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# THE DIG

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A ONE-ACT PLAY

## CHARACTERS

**Eleanor** – an archaeologist.

**Lucy** – a convict woman.

*The play takes place at an archaeological excavation site, c. 2018; and in a solitary confinement cell, c. 1851. Both sites are located at the Ross Female Factory, Tasmania.*

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*Dusk, sounds of tools downed, “see you at the Man o’Ross”, blackbirds clucking. Only **Eleanor** remains at the dig. She scratches up a bit of soil, picks it up, tastes it.*

**Eleanor:** Food.

*She scrapes at the ground a bit more, nostrils flaring.*

**Eleanor:** Cherry plum.

*Sound of trowel knocking buried glass. **Eleanor** works fast, intently, on a large bottle dump. She puts aside her trowel and lifts a large, old medicine bottle from the earth, up to eye level. The setting sun illuminates it briefly. Eleanor prises out the cork, sniffs, takes a sip. The sun sets and it is suddenly dark. Disorienting movement (of set change). Dim light returns. **Eleanor** is in a cell. Someone moves in a corner.*

Together { **Lucy:** What in the rat’s cassock are you?  
**Eleanor:** What the . . . ?

Who are you?

**Lucy:** I might ask y’ the same!

***Eleanor** takes a swig of the bottle.*

**Lucy:** ‘Ere, I’ll ‘ave some o’ that, an’ thankin’ ye.

***Eleanor** hands her the bottle.*

**Lucy:** *(Reaching for it)* 'Eaven knows 'ow ye got in 'ere like that, but at least yer've bonneted th' bub.

*(Takes a swig).* Them cherry plums don't aaf make a vile drop, do they?

*(Wipes her mouth then fixes her eye on Eleanor again).* What else 'ave y' scamp'd?

**Eleanor** feels in her pockets and finds a roll of Lion Mints. Hands them to **Lucy**.

**Lucy** eyes them suspiciously then takes one. Hands the bottle back to **Eleanor** and pockets the mints.

**Lucy:** Smells like that toff Mundy Matron brought gunnin' round 'ere earlier. They thinks 'ey can come round here anytime, yorkin' at us like beasts at the zoological gardens . Well I give 'em hanimal, I did!

**Lucy** re-enacts, like a wildcat.

**Lucy's** acting stirs **Eleanor** to 'come to'.

**Eleanor:** What is this place?

**Lucy:** *(Laughing)* Ah yeah, Her Majesty's Zoological Gardens, that's what it is. Feed us no worse than them animals, don't they; but it's the same every day. Makes yer stomach turn when y' sees it again – stinkin' mutton, neeps . . . 'Er Majesty's Work-em-'ard Make-'em-shut-up Swanky Flamin' 'Ouse o' Correction . 'Ard labour 'tis too – all th' poor unfortunates sent up 'ere to 'ave their babes. There's no gentlin' from the finger-smith 'ere, oh no. Make 'em yowl. They's all doxies. Don't deserve no kindness. Never mind 'ow the master roughed 'em up.

All 'igh n' mighty they pretend they is in their flash 'ouses. Like 'is nibs back 'ome. But 'eaven knows, they knows we knows them's just like us. An' a girl's gotta do what she's gotta do, don't she? Survive. Take a chance. Fortune's gotta find 'er a swell someday, surely, 'oo'll swish 'er outa the drudge, give 'er an 'omely ken an' a ring so the other scoundrels leave 'er alone. Why stop at the knob 'ey? Any of them will do. They's all th' same.

*Pause. Distant sound of an infant crying out.*

**Lucy:** 'Ark! That's me babe. Me little un.

First they sends me away to 'ave 'er, then they dollops me in this 'ere 'ole. I would not leave 'er. That's y'r nine months up, they says; you won't 'ave 'er now. Only if y'r good. They wants me a slavey 'fore they'll let me light me lamps on me own li'l babe again. She's me own and they snaffles 'er and say I'm the lightfinger! All I took were an 'ankerchief. It wouldn've 'urt 'im I took it from to buy another. 'Ow they lords it over us, rubs our faces in it like we're swine, or even their very grime. An' 'er; ne'er a feeder for t'amuse 'er.

