



JOANNA MURRAY-SMITH's plays have been produced throughout Australia and all over the world, including *Honour* which had a public reading with Meryl Streep and was produced on Broadway in 1998, the National Theatre, London, in 2003, and on the West End with Dame Diana Rigg in 2005. Other plays include *Rockabye*, *Ninety*, *Bombshells*, *Rapture*, *Nightfall*, *Redemption*, *Love Child*, *Atlanta* and *Flame*, many of which have been translated into other languages and adapted for radio. In 2008 her play *The Female of the Species* was produced on the West End. The same year her adaptation of Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* was directed by Sir Trevor Nunn in 2008 at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry. She has won many awards, including the Victorian Premier's Award for Best New Play (*Honour* and *Rapture*) and in 2008 *The Female of the Species* was nominated for an Olivier Award. Her novels include *Truce* (1994), *Judgement Rock* (2002), both published by Penguin Australia and *Sunnyside* (2005), published by Penguin Australia and Viking in the UK. She lives in Melbourne with her husband and three children.

# SONGS FOR NOBODIES

JOANNA MURRAY-SMITH



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## CURRENCY PLAYS

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# Contents

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## SONGS FOR NOBODIES

Judy Garland / Beatrice Ethel Appleton	1
Patsy Cline / Pearl Avalon	5
Edith Piaf / Edie Delamotte	11
Billie Holiday / Too Junior Jones	17
Maria Callas / Orla McDonagh	25

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*To Fieke Went*  
*with love, admiration and gratitude*

*Songs for Nobodies* was first produced by Melbourne Theatre Company at the Fairfax Studio, Melbourne, on 10 November 2010, with the following participants:

All characters played by Bernadette Robinson

MUSICIANS

Greg Sully, Lachlan Davidson

Director, Simon Phillips

Musical Director, Ian McDonald

Designer, Andrew Bailey

Lighting Designer, Kerry Saxby

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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*Joanna Murray-Smith*

## PRODUCTION NOTE

Although these monologues draw on general knowledge about the lives of Judy Garland, Patsy Cline, Billie Holiday, Edith Piaf and Maria Callas, the specific situations and conversations here are entirely imagined, as are the five female characters with whom the legendary singers interact.

*Songs for Nobodies* was written to be performed by a single actress capable of effectively impersonating the singing and speaking voices of the famous singers. The set for the play should be very simple. There should be no costume changes, with all characters inhabiting a simple black dress, and the differentiation between all the characters should be effected by the voice and physicality of the actress alone. The theatricality of the show should be drawn from the power of the performer and the lights.

In the original production of *Songs for Nobodies*, a small band accompanied the performer. The use of a scrim meant the musicians were visible and present, but capable of disappearing when the theatricality of the moment required the actress to be alone on the stage.

All producers of the play must acquire the necessary rights to the music.

## **CHARACTERS**

JUDY GARLAND / BEATRICE ETHEL APPLETON

PATSY CLINE / PEARL AVALON

EDITH PIAF / EDIE DELAMOTTE

BILLIE HOLIDAY / TOO JUNIOR JONES

MARIA CALLAS / ORLA MCDONAGH

JUDY GARLAND / BEATRICE ETHEL APPLETON

*The Plaza Athenaeum New York, 23 April 1961.*

BEATRICE: [*a New York accent with or without traces of the mid-West*]

Pretty much everyone has it wrong about happiness. Everyone's always talking about happiness like it's something complete and whole and distinct, like you'd notice it if it happened to come by. But it's not like that. Happiness is ordinary misery without extraordinary fear. Or in a nutshell: Happiness is the temporary illusion that nothing is about to change for the *worse*. That's happiness. And while you have it, all's you can think is: *This ain't happiness*. And then the moment it's over, you think: *That was it. That was happiness*.

