

“Hamlet’s Angel”
a tale of women and madness

by Bee Williamson

The stage is set with a simple kitchen table and one chair (sunflower chair). There is a teapot and cup. In the corner is a single bed, with plain white linen on it. A few candles are scattered around the stage. A woman is planting flowers and humming to herself.

A **voice-over/or actor on stage** is heard, an old woman, Christine Williamson, my paternal grandmother’s voice saying:

CHRISTINE V/O: I am Christine PAUSE “Everybody's carrying their faces like petals, softer in the rain, we weep.”

The woman planting rushes over to the table and quickly writes the lines down into a red journal. Smiling to herself she returns to tend the flowers, standing up she bursts out in a gospel song:

WOMAN: That’s beautiful, Grandma! *singing the end of the song “I’m Gonna Sit At The Welcome Table”:* “I’m gonna sit at the welcome table, I’m gonna drink sweet milk and honey, I’m gonna meet my lovin’ mother, I’m gonna shout and never get tired, shout and never get tired, shout and never get tired, shout and never get tired, shout and never get tired hey (*vamp*)!!!!”

PAUSE

CHRISTINE V/O: Set upon a dais, undressed and unaware, you would have us plucked and pruned, perfumed so we smell sweet, unattainable, raped so as to own us back again. “Woman”, the greatest of all pretenses, agonizingly crafted, over centuries, by the hands of intrigued men. Didn’t you know? Women are made angels. Ophelia, she is Hamlet’s Angel (pause) soft and

yielding... but broken. Here there is the untold story of a young woman driven to madness. Destroyed by her father's death and broken again at Hamlet's words. In a moment of clarity, before her demise, she says "...we know what we are, but know not what we may be".

PAUSE

WOMAN: I'm going to tell you a tale. It begins with my Grandmother. When I was about eleven, she wrote me a letter and told me the most fascinating anecdote. It's only short, so pay attention! (laughs), (*picking up an old snail airmail letter, reads aloud*) **V/O whispers behind:** "The French Revolution... must have been terrible, some of my relations escaped from the French court; (they were musicians and courtiers) and came to live in London where they lived for awhile. One young girl had a baby, which was cradled in a violin case! So there were hippies, even in those days. They were called Bohemians! I think your love of dance and rhythm comes from there."

PAUSE

WOMAN: Well? What do you think? "Cradled in a violin case", they escaped the French Revolution! I didn't think much of that when I was eleven... my Grandma had sent me a book, "The Scarlet Pimpernel" which captivated my attention more than the story. I was a serious, serious (laughs) bookworm those days. I used to read till 6am in the morning, and was always late for school.

I was a nerd, a dreamer, and a 'Pom': which by the way, I'm told, means "Prisoner of Mother England". You know what? I think I'll always be a nerd, a dreamer and a Prisoner, (pause) but you'll have to wait awhile for that last one, to understand.

PAUSE

Women pours herself a cup of tea, and rolls herself a cigarette.

WOMAN: I hope you don't mind? The fags I mean.... A friend said today that smoking was a sign of weakness, and that when you smoke every-one can see you're weak. (Pause) I think weakness is good. Visible weakness even better! I am just a weak and beautifully flawed human being.

Virginia Wolff did say, "To be ill-adjusted to a DERANGED world is hardly madness" (takes a puff) and I'd have to agree with her... I would so love to write something like "A Room of One's Own".... [**cut out next bracketed lines for reading only**] [oh well, let us just agree that you'll stick with me till interval and then see what happens! You could just go down the road to the local and have a pint instead if you like!]

PAUSE

Woman gets up and tends flowers.

WOMAN: [**cut out next bracketed lines for reading only**] [Speaking of pints] you know my Grandfather has a beer named after him! "Tarka's Tipple". I've had it, I was pissed after just one glass! English beer.... warm... hmmm.... gets you pissed pretty quickly... Grandpa was a well-known English writer, Henry Williamson, his most famous work was "Tarka the Otter". (Pause) But my Grandma wrote too, her one and only manuscript was 173.000 words long! (Pause) For so long now I have wanted to write her story, but in fact, she has written it herself! How beautiful she must have been! (*photo of Christine seen behind actress*) She married my Grandpa when she was only 29.... he was fifty-four! When I was younger, I thought this age gap was so extreme, so out-of-the-ordinary, but now, as I reach 32, it doesn't seem so odd.

PAUSE

WOMAN: She went mad you know?... My Grandma...Why? I don't know... I used to think he drove her to it. That Grandpa's dictatorial, aggressive and tyrannical manner drove her to madness.... now I'm not sure.

