, Jeremy Ehrlich and Folger education staff, Folger security staff, Garland Scott, Eric Grims, Kate Eastwood Norris, Dr. Jeanne Addison Roberts, Carl Jennings.

SET AND STAGING

The scenes should flow seamlessly without blackouts. In its original staging the set was comprised of a series of light-weight wooden pillars and cubes. Stood upright they created a Stonehenge-like forest. When lain down they could be reconfigured to represent the courtyard (women's wash tubs, a spinning wheel and cradle), Queen Gertrude's chamber (bed and dressing table), Ophelia's chamber (bed and desk) and the riverbank. The actors playing the peasant women can change the sets while Elspeth beats the drum and/or they chant at the end of the scene.

ACT I

Scene i

Friday, midnight. Forest outside the walls of Elsinore castle

(A chorus of 11 women enter whisper-chanting. They are barefoot and their faces are hidden by shawls. They carry offerings in bowls and baskets in their hands. One woman carries a folded white nightgown. ELSPETH [the PRIESTESS] beats a rustic drum and serves as a choral leader. The women move and chant in ritualistic ways. They put offerings on a rustic wooden altar.)

CHORUS. We gather, yet we gather, still we gather

DUN. Brought from bed and barn and briar

LIVEY. Still enshrouded by our sleep

ENON. Still unsettled by our dreams.

CHORUS. We gather, yet we gather, still we gather

ANATHA. With branches of the sacred forest wood

JORGAN. With baskets of the flowers of the lea

BERTHE. With cloth on which pure drops of blood are
spilt

DAKIN. This war with Norway robs us of our men.

TAVA. This war takes husbands, brothers, sons alike.

NARDETH. We huddle in the whisper-mist of night

BERGRUND. To pray for peace and beg their safe return.

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS.

Celestial Goddess, keeper of our souls
Protect our men and keep them safe from harm
Let Christians, pagans both live in accord
In balance 'twixt the goddess and Our Lord.

CHORUS.

We worship you. We sing this song of praise
Keep us protected in these frightful days.

(OPHELIA bursts in upon the ritual.)

OPHELIA. And what unholy gathering is here?

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS.

Lady Ophelia, pardon if our chant
Disrupted your sweet slumber, made you rise
Ungently and uncovered from your bed.

OPHELIA.

Why do you hide your visages from me?
What shameful acts are done with hidden eyes?
Your witchcraft is a vile and wicked thing.

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS. We are no witches, Mistress,
this we swear.

(OPHELIA points to the offerings on the altar.)

OPHELIA.

And are not these the very instruments
Of spells and curses?

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS.

My dear lady, no.
We make these offerings to goddess moon
In gratitude for our well being.

OPHELIA.

Yet
You know full well these pagan acts are marked
For punishment by order of the king.

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS.

It is no crime to chant unto the moon:
Celestial orb which guides the sailor's ships
And lights the weary soldier's pathway home.

(The CHORUS of women chant and move.)

CHORUS.

We celebrate the rising of the moon
And praise the loving spirit of her light.

(OPHELIA blocks their movement.)

OPHELIA.

Praise God the Father who rules o'er the world.
All other praise is naught but blasphemy.

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS.

We praise our Lord with holy reverence
And no less praise His blessings when we dance
In honor of our goddess and the moon.

OPHELIA.

Thou hast but one allegiance: to your God
The father of all realms both heavenly
And earthly. Hast forgot to bend thy knees
Unto thy loving God? He, who hath made
Thy wretched and unholy pagan selves?

(She indicates the cross on a chain around her neck.)

Hast forgot this bless'ed ornament?

(She investigates the items on the altar.)

Instead you bring the devil's playthings here
O fie, upon this evil.

(She unfolds a bloodstained white nightgown.)

And what's this?

My nightshift!

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS. Aye and tainted with your blood.

OPHELIA.

Unto my washerwomen I did give
This very garment, and with it my trust
That they would wash it clean and not betray
My shame.

(OPHELIA begins to back away, but the women encircle her.)

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS. But lady, you've no cause for shame.

OPHELIA.

'Tis plain you mean to use my garment here

To conjur spirits and to do me harm.
Who art thou, wicked traitors to our God?

(The women kneel.)

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS. We're none but sweet Ophelia's guardians.

CHORUS. Who kneel in dedication and in love.

OPHELIA.

I know thy voices, aye, I note thy sounds.
O how it pains me that thou are the ones
Who once did nurture me with gentle hands.

(OPHELIA goes around the circle. She recognizes each woman as she removes the shawls from each of their faces.)

OPHELIA.

'Tis you, sweet Berthe, nursed me and did sit
Beside me when the fever wracked my limbs.

BERTHE.

I gave you coloquintida, I did
Oft times when you had feasted overmuch.
Good lady, your health is my only joy.

OPHELIA.