This was what I was thinking as I was crying, sitting in the ladies lavatory of the *Plaza Athenaeum* on Sixty-Third Street on April twenty-third 1961 when Frances Ethel Gumm happened to come in for a pee. George had told me that very night that it was over. He was going and he took the keys to the Rambler and the door closed after him and I didn't see it coming. All that time with George, I thought I wasn't happy because things didn't *zing*. And then he left. And I realised that that was what happiness looked like: something small and reliable and ordinary. Maybe that's the point of happiness. It only exists as memory.

We had our rituals and I thought that was what marriage was about: creating rituals and fitting into them, but he didn't like that. Wasn't happy enough of the time. Or maybe it was just that he was happier somewhere else, *with* someone else who possibly was a red-headed waitress at Sam Chinita's on Eighth and Nineteenth.

Evening in Paris. Diorella. Apple Blossom, all the bottles lined up, along with hair maintenance products and small quick-fix items: bobby pins, safety pins, sewing kit, nail varnish for stocking ladders, sanitary items and face powder for those who were glowing with unsightly fervour.

April twenty-third 1961 started out a dull night. There were some Park Avenue matrons out for dinner and dancing, most of them too fat for their dresses and too lousy to tip. As they came in and out of the ladies room, I was caught up in the thought of how fast things changed. A couple of nights back I thought I had a pretty good job in a pretty good life and now it seemed pathetic to be sitting there with some perfume atomisers and hair lacquer and handtowels at thirty-six years of age, no children and a husband moving into the shadows of the future without me.

And that's when Frances Ethel entered in a black shift dress with a stiff silk evening coat with mink collar. Not even five foot, that's what gave it away. A little doll in kitten heels and theatrical make-up and then I remembered. Carnegie Hall. Judy was singing a few blocks away and it was 11.30 p.m. and now she was here, having a pee. And that's the first time I ever saw Judy Garland.

Many people subsequently called that concert 'the greatest single night in show business', but nobody knew that yet. It was just the night that followed the night before.

Technically, the first time I really saw Judy Garland was in 1940 when Granny Louisa Appleton took me to a Saturday matinee to see *Andy Hardy Meets a Debutante*. Because what remains a little known fact is that Frances Ethel Gumm was born in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, and so was Beatrice Ethel Appleton, being me. Only, when I was born, Frances Ethel was three years older, but we were both baptised in the Episcopal Church on the corner of Cody and Willowbank right next to what is now the Kentucky Fried franchise. So being a Grand Rapids girl, everyone was interested in Judy Garland in Grand Rapids, from the get-go. Apart from anything else, she was living proof you could get the hell out of there.

I thought to myself, I thought: *This is Judy Garland*. She was looking at herself in the mirror, checking out her lipstick and I noticed that her hem had snagged on something and was down at the back. That might

seem strange to have Judy Garland two feet away and to notice that little detail, but that little detail was my job.

‘Miss Garland, your hem is coming down at the back.’

She said: ‘Oh, gosh, oh—’

‘I have a needle and thread and I’d be—’

‘I couldn’t—oh—’

‘It would only take me a couple of minutes.’

And she smiled.

She sat on my stool. I knelt on the floor.

*Hello, I said to myself. Hello? I am holding the edge of Judy Garland’s dress! I am brushing her leg with my hand, feeling her breath on my neck as I sew.*

‘I had a short guy in a wig sobbing in the front row. Short guy, fat, expensively dressed but that didn’t help any, next to this itty-bitty little beauty, couldn’t be more than nineteen years old in chartreuse chiffon, and I could barely concentrate for thinking what kind of world it was where those two were the perfect halves of a whole?’

She was light and funny and alive like nothing I’d ever seen.

‘You’ve been crying,’ she said.

I said nothing to that. I had a live, living, one hundred per cent movie star in my midst and Bea Appleton’s husband problems belonged to another universe.

‘What happened?’

‘Oh, Miss Garland, really it’s—’

‘No, no, come on, let it out—’

‘Miss Garland, it’s just nothing, it’s just—’

Nothing? *Nothing!* It was my *life* that was vanishing before me. It was everything George and me had made. It was Christmases and long weekends. It was fireside suppers and skating in winter. It was anniversary dinners and shared jokes that nobody else could get. It was a strange little world, our world, but when you get down it, what world isn't that revolves around two people within four walls?

