

THE CHAPEL PERILOUS

Dorothy Hewett



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The Chapel Perilous derives from Sir Thomas Malory's *The Tale of King Arthur*, 1485 (Winchester MS, Caxton, Book VI).

HOW SIR LAUNCELOT CAM INTO THE CHAPEL PERELUS AND GATE
THERE OF A DED CORPS, A PYECE OF THE CLOTH AND A SWORDE

Than she sayde, 'Sir, folow ye evyn this hygheway, and hit woll brynge you to the Chapel Perelus, and here I shall abyde till God sende you agayne. And yf you spede nat I know no knyght lyvyng that may encheve that adventure.

Ryght so sir Launcelot departed, and when he com to the Chapel Perelus he alyght downe and tyed his horse unto a lytyll gate. And as sone as he was within the chyrche yerde he sawe on the frunte of the chapel many fayre ryche shyldis turned up so downe, and many of the shyldis sir Launcelot had sene knyghtes bere byforehande. With that he sawe by hym there stonde a thirty grete knyghtes, more by a yerde than any man that ever he had sene, and all they greened and gnasted at sir Launcelot. And whan he sawe their contenaunce he dredde hym sore, and so put his shyld before hym and toke his swerde in his honde redy unto batayle.

And they all were armed all in blak harneyse, redy with her shyldis and her swerdis redy drawyn. And as sir Launcelot wolde have gone thorow them they skaterd on every syde of hym and gaff hym the way, and therewith he wexed bolde and entyrde into the chapel. And there he sawe no lyght but a dymme lampe brennyng, and than was he ware of a corpus hylled with a clothe of sylke. Than sir Launcelot stouped doune and kutte a pese away of that cloth, and than hit fared undir hym as the grounde had quaked a lytyll; therewithall he feared.

And than he sawe a fayre swerde lye by the dede knyght, and that he gate in his honde and hyed hym oute of the chapel. Anone as ever he was in the chapel yerde all the knyghtes spake to hym with grymly voyces and seyde, 'Knyght, sir Launcelot, lay that swerde frome the or thou shalt dye!'

'Whether that I lyve other dye,' seyde sir Launcelot, 'with no wordys grete gete ye hit agayne. Therefore fyght for hit and ye lyst.'

Than ryght so he passed throwoute them.

The Chapel Perilous was first performed at the New Fortune Theatre, Perth, on 21 January 1971, with the following cast:

SALLY BANNER	Helen Neeme
MICHAEL	Colin Nugent
THOMAS / FATHER	Clifford Holden
SISTER ROSA / JUDITH /	
DAVID / SAUL	Victor Marsh
HEADMISTRESS / MOTHER	Margaret Ford

with Penny Allsop, Brian Blain, William Clark, Charlotte Connell, Trudy Edmonds, David Heeley, Emma Hogen-Esch, Penny Leech, Rick Mackay Scollay, Adele Marcella, Marianne Megan, Howard Nowak, Elizabeth Rafferty, Patrick Rafferty, Tricia Robbins, Rosemary Sands, Miles Smith, Grant Synnot, Teresa Ungvary.

Original music composed by Frank Arndt and Michael Leyden

Directed by Aarne Neeme

Setting designed by Brian Blain

Musical direction by Frank Arndt

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CHARACTERS

SALLY BANNER, from fifteen to sixty one years old, a poet. Most of her scenes are played as a young woman: handsome, long haired, rebellious, self absorbed.

THOMAS, from his twenties to forties. Sally's husband: idealistic, gullible.

MICHAEL, seventeen to forties. Her lover: rough, demanding, cruel.

DAVID, twenties to forties. Her lover: university student and biologist, an intellectual.

SAUL, in his thirties. Her lover: a leader of the Communist Party of Australia, an authority figure.

JUDITH, a schoolgirl and later a teaching nun: sardonic, cold, lesbian.

HEADMISTRESS, an English bluestocking with intellect and dignity.

CANON, ageing, weak, hypocritical.

SISTER ROSA, a senior member of an Anglican teaching order: an implacable authority figure.

MOTHER, from middle age to senility: neurotic and overbearing.

FATHER, middle aged and sad.

Other female characters: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS, NURSES, MISS FUNT, SCHOOLGIRLS, MICKY SNATCHIT, POLICEWOMAN, FEMALE SPRUIKER

Other male characters: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS, INTERNES, POLICEMEN, RADIO ANNOUNCERS, VARIOUS VOICES, PALLBEARERS, PSYCHOLOGIST, MAGISTRATE, OLD TRAMP, SPRUIKERS

CHORUS of singers and dancers, male and female: schoolgirls, students, protesters. They are essentially chorus crowd figures

The play has been performed successfully with two women and four men playing all the bit parts and the chorus. A separate chorus is, of course, preferable.

SETTING

A permanent set. Upstage against the cyclorama is the outline of a school chapel with a stained-glass window discovered later to contain a figure of Sally Banner. Three shallow steps lead to the chapel and the tower is accessible. In front of the chapel are three rostrums and an altar on a platform. Large masks of the Headmistress, the Canon and Sister Rosa remain constant throughout the play, standing on the three rostrums and large enough to hide an actor behind each. Three loudspeakers are placed prominently.

