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In Silence

A One-Act Play by Kenneth Robbins

AT RISE:

Five women sit, dirty, disheveled, frightened, hungry, cold, separate. MICA sits on a bunk, rocking and chanting a tuneless song. ERICA paces the cell around the walls. RUTH sits on a crate counting the bricks in the floor. JESSIE lies on a bunk, staring blankly at the ceiling. SEENA sits idly on a crate, picking at the wood with her nails. The chanting continues, the only break in the silence.

RUTH

(to ERICA)

Are you looking for something?

ERICA

Cracks.

(she tries to laugh. Silence.)

No. I'm counting. I can't get it to come out right.

RUTH

You're not even. Measure your steps with the length of your foot.

ERICA

It won't come out right. It's the walls. They're not even.

SEENA

What difference does it make? We're none of us architects.

ERICA

It makes a difference to me. I don't belong here. If I can get it to measure right, I might be able to prove it.

She paces. Silence.

RUTH

Can I help?

ERICA

No.

RUTH

There are six hundred and forty-two bricks in the tiling on the floor and nine hundred and fifty-seven in the ceiling. How do you explain that? Jessie, how do you reason that?

JESSIE

They used bigger bricks to tile the floor.

RUTH

That wouldn't make any sense. Unless. . . Unless they ran out of bricks in between.

ERICA

(to JESSIE)

Would you ask your friend to stop singing?

JESSIE

She's not my friend.

Silence. The chant continues.

RUTH

I think I recognize these bricks. They were fired in Luthen. Not far from here. Not far from the German border. The old German border. It's all Germany now.

(no response)

My father worked there as a boy, a long time ago. He fired bricks like these in tons. Tons. They wouldn't have run out. Remarkable, isn't it. It is quite possible that my father helped fire these bricks we're walking on. Interesting. He took me to the kiln one day. He would show me how he would etch his initials into the soft clay. But the firing would take the etching out.

(pause)

You need a compressor for proper etching, he told me. Imbed the initials so deep into the mortar that they can't melt out. Once, the initials stayed in through the firing. There were my father's initials as clear as can be. I have -- I had that brick at home.

SEENA

I could have made the blouse you're wearing. It looks like my work. But that wouldn't make your blouse interesting. Only business.

ERICA

You're a seamstress?

SEENA

Was.

ERICA

Where was your shop?

SEENA

Why ask? It's no longer there. I'm no longer there. Where my shop once was is now a pile of rubble with a stench worse than here.

ERICA

I might have bought something from you.

SEENA

Maybe. Maybe not.

ERICA

I liked shopping in those little shops. I could easily have bought something from you. What was your shop called?

SEENA

It doesn't matter.

ERICA

Tell me.

(silence)

It might help pass the time.

SEENA

I don't care to pass my time. My time -- that's all I have left.

ERICA

Shut that noise up, for God's sake.

Long silence.

RUTH

I went to her shop many times. It was three blocks from the well, five blocks from my house. It was clean, her shop. Kept by her mother. Ruby's was its name. That was her mother, Ruby. She

was a beautiful woman, Ruby. White hair, a little black mustache under --

SEENA

Shut up! Shut up for. . . Pity's sake. And you! What have you to sing about? Give us some quiet.

MICA

You want quiet -- you get quiet -- soon enough.

She returns to her chanting.

JESSIE

They're coming.

The chanting stops as a NAZI MAJOR enters followed by a GUARD.

NAZI MAJOR

Petra Mica Simonsky.

(silence)

Petra Mica Simonsky!

(MICA rises)

Petra Mica Simonsky?

(silence)

Answer when you are addressed.

MICA

Yes.

NAZI MAJOR

You have been tried and found guilty of treason, a crime punishable by execution. Do you have anything to say?

MICA

I -- uh --

NAZI MAJOR

Do you have anything to say!

MICA

No, sir.

NAZI MAJOR

Very well. Is there anyone here who will speak in favor of this woman?

(silence)

Come with me.

The GUARD shoves MICA roughly to and through the door. The three exit.

SEENA

They gone?

JESSIE

Yes.

ERICA

Why didn't anyone speak on her behalf?

(silence)

Why didn't you speak for her?

JESSIE

I didn't know her.

RUTH

I knew her. Not well, but well enough. She lived near me in the Ghetto. We all knew her. She had three daughters. A husband who was among the first to go. She wept from the heart for him. I was with her when we were captured. We fought side by side until all our rocks were spent. She wept for me, too. And then she sang. It takes a good woman to sing as she sang. I should have spoken up for her. They gave me the chance.

JESSIE

Then they would have taken you instead -- or as well. No, you're better off keeping silent.

ERICA

Don't say that! She should have spoken if she could. She might have saved that woman's life.

