

DELIA'S CLOTHES

by Hilary Bell

SYNOPSIS

A young woman recounts how she fell through
the cracks of a heartless 1940s Sydney.

CHARACTER

DELIA

A girl in her late teens.

DELIA'S CLOTHES

DELIA opens her suitcase and unpacks her clothes. She folds them as she speaks, as if putting them away.

These are the clothes I was wearing when I got on the train at Inverell.

The jacket I made myself, run it up on the tech sewing machine. That's good wool, I saved up for that for two months. I can't do pleats yet, so my teacher helped a bit.

The girdle belonged to my sister before she had twins.

The blouse I got when I turned fourteen, still fits.

The hose I wash every night, my only pair.

And the skirt ... I got it second-hand at the Inverell Humane Society. I don't know where it come from before that.

These are the clothes I was wearing when I got off the train at Central Station and tried for a job

in the tea-room
custard powder factory
babysitting
selling shoes
in the post-office
as a cleaner

because they were the only ones I had.

They're what I wore to church when my savings run out, asking Our Blessed Lady to intervene.

What I wore to the soup kitchen.

And what I left in when they said welfare was for unfortunates, not girls who spoke nicely and knew how to sew.

Several beats

This is what I was wearing when I stood on the corner of Palmer and William Streets.

These are the clothes a stranger unbuttoned, unbuckled, unlaced, unclasped.

I'd never been undressed by anyone except my mum.

The clothes are now neatly folded.

People do talk to you sometimes. This lady come up to me once or twice, ask if I need anything.

'No thank you.'

'Something to make you feel better?'

'No thank you.'

'Little bit of snow take all the shame away.'

Pause

'Snow?'

You'd think in clothes this familiar to me ... How is it I come to not recognise myself? Know every stitch, every stray thread, but not the girl inside them?

I started seeing her the way other people did, people who looked away when she caught their eye.

I started hating those people.

That's a terrible feeling.

But a little tiny bit of snow, the lady's right, makes it not so bad.

And then one day everything changed.

Ted's a copper. Started by moving me along, ended in a moonlit ride on the Neutral Bay ferry.

He's crazy about me, and I like him enough. The more he talks, the more I start to wonder if I might still have some sort of a chance?

Some sort of a life?

Maybe,

the way he talks,

maybe I really could,

'til I'm hoping so hard that I see not a man so much as a rope thrown me in deep water, and I hang on just as tight as I can.

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The future I ran away from—my mother's life—now I'd give anything to be at the sink all day, bunions, only putting lipstick on when there's a christening to go to. I don't need to be a fashion model, all I want is a home and a canary and a bit of greenery.

The more I think about it the realer it gets, until the whole time while I'm working, I'm actually watering my roses.

Ted's happy to let me dream.

He's married, that's all right: it's not serious with her. He tells me every visit,

'I'm bored with her.

She's bored with me.

It's only a matter of time.'

'That's wonderful, Ted.'

'You're wonderful, Delia.'

But the weeks grind on, and I start to wonder,
When is it time?

I ask him and he talks about folk-dancing.

I ask him and he talks about his wife.

I ask him and he tells me to stop.

I need a little more snow to cool the hot shame.

I ask him and he stops coming round.

All these months I've been saving up for my bridal frock, so now I'm really burning up: I blow the whole lot in one great blizzard.

Hands shaking, face twitching, I wait outside the school. I whisper,
'Something bad's going to happen to your father, girls, if you don't let him go.'

Pause

It works!

She lays out the clothes as if preparing them for tomorrow's outfit.

Ted comes over all dressed up and says, 'We're going on a picnic, there's something I want to ask you.'

He's got a basket with a bottle of beer, there's cake and boiled eggs.

'Ask me?'

He smiles.

I know what it is. Yes. Oh yes, as I put on the blouse, my sister's girdle, the Humane Society skirt, that excited I can hardly do the buttons.

And he's shy as we walk up to Wynyard, sweet and quiet on the bus to Lane Cove. Waiting till we're alone. Waiting for the moment. Squeezes my hand as he pulls the cord and strokes my cheek and says the cocaine's starting to ruin my complexion, but soon I won't need any more.

Walk through the muddy grass, looking for a secluded spot.

Yes, I'll say, oh yes, and I'm so excited I can hardly breathe.

Pause

She slightly adjusts the laid-out clothes to create a forensic photograph image—like a body lying awkward on the ground.

The jacket was found half-buried in the sand.

The girdle stuffed under a log.

One stocking flung over a lemon myrtle, the other nowhere to be found.

The blouse was half-burnt.

The skirt floating in the water.

She packs them back in the suitcase.

I won't go back to Inverell. Not now. Not with my bad skin, my shoes missing, the shame ... No.

