

THE STORY OF MAGGIE REID by MARSALI TAYLOR

CHARACTERS:

MAGGIE REID

WILLIE GOODLAD - her fiance

ELIZABETH - her mother

TAMAR - her friend

TAMMY GOODLAD - her fiance's father, later her husband

HAKKI - her fiance's friend

CHORUS 1

CHORUS 2

CHORUS 3

The play can be done for examination purposes with Chorus 2 being doubled with Elizabeth and Chorus 3 doubled with Tamar. The Chorus characters must be female. With this doubling, we have a nicely balanced piece with a cast of 7: 3 boys and 4 girls.

Alternatively, if not an exam piece, this play can be done as an atmospheric tale, against a constant background of the wind and the sea, with an extended chorus of as many as you like. This version would also include the non-speaking roles of the children, who Maggie looks after.

The play lasts about half an hour.

'The Story of Maggie Reid' is based on the known facts of a Burra story of the 1840's. [Burra is in the Shetland Isles.] Margaret Reid was engaged to William Goodlad in Burra in the middle of the nineteenth century. William went to sail in the Merchant Navy to get some money before getting married and Maggie stayed at his home, living with his father, Tammy [Thomas] Goodlad, who had recently been widowed and had four young children to bring up, the youngest of a family of eight.

Time passed and William did not return when expected. News came that he had left one ship he had been on, and then a story arose that he had died or been killed on shipboard. Eventually, Maggie was prevailed upon to give up hope of him returning. Instead she married Tammy Goodlad, so she could continue to help bringing up the children she had been looking after.

One winter night, about a year after her marriage, an unexpected visitor appeared at the door. It was Willie Goodlad, who had changed ships a couple of times but was now home, with money, and ready to marry his sweetheart.

The next day, Maggie's clogs and wedding ring were found on the edge of the cliff at the back of the house and her body at the bottom. It is still known as 'Maggie Reid's Geo' today.

Willie Goodlad left Burra again, never to return but Tammy married for the third time and had another seven children.

Mainly this play is an atmospheric retelling of a local story by writer Marsali Taylor, who lives and works in the Shetland Isles. It works best if an effort is made to give a historical feeling to the piece, showing the poverty and hardship of the inhabitants, wresting a living from the land and sea. The chorus helps in this, emphasising the daily rhythms of their lives: women and older men at home, working the fields and younger men at sea.

Originally, the play was performed by quite a large cast, the Chorus being swelled out with more women and with children. This would undoubtedly benefit the atmospherics of the piece but should not deter you from attempting a pared down version as an examination script. To retain the atmospherics, effort should be made, I feel, to use a soundscape background of the sea throughout much of the script,

especially through the Chorus sections. I think characters when they are not 'on' as themselves could become part of the background of island inhabitants at other times; this would make the play a very ensemble piece.

The main theme of the play is that of Fate. At times the three Chorus women [and here the exam version of the use of only three works well] can represent the three Fates themselves; at other times they can represent the pagan portrayal of the three stages of woman: Maiden [Tamar], Mother [Elizabeth] and Crone - for this reason playing Chorus 1 as an old woman. There is enough emphasis on both the role of Fate in the story and the pattern of women's lives, tied up with the rhythms of the land, to justify this approach - and it gives an added depth to the piece. Maggie feels the brush of Fate on her at times, and these moments can be emphasised and there is a feeling of inevitability about the whole story. The sounds of the sea calling Maggie at the end show that even her suicide is not really something she can choose to do or not to do; there is no free will in this play; everything is pre-determined by destiny.

The style should be appropriate to the theme. It should not be naturalistic, though some parts of the conversations between characters may be. Aim for a stylised, ritualistic feel, using patterned repeated movements.

EXTRACT ONE

We hear the sound of the sea. Maggie is sitting at the table, head slumped on her hands, crying in an exhausted, gulping way, as if she has drained dry all the tears that are in her. The Chorus look at her compassionately.

CHORUS 1 This is a true story.

CHORUS 2 One version of a true story.

CHORUS 3 Who can say, now, what really happened?