RUTH

I didn't know her that well.

JESSIE

Who are you to judge? I didn't hear you say anything. You had as much opportunity to speak as she did.

ERICA

I couldn't. . .

JESSIE

Typical moralist. Condemn others for what you're not willing to do yourself.

ERICA

I couldn't because. . . I'm not a Jew.

Silence.

RUTH

Then, what are you doing here?

ERICA

I keep trying to tell everyone that I don't belong here. That it's some sort of mistake. I'm Danish. I'm in Warsaw because of my fiance. Don't you see? I shouldn't be here at all.

SEENA

They don't make mistakes. They only make ammunition.

RUTH

You don't look Danish.

ERICA

You don't look Jewish, either.

RUTH

Who says that I am a Jew?

ERICA

You must be. Otherwise --

RUTH

Otherwise? They've made a second mistake? Hmmm? No, they've got their Jew in me.

ERICA

I'm from Copenhagen. I've only been in Poland for three months. I haven't even asked for a visa yet. They will discover their mistake. You can tell that I'm Danish, can't you?

JESSIE

You all look the same to me.

ERICA

They'll let me go. They'll have to. They don't shoot women, everyone knows that. And once they've discovered their error--

SEENA

If.

RUTH

Why were you in the Ghetto?

ERICA

I wasn't in it. . . Well, I was, yes, in a way. I'd heard the gunfire and when it stopped, I came down out of curiosity, and . . .

JESSIE

She finds us and our loved ones and our homes and our losses objects of curiosity. All of our dead and dying were a mere tourist attraction to her. She deserves what she gets.

ERICA

No. No, that's not it at all. You see, I thought I might help. I know a little medicine. I've been a nurse. And then, the SS came in -- everywhere -- and took us all. Even me.

SEENA

Such a shame. Why didn't you explain to them about your Danish buns?

JESSIE

Obviously, she couldn't. Anyone interested in helping the Jews can't be of value to the Third Reich. Or were you really intent upon looting?

ERICA

No. That's not it. . . That's not it. . .

JESSIE

You disgust me.

SEENA

Why not leave her alone? Leave us all alone.

JESSIE

(directly to ERICA)

My husband, my four-year-old son -- I saw them both -- with my own eyes. I looked into the bunker where I'd told them to wait and. . . The SS had come through after the shooting, had stopped and gassed all the bunkers, basements -- attics, cellars, ditches. . . Anything left alive was soon. . . And I saw them. Their faces, purple, ghostly. . . My father, Thomas, wasn't there. I don't know where he was. Is. He's eighty-one. And you find such things objects of curiosity? Of pity? Something to write home about and shake your silky little head over? You deserve what you get! And I hope you -- No, I pray God that he strikes you and all those like you dead.

ERICA

I didn't see your family. . . I didn't see her family. What is it --

RUTH

She doesn't mean what she says.

JESSIE

Don't interpret me! Don't correct me! Leave me alone and I'll be satisfied. Just leave me in peace.

Silence. Sound of a firing squad
somewhere in the distance.

ERICA

Oh, God.

RUTH

May God have mercy on her soul.

ERICA

They're good Germans. They won't shoot women!

SEENA

Why don't they shoot us all at once and get it over with? Having to wait here is torture. . . Worse torture.

JESSIE

It's supposed to be.

ERICA

I've got to get out of here!!

JESSIE

Scream? Of course, scream. That helps. Go on, shout the walls down. Be a Joshua.

RUTH

Don't badger her. She's afraid, that's all.

SEENA

If you're not Jewish, at least you're learning how to fear like a Jew.

ERICA

Isn't there anything we can do?

RUTH

Since time began, God has been testing His people, giving us every opportunity to deny Him, to renounce Him and His ways. This is only part of the great continuum. This will pass. Perhaps without our being aware of it, but this too will pass. God said, "Look upon My people and see how they weep."

SEENA

When did He say that?

JESSIE

When did you become a rabbi?

RUTH

I studied. I understand the ways of God.

SEENA

If God has His way, there won't be any Jews left on the face of the earth.

RUTH

You're confusing Hitler and his ways with those of God. They're not the same.

ERICA

But this is Poland. . . Not Germany.

JESSIE

Soon, the entire world will be Germany. Don't you understand what's going on? How can you be loony-blind to the Germans goose-stepping 'round the world? Poland. There is no Poland. Only Germans and those who hate Germans.

SEENA

Who knows? After the Jews are gone, the Danes may be next. Your country is occupied, isn't it? That makes you German, doesn't it?

ERICA

Why don't you strike back?

SEENA

With what? At whom?

ERICA

That officer.

(pause)

I know. I'll stand behind the door when they come back and you -- you grab the German and pull him in. Then, I'll shut the door in the Guard's face. We hold the German hostage until they set us free. What do you say?