*Silence. Eleanor is trying to speak. Child cries again.*

**Lucy:** Me darlin'. Poor li'l mite.

**Eleanor:** (*hands Lucy the bottle*) Well you won't do her any harm now then. Have a drink.

**Lucy:** 'Arm? I'd not 'arm her! You're like the rest of 'em. Say we must be kept away ...

**Eleanor:** No! No. I just meant the alcohol. It's not good. No good for any of us really, but you couldn't know...

*Silence. Eleanor is searching for words.*

**Eleanor:** I had a child. No one took her away; she died. She was called Lucy. (*Lucy starts but Eleanor doesn't notice*).

I guess I took my chances too. I don't know why I've never told anyone.

Her father was my hero. The Great Professeur. Couldn't believe it when he singled me out. I guess he did think I was bright. Sure thought I was sexy but who knows anymore. Men – they'll go for anyone they think they've got a chance with. And those ones at the top – think they're so good. Think they're entitled to whatever they want. Should have listened to my mother, but little me – here's the great Professor, says he's in love with me. And me? Well, you know how it is. It's never just about the sex. You're sick of struggling. Sick of being no one. And there's your chance you think – Grab it! You're all in love and hopeful. And someone's got to get lucky, like you said. You can't just let it go.

He got sick of me pretty soon though. But at least he left me Lucy. No one takes your child away anymore. Not unless you're a Blackfella. It's a hard slog but you can do it. Maybe I should have scaled things back a bit though. I was always dragging her round the world. One dig or another. She got the flu, would you believe it? In our day and age! Sorry, mine. You can still die of flu. Picked it up on a plane; I'm pretty sure o' that.

*Lucy hands Eleanor the bottle.*

**Eleanor:** But sorry. (*She upturns the bottle and finishes the last drops of wine*).

You won't understand any of that.

(*Rubbing the bottle meditatively*) What am I talking about?

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**THE END**

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## NOTES

*The Dig*, draws on archaeological and archival records to imagine and present a plausible 'convict woman of Ross'. *The Dig* compares and contrasts two aspects of the Ross Female Factory's (RFF) multi-layered history – the convict and contemporary periods. These periods are represented in a narrative form that offers many opportunities for reflection and engagement. It was written in this way particularly with a view to its being useful as a student learning tool. The play is targeted towards high school students, which will also mean, I hope, that adults could enjoy it too.

The play revolves around an unusual encounter between a modern day archaeologist, Eleanor, and a convict woman, Lucy. The latter has been sentenced to a term of solitary confinement at the RFF. Eleanor and Lucy discover they have much in common, despite the different times in which they live.

My incorporation of archaeology is, in part, based on recognition that both children and adults often enjoy archaeology – the idea of getting one's hands into the soil, peeling back the layers, and searching for treasures can be inspiring. And I wanted to emphasise the value of archaeology as a means of learning about the past. Archaeology literally brings the past to life and makes us aware of space as a living pallet upon which events continuously occur, rather than simply happening and then receding into the past. In fact, as Paul Carter suggests, history is intensely spatial. Being within a physical area that is rich in history is like apprehending a tableau of the present into which the past continuously erupts. Ultimately, this is what I would like *The Dig* to reveal: not only how the things we think and do in a place are influenced by the past, but also how, when we apprehend the past, it can enrich our lives.

### About the characters

*The Dig's* Lucy is similar to a convict called Bridget Hines, who, being "... reluctant to part with [her baby]" when it was time for it to return to the nursery, had it taken from her by force (RFF Interpretation Panel, Overseers Cottage). Although like Bridget, however, Lucy is actually a pastiche of several women who served terms in the RFF. Initially I thought I would write a story about just one woman, but I found that there are many parallels between different women's stories. Noticing these reveals what Kay Daniels meant, I think, when she stressed the importance of paying attention to the different factors that influenced women's lives (see *Convict Women*, Introduction). I focussed, therefore, on what I perceived as common threads that joined women; even though this meant glossing over the uniqueness of individuals. I think my approach highlights how social forces contributed to women having similar experiences, despite their individual characteristics and differences.

