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Dramatic Publishing

Selkie



Drama by
Laurie Brooks

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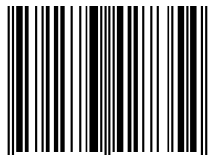
*Featured at the Bonderman Playwriting for Youth National Symposium
and New Visions/New Voices at The John F. Kennedy Center
for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.
An American Alliance for Theatre & Education
Distinguished Play Award winner*

Selkie - Drama. *By Laurie Brooks. Cast: 3m., 4w.* On the wild rocky islands north of Scotland it is told 'round the peat fires that the selkies transform into beautiful lasses on Midsummer's Eve and dance on the beach, celebrating the dual nature of the seal people—land and sea. *Selkie* chronicles the story of 16-year-old Elin Jean as she discovers a hidden pelt that unlocks a mystery foretold and is set on a path to find “the knowin’” she desperately seeks. This original version was featured at the Bonderman Playwriting for Youth National Symposium and New Visions/New Voices at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., and won the Distinguished Play Award from the American Alliance for Theatre & Education. Filled with lyrical language, music and mysticism, this coming-of-age story will fascinate audiences of all ages. Perfect for competition! *Unit set. Approximate running time: 40 minutes. Code: SW7.*

Commissioned by and premiered at the Coterie Theatre,
Kansas City, Mo. (l-r) Kip Niven, Heidi Stubblefield, and
Doogin Brown. Photo courtesy of Coterie Theatre.

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SELKIE
(One-act Version)

By

LAURIE BROOKS



Dramatic Publishing

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(SELKIE)
(ONE-ACT VERSION)

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Selkie premiered at The Frederick Loewe Theatre, produced by New York University's Program in Educational Theatre, March 22, 1996.

*The School of Education, New York University
The Department of Music and Performing Arts Professions
The Program in Educational Theatre
present
The World-Premier Production of the Prize-Winning Play*

Selkie

Playwright Laurie Brooks
Directed by Nancy Foell Swortzell
Setting Designed by Roger Hanna
Lighting Design by Jason Livingston
Costumes Designed by Michele Wynne
Original Music by Carlos Guedes
Choreography by Hye Jueng Chung
Stage Manager Amy Koblensky

CAST (in order of appearance)

Pa John Doerner
Margaret Ann McCormack
Ellen Karen Cooke
Duncan Mathew Zahner
Tam Aubrey Chamberlin
Black Haired Selkie Maria Goldstein
Red Haired Selkie Maria Papageorgioe

Dedicated to the memories
of
my mother, Marjorie Gleason Brooks,
who loved stories,
and
Aurand Harris,
who loved the little girl with the webbed hands.

NOTES FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

A reliable source for sounds of the grey and common seals is BBC Radio Orkney, Castle Street, Kirkwall, Orkney, KW15-IDF, telephone 001-441856-87-3939. Information regarding original Orcadian fiddle music is also available from this source.

The music in the play has three parts: the lively fiddle music played by Pa, the magical music of the selkies, which may include sounds of the sea, the wind and the selkies moaning, and finally, the fiddle music of the Johnsmas Foy.

Song “Margaret’s Lullaby,” music by Paul Carrol Binkley, lyrics by Laurie Brooks, copyright 2005.

The dialect is written to suggest the archaic, musical language called the Orkney Norn. It is spoken gently, suggested rather than affected. The r’s are rolled softly, ing becomes in’, you becomes ye (pronounced “yuh”). To becomes tae, pronounced “tay”. The consonant “s”, when ending a word, becomes a soft sh sound. Peedie Buddo is pronounced with a long ee in peedie and the oo sound in buddo. Aisins is pronounced with the diphthong ae. The expression Giddy (as in Giddy God!), mither, and tither are all pronounced with the short i sound. All other words are pronounced as they are spelled. See glossary at end of play for Orkney word definitions.

The Orcadian culture is a unique blending of the characteristics of early Norse settlers and later Scottish influence. Therefore, the dancing should not be an imitation of typical Scottish dances such as the Highland Fling. The dancing may contain hints of the Scottish culture, but is best

choreographed imaginatively to reflect the movement and beauty of the sea so central to the world of the play.

These traditional Orcadian rhymes are taken from children's games:

Eetam, peetam, penny pie,
Pop-a-larum, jinkum jie,
Stand thoo there 'til I come by.

