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Photo: Stuart Campbell

For Lucy

Wolf Lullaby

HILARY
BELL



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Author's Note

HILARY BELL

Wolf Lullaby began life in mid 1993, inspired by a newspaper article about a 13-year-old boy in a small town, who had murdered a 4-year-old. The photograph showed a bewildered red-head, freckles and glasses, being handcuffed before a rabid crowd. It was only a few months after the killing of 2-year-old James Bulger by two 10-year-olds in England. The headlines ('Little Devils', 'Bad Seed', 'Born to Murder', 'Evil, Brutal and Cunning', 'How Do You Feel Now You Little Bastards') were less shocking to me than Prime Minister John Major's response: 'We must begin to forgive less, and condemn more.' It wasn't so much outrage at the hatred turned on these children (for what they did was unspeakable), but at the ease with which a society relieved itself of any responsibility. It was quick to accuse: working-class parents; single, working mothers; TV; genes; lack of moral education by the church and schools... Never once did we turn the mirror back on ourselves, on a society where banal acts of evil are committed every moment. These acts are often minute—and alone, hardly constitute 'evil'. I mean the way we ignore children, neglect them, lie to them because the truth is too complicated or uncomfortable. The gulf between what we demand of them, and our own actions. The abuse—physical, sexual, emotional, psychological—that is perpetrated against many children every day and night. And not just (sometimes not even) parents—but teachers, the media, the community. The true teaching of morality can only be through example, and that requires vigilance of behaviour. By purporting the idea of children being 'born evil', we are simply abdicating societal responsibility. I didn't write the play in order to explain why such an atrocity occurs—who can say? But I believe there are a number of elements which can act on a person, and, should they themselves be unstable, something terrible can happen. Of course, many people go through a hellish childhood and grow up to be saints.

But those less resilient are stunted, and sometimes poisoned. For some child murderers, the fatal blow is a cry for help: absurd as it sounds, it is one sure way of getting the attention they crave.

Then there is the fact of children's natural violence. How many of us can claim as children to have never committed an act of savagery on something—or someone—smaller and weaker? Talking to people during the writing of this play, I was continually astonished by how close so many had come to killing or being killed—and what it was that had stopped them.

The theme of truth and lies also runs deep. How does a child's perception of 'truth' vary from an adult's? Is it more important to a child to report a fact, or to appease an angry parent? What do we do with a child who commits such a crime? To what extent are they responsible, and to what extent are we?

Perhaps the most difficult situation is that faced by the murderer's parents. For those of the victim, the reaction is grief, rage, loss. But for the other parents, there must be a maelstrom of conflicting emotions: Natural love, horror, disgust, fear, loyalty, self-examination, and of course grief, but grief of a kind that is not easy to resolve.

The play evolved, over three years, with invaluable input from many people, not only dramaturgically, but also those who confided in me their own inglorious confessions. I would like to thank all of these, especially the actors, dramaturges and director of the 1994 Australian National Playwrights' Conference, and of the Griffin Theatre Company production.

April 1997

Wolf Lullaby was first produced by Griffin Theatre Company at the Stables Theatre, Sydney on 23 April 1996, with the following cast:

LIZZIE GAEL

ANGELA GAEL

WARREN GAEL

SERGEANT RAY ARMSTRONG

Lucy Bell

Tara Morice

Sean O'Shea

Anthony Phelan

Directed by John O'Hare

Setting designed by Genevieve Blanchett

Lighting designed by Efterpi Soropos

Sound designed by John Hessey

Dramaturge Ros Horin

Production Notes

There are a few tricky demands made in the play, perhaps the greatest of which is how to realise the Wolf. In the first production, directed by John O'Hare, we came up with some solutions that may be useful to future productions. I chose not to put them in the stage directions, because I didn't want to limit the director's imagination. But these notes may prove useful...

The 'transitions', including Scene 8, were spoken by the three actors other than she playing Lizzie. The verses took a quality even more sinister as they slowly encroached on the on-stage action. The first was sung off-stage; the second on the stage's periphery; and in the case of Scene 8, the adults entered and created Lizzie's nightmare, speaking the poem with a 'story-telling' lilt.

The three actors also did Toby's voice in Scene 11. They were all on stage, in semi-darkness, and by dividing the lines between them, Lizzie's fear was augmented as the ghost's voice came from three different directions, surrounding her. They simply stood up and walked out, in semi-darkness, as Lizzie continued the scene with her song.

Our set was dominated by blackboards covered in obsessive chalk graffiti: 'I murder so that I may come back'. In the transition between Scenes 4 and 5, Lizzie lay her (baby-sized) doll on the ground and drew a chalk outline around it, and then lay on that outline, leading into Scene 5.