CHORUS 1 Why Maggie did what she did.

CHORUS 2 She is long dead. We cannot ask her.

A pause. Maggie rises, moving blindly, stumbling, as if she does not know where she is going. The Chorus move around her, talking over her.

CHORUS 1 Why Maggie? How did she deserve that the world should turn on her?

CHORUS 2 It was her own fault. She was weak. A coward.

CHORUS 3 She chose security over love. Death over life.

CHORUS 1 Must it always be someone's fault?

CHORUS 2 Yes. We must have someone to blame.

CHORUS 3 How could we bear an uncertain universe?

CHORUS 1 Perhaps it was just bad luck. Perhaps Fortune spun her wheel.

Still moving blindly, Maggie mounts the cliff, ending at the highest point. The Chorus move around her.

CHORUS 1 The top of the wheel.

CHORUS 2 The lucky one.

CHORUS 3 Everything going well for her.

ALL CHORUS Remember, Maggie, remember.

MAGGIE Willie...

The lights change. We see her memory, as Willie comes and spins her round, laughing. Then the lights return.

MAGGIE on a sob Willie!

CHORUS 1 The wheel begins to spin...

CHORUS 2 The person on it begins to fall ...

CHORUS 3 Luck changes...

ALL CHORUS Spinning, spinning...

They whirl around Maggie, drawing her forward until she reaches the front of the stage and falls to her knees.

CHORUS 1 The bottom of the wheel. The lowest point.

They all kneel with her.

CHORUS 3 What goes down comes up again.

They begin to move on, whirling upwards, leaving Maggie kneeling by the front

of the stage.

CHORUS 1 The fallen rise again.

CHORUS 2 Bad luck turns to good.

CHORUS 3 She should have waited.

CHORUS 1 Waited for the wheel to come full circle, and bring her with it.

The Chorus have spun round to the upstage higher level where they stand tall, watching.

CHORUS 1 Rise, Maggie, rise.

CHORUS 2 Remember.

CHORUS 3 Three years ago.

CHORUS 1 Saying Goodbye.

CHORUS 2 Do you not remember?

MAGGIE I remember.

Maggie stands slowly and moves to the door of the croft house. Willie comes to stand at the door. She turns to him.

MAGGIE Six months. A year. Two... only God can tell.

WILLIE Not so very long. It'll soon pass and then I'll be home, with money in my pockets.

MAGGIE falling in with his mood And tales for the long winter.

WILLIE Icebergs taller than the cliffs o' Foula.

MAGGIE Whales bigger than ships.

WILLIE The Arctic skies, as thick with stars as buttercups in the meadow.

MAGGIE Polar bears... and seals with moustaches...

WILLIE teasing I think you fell in love with my travels, not with me.

MAGGIE suddenly clasping him to her Willie, I'm afraid.

WILLIE Now then, sweetheart, what's this? Afraid?

Maggie lets her hands fall.

MAGGIE I have a feeling. There's so much could happen to you.

WILLIE Now, Maggie, that's no way for a seaman's girl to think.

MAGGIE No. I know. I'm sorry.

WILLIE Give me a smile to see me off.

Maggie smiles. As they stand looking at each other, Tammy, Willie's father, comes out to join them. They stand apart to include him in the leavetaking.

WILLIE Now then, father.

TAMMY God's blessing go with you, boy.

WILLIE And with you. You'll take care of Maggie for me.

MAGGIE And I'll take care of him.

TAMMY Indeed she will. She's been the mainstay of this house since your mother died, God rest her soul.

WILLIE Aye, she's well enough.

TAMMY mock indignant Well enough? She's a jewel of a girl, and if I was twenty years younger I'd have married her before you.

MAGGIE Do you hear that? [**Teasing**] You'd better hurry back or he'll cut you out entirely, and you'll have a stepmother instead of a wife.

The Chorus react to this, shaking their heads.

CHORUS 1 Careful, Maggie.

CHORUS 2 & 3 whispered echo Careful....