I warn ye once, I warn ye twice,
I warn ye oot the glowne's eyes.
Deer, sheer, bret and smear,
What shall ye have fer dinner?
Minch meat small or none at all,
Tae make ye fat or thinner.

The author would like to warmly acknowledge and thank the following for their assistance in bringing Selkie to life:

In Orkney: The Zawadski Family of Balfour Castle, Sandy Firth, Robert Leslie, Carole Fathergill and the Shapinsay school, Mike Wallace of BBC Radio Orkney, and the Kirkwall Library.

In the United States: The Marine Mammal Commission of Washington, D.C., Amie Brockway and The Open Eye Theatre, Dorothy Webb and The Bonderman/IUPUI Symposium, The Kennedy Center's New Visions/New Voices, Lowell and Nancy Swortzell and The Program in Educational Theatre at New York University, Lauren Friesen, my patient and loving children, and always, Aurand Harris.

SELKIE

CHARACTERS

- PA Duncan's father, a fisherman
MARGARET..... Late 20s, lovely and pale skinned,
with brown hair
ELLEN JEAN..... Brown-haired daughter of Duncan and
Margaret, thirteen years old; has webbed hands
DUNCAN A crofter, early 30s
TAM A traveller (gypsy) lad of fourteen,
with black eyes and a keen sense of mischief
BLACK HAIR..... One of the selkie-folk women
with long, black hair
RED HAIR One of the selkie-folk women
with long, red hair

TIME

One hundred years ago, on Midsummer's Eve (June 21st) when the people of Orkney herald the coming of summer with a celebration called the Johnsmas Foy. They call this time the simmer dim, when there is daylight even at midnight.

SETTING

The Orkney Islands north of the wild, rocky coast of Scotland. The stage is set to suggest the rocky seacoast. There is a large flat rock at center. Downstage of the rock, rippling lights create the sea. The upstage perimeter of the stage is dotted with rocks and grass.

A movable set piece defines the interior of a crofthouse (Orkney farmhouse). There are two small windows with shutters upstage. In the center of the crofthouse is a peat fire, which is burned down to glowing embers. There are two low stools standing around the fire and a wooden rocking chair. There are two doors leading to other areas of the crofthouse and one leading to the outdoors.

SELKIE

(Fiddle music. Dim daylight. The beach. It is Midsummer's Eve, when there is light for twenty hours a day. PA is downstage, playing his fiddle. He is scruffy and bearded, with a kind voice and warm ways. Through the thick fog, called "the har," a large, flat rock can be seen at center. Rippling lights create the sea downstage of the rock. Sounds of the wind and the sea. Sounds of the selkies singing in the distance. PA tucks his fiddle under his arm.)

PA. There was alus the sound of the sea *(he imitates)* and the sound of the wind *(he imitates)*. Aye, and the selkies singing. *(He imitates the selkies.)*

(DUNCAN, as a young man of about eighteen, enters, carrying a rake and a bag for gathering seaweed.)

PA *(cont'd)*. There was also a young crofter named Duncan who lived by the sea. Through the thick fog he could see them approachin' the rocks—the selkie folk—seals that live in the water but change into humans one magical night each year. It was that night...Midsummer's Eve, the night o' the grand celebration called the Johnsmas Foy.

(Three selkies, BLACK HAIR, RED HAIR and a brown, spotted selkie enter and move in the sea area toward the

rock at center. DUNCAN hides himself behind upstage rocks. The selkies emerge onto the rock at center.)

PA (*cont'd*). He'd heard the stories told 'round the peat fires of the grey seals that shed their pelts and become beautiful lasses, but he niver believed them. Yet here, before his own eyes, were three selkies on the shore; and as he watched, they shed their skins.

(Selkie music. Joyously, the three throw off their skins and are transformed into beautiful young women; one red-haired, one black-haired, and one brown-haired.)

PA (*cont'd*). One was a fair lass with golden-red hair, another, a young lass with shinin' black hair, and last ...the fairest lass he had ever seen, with brown hair shimmerin' in the dim northern lights.

(As the music soars into the night, the selkie girls leap off the rock and do a wild dance on the beach as DUNCAN watches, unseen in the shadows.)

PA (*cont'd*). They danced, the three selkie lasses, danced on the land, like waves on the sea. As he watched them leap wildly about the beach, he looked at the brown-haired selkie lass with all the eyes in his head. A strange feelin' came over him, a powerful feelin'. He knew he must take her, the brown-haired selkie lass, take her home tae be his sea wife. Yes, and he knew he must steal her pelt, like in the stories. Withoot her pelt, she could niver go back tae the sea, but must follow him wherever he might lead her.