So I knotted the thread and used my teeth to break it and then I told her. And I cried. And finally I said:

'Miss Garland, here is the thing. I think happiness is not something good in itself so much as the absence of something bad. Happiness is just two flawed human beings who don't allow what they despise in the other to overwhelm what they admire.'

And Judy looked at me intently and she smudged away a tear from my face. Judy Garland. Smudged. Yep. My face.

'What's your name, honey?'

'Beatrice Ethel Appleton, but I go by Bea.'

'Bea Appleton, you see more than what most people see.'

*I see more than what most people see.* Yes, I do. *Yes, I do.* Bea Appleton is not a loser! Despite George. Despite George driving away from me: one block, two, three, four, before disappearing, taking a right by Filene's.

And I looked at her, into those dark velvet eyes and she looked at me. At me. Bea Appleton, philosopher.

JUDY *sings tentatively, softly, the first line of 'Come Rain or Come Shine'.*

Judy Garland. Judy Garland. Singing for *me*.

JUDY *sings the rest of the song.*

*PATSY CLINE / PEARL AVALON*

*The Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall, Kansas City, 5 March 1963.*

PEARL AVALON starts by singing some beautiful, pure, clear notes. We don't realise it for a second, but these are the sounds of a back-up singer, singing without the song. What we can hear is a great, true voice, but the notes don't add up to a melody.

PEARL: [a Southern accent]

[Singing] Ooh... Aaah... Oooh... Aaah...

There are all kinds of voices.

[Singing] Ooohhhhh...

My voice is the voice *behind* the voice.

[Singing] Ooh... Aaaaaah... Ooooh...

She is up there, always centre stage and it appears, although it isn't true, that she is alone. She does not share the light.

I am behind her. I am always to the side of the stage. I am never alone. I always share the light.

This is how you never hear me sing:

*She sings from the chorus of 'Stand By Your Man', beautifully.*

Who is she? She is Loretta Lyn and Barbara Mandrell and Lynn Anderson and Crystal Gayle and Linda Ronstadt. I sang in their shadows.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, because until I was twenty-three years old I never thought I'd be more than an usher at The Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall in Kansas City. I liked the work, 'cause I got to hear real singers, the kinds of singers I bought records of as a teenager at Robbie Boxer's record store just off of Main Street. But as I stood there, with my little flashlight, showin' folk to their

allocated seats, I nurtured a... I allowed myself to be caught up in the words of the songs floatin' across the auditorium... I sailed away on those lyrics... I had a dream.

In this country, people are always talkin' about dreams. You can be your dream. You can have your dream. You can live the dream. But that's just a clever way of gettin' people to shut up and stop complainin'. If people think they can have their dream, they stop makin' trouble. And then one day they wake up to the fact that not very many people live a dream. And that the best advice is not: *Follow Your Dream*. It's *Adjust Your Dream*. When we're little children and we want to be somethin', someone should shake us and look into our eyes and say: *Lower Your Expectations*.

Which is what I did.

And so I became the voice that you hear but never name.

Some voices sound better alone and others sound better in company. My voice has size, but also modesty. It's a voice so darn sure of itself, it doesn't need the acclaim to prop it up.

But, a great singer has more than a great voice, they have the kind of personality that catches the light. They have so much natural fuel in them, they can light a fuse in another person. And I've always been a popular person, but there's more than one of me out there, more or less. Johnnie says he never wanted a star. He liked me because I reminded him of the kind of woman who married the kind of man he was.

But there were never any more of Patsy. You knew she was the one and only. Until March the third 1963, I was singin' on the sly. It was Patsy who showed me what I should be.

Cactus Jack Call had driven himself into a brick wall and bein' a very well-known disc jockey of the time, there were a lot of people who felt they owed him somethin'. So someone did a ring around and pretty soon there was quite a line-up willin' to come on down