CHRISTINE V/O: Psych texts do say, "anyone subjected to **enough stress may be pushed to a psychotic break.**"

WOMAN: She was diagnosed as schizophrenic when my Dad was a young boy. She was put on heavy tranquilizers. And dread of all dreads, she had E.C.T five or so times. Which by all accounts, was horrid back in the fifties, in remote Devon.

Christine was born in 1920. She came from a long line of musicians, played violin and sang beautifully. In 1949 she moved into a 5 acre property with Henry, which Grandfather called Ox's Cross, in North Devon. My dad was born there and 25 years later, I was born there. She established a large garden, with fruit trees. They had chickens and lots of corn. During this time they all slept in a caravan while Henry wrote in the writing shack he had built in 1928. Christine established an independent local school with her friend Elizabeth Olive - she was a dedicated educationalist. She was also very into theatre. Henry was a very loving man, an eccentric and a genius. He often comes to me in spirit when he thinks I should get out my dancing shoes and have some fun. He was a truly great man and beautiful soul, but very troubled from the trauma of the First World War and his childhood. The story goes, one day, when Henry was away in London, on business, Christine decided to file all his documents in a nice big cabinet. Despite having asked for this to be done for years, Henry got back and flew into a rage, which he often did, saying "he could not find anything any more" that she had completely ruined any order he had established. He beat Christine up badly. Dad says, Henry was "always angry... wild". He used to stand outside his writing hut and shoot over the caravan roof with his rifle when dinner wasn't served on time or he wanted his tea!

When Dad was 9 he was sent away to boarding school in Exeter. During this time Christine was going to anti-nuclear marches and wanted to go to Geneva to protest against the imminent and threatened Nuclear War. She was concerned with the Cuban Missile Crisis and JFK's assassination. One night she got beaten up badly by Henry, ran away to Exeter and stayed in a boarding house. Christine, being a faithful Christian, trusted the local Bishop. She went to him to see if what she was experiencing was "normal", she had started seeing beatific visions: [*images shown of angels and mandalas behind actress*] of angels, and amazing mandalas, [*lighting state changes and music is*

heard] ethereal lights and heavenly music. The Bishop had her committed to the local asylum, which was called 'Digby'.

Dad saw her some time later when she visited him at school and she'd just had E.C.T, and there were huge purple-black bruises on her temples. Back in those days patients were not often dosed properly. Young women were given doses suitable for old men. She had several treatments of E.C.T.. Dad felt as if he was the only life-line she had left. Dad says, looking back, his Mum must have been very isolated in North Devon. "Split between the illiterate underclass and wealthy landowners". Even after all this she recovered, being constitutionally very strong – of Yorkshire Stock as she always said, proudly and was able to continue teaching at the local school.

PAUSE

Henry and her were friends with Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes when they lived in Black Torrington a kind of far-flung fellowship of estranged souls in a remote community. Henry and her had separated because of his increasing cruelty and violence. She, like his previous wife, feared for her life.

Christine was put on Librium and Valium. Dad thinks she was manic-depressive but was diagnosed with schizophrenia because she also heard voices. During the long summer holidays of the mid 1960's Dad has lovely memories of cycling round Brittany, France. They stayed in youth hostels, went sailing and used to make friends easily, often starting sing-alongs and parties. Dad said for a 40 year old she coped really well with her anxiety and cycling miles and miles every day in the dry heat..

She did start to do strange things though, like organize threepenny [pronounced thrupenny] bits, 12 sided brass coins, into amazing hexagons [*image shown behind actress*]. And when asked about it, said "Oh the spirits did it". One night, Dad recalls, they were sharing an attic room in Appledore at her best friends cottage, and his Mum went totally off the rails, talking and talking non-stop gibberish all night, it was the beginning of another major breakdown. At 5am and not knowing what to do, he got scared and hit her telling her to 'shut up – please shut up'. PAUSE Poor Dad, he only just told me this story, he was so ashamed that he hit his own mother.

Change lighting states. Woman puts on red kimono, piano music is heard. Rain is heard on a tin roof. Women stands looking out of window or out to audience.

CHRISTINE V/O: “The fragility of her senses that cuts all things to one.”

WOMAN: *(woman runs over to table and writes out the poem, smiles to herself)*
Now, let me tell you **my** story.

PAUSE

A friend suggested on the eve of the millennium that I do a meditation retreat. She acted with the best intentions I’m sure... anyway, I decided to go. I went up to Bendigo and camped in a train carriage. It was a one-week intensive and most of my friends had done Vipassna’s before, some had even done several! (pause) I have fond memories of the time, except an aching back and stiff legs, *(actress takes lotus pose on table top)* I managed to gain some “equanimity” eventually and accepted Buddha into my heart. (pause) the lotus flowered when we were there, an “auspicious” sign no doubt. The trouble wasn’t with the retreat itself, it was when I got back to Melbourne that my true **dysfunction** blossomed.