(DUNCAN comes out of his hiding place and approaches the women. The black-haired girl sees him and cries out a

warning to the others. The selkie folk grab their pelts and enter the sea area. DUNCAN runs forward and takes up the pelt of the brown-haired girl. She reaches out her arms, imploring him to give back her pelt. DUNCAN firmly tucks the pelt underneath his arm. The girl slowly collapses on the beach, crying bitterly. DUNCAN offers his hand to the selkie girl. She hesitates. DUNCAN takes her hand, kisses it, and, never taking his eyes from her face, leads her offstage.)

PA (*cont'd*). 'Tis true. It happened. The crofter was my son, Duncan; and because she wouldna say her name, we called his sea-wife Margaret. Their only bairn, a daughter, was named Ellen Jean.

(ELLEN JEAN enters and runs forward onto the rock at center. She gazes out to sea as if looking for something, then swiftly enters the water and exits.)

(Lights fade on beach and come up on the interior of the crofthouse. MARGARET sits on a stool, winding wool, working the yarn carefully between her fingers. She is much changed from when we saw her in the first scene. Her body is bent and she wears a shapeless homespun dress with an apron. She moves with an odd, shuffling gait, as though her limbs are too heavy for her body.)

(PA begins to play a lively tune on his fiddle. He enters the crofthouse, fiddling, as ELLEN JEAN enters and begins to dance about the room. The dancing is similar to the dancing performed by the three selkies in the first scene. ELLEN JEAN's long brown hair swings about her as she dances. She wears a nondescript homespun dress tied at the waist, with unusually long sleeves which hang

down, covering her hands. She shouts for punctuation as she dances. PA ends the tune as ELLEN JEAN leaps into the air and lands gracefully on the floor in a heap.)

PA (*laughing*). Well done, bonny lass! There's none can dance the music tae life as yerself.

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

ELLEN JEAN. Tis no' guid yet, fer all the tryin'.

PA. It'll come tae ye, in time, if ye wait.

ELLEN JEAN. Waitin' fer this, waitin' fer that. When will all the waitin' be over?

PA. When ye're stone dead, buried in the ground, and cold as the fishes.

MARGARET. Then ye're wishin' ye had the waitin' tae do.

ELLEN JEAN. Sometimes I have the strangest feelin'. walkin' through the days sleepin' like. One day I'll wake up an' everything'll be different.

PA. Different? Worse is more likely.

ELLEN JEAN. Oh, Pa, ye canno' tell the future. Mither, will ye do up me hair? It always comes all far-flunglike when I'm dancin' wild.

MARGARET (*smiling*). A fine nest fer the birds ye have there.

(MARGARET combs ELLEN JEAN's hair, fastening it with a clasp. She sings a cappella.)

SONG: MARGARET'S LULLABY

(see end of script for melody)

MARGARET.

VOICES WHISPER WITH THE WIND
OF PLACES YE HAVE NIVER BEEN.
SINGIN' SONGS OF EBB AND FLOW
OF SECRETS YE WILL SOMEDAY KNOW.

LISTEN TAE THE SEA
THERE IS A LAND FAR BENEATH
AWAKEN FROM YER SLEEP
TAE THE MYSTERIES DOON BELOW.

SELKIES GLIDIN' IN BETWEEN
TIDES THAT PLAY UPON THE SEA
CALLIN' YE TAE COME ALONG
BECKON YE TAE SING THE SONG.

LISTEN TAE THE SEA
THERE IS A LAND FAR BENEATH
AWAKEN FROM YER SLEEP
TAE THE MYSTERIES DOON BELOW.

ELLEN JEAN. Thank ye, Mither, ye alus do it best.

(MARGARET kisses ELLEN JEAN's forehead.)

MARGARET. Eyes green as the sea.

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

ELLEN JEAN. Dunna be sayin' that. Ye're only feelin'
sorry fer me.

PA. I like rhymin' is all.

Eetam, peetam, penny pie,
Pop-a-larum, jinkam jie,
Stand thoo there til I come by.

(Angrily, ELLEN JEAN starts to leave.)

PA *(cont'd)*. Dunna be goin' off in a huff! What's got ye so
ill-bisted?

ELLEN JEAN. I canna abide rhymin' is all.

PA. I meant ye no disrespect.