I don't know where I'm supposed to go.

But I'm packed and ready.

END

DELIA'S CLOTHES

Notes for Performer

Delia's Clothes is about a young woman who has come to the city in order to escape a life of drudgery, but her desperate circumstances put her in harm's way.

Research

This play was inspired by a photograph. It's a forensic police photo taken in the 1940s, depicting a woman's outfit laid out on the station floor. The clothes are ordinary. There is no description of who wore them or what happened to her. The only information, written on the envelope containing the photo, is 'Clothing Stolen From Melbourne Express, 21.6.45'. This play suggests another possibility. The image is in Peter Doyle's publication of photographs from the Sydney Police and Justice Museum, entitled *City Of Shadows*. It's accessible on the website of the National Library of Australia: <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-pa-http%253A%252F%252Fcollection.hht.net.au%252Ffirsththpictures%252Fpicturerecord.jsp%253Frecno%253D31309>>.

Read up about Sydney in the 1940s, particularly as it affected the lives of working-class women. Ruth Park's *The Harp In The South* and *Poor Man's Orange* are full of first-hand detail. Larry Writer's *Razor* delves into the era's petty-criminal underworld of which Delia becomes both protagonist and victim. Along with *City of Shadows*, the portraits in Peter Doyle's *Crooks Like Us* capture the desperation of ordinary women who, with no other way to feed themselves (and in some cases, their families), turned to prostitution, and became prey to its attendant dangers.

You should also read articles and first-hand accounts of contemporary young people who have wound up on the streets. There's a moving song by Linda Thompson called 'The Banks of the Clyde' dealing with a similar idea.

Style

Delia is a ghost. But you don't want to tip the audience to this from the start—better if the discovery dawns in the last moments of the play. So think about how naturalistically you want to play her.

It's important that, despite this piece being set in the past, you bring Delia to life as a modern girl. There can be a temptation to romanticise period characters, or to fall back on stereotypes. While it's true that people (especially women) may hold themselves differently—according to the restrictions of their dress, or the requisite modesty of the times—the performance will work best if you treat her as you would a contemporary character.

In some monologues, the audience is cast in a particular role, and in addressing us the character is attempting to affect us in some way. In this one, however, Delia is recounting, with a kind of cool distance, the story of how she came to be where she is, waiting with her suitcase.

Just as Delia shies away from the specifics of her trade and the fact of her murder, so does she prefer to focus on the clothes. The folding and arranging of these is something over which she has control, unlike her circumstances. Think about the detail of her gestures, the care she takes, and also in terms of design, what that suitcase looks like, the state of the clothes, and what she's wearing now. Go op-shopping and you'll find a suitably battered suitcase, and remember the clothes needn't fit you as they're props rather than costume.

Skills

While there's a degree of remoteness in the way Delia recounts her story, it would be boring to deliver the whole monologue in the same distant tone. You need to find variety and colour, according to the changes she undergoes. She's full of self-loathing when she first turns to cocaine ('snow'); full of hope when she thinks Ted is going to propose to her. How does she describe the clothes at the murder scene? Is she bewildered? Detached? Matter-of-fact? The play is composed of troughs and swells, like the ocean: where will you build in terms of pace and volume and intensity? Which moments will you leave air around?

Where do you think Delia *is*, as she relates this story? Is it an actual place? Or is she in limbo, some kind of netherworld between the living and the dead? Perhaps the organising of the clothes is again, here, about exerting a modicum of control over something that frightens or confuses her. How will you use the space? What might Delia do to comfort herself, to make herself feel safe here? For example, will you surround yourself with the familiar clothes, enclose yourself in a tight circle? Will you stand? Sit? Move away from the clothes? Take the clothes with you?

Character

What information can you glean about Delia? Look for clues in the text as to her family, her socio-economic background, where she comes from and think about what it would mean (remembering that people travelled far less in those days) for a young country girl to come friendless and alone to the city. What does the fact that she's done that tell you about her? She reaches a point of not needing to be 'a fashion model'; she studied sewing at tech—what does that indicate about her character?

Think about how she holds herself, and how this might change as she descends from a wholesome country girl into a drug-addicted and desperate woman. How does she relate to the audience? Does she acknowledge us? Is she always able to steadily hold our gaze, or does she falter at some point?

How does she present herself? Does she take care to make a good impression? What does her costume say about her? How well-groomed is she? Does she wear make-up (or does she apply it during the piece)? How does she embrace or suffer our gaze?

Structure and Dramatic Coherence

Other than the props required by the text, will you use anything else? What colours and textures will these be? Will music or sound feature in your performance? What about the other senses? Will you make physical contact with your audience? Is there a particular smell that would evoke the atmosphere you want? How might you incorporate creating these effects in your performance?