PAUSE

WOMAN: I had started my own design business six months earlier and it was January. I didn’t know at the time that January was a quite time for businesses and that most people were away on holidays and vacations till February. Business was “slow”. But to me, “slow” was an understatement. I thought I had “failed”. My deepest fear was, as I wrote in my journal at that time: “... is not getting enough work to pay of the loan for the computer. It is the fear of not being wanted, useful, valuable and SEEN, feeling HIDDEN, but then, my deepest pain is in the hiding of my devotional soul. The soft, radiant, wise, soulful bee bee. Somehow I began to spiral down and down. I was doing many hours of meditation a day, and had got past the initial pain in just sitting. I was fixated, on a mission to delve **as deep as I**

could go. I was living with a girl-friend at the time, in a flat in Melbourne (*show hand drawn map*) and she was my constant and loyal companion through it all.

I decided to go away to a friend's place down the coast, near Portsea, and we were sitting there talking intimately about our childhood experiences, and I stopped, watching myself, (pause) I decided to go deeper and deeper into my real feelings. Afterwards I was so overwhelmed I had to go to bed. I said to my friend that I felt I was covered in faeces: a black, sticky stinky stuff over me. He said he had to go, and went off sailing. (woman laughs) I eventually moved through this bizarre sensation and took (*woman gets hyped up and jumps around on stage*) all my clothes off and ran into the pool, screaming and laughing at the top of my lungs. I put Bob Marley on [*Bob Marley music is heard*] full blast, my favorite music, and out of control and ecstatic, laughed at my predicament. I made a promise to myself never to be like my grandmother or step sister – who was also “mad”(schizophrenic) – **little did I know I was fast approaching the time I would really lose it.**

PAUSE

Some change in lighting state.

WOMAN & CHRISTINE V/O: *together, “Whispers, words spilling out from whispers, words forming sentences, sentences becoming poems, becoming stories, becoming lives, becoming generations.”*

PAUSE

Woman returns to table, and pours another cup of tea. Joni Mitchell song “Green” from the “Blue” album is heard.

CHRISTINE V/O: *“Your unconscious carves for you a bed of narrow confines”.*

WOMAN: For the first month of January 2000 I was writing in my journal a lot, really, up until my hospitalization. I will try and tell you what happened as honestly and thoroughly as I can. Please be patient...(laughs) All up I wrote over 8,000 words. Here is some of what I wrote: (*holds up a few sheets of paper and reads aloud*)

I will keep no secrets, I will not keep Dad's secrets, whatever they are...

Mum, I need to tell you this, all this, please don't walk away.

Please don't try and make sense of it all, the babble I talk.

*It is my feelings, memories, emotions, recollections, dreams, visions, and nightmares over and over again. I am trying to make sense, but sometimes you just need to **FEEL** I need to feel, I cannot **THINK** my life. I am feeling my life for the first time, since I can remember. Not being angry, not tired, selfish or boring, I am feeling my life and I can't stop it ... don't make me stop it Mum....*

I'm reading my journal from this past weekend, trying to get to my truth.

All I know, rationally, is that I became my mother, I became my own mother at 4 years old.

Mum said last night.

"Can I take some of the pain away?".

*It was one of the **best** things she said.*

PAUSE

WOMAN: Let me explain. When I was four, there was a court case, my father got custody. Previously, Mum had taken me to Ireland with her new boyfriend. She left me alone a lot and he apparently locked me in cupboards and hit me for things like not eating my mashed potatoes. We were like prisoners, held against our will, in a cold damp isolated cottage. Mum said she was always planning our escape from him. I remember becoming really upset when Mum brought me back. I went early one morning at Ox's Cross to say hello to Mum and give her a cuddle. Her boyfriend hit me and pushed me away and said to her, "Now you must forget that girl!". I was inconsolable and wouldn't let Mum touch me, I ran to my step-mum instead. I was really

sick, infested with scabies, and lice and worms, and deeply disturbed. I used to go around cutting up pillows, curtains and expensive gloves with scissors.

As I said, Dad got custody and we moved, with his wife and her two kids, from England to Melbourne, Australia in the early eighties. In court they said my Mum wasn't fit to be a mother, that she wasn't a "good Mum". (pause) Sure, she did some fucked things, like I said, she had some disastrous love affairs as I've explained...it wasn't drugs or booze if that's what your thinking. No! she was the "straightest" of the whole tribe. She was insecure and prone to doubt. Her mother, my maternal Grandma, died when Mum was only eighteen, of cancer. Mum was on anti-depressants for a year after that. But she coped pretty well.