I have, therefore, situated Lucy against the background of the convict system, and the specific cultural/anti-cultural, social/anti-social and economic/non-economic roles that individual women performed. To recreate this background with authenticity, I drew on archaeological evidence as well as historical records. Much of the archaeological material comes from Eleanor Casella's insightful and fascinating reports on the RFF, as well as from a site visit with her (5/4/18).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have named one of the characters in *The Dig* as a tribute to Eleanor Casella. Likewise with the convict, Lucy, who I have named after a prominent historian, Lucy Frost, who has written several texts about the Tasmanian female factories and convict women. I also thought that both names seemed contextually

## **Developing the storyline and the archaeology of the site**

One of the things Casella mentioned on this occasion was occasionally tasting deposits, and, furthermore, that archaeologists “know” they are working on a “human” strata because these layers have a distinctive smell and texture. This inspired me to imagine Eleanor tasting the contents of an artefact, which led to me thinking Eleanor might be a time traveller. A ‘little intoxication’ also smoothed the way for what might otherwise inspire some incredulity: the ease with which Eleanor and Lucy slip into conversation. Joseph Gusfield noted, pertinently, that sharing alcohol can work symbolically as well as biochemically, signalling entry into a playful or relaxed mode of communication (73-90).

Casella reports that high densities of glass bottles have been found within excavations at the site of the RFF solitary cells. She suggests that this indicates alcohol consumption on the site, and that a black economy must have existed within the RFF, enabling it to be procured and traded, even in the solitary confinement area (*Every Procurable Object* 33; *Archaeology* 71- 73; also *Doing Trade* and *To Watch*). These facts might also help explain Lucy’s readiness to accept Eleanor’s appearance in her cell. Having the ‘magic potion’ taste of cherry plum was a whim however; numerous cherry plums can be found growing around the RFF (as is often the case at with heritage sites around Tasmania), but they make a thin and sour wine. Surely a brew that only a convict would aspire to.

## **Reconstructing convict women’s lives**

A key issue that needed to be resolved if I was to authentically reconstruct convict women’s biographies is: how does one do that exactly? Like Daniels, Frost and Maxwell-Stewart suggest that the life narratives of convicts should be written with reference to the system that enveloped them. They note that: “[e]very narrative or snippet of life we retrieve is constrained within technologies of penal power and inflected by the colonial politics of the period within which the words were written” (3). An effect of this is that, as Ruth Thomas notes, “[f]emale convicts were not able to access the authority required for publication of their autobiographical narratives . . .” (13).

Joy Damousi and Daniels also note the absence of convict women’s voices. Searching the archives reveals occasional newspaper and court reports that contain only snippets or shadows of their words (see NLA). Letters and journal entries by overseers or others who came into contact with convict women are similar. Normally, in these, the women’s’ words have been paraphrased for genteel readers (Melvina Johnson Young noted this in relation to former America slaves’ narratives 57-58). Even in the rare instances where writing by convict women exists, what is preserved is often a language that they have aspired to make proper, themselves, as they attempted to put their convict pasts behind them (see, for example, Alice Meredith Hodgson, *The Convict Letter Writer*).

Damousi advises that, in the absence of written records of the voices of convict women, we should read them through their actions. These, she suggests, do express their motives and desires, and so they offer valuable traces of their lives (“Disrupting”). Frost and Maxwell-Stewart note how various material remains can communicate parts of convicts’ stories – “. . . messages carved into coins as symbols and words”, for example (3-4). Archaeology, of course, reveals traces.

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appropriate. The characters Lucy and Eleanor are otherwise imagined. In this document I refer to the real Casella and Frost by their surnames, to avoid confusion.

Frost and Maxwell-Stewart stress the importance of asking epistemological questions about the interpretation of evidence – how can we legitimately interpret convict remains? (4). I have endeavoured to ask such questions of the material I have used to create Lucy, who is in fact many ‘Lucys’. This has, in part, been achieved by presenting her within the context of her culture and era, and depicting her choices, actions and experiences with respect to her surroundings and the options that were available to her; who she might sleep with, for example, and why she might feel like she has been treated unjustly.

To portray Lucy’s society in what I hope is a balanced way, I used three main strategies. Alongside specific women’s histories and convict system operations, I also considered the wider historical context: Van Diemen’s Land’s colonisation, and the systems implemented as part of that process. James Boyce’s *Van Diemen’s Land* offers insights into the power dynamics of convict-era Tasmania, which undoubtedly affected convict women and their families, as well as the people to whom they were assigned. But convict system changed over the period of transportation too, and those changes also impacted on convict women. Female factories, like the RFF, were only developed during the later stages of transportation and their specific layouts were modified at intervals. The RFF was the last female factory constructed and a relatively sophisticated iteration (Snowden, Frost *Convict Lives*, Rayner). An important reason given for its construction was that it was thought that it would provide a healthier environment for infants than the past options. It was also to provide labour for settlers (Parker 18). These aspects are reflected in Lucy’s child-bearing experiences, in *The Dig*.

