

The Magdalen

Whitewash

By Valerie Goodwin

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extract

A 4m/16f, two act play set in 1929 in the Magdalen Laundries of Ireland, to the south of Dublin

Characters (in order of appearance) :

Girl / Nancy	16 years old. Self-assured. American
Mary (old)	28 years old. Institutionalised and resigned to her fate.
Waitress	
Mary (young)	Nearly 13, a bit of an 'eejit'. lived alone with her father.
Sister Ignatia	About 40 years old. fairly kind natured.
Bernadette	A resident at the laundry for about 10 yrs. A natural poet. The identity of her child's father has been kept a secret.
Martha	Made pregnant by a married man. Resident for about 2 years.
Assumpta	Bitter. About 20 years old. Has only just had her baby. Father refused to marry her, and went off to England.
Angela	Had her baby a month ago. Is still hopeful about leaving. Her cousin got her pregnant.
Marie	Aged 64. Resident for about 50 yrs.
Pauline	The joker. 15 years old and nearly due. The boy has now married a rich widow.
Father Doyle	Early 30's, Very 'Stephen Tompkinson'. Believes in the sins and the penance. Tries to help the girls. Sincere.
Sister Margaret	A bit dithery. New to the Magdalen.
Father O'Connell	Mid-50's. A nasty, perverted type.
Jim	A delivery man.
Donal	Another delivery man.
Sister Gabriel	About 30 years old. Very cold and strict.
Mother Superior	Aged 60 plus. Distant and unyielding.
Mrs Doolan	Pauline's Mother.

Patricia

10 yr old orphan

Other girls/ singers offstage

Synopsis: The Magdalen laundries were set up in collaboration between Church and State in Ireland and were still going until the late 1990's. They were attached to convents and girls were signed in by their families. Once in there, they could not leave until their families came to get them out- which in some cases meant a lifetime of washing and virtual imprisonment. What was their crime?

Pregnancy, in most cases; but some girls were transferred there from orphanages, some were deemed to be a threat, or at risk of falling prey to lust.

The play focuses on eight of these 'Maggies', their stories, and their attempts to leave the laundry. In their dealings with the few men they encounter within the steamy walls- priests and delivery men, and in their contact with their relatives, we see them through the eyes of the 'free'. Robbed of their lives because of events beyond their control, they were branded as 'sinners' and locked away to 'wash away the stain'.

How do they cope with the gruelling toil, and the stigma, the abandonment by their families and the sense of the passing years with no hope of reprieve?

And how did they cope with the agony of losing their babies?

This play is fictional only in the sense that the girls depicted are not based on actual women known to the author- however, any similarity to real persons living or dead is regrettable, but all too likely.

Settings:

Sheets strung behind actors as a backdrop, and stencilled sheets bearing such homilies as 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness' and 'The wages of sin is death' 'The eyes of the Lord are Upon You'.

The rest; 4 chairs, a bench, a long folding table. Washing baskets and hampers.

Religious statues of Madonna and Jesus, crucifix, prices board for café, hampers, scrub boards, tubs, etc.

In scenes in other places eg nun's parlour the lighting can isolate a smaller downstage area where eg armchair(s) can be set.

MUSIC

‘GOING TO THE CHAPEL OF LOVE’ ; as with all music cited, it should be sung offstage and unaccompanied.

Settings:

Act 1	Scene 1	A Café
	Scene 2	A Hallway
	Scene 3	The Refectory
	Scene 4	The Dormitory
	Scene 5	The Nun’s Parlour
	Scene 6	The Delivery/Hampers Room
	Scene 7	Mother Superior’s Office
	Scene 8	The Dormitory
Act 2	Scene 1	The Visitors Parlour
	Scene 2	The Delivery/Hampers Room
	Scene 3	The Hallway Outside Father O’Connell’s Office
	Scene 4	The Refectory
	Scene 5	The Visitors Parlour

Smells: a bubbling pot of old dishcloths , or spraying the sheets with disinfectant and soapy water.