PAUSE Now, the pain of loss is etched in her face, she is beautiful and her grief gives her character. *actress sings next line* "I can't conceal my emotions, they're always written on my face". (aside) Ahhhh Joni.

PAUSE

Woman begins to sway and dance to a song she's humming, the Gospel tune "Freedom"

WOMAN: *sings* "Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom over me, And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, And go home to my Lord and be Free."

Woman continues singing and dancing until she decides to roll another cigarette.

WOMAN: *(taking off kimono)* Nowadays I dance and sing and that gets me through. Dance out the fear, dance out the shame... dance! ... dance! (pause) I suppose I should tell you what happened next, my big meeting with the Goddess.

(they take on a dramatic tone of voice)

V/O: Eve
the great

un-masker.

WOMAN: Covered
with flesh
from a thousand
years.

V/O: In deceiving forms
she lays bare
daughter,

WOMAN: mother,

V/O: grandmother

UNISON: Eve,
the wise un-masker.

PAUSE

WOMAN: One afternoon in that January I was writing in my journal. It was 1pm and because I had been manically writing all morning I still hadn't had breakfast. I was writing crazy shit, about Auschwitz and Anne Franks journals and having to tell the 'truth' and keep no secrets. By that evening I was exhausted...(PAUSE)

But when I was writing I felt, at the back of the room, spirits watching, laughing at me and warning me. I decided to stop. That night there was a heat wave in full swing. I lay down in my bed and began moving into a very strange experience. My father's family totem is the Owl and I had my great uncle's picture of a barn owl [*show images of barn owl drawing behind actress & sculpture*] hanging on my wall, and it's very eyes were looking at me, communicating owl wisdom to me... (pause) I started to feel the air become electric. Suddenly, another friend, we called Possum came into my room and laid down with me. I laid there and listened to her breathing as she slept. I felt everything was giving me messages. Then Possum got up and left. It was late, I tried to sleep in the heat-wave...as I was lying there between sleep and waking, I felt the presences again. An old man's spirit was sitting at my head

and a woman at my feet. They started pouring light down my body, “stretching me out” I had explained later. I felt my head filling with light and the man began describing and explaining to me the “Tree of Life” willing me to become like a tree, with my roots in the ground and my arms up into the sky. The woman at my feet was “Mother Earth”, or so I felt.

CHRISTINE V/O: In the Quabalah the Tree of Life is a “symbol or psychic map” which has been called “a ground plan of the universe and of the soul of man”. [*show images behind actor from The One journal of mine, the tree of life and Quabalah images*]

CHRISTINE V/O “By the “tree” they meant the human cerebrospinal system, Bee. When it is stimulated by a new and more potent form of Life Energy, called *prana*, the nervous system becomes the Tree of Life, that’s what happened to you dear.. Then a change occurs, marking the beginning of a highly accelerated evolutionary activity in the body, known to adepts as the awakening of the Serpent Power, or Kundalini. The main participants in this inner drama, designed to fashion the whole system to a new awareness, beyond the normal limits of consciousness, are the brain, the sexual organs and all the nerves of the body. It is a process of rebirth – so there you have it – it was a kind of rebirth Bee. [*more images and text projected*]

PAUSE

WOMAN: After they had stretched me out and explained very simply the Tree of Life, how the wood of the cross is symbolic of the tree and the human form is geometrically aligned, like Vertruivus Man. I also felt these “blue hands of light” on my stomach, and they began pulling out the umbilical cord, and bioplasmic streamers (*image on screen*) and cleaning them. After all this was finished they told me to sleep. (pause) How I didn’t find this man talking to me in my head strange I don’t know!?! Didn’t I know about hearing voices? Durrrrrr. Anyway, I tried to sleep and they tried their best, even getting to the point of showing me sheep jumping over turnstiles! (laughs) But I was so excited, and it was so hot, I couldn’t get to sleep. (pause) **Just how much I needed to sleep after this strange visitation I would only come**

to understand many many years later. I was now alone and in dangerous territory.

PAUSE

Woman pours herself another cup of tea. Sings to herself softly the gospel song, "Let your little light shine".

WOMAN: *softly*, "Let your little light shine, shine, shine. Let your little light shine over me. Cause there may be some-one down in the valley, trying to get home."(repeat)

woman leans back on table, spread -eagled and starts to moan and breath heavily...

CHRISTINE V/O: The kundalini arising you experienced early that morning began very slowly and softly with the guides clearing your body and ended quite violently, as if you