### **Exploitation of convict women and sexual politics**

Many authors have demonstrated the vulnerability of convict women to sexual exploitation and gender-based oppression (Ann Summers; Damousi; Daniels; Tardiff, Oxley and Frost in *Abandoned Women*). A focus on these concerns in *The Dig* is, therefore, clearly justified. Summers’ core assertion is that colonial conditions contributed to a polarised semantics arising during the nineteenth century, which “damned” women as “whores” or regarded them as “God’s police”. Her assertion provides insights into social factors that are likely to have affected convict women who offended, and found themselves sentenced to female factories like Ross.

Damousi’s *Depraved and Disorderly* offers a valuable, systematic review of ways in which cultural notions of sexuality and gender influenced different aspects of convict women’s lives. Not only were they transported to provide the colony with “whores” and mothers, as Summer’s suggests, but many of the pregnancies that inevitably arose from this led to further punishments, for ‘offences’ for which fathers were rarely “similarly punished”, no matter what their social status (Newham 46). Once inside a female factory, these women “. . . inhabited an institutional landscape designed to engender a painful yearning for the affectionate bonds of motherhood” and this yearning was used to encourage their cooperation with the system (Casella, “Where are the Children” 37).

*The Dig* confronts the issues that convict women faced and draws attention to the complex reasoning that may have contributed to their decisions and, ultimately, their pregnancies. Not only were convict women vulnerable to sexual predation, but their gender could also offered them a source of possible power, which some might have attempted to use. *The Dig* attempts, therefore, to draw attention to the complexity of sexual relations, and, through Eleanor, demonstrate how they remain complicated even today, and for similar reasons. I hope that including this material will help make the play interesting for contemporary audiences and provide useful discussion points.

## Interpreting women's experiences through actions

In response to Damousi's suggestion that we should note how convict women expressed themselves through actions, and, like her, observing how convict women used play, songs and performances to resist authority, I initially thought of writing a play that was much more focussed on actions ("Disrupting"; *Depraved* 4-5, 60-62). A 'play within a play', perhaps featuring a disruptive or destabilising episode, for example, is not an uncommon technique. Shakespeare often deploys his fools in such ways, and both Timberlake Wertenbaker and Louis Nowra have used it productively in plays about convicts; in *Our Country's Good* and *The Golden Age*, respectively. I finally decided, however, to limit this approach to Lucy's re-enactment of her response to Colonel Mundy's visit. This incident was based on Von Steglitz's record of an actual visit to the RFF by Lieutenant Colonel Mundy, in 1851. In the record, Mundy described how, on looking into one of the solitary cells during a tour of the RFF, he was startled by a girl with the "fierce beauty of a wild-cat" (Von Steglitz 16). This is an episode that speaks volumes about the ways free settlers regarded convict women, as well as of their sexual vulnerability and how they managed it; perhaps through a kind of defiant resistance, like that which Lucy demonstrates.

Lucy's experiences of giving birth in the RFF are imagined, and (interestingly) I have found no detailed information about midwifery at female factories. Several writers have noted that it was difficult for the government to attract and retain skilled workers (Newham 43; McAlpine 22). Staff were probably often ex-convicts familiar with the system and in need of work, however it is possible that other convicts might have performed midwifery duties while they were there. Snowden reports that Bridget Kelly (nee Lee) became a respected midwife in New Zealand after completing her sentence. Perhaps she learnt some of those skills while at the RFF ("Most useful citizen" 201).

## The verbal language of convict women

The expression "finger smith" (midwife), is from James Vaux *Vocabulary of the Flash Language*. This is a record of the language of New South Wales convicts, from around 1812. It is a valuable resource, which I have used to try to reconstruct an 'authentic' convict women's language, but it has limitations. In the rapidly evolving lexicon of street cant, it was already old in 1851, and that is a problem shared with other resources like Francis Grose's *The Vulgar Tongue* and Phillip Tardiff's glossary of convict words (43-44). I also think that these texts probably favour a language of men and the street, rather than the language women might have used in their own company. Furthermore, they contain few hints of the ways words were strung together to make a language of rhythm and colour.