ACT 1

Scene 1 A Cafe

As audience are settling music such as ‘This Woman’s work’, Kate Bush, from ‘The sensual world’ (1989) are played.

(Spring 1946. Lights fade up to two women drinking tea in a café, suggested by a table and two chairs. 'Chapel of love' is being sung and fades into sounds of clinking cups offstage. Both women in nondescript shapeless coats, could be from any era. Both are nervous. Mary is about 28, the girl is about 16.)

Mary Well, well, this is nice isn't it? I'll not be late back though, or I'll be in trouble.....

Girl No need to worry about that. No need to worry about any of that, any more.

Mary Oh I'm not worried, for I'll not be late. I've not been late for...oh. For months. You soon learnt not to be late, oh, my word, yes, I learnt that very soon.

Girl Shush, now. I mean; don't let's talk about that. *(Pause. She watches Mary stirring and stirring her tea)* Have you enough sugar?

(Mary puts 3 more sugars in. Girl is amazed at how much sugar she is heaping in. Mary giggles and looks around guiltily.)

Mary Don't tell- don't tell them how many I've had! *(she giggles, and slurps and laughs delightedly. Then she looks around furtively)* You won't tell will you? Will you ... what's your name again?

Girl Nancy.

Mary Oh, aye, Nancy. You told me. You're a very pretty girl. Your hair is so long. And your clothes ... they're very pretty. You'd need to be careful when you wash them, or they'd go out of shape, and then you'd catch it ... like the lace things ... from the Big House ... the silks and the voile, oh just imagine wearing those!

Nancy *(with tears in her eyes)* You shall have all the silk and lace you want. I'll get you whatever you want. And you'll never wash anything ever again.

Mary *(laughs)* Oh get along with you; whatever would I be doing wearing clothes like that? The other girls would only be at me for swank. And what would I be doing in clothes like that, sure they'd never let me. Anyway I'm not at the washing any more, they let me do the

mending and the ironing now, and the re-packing , it's a holiday for me nowadays, though I do miss all the chat round the washboards.

Nancy Would you like another scone?

Mary Oh I would, I would, it was lovely, but hadn't I better get back? Sure it's nearly time for Mass. I'd a big pile of mending to do, and it's not done; and tonight is hot pot night. I love those dumplings, Pauline says they're even better than her Mammy's.

Nancy Now listen, listen ... I don't know what to call you.

Mary Mary is my name, pretty miss.

Nancy *(struggles)* Now listen. Its like I told you before, in there. You don't have to go back there. I've come for you. You're coming home, with me.

Mary Home? I remember home. The sound of the gulls, and the wind. The wind blew the dust in. It was hard keeping the floor clean. We had curtains with little checks, little green checks - that's gingham. Its not hard to wash, you can boil it. Sometimes the colour runs - and that's bad.

Nancy Listen. Listen M .. Mary. I've come such a long way, such a long way to see you. I wrote you a letter - did they give you the letter?

Mary The letter? From Boston. I kept the stamp. Such a lovely smell on the paper! Wasn't it lavender? *(Nancy reaches out to touch her hand, MARY stares down at the hand)* Oh look at your soft , soft hands, so smooth and smelling of lavender! Angela loves lavender best, but Pauline says she loves violets. I like roses, the pink roses smell ...
(Bells ring, Mary jumps up, and her cup tips over).

Mary Oh by all the saints- now I'm going to be late, I'm late, *(the tea is spilt, Mary tries to mop it up and starts crying)*

Nancy Don't worry - leave it, it doesn't matter *(they are both talking at once and Mary tries to break free but Nancy won't let her go)*

Nancy You're not late, you're not going back!

Mary Look, you! Nancy, or whoever you are! Let go of me, let go! I shall be in trouble, I don't want to be told off, they'll make me miss breakfast!

Nancy *(crying)* You won't miss breakfast, or wash, or mend, or iron. And no one shall tell you off for being late ever again. You've had 16 years of hell, but its over now. You're coming home with me.

Mary I won't get told off?

Nancy That's right. I told them, they know, it's OK. Honest. Its all been settled.