EXTRACT TWO

ELIZABETH ...You're going to marry a seaman. [**Short laugh.**] Did you think it would be easy? You've seen it all your life. Spring comes and they go... [**To her face.**] ... and they don't all come back. And we are left to do the work.

CHORUS 1 Dig the fields and plant the seeds.

CHORUS 2 Milk the cows and feed the hens.

CHORUS 3 Weed the crops and lamb the sheep.

CHORUS 1 Carry their children; go through birth.

CHORUS 2 Cook and clean and sew and knit.

CHORUS 3 Juggle the debts to landlord and shop.

ELIZABETH And take care of the men whose sailing days are done. And cherish the young ones that can't wait to go. And support each other. And keep faith that he will come home. That the one who's killed won't be mine. [**Emphatically.**] Because if we didn't, we couldn't carry on.

Mime sequence: the cast, including the children, move into working positions, digging and planting, chanting the chorus lines, above, building the sound until Maggie stops.

MAGGIE passionately It's not fair!

The cast keep working. The Chorus surround her.

CHORUS 1 Did you think life would be fair?

CHORUS 2 When has life ever been fair?

CHORUS 3 It never was. It never will be.

CHORUS 1 The rich are struck by plague just like the poor.

CHORUS 2 The poor work all day and still are hungry.

CHORUS 3 We all die in the end.

ALL CHORUS whisper, diminishing as they back away All, all, all ...

Women pause on stage, stretching backs, rubbing hands across brows. The men return, whistling. A moment, then one woman spots them and points them out. Excitement, joy, tweaking of shawls and smoothing of hair and rubbing of cheeks as they come to look, wave, run to meet their men.

MAGGIE Where's Willie?...

EXTRACT THREE

TAMAR ... Will you go home to live with your Mam again?

MAGGIE she's been thinking about it From being the mistress of the house to being a daughter again.

TAMAR Tammy'll want to get married again. He won't be able to manage the children by himself.

MAGGIE Not even if I stayed here and helped him?

TAMAR Stay here - in his house? And what would the Church say to that? [**It's a powerful argument. Maggie bites her lip.**] No, Maggie. You want to make a life of your own. [**Maggie looks at her blankly.**] You're free to marry somebody else now. [**Maggie turns away, shakes her head.**] Lass, love someone else, and have children of your own at last.

MAGGIE I'll never love anyone else.

TAMAR Willie wouldn't want you to waste your days draped in black. [**Diffidently.**] For all his joking, Hakki's fond of you. [**She puts a hand upon Maggie's shoulder.**] Think about it, at least.

Tamar exits. Maggie walks forward, irresolute, until her mother, Elizabeth enters.

ELIZABETH Maggie?

MAGGIE Oh, Mam, what should I do?

ELIZABETH Only you can decide that.

MAGGIE Tammy wants me to marry him.

ELIZABETH Aye, I heard he was on the look-out for a wife.

MAGGIE He's an old man. He's Willie's father!

ELIZABETH Refuse him then. Come back home. Lass, there'll be another man for you.

MAGGIE It was Willie I loved. Loving someone else would be a betrayal.

ELIZABETH Time heals everything.

MAGGIE passionately I don't want to heal!

ELIZABETH with sympathy Lass. [**Coaxing.**] Come with me and give me a hand. You might as well learn to find your way around the old house again.

MAGGIE going with her, casting a glance back at the house It'll be queer to see another woman in charge at the Broch.

ELIZABETH I heard word of Aggie Nicolson.

MAGGIE *annoyed* Aggie? Her - breaking my china?

ELIZABETH Marry him yourself then...

EXTRACT FOUR

HAKKI Maggie, you mustn't keep brooding over the past.

MAGGIE If I could go away - travel - see all the sights he told me of - icebergs taller than the Foula cliffs, and polar bears.... you're so lucky to be born a man!

HAKKI Lucky! [*He laughs shortly and then becomes serious.*] Maggie, if I had any choice, I'd never go away from home.

MAGGIE Never go? Give up all the excitement?

HAKKI Life at sea's not like that. [*He sits down and she sits with him.*] The strange sights is what we tell you about when we come home, because we can't tell you about the rest of it.