Although records of the actual words of convict women are rare, hints can be gleaned from mentions of the ways they resisted authority. Amelia McCabe was sentenced to a term of solitary confinement for "making use of language to excite the women"; and it is not hard to imagine women parodying overseers to their faces and behind their backs, perhaps to amuse other women (Crane 177). In writing *The Dig*, I used such descriptions to imagine how women might have spoken to authority in the heat of the moment; and I used the lexicons previously mentioned, and other sources, including the *Oxford English Dictionary's* "Historical Thesaurus", to construct what I hope is a credible language for Lucy.

Another resource that I drew on to construct Lucy's language was fiction. Modern renditions, such as can be found in works by Bryce Courtney, Pete Hay, Tom Gilling, Christopher Koch, Timberlake Wertenbaker and Louis Nowra, offer examples of the different ways seemingly authentic convict voices could be written. Charles Dickens is also a valuable resource: he

represented the England of Lucy's time. Perhaps because his works are still read today, much of the vocabulary within them remains intelligible; an important consideration because I needed a language that would be tolerable to modern students and adults. It needed to be challenging and interesting, but not alienating.

I found colonial writing from Lucy's period less useful than Dickens. Texts published between 1800 and 1860 include Henry Savery's *Quintus Servinton* (1830/31) and Oliné Keese's *The Broad Arrow* (1859).<sup>2</sup> Keese's novel ought to be invaluable given its date of publication and central character – a convict woman of Van Diemen's Land; however, Keese's characters rarely speak for themselves. In fact her protagonist, Maida Gwynnham, is a fallen noble woman, so her language would not be expected to be representative of the majority of convicts; and, regardless of that fact, she is a remarkably silent woman! Generally, Keese's convicts speak a modulated language that lacks in individual nuances, although perhaps it preserves just a handful of words and phrases.

Considering that convict women were so often characterised as “damned whores”, it occurred to me that another possible source might have been popular fiction and even pornography, despite the gendered bias usually present, particularly in the latter.<sup>3</sup> Heather Gaunt records a large collection of “sex books” having been transferred from what is now the Tasmanian Archives to the Royal Society, however I have not followed this line of inquiry further (123).

Ultimately my task was to construct a convict woman's language which was historically credible and which held the right connotations for modern audiences to readily grasp it. This was why I used words like “doxie”, for example, rather than other words of the times; it seemed to have a suitably ‘hard’ edge to it and communicate Lucy's bitterness. Another word I chose for its modern connotations more than its historical accuracy was “toff”, which was a brand new word 1851, and so unlikely to have been known to Lucy (*OED*). I also hesitated in how far I should go in replicating Lucy's slangy pronunciation, thinking that perhaps this is something one should leave up to actors, however, like with stage directions, I decided to err on the side of conveying my view of the characters. Therefore I have abbreviated words, emphasising rhythm rather than consistency. This is why “aitches”, for example, have not always been dropped or added.

## **Final comments**

*The Dig* has been written in a way that I hope is engaging, and encourages not only an ear for language, but also an interest in Tasmanian history and the ways we can learn about it. Juxtaposing a convict woman of the past beside a woman of the present highlights some congruencies and contrasts; from ways of speaking and changes in language, to how people live in the world.

The play offers audiences an opportunity to reflect on quite profound epistemological and ethical questions. Perhaps, in a play intended for high school students and holiday-makers, this is a bit risky but dealing with confronting and difficult texts can be good for young adults, and,

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<sup>2</sup> Oliné Keese was a pseudonym for Caroline Woolmer Leakey (1827-1881).

<sup>3</sup> The frequently cited quote “damned whores” comes, most famously, from Lieutenant Ralph Clarks' journal, in which he recorded experiences of his life in the NSW colonial settlement between 1787 and 1792. In this, he referred to convict women during transportation, going on to write “I never could have thought that there wair So many abandond wreches in England, the[y] are ten thousand time worse than the men Convicts, and I am affraid that we will have a great dele more trouble with them” (journal entry for May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1787).

indeed, all of us. It provides an opportunity to learn without having to confront actual discomforts or dangers, and to develop empathy and understanding. Convict women's stories offers novel opportunities to investigate these topics and continue to be of relevance today, as they have always been.

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