ELLEN JEAN. Day after day I got tae hear the others sayin' hateful rhymes about me.

PA. What a bulder o' nonsense! Dunna be payin' attention tae what the others say. It's the inside o' ye that matters.

ELLEN JEAN. No one wants to know me inside, they're too busy gawkin' at the outside.

MARGARET. People's afraid o' what's different, fearin' what they dunna understand.

ELLEN JEAN. None o' them others wants tae be wi' me.

PA. I do.

ELLEN JEAN. I dunna care fer that.

PA. Dunna care fer yer old Grandpa?

(He takes a stance like a puffin and waddles about the room, making the high-pitched "hey-al" sound of the puffin breed. ELLEN JEAN scowls.)

PA (*cont'd*). I remember when 'at sent ye rollin' on the floor wi' laughin'.

ELLEN JEAN. When I was a bairn.

PA. How about this?

(He configures his body to imitate a sheep and makes ridiculous bleating sounds.)

ELLEN JEAN. Ye've gone daft.

PA (*physicalizing himself into a cat. Cat voice*). Rrrrrrrrrrrr. Meow. Skim off the cream fer me dinner, I'm a peedie bit hungry.

(PA rubs his shoulder up against her, knocking her down. ELLEN JEAN laughs.)

PA (*cont'd*). There. I've made ye laugh.

ELLEN JEAN. Pa, ye're me family. Ye've no choice but tae be with me.

PA. Buy, buy, that's no way tae talk.

ELLEN JEAN. It's the others—I wish the others liked me.

MARGARET. The lads and lasses'll take notice when they see yer dancin' at the Foy this night.

PA. It'll be a celebration like none afore it. The torches o'heather cracklin'. The dancin' and singin' til dawn. I can see the looks on 'em. Eyes wide as saucers with the surprise.

(ELLEN JEAN hangs her head and is silent.)

PA *(imitates village voices)*. Look! Have ye niver seen the like o' the dancin'! More wondrous than the skelly sun hittin' the cliffs o' Hoy! Who is she, 'at bonnie lass?

ELLEN JEAN. I'll no' be dancin' at the Foy.

PA. Ye're thirteen. Yer fither expects ye tae dance. He's bragged about it from Kirkwall tae Stromness.

MARGARET *(caressing ELLEN JEAN's hair)*. Yer dancin' is a gift. Ye must no' hide what is worthy in yerself. Perhaps when the others see 'at side o' ye...

ELLEN JEAN: They'll hate the dancin' and think me a fool!

(ELLEN JEAN turns in anger and charges for the door. The door opens and DUNCAN enters. He is tall and dark haired; a lanky, awkward man who looks as though he isn't quite comfortable in his skin.)

DUNCAN *(stopping ELLEN JEAN at the door)*. Hover ye noo, lass. What's yer hurry?

ELLEN JEAN. No hurry, Fither.

DUNCAN. Sit ye doon then. I'd be havin' a word wi' ye.

(DUNCAN goes to MARGARET and kisses her lovingly.)

DUNCAN. Pale as the winter sky and twice as lovely.

(ELLEN JEAN tries to slip out of the room unnoticed.)

MARGARET. A lie is harder tae tell in the long haul than the hardest truth.

PA. The truth! There's a slippery fish, just when ye've caught it up, it slides away from ye.

DUNCAN. Tae me ye're bonny as ever. Workin' each day I'm only waitin' fer evenin' tae be home with ye...and Jean.

(DUNCAN spots ELLEN JEAN leaving.)

DUNCAN(*cont'd*). Jean! Come hither, Lass. James Leslie saw ye yesterday, swimmin' oot beyond the voe. Ellen Jean, I've told ye and told ye no' tae swim oot beyond the voe. Even the finest swimmer in Orkney must respect the tides. They change in a peedie minute and pull the strongest swimmer doon into the blackness.

ELLEN JEAN. I know the tides.

DUNCAN. Then why do ye swim oot beyond the voe? Is it a watery grave ye'd be after?

ELLEN JEAN. I canno' help meself. Somethin' pulls me doon tae the beach and in tae the sea.

DUNCAN. I'll no' have ye riskin' yer life when the har rolls in and ye canna see beyond yer nose. None o' the others would dare swim in these waters. I dunna understand. Why do ye no' stay on land with the others?

ELLEN JEAN. I had tae swim oot tae the skerrie.

DUNCAN. What were ye thinkin', Lass? 'At's near two miles oot tae sea.