They hesitate, looking at one another.

MAGGIE *fiercely* I lost my man to the sea. Haven't I earned the right to know the truth?

Hakki moves forward, looking out into the audience, reliving it.

HAKKI There was a day, once, at the Horn, when we were sailing in company with this other ship. Just the two of us, on this wide ocean. And a squall came over, and a wave with it, and when it had passed over the other ship was gone. Gone - just like that, with no trace - and the hundred men aboard perished in those two minutes. I've never forgotten that. [*He comes back to Maggie.*] Then there's arriving in another foreign port where you're a stranger, and can't trust the natives. And there's the food. It's fine and plentiful when we set out but by the end, Maggie, you wouldn't believe the things we've been forced to eat. Rotten meat. Biscuits with weevils crawling inside them. The best times are the long tedium of day after day on a still sea, with nothing to do but polish up your tales for when you come home. And you make it at last, and bless God for bringing you safe. You tell your tales and make it sound exciting and envy the old men that can stay home.

MAGGIE *standing* It's like a conspiracy. You go to sea and pretend to like it and we work our fingers to the bone, and scrape and save and make ends meet somehow and tell you it's all been fine while you've been away. [*She moves away from him.*] Is this all there is to life? Work and death? Is there nothing more?

The Chorus moves around her.

CHORUS 1 There's the satisfaction of a job well done.

CHORUS 2 A clean bank, a tilled field.

CHORUS 3 The joy of escaping in dancing or laughter.

CHORUS 1 There's the closeness of family.

CHORUS 2 Bearing your children and watching them grow.

MAGGIE Children who will grow to keep the conspiracy going.

ALL CHORUS There's love.

MAGGIE My love is dead.

ALL CHORUS Love, love, love...

MAGGIE Well, I'm not going to play your game any more. I won't pretend everything's fine. I won't marry another seaman and keep smiling as he goes. I won't spend the rest of my life worrying. I'll marry a man that stays at home.

ALL CHORUS Careful, Maggie, careful...

EXTRACT FIVE

WILLIE *incredulously, head up* My father? [*On his feet, angrily.*] You wed my father? [*Maggie remains helpless centre stage while he moves around her, throwing the words like stones.*] I thought you'd wait for me. I trusted you! And now - now you married my father! How long did you wait? My father, my own father! [*He fumbles in his pocket, pulls out her ribbon.*] I kept your ribbon all these years... [*He holds it up in front of her, then throws it to the ground.*]

MAGGIE *holding out imploring hands* Willie...

WILLIE Don't touch me!

Her hands freeze. He is about to storm off, when he sees, past her, Tammy coming towards him, with Elizabeth behind. He stills. His eyes meet Tammy's. There is a long pause.

TAMMY Willie...my son...

WILLIE If you were the same age as me, I'd kill you.

He shoulders past him and exits. Tammy approaches Maggie. She speaks with all the repulsion she feels, a cold hatred.

MAGGIE Get away from me.

He moves back slowly. Another long pause, then he moves slowly away.

CHORUS 1 *whispered* No, Maggie!

ELIZABETH Lass...

MAGGIE *the same cold, hard voice* Leave me alone.

CHORUS 2 Let them help you, Maggie.

MAGGIE I want to be by myself.

CHORUS 3 He's angry now. Give him time.

Elizabeth shrugs helplessly and exits. Maggie goes to the position she was in at the beginning of the play, sobbing at the table. Then she rises, moves blindly, as before, to the highest point of the stage. The sea noise rises.

CHORUS 1 Time mends everything.

MAGGIE Nothing can mend this.

The sea noise rises again. She moves straight forward and eases her shoes off.

CHORUS 2 Think of your child.

MAGGIE His child. [*She wrenches at the wedding ring.*] I won't die his wife. [*She drops it in her shoe.*] Do you think he will understand that? [*Slowly she moves forward, as if she is walking towards a cliff edge. The sea noise is deafening.*]

CHORUS 3 Wait.

CHORUS 1 Wait.

CHORUS 2 Wait.

CHORUS 3 The wheel will turn again...