Mary They said I could go back after Mass?

Nancy Sit down, sit down. I 've sorted it all out with Mother Superior.

Mary But Sister Gabriel ...-

Nancy I told Sister Gabriel, it's all settled. Sister Gabriel, with the moustache, right?

Mary *(laughs)* We call her Clark Gable. *(hurriedly)* Don't tell .

Nancy Now come on, relax. How about an éclair, or a slice of Victoria sandwich? Huh? Or a toasted tea cake, or an ice cream?

Mary Oh I don't know, I don't know what to choose, what's a milkshake? It says 'milkshake' up there on the sign, doesn't it? Martha taught me to read - in the evenings, at recreation time. We read the life of Joan of Arc. I like that one. I miss Martha.

Nancy What happened to her? Did her daughter come and fetch her home? Or her son?

Mary *(shivers)* No. No one fetched her. No one. Pauline's Mammy came once, but she didn't come to fetch her. She went away, again, and Pauline cried. I'll have a strawberry milkshake please. Nancy.

Nancy Sure thing. *(she signals to unseen waitress.)*

Mary *(giggles)* You talk funny. Where are you from?

Nancy Boston. *(Mary is none the wiser)* In America.

Mary America is it? But that's away away, over the sea. That's a great big land isn't it? How did you get here? On a big ship?

Nancy I flew, on a plane.

Mary Get along, you're kidding me. I've heard of planes, though, Pauline told me. And Bernadette, she's seen one she said. Right up close. But what was your mother thinking, letting you come all this way by yourself?

Nancy My ... adoptive mother. She's happy for me to come here, she knew it was real important for me, to find my real birth mother.

(There is a long silence and Mary seems to have a glimmer of comprehension. The waitress comes over)

Waitress Oh will you look, it's one of those Maggies! Now then, you. Out of it! What'll the nuns say if they catch you in here?

(Mary has bolted before the waitress has finished speaking.)

Nancy Come back! Wait. Come back ... *(she gathers together her things, but Mary has gone)*

(She turns and glares at the waitress)

Nancy How dare you, how can you be so cruel?

Waitress Ah well miss, it's plain to see you're not from these parts, or you'd know better than to associate with the likes of them; they're a bad lot don't you know, and their own priests and families had them locked away so as not to contaminate decent folks like ourselves.

Nancy Well if that's the attitude of you people it's a damn good job I'm taking her home.

Waitress Is that right? To Amerikky is it? Sure and that's just as well, best place for her, I'm thinking. And she's your cousin, I suppose?

Nancy *(defiantly)* She's my mother. *(She storms out, leaving waitress staring after).*

Scene 2 A Hallway

(It is sixteen years earlier. Young Mary is scrubbing the floor, singing "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam" or "What a friend we have in Jesus". She seems content and in a dream.)

Voice off Mary?

(Mary stiffens, begins scrubbing furiously, guiltily. Enter Sister Ignatia).

Ignatia Have you not finished that floor yet Mary?

Mary Ah ... not quite Sister, I'm afraid not.

Ignatia Well ... it'll be time for supper very soon; if you've not finished there'll be no morsel left by the time you get yourself down there.

Mary Could I not finish it after supper Sister?

Ignatia Now Mary, Mary, what have we told you? All the day's tasks must be done before we ask the Lord's blessing at the meal. You know that by now surely.

Mary When can I go home Sister?

Ignatia Your family will come for you when they're ready. If that time comes ... best not to think of that. This is your home now, Mary. Now get on with that scrubbing. Cleanliness is next to Godliness, remember. It's a pity you didn't remember that before.

(Ignatia exits. Mary stares after her in open-mouthed amazement).

Mary What did she mean by that? I was always the cleanest one, always on my knees at home, always washing the clothes there too ... I wish I knew why they have brought me to this place.

(Mary stands, and as she does we see she is pregnant. She wanders off. Her bucket clanking.)

Song: Mamma he's making eyes at me

Please NOT Lena Zavaroni; so wrong in era and accent and mood. Have the cast sing this offstage.