The three masked figures play the roles of judges of the action against the landscape of the profane chapel. Sometimes they play themselves, sometimes they step from behind the masks into the body of the play and become other characters.

PROLOGUE

The stage is in darkness.

A clap of thunder rolls away.

Ushers in school uniforms and the rest of the cast take up their positions.

SALLY: I rode forward through the blackened land. I found the forests burning and the fields wasted, waiting for rain. Upon a slope I saw a glimpse of light. Then I came to the Chapel Perilous.

Loud knocking.

The chant begins.

CHORUS: [*in the auditorium*] God give thee comfort, poor soul. Whither goest thou this night?

SALLY: I seek the Chapel Perilous and by my courage and great heart I will win through.

Loud knocking.

CHORUS: Sorrow and death, rebellion and treachery stalk the land. Who are ye who are neither pure in heart nor humble?

SALLY: I have seen such things that are beyond the power of the tongue to describe or the heart to recall, and had I not sinned I would have seen much more.

CHORUS: Your worldly renown can avail thee nothing in matter of the spirit. Repent yet for ye do not belong to the blessed, and we foretell your death.

Blackout. SALLY exits.

The chant fades away and lights come up.

The outline of the chapel is revealed with its large stained-glass window representing the figure of SALLY BANNER. The altar is dressed with cloth and candles.

HEADMISTRESS: [*coming from behind her mask*] Parents, teachers, girls: on this speech day we pause to honour one who was once of your number, who walked these same lawns, carrying her books; who

seemed, on the face of it, to be much as you are now; young, unsure, adolescent, facing the problems of life. Yet she *was* different from all of you and her teachers felt the difference even then. It is rarely given to meet a student who has the recognisable instant quality... genius... major poet.

AMPLIFIER: [HEADMISTRESS'S *voice*] Minor poet! Major poet in a provincial town.

HEADMISTRESS: These are big words yet we began to apply them to her while she was still in her teens.

AMPLIFIER: [HEADMISTRESS'S *voice*] Big frog in a small puddle.

HEADMISTRESS: We were all privileged to know her and as I look about this great hall inscribed with the names of famous women in history I rejoice that the name of my old pupil stands amongst them.

A spot lights SALLY.

SALLY: Queen Elizabeth, Madame Curie, Florence Nightingale, Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, Joan of Arc, Boadicea, Grace Darling, Queen Victoria, Elizabeth Fry, Helen Keller, Daisy Bates... [*Whispering*] Sally Banner... Sally Banner...

HEADMISTRESS: I believe I always knew it would be so.

SCHOOLGIRLS: [*singing*] Poor Sally.

She never made it.

No matter how hard she tried.

She tried hard not to know it,

But she *was* a minor poet,

Until the day she died.

HEADMISTRESS: I remember her fragile, passionate poems in the school magazine, the range and depth of reading that gave her a gold medal for English in her final examinations. I remember her delicate, sardonic school essays for which she always received...

AMPLIFIER: [HEADMISTRESS'S *voice, angrily*] I feel incapable of evaluating this.

HEADMISTRESS: [*firmly*] Always received A-minus.

AMPLIFIER: [HEADMISTRESS'S *voice*] You seem to be in danger of regarding literature as a drug addict regards his drug, a perpetual stimulant to unreality.

HEADMISTRESS: Beware of rhetoric.

AMPLIFIER: [HEADMISTRESS'S *voice*] *Put your name in your book!*

HEADMISTRESS: She was an impossible child to teach. One never really reached her. She would sit for hours in class never listening to a word I said.

AMPLIFIER: [HEADMISTRESS'S *voice*] I must warn you. She is in moral danger, and a danger to others.

HEADMISTRESS: Yet one always knew even when she was at her most outrageous that here was a superlative gift and talent.

AMPLIFIER: [HEADMISTRESS'S *voice*] She is morbid, introspective, violent, immature, dangerous, malicious, macabre... and *lesbian*.

HEADMISTRESS: I feel incapable of evaluating this. [*With an amplifier, as through an echo chamber*] I feel incapable... incapable... incapable... of evaluating this... *this... this... this...*

The CANON comes from behind his mask.

CANON: Parents, teachers, young ladies, dear brethren, children of Christ; on this speech day, we pause to honour Sally Banner, born Widgiemooltha, 1923. As canon of this college of young and foolish virgins, I bear a great responsibility, and I rejoice today that we are gathered together here to offer up our humble thanks to Miss Banner, who has so liberally endowed our little chapel with a stained-glass window in her image and likeness... as well as providing some little patrimony for me. For since the days when she walked amongst you, an upright and Christian young woman, Miss Banner has travelled one of the great symbolic journeys of the human spirit. And she has come home at last to her beginnings, to the Mother Church that bore her, to the Chapel Perilous where at last we all must come. Dear friends, let us pray... I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness...

Amplifiers and the CHORUS OF GIRLS join in the creed, which continues under the amplifier.