The Wolf itself was made manifest simply by a sound: A deep rumble, which grew in intensity until it shook the theatre.

Characters

LIZZIE GAEL, 9 years old

ANGELA GAEL, 28, Lizzie's mother

WARREN GAEL, 28, Lizzie's father

SERGEANT RAY ARMSTRONG, 50

CHILDREN'S VOICES

VOICE OF TOBY, a two-year-old.

Setting

Time: The present.

Place: A small industrial town in Tasmania.

Action: The story unfolds over a period of about ten days.

Props and set should be minimal.

Note on Layout

A slash / denotes the following character interrupts while the first character continues talking.

RAY: The tests on her shoes / were positive –

ANGELA: Yes but what if she didn't?

Acknowledgements

The author's research for this play included reading a wide variety of newspaper articles on the James Bulger case, the Eric Smith case, the Mary Bell case and the Jeffrey Dahmer case as well as various children's rhymes and fairy tales. Gitta Sereny's book, *The Case of Mary Bell* (London: Arrow Books, 1972) was another very helpful resource.

SCENE ONE

The wasteland. LIZZIE plays a game with stones and sticks.

LIZZIE:

Ding dong my funeral bell,
Farewell to my mother.
Bury me in the old churchyard
Beside my elder brother.

My coffin shall be white,
Six white angels by my side,
Two to sing and two to play
And two to carry my soul away.

SCENE TWO

The hairdressing salon. ANGELA cuts WARREN's hair as he reads the paper. ANGELA and WARREN are good-humoured throughout, if slightly exasperated. LIZZIE, doing homework, shouts above the radio.

LIZZIE: Guess what?

She waits.

Mum? One more day of school. Then it's Christmas Eve! Dad, will you come to our place for Christmas? And then it's the holidays, I can wash their hair for you! You should've seen all the animals we had. Andy brought his fish in a cornflake box and it died. Samantha brought three chihuahuas and she's got even more at home. She's got about seven. She collects them. How do you spell chihuahua?

Pause.

Mum?

ANGELA: Do you think we could have five minutes' silence? Please?

WARREN: How much you taking off?!

ANGELA: You had knots.

LIZZIE: How many minutes left?

ANGELA: Four and a half.

LIZZIE: I have to spell it right, or I'll get busted.

ANGELA *cuts*. WARREN *reads the paper*.

Mum, can you show me how to do that?

WARREN: Not on my hair you won't.

ANGELA: The scissors are too sharp for you. When you're older. [*To*

WARREN] So what about Christmas? You doing anything?

WARREN: I'll come over. If I'm invited, that is.

ANGELA *laughs*.

LIZZIE: Norman brought his two budgies. Can I take Tweetie in next
Pet Day?

WARREN: That's your mum's bird. You can get your own bird, love.

LIZZIE: [*pointing to the newspaper*] Who's she?

WARREN: A politician.

LIZZIE: What did she do wrong?

WARREN: Darling, I'm trying to read.

ANGELA: Two minutes. Can we handle that?

LIZZIE *wanders around the room*.

Don't touch anything.

LIZZIE *sits by ANGELA's legs*.

Ow!

WARREN *too reacts, stabbed by the scissors*.

WARREN: Christ!

ANGELA: She's pulling the hairs out! Lizzie!

WARREN: We'll ignore you. Is that what you want? 'Cause that's what
you're asking for.

ANGELA: Sit there and do your work.

She obeys.

LIZZIE: There was a dog-fight between one of them chihuahuas and
Mr Muir's sausage dog. We had to put one in the drawer. It was
my job to see all the animals had drinks of water and to fill them up

with the hose.

WARREN: [*indicating the paper*] That's not bad: four forty-nine dollars.

ANGELA: What for?

WARREN: Windscreen tinting.

ANGELA: Shop around.

LIZZIE: I like animals. Do you? Do you, Mum and Dad?

WARREN: Foy's cost you upward of four eighty. At least.

ANGELA: Highway robbery.

LIZZIE: I think they're great. I wish I was one. What would you be? Dad?

WARREN: [*taking the mirror*] Let me see. Gawd, woman.

LIZZIE: I'd be something cuddly. Something cute that you could pick up and kiss and stroke. Something small. A guinea pig. Do you think maybe I could get a guinea pig? Would you get me one as a present? Because I haven't asked for anything for ages. Just something little to snuggle.

LIZZIE *looks in WARREN's mirror; plays with ANGELA's hair.*

But you can squeeze too tight. They shouldn't be so small.

ANGELA: Get the Saturday papers. They'll have specials.

LIZZIE: It's bad to make them so small.

WARREN: Even do it myself. You can buy the stuff in sheets, just stick it on.

LIZZIE: I wish I was the smallest, with the smallest hands. Dad?