MARGARET. 'Twas the selkies callin'. The red and the black.

ELLEN JEAN. They came back, Mither, just as ye said they would.

MARGARET. Aye, at Midsummer's tide.

ELLEN JEAN. One red as the sun goin' down, the other dark as peat. Noses lifted straight oot o' the water, like they'us lookin' fer somethin'.

(MARGARET looks toward the sea.)

DUNCAN. There are hundreds o' selkies swimmin' in these waters, alike as one another.

ELLEN JEAN. I knowed 'em straight away, and no mistake. I saw their eyes up closelike. Human eyes, they were. They 'us cryin'.

DUNCAN. Ach, 'twas only sea water drippin'.

MARGARET. Selkies cry just as humans do. And fer the same reasons. Longin' fer what's been lost and canno' be found.

ELLEN JEAN. They 'us callin' me. They wanted me tae follow 'em.

DUNCAN. I'll no' ask ye tae explain it. Just no' tae do it.

ELLEN JEAN. I try tae stay on land, Fither, but then I'm achin' fer the feel o' the water and the pull o' the waves.

(ELLEN JEAN moves her arms to illustrate her thoughts, and her long sleeves fall back to reveal her hands. The croft house grows silent as ELLEN JEAN realizes she has shown her hands to her father. She instinctively hides them behind her back.)

DUNCAN. Sha' me yer hands.

PA. Giddy God, noo ye've done it.

MARGARET. Duncan, come have yer ale. It's waitin'.

PA. Aye. I'm thirsty as a landlocked fisherman.

MARGARET. I've fresh baked bannock. Ye must be hungry.

DUNCAN (*to MARGARET*). I'll no' be dissuaded. I'm waitin', Lass. (*ELLEN JEAN slowly holds out her hands.*)

Webbed, they have grown webbed again. Where's me gully knife? (*He pulls the knife out of the back of his belt and, using his belt, sharpens it with a stropping motion.*)

MARGARET. They'll only grow back, like alus.

PA. Leave her hands alone, won't ye? There's naught tae be done fer it.

MARGARET. Aye. 'Tis no guid tae cut 'em.

ELLEN JEAN (*bravely*). It doesna' hurt too much, Mither.

(*PA gets up and reaches for his coat.*)

PA. 'At pony'll be wantin' tae be fed.

MARGARET. Dunna run from it, Pa. Help me.

PA. Dunna cut her, man. There's naught tae be done fer it.

MARGARET. Even if ye cut 'em clean off, she'll niver be like the others.

DUNCAN. Who will she be like, then? She's thirteen now, time tae think o' makin' a guid marriage to a crofter with land, home and hearth. She'll need more than a dowry tae fetch a husband.

MARGARET. Let the future be takin' care o' itself.

DUNCAN. Ye'd have me do nothin'! I canna bear tae hear the others laugh and make sport o' her. I wilna' stand idle, seein' her married off tae some tinker like that dirty Tam McCodrunk without a sturdy tub fer washin' or a strip o' land tae keep his family fed.

MARGARET. I've heard tell o' him who took a stunder tae love a lass wi' naught but hersel' tae offer.

ELLEN JEAN. Cut them, Fither. I want tae be like the others. *(She obediently lays her hands on the table.)*

DUNCAN. 'At's a good lass. Hold yer hands steady.

(ELLEN JEAN turns her head away. DUNCAN positions the knife to cut the first web. MARGARET rushes forward and stops him.)

MARGARET. No! Cuttin' her hands wilna' keep her from the sea! Ye canno' shape her intae yer dreams o' what's tae come or cut her tae fit ye like a bit o' cloth. Look at her! Do ye no' see she's bonny as she is?

(DUNCAN drops the knife as MARGARET sobs. He gathers MARGARET into his arms.)

DUNCAN. There, there, darlin'. Dunna cry. I canna' bear tae hear ye cry. I'll no' cut 'em. I'll no' cut 'em.

(ELLEN JEAN quietly picks up the knife.)

PA. Ellen Jean, go oot tae the byre. 'At pony wants feedin'.

(ELLEN JEAN looks toward her parents and hesitates.)

ELLEN JEAN. Then I'll cut them meself!

(ELLEN JEAN slashes the largest web. She cries out and drops the knife, holding her cut hand high in the air.)

BLACKOUT

(Dim daylight. The beach. Sounds of the sea and the wind. Sounds of the selkies. ELLEN JEAN sits on the rock)