AMPLIFIER: [CANON'S *voice*] I don't remember any Sally Banner. Who was this Sally Banner? Was she thin, fat, blonde, brunette or redhead, bad, good or indifferent?

The CHORUS recital stops.

CANON: I baptised her, confirmed her, married her, from this very chapel. Some of the old girls present would have caught a belladonna lily from her bridal bouquet.

AMPLIFIER: [CANON's voice] God knows! I'm an old man, and all that I remember is that I married my dead wife's sister. She was a young thing then, lived with us all our married life. My wife was scarcely cold.

CANON: *The forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting!*

The CHORUS responds.

AMPLIFIER: [CANON's voice] It was forbidden in the Anglican Church. But I received a dispensation. She had such breasts on her.

CANON: I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only son our Lord, conceived by the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified...

The CHORUS continues under the amplifier.

CHORUS: Dead and buried. He descended into hell. The third day he arose again from the dead, he ascended into Heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty, from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

AMPLIFIER: [CANON's voice] They crucified me. There was a scandal and I nearly lost my living. Oh! I remember how they sat and giggled. Nasty little females, sitting in the pews with their wet thighs pressed together. And she amongst them... Sally Banner.

CANON: Crucified, dead and buried.

CHORUS: Crucified, dead and buried.

AMPLIFIER: [CANON's voice] And it was all for nothing. She turned out dry as the other one.

CANON: Life everlasting... life everlasting...

CHORUS: Life everlasting... life everlasting...

AMPLIFIER: [CANON's voice] Wet thighs pressed together.

CANON: Crucified, dead and buried...

CHORUS: Crucified, dead and buried.

AMPLIFIER: [CANON's voice] Dry as the other one...

CANON: Amen.

SISTER ROSA comes from behind her mask.

SISTER ROSA: Parents, teachers, girls: on this speech day I welcome back our old pupil, Sally Banner, who was once one of your number, who walked in the school crocodile to the school chapel, who curtseyed

before the altar, and bowed to the name of Jesus. Her name appears, suitably inscribed in bold type, in the school prospectus. An old woman remembers only those pupils who have made some mark in the world: I remember Sally Banner. I remember her well.

AMPLIFIER: [SISTER ROSA'S voice] I remember her bold eyes staring me down at the foot of the altar. She would not bow. She would not bow...

SISTER ROSA: She was not baptised, nor confirmed. Therefore she could never become a school prefect.

AMPLIFIER: [SISTER ROSA'S voice] She drew lewd women on the back of her divinity notebook, and she would not bow. *She would not bow.*

SISTER ROSA: She had a slight tendency to wildness, never wearing her hat to the school tuck shop, and occasionally found out of bounds. She had no school spirit.

AMPLIFIER: [SISTER ROSA'S voice] Adulteress, divorced, she lived in sin. She did not bow, she did not bow.

SALLY: [*young, fresh, joyous*] I will live in Ringsend
 With a red-headed whore,
 And the fan-light gone in
 Where it lights the hall door.

SISTER ROSA: Sally, Sally Banner, where did you find that awful verse?

SALLY: Why, Sister Rosa, in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* I got for the English prize.

AMPLIFIER: [SISTER ROSA'S voice] *And she did not bow... She did not bow...*

A bell rings. SCHOOLGIRLS come from all parts of the school and take up positions on right and left of stage.

GIRLS: [*singing*] Bring me my bow of burning gold:
 Bring me my arrows of desire:
 Bring me my spear! Oh! clouds unfold:
 Bring me my chariot of fire!
 I will not cease from mental fight,
 Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:
 'Til we have built Jerusalem,
 In England's green and pleasant land.

The hymn tails off as SALLY BANNER enters down the centre aisle, singing. She goes to the altar and stands before it. SISTER ROSA stands beside the altar, arms folded. SALLY confronts her.

SISTER ROSA: Bow.

SALLY remains rigid with her back to the audience.

Go back, that girl. Make your entrance again. 'Bring me your bow...', girls, please.

SALLY retreats up the aisle. The GIRLS repeat the hymn. SALLY comes again to stand rigid at the altar.

Bow.

SALLY remains rigid.

Again, Sally Banner. Girls, *please*: 'I will not cease from mental fight...'

SALLY retreats, then returns.

Bow.

SALLY: I will live in Ringsend with a red-headed whore.

Pause. SISTER ROSA exits behind her mask. The stage darkens, with a spotlight on SALLY who sits in front of the altar, cross-legged. The SCHOOLGIRLS slowly dance around her, singing softly.

GIRLS: Come live with me and be my love,
And we will some new pleasures prove
Of golden sands and crystal brooks,
With silken lines and silver hooks.
There will the river whispering run,
Warmed by thy eyes more than the sun.
And there the enamoured fish will stay.
Begging themselves they may betray.

They sit in a circle to watch the next scene. Their voices die away. The stage darkens further.

The heads of the CANON and the HEADMISTRESS are silhouetted by a red glow. JUDITH, hair cropped, in school uniform, enters from behind SISTER ROSA's mask. She stands behind the altar.

SALLY: [*rising*] Judith, is that you, Judith?