O Jorgan, thou hast nourish'ed my bones.
From thy old pots I've supped a thousand times.

JORGAN. I've cooked that you might thrive, sweet lady mine.

OPHELIA (*indicates her clothing*).

Good Bergrund, here thy stitches and thy threads.
This very garment, Nardeth, thou hast sewn.

NARDETH & BERGRUND. O aye and may we live to sew them all.

OPHELIA. Dakin and Tava thou hast washed my clothes.

DAKIN & TAVA. Aye, Mistress, white and spotless as your soul.

OPHELIA.

O Enon, Anatha, you keep our hearth.
And thou, and thou, I do not know
By name, but sure thy faces I've oft seen.
Why blaspheme 'gainst our God with these foul deeds?

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS.

We practice rites most ancient and most dear.
These sacred acts pass sweet among us here.

OPHELIA.

As I'm a Christian maiden, I am proud
To give my life, such as it is, to God.
As I have had some learning in the books
Of many great and wise philosophers
I do renounce your rites as ignorance.
I want no hurly burly, no black arts
I want no mumble jumble and no chants.

Fie, women, this is why men curse us so
And chide us for our feeble-mindedness.
Throw off these silly superstitious ways
And be enlightened to the word of God,
And all the science written in our books.

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS.

We bless all knowledge, and we praise your God
By worshipping our goddess and her power.

OPHELIA.

I pray you now repent and thus be spared
King Hamlet's threat of fatal punishment.

(The PRIESTESS points to the bloodstains on OPHELIA's nightgown.)

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS. Fair lady, wherefore came these
roses here?

NARDETH. She does not know

BERGRUND. She does not understand.

BERTHE. O see the virgin tears stream from her eyes.

JORGAN. The goddess' own moonlit dewy pearls.

OPHELIA. A kind of dream doth shadow o'er my heart

CHORUS. O let us hear.

OPHELIA. I cannot speak.

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS.

You must!

What brought you here compels you tell us all.

(OPHELIA pauses, then begins tentatively.)

OPHELIA.

As I lay sleeping yesternight in bed
In tumult of a dream that wracked my brain,
A beauteous fair woman did appear.
With copper tresses and with eye so blue
Methought I saw the heavens in each orb.
Her skin so white it shimmered silver-like.
Her lips a precious ruby red in hue.
I did not know her but she stirred within
A sadness and a joy mysterious
That mingled on the edge of memory.

(The CHORUS of women sigh knowingly.)

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS. And did she speak to you?

OPHELIA. Oh, aye she did.

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS. What did she say?

OPHELIA.

'Twas strange, 'twas passing strange.
She sang a song and bid me sing along.
And when I said I did not know the tune
She sang alone and danced around my head.
She held a wineskin in her shimm'ring hands
And emptied all the wineskin on my shift
Which had been white but now was crimson stained.
When I awoke I found those very blots.
As if my dream had been reality.
I fell to pray upon my knees and weep
Convinced I'd had a visit in the night
From wicked handmaid of Beelzebub.

(The CHORUS of women laugh gently.)

OPHELIA *(cont'd)*.

This night your chanting roused me from my bed.
I followed these strange sounds which led me here.

CHORUS. We gather, so we gather, yet we gather

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS.

To sing our praises and to welcome you
Unto the mystic realms of womanhood.

JORGAN. This spirit in your dream brings joyful news.

BERTHE. She blesses you with sweet fertility.

DUN. This blood upon your nightshift hath revealed

LIVEY. Thou art a woman with all joys and pains

ANATHA. Our goddess doth bequeath to womankind.

ENON.

Ophelia, even better news is here.
The woman you have spoke to in your dream

DAKIN. Who you have painted for us with your words

TAVA. In likeness of her truer than you think

NARDETH. Is someone you have always yearned to know.

BERGRUND.

Now that you are a woman, she'll reveal
Herself and all you're meant to understand.

OPHELIA. And who is she?

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS.

The Lady Hilda, child.

The mother who gave loving birth to you.

OPHELIA. How speak you of my mother? She is gone.

JORGAN. Aye, gone in body, but her spirit walks.

BERTHE.

And with her visitation and this blood

She has the proof of your fertility.

ELSPETH as PRIESTESS (*indicating nightshift*).

Now you are ripe in body, this doth show

That you are ripe to hear all you must know.

*(The PRIESTESS beats her drum. The women conjure
LADY HILDA's spirit.)*

CHORUS.

Sweet mother of the earth who gives us blood.

Return what has been dead and in the past

To life in spirit and in corp'ral form.

See where she walks!

*(The ghost of a woman enters, draped in a white hooded
cape which covers her face. The CHORUS sees her but
OPHELIA does not. The CHORUS falls to its knees,
leaving OPHELIA standing in the middle of the circle
alone.)*

OPHELIA. Where?