WARREN: Terry did it himself. Stuffed it up of course, but he's a git, isn't he? Wouldn't ask him to help.

ANGELA: You're better off getting it done.

WARREN: Cost you three times as much.

ANGELA: Customers notice, wrinkles in the tinting. I'd get a professional. [*Fluffing his hair*] There you go.

WARREN: You're beaut. When are you out of here?

ANGELA: Soon as I clean up.

WARREN *makes to go. Then he remembers LIZZIE.*

WARREN: Hey, Liz. How'd you reckon the girls'll like my haircut?

LIZZIE *mimics him. The three of them laugh.*

See you Christmas Day, then.

He kisses LIZZIE and exits. ANGELA tidies as she talks.

ANGELA: Next Thursday night shopping we'll go to the mall. Find Dad's present, chocolates or something. And a nice card. You can choose.

LIZZIE: Chocolates!

ANGELA: Now it's time to lock up.

CHILDREN: [*off*]

You know last night,
 You know the night before,
 Three little tomcats came knocking at the door.
 One had a fiddle,
 The other had a gun,
 The third had a pancake stuck to his bum.

Early in the morning,
 Early in the morning,
 Early in the morning,
 Before the break of day.

SCENE THREE

A cell. Darkness. The clang of the cell door opening as RAY switches on the light to reveal LIZZIE.

RAY: Have a good look around. Go on. Not very nice, is it? No TV, no mattress. No comics. That big door with no window. When you go to sleep, do you have a light on? Get frightened in the dark? Well it gets very dark in here.

Pause.

I hear you've been a bad girl, Elizabeth.

LIZZIE: [*whispering*] 'Lizzie'.

RAY: What?

LIZZIE: [*inaudibly*] My mum and dad call me that.

RAY: You'll have to speak up.

She murmurs.

Your mum and dad call you 'Lizzie', do they? Well I'm not your

mum and dad. And if you carry on like you have been, you might not see them again for a very long time. How old are you?

LIZZIE: [*whispering*] Nine.

RAY: When will you be ten?

LIZZIE: [*whispering*] I don't know.

RAY: You don't know. Do you know why you're in trouble? On the last day of school?

LIZZIE: I can't spell chihuahua.

RAY: You know the difference between truth and lies?

Barely perceptibly, LIZZIE nods.

You do. What happens to little girls who lie?

LIZZIE *murmurs.*

They go to hell, do they?

LIZZIE *nods.*

You've told lies in the past, haven't you? Now come off it. Don't start with that smiling again. You are quite capable of telling lies.

Convincing lies, aren't you? You tell me why you think you're here.

LIZZIE: [*whispering*] Don't know.

RAY: The shop detective called me in. It's not the first time, either. She says you went pinching things from Coles.

LIZZIE *shakes her head.*

I don't think a detective would lie, but I think you might.

LIZZIE *shakes her head.* RAY *takes texta colours from his pocket.*

What's this, then? You haven't got the money for these.

LIZZIE *murmurs.*

Your lunch money? I don't think so. What's more, you wagged school to do it, didn't you? *Didn't you?* I spoke to your teacher. So you're not only a truant, you're also a thief. Not looking good, is it? You going to be a regular visitor here?

LIZZIE *whispers.*

I don't care if Errol Nugent's got them. If your mum wanted you to have texta colours, she'd buy them.

Pause.

And now perhaps you'd like to tell me about Pet Day.

LIZZIE *looks at him.*

Yesterday. What happened to the budgerigars, Elizabeth?

LIZZIE *murmurs.*

Nothing? Oh, I don't think 'nothing' happened at all.

He takes two dead birds from his other pocket.

Little Johnny Whatsit doesn't call this 'nothing'. Thanks to you, that's a very sad boy. You wait till everyone's gone to play-lunch, then you sneak inside and strangle them.

LIZZIE: [*whispering*] I never.

RAY: Well they don't look very alive to me. So what does *that* make you?

LIZZIE *is silent.*

How could you do such a horrible thing? Twist their necks?

LIZZIE: The wolf.

Beat.

RAY: I'm going to have to teach you a lesson, Miss Gael. I don't want to, but it seems to be the only way to get it through your thick skull: be naughty, and you get *in trouble*.

He reaches for the light.

LIZZIE: Don't switch the light out, please sir.

RAY: Well what about that? I was starting to think you had no tongue.

RAY *exits, clanging the door shut.* LIZZIE *sings a lullaby.*

LIZZIE:

Hushabye, you naughty girl
 Don't you make another peep.
 No one worse in the world
 Time to go to sleep.

The second verse is interrupted by RAY banging on the bars.

RAY: [*off*] Quiet in there!

LIZZIE:

God has seen the things you do,