(silence)

We're strong women! We can't go like lambs to the slaughter. Don't just stand there -- talk to me.

SEENA

I wonder if it's daylight outside. It seems so long since I've seen the sun.

RUTH

Does the sun still shine? Are there still flowers and trees?

SEENA

And birds. . . And songs. Children laughing. It seems so long.

RUTH

So long.

ERICA

What's wrong with you people? Can't you take a stand and fight?

JESSIE

What do you mean -- you people.

ERICA

Nothing. I didn't mean anything. I didn't. . .

JESSIE

Take a stand. Of course we can stand. Why do you think we're here, waiting to die? Our choosing? We fought. We lost. Right along side our men. Each of us here fought the battle and lost.

ERICA

But --

JESSIE

I'll tell you what really happened. During the uprising, my husband, myself and a handful of other Jews, ambushed a German company. We came on them from the basements and over-ran them. We captured their lieutenant and two other officers. When the tanks came through, we tied the Germans outside our bunker. That didn't stop the tanks. They blew the bunkers apart. The first to die were their own men. Take the German hostage, so you say.

All Germans would sooner die than allow a single Jew free in the streets.

(pause)

Be silent. You make me sick.

ERICA

But, we have to do something!

SEENA

All her somethings. Here's something you can do. Be quiet.

ERICA

You all fought before. Why not again?

JESSIE

Such a Moses. Where were you when we needed you? In your quiet little house somewhere far from the Ghetto, right? Now you want to fight, not that you're any more eager to fight, but because it is your own neck that's slipping into the noose. When you had a choice, you chose to be silent. Now that your choices are slipping away, you wish to join us as comrades and fight for your life.

She spits.

RUTH

You're only frightened. You'll get over it.

Noises come from the corridor.

JESSIE

They're back.

SEENA

That was quick.

JESSIE

They want to finish us fast. Move on to the others, the men. Thank God the firing squad is merciful.

SEENA

Merciful. Just pray they make clean work of you. Pray they don't mangle you and leave you to the provost's pistol.

RUTH

Shhhh.

ERICA

Who're they coming for?

JESSIE

You have one chance in four. The same as the rest of us. If not this time, then maybe the next.

The door opens. The NAZI MAJOR enters followed by the GUARD. ERICA hides behind the door.

NAZI MAJOR

Where is the fourth?

JESSIE

Behind the door. She's waiting to leap on you, but she's lost her nerve.

NAZI MAJOR

Come out from there.

(ERICA slides into the Nazi Major's sight)

Jessie Thillman.

JESSIE

So. It's my time. I'm relieved.

NAZI MAJOR

Jessie Thillman, you have been tried and found guilty of treason against the Third Reich. You have been condemned to death by firing squad. Do you have anything you wish to say?

JESSIE

Yes. Make sure you use skilled marksmen. I don't want my lovely body mangled and left alive to know of it.

NAZI MAJOR

We'll do our best. Is there anyone here who will speak in favor of Jessie Thillman?

(silence)

Very well, come with me.

RUTH

I'll speak for her.

JESSIE

Be quiet.

RUTH

But, I must.

JESSIE

I don't want you to. Leave it --

NAZI MAJOR

What do you have to say?

RUTH

I lived on Hannah Street. Jessie on Mt. Sinai --

JESSIE

Ruth -- don't give them the pleasure --

NAZI MAJOR

Let her speak.

RUTH

We weren't what you would call close, but I knew her and liked her. I fought against the Germans beside her.

NAZI MAJOR

Don't waste my time. What can you say of Jessie Thillman that would be in her favor?

RUTH

She was -- is -- a good mother.

NAZI MAJOR

How do you know this?

RUTH

She tried to protect her son with her own life. Greater love hath no --

NAZI MAJOR

I see. A good mother. Very well. If you could, would you take Jessie Thillman's place before the firing squad?

JESSIE

Don't answer that.

RUTH

You mean --

NAZI MAJOR

Would you take her place? Now. Right this minute.

JESSIE

Don't let him do this --

NAZI MAJOR

Shut her mouth.

(the GUARD restrains JESSIE)

Well?

RUTH

Yes, I would.

JESSIE

No!

NAZI MAJOR

Come with me, both of you.

The two are led away. The door is locked.
Silence. It is some time before anything
is said.

ERICA

Why didn't you say anything?

SEENA

Why didn't you?

ERICA

Because that woman did. . .

SEENA

And you're not Jewish, remember.

ERICA

But you are. Why didn't you speak up?

SEENA

Why should I? They're going to kill them both anyway. Why add my name to their list before I have to? Know your place, keep in it, don't make waves. That's my creed.

ERICA

Your creed. They were your sisters.

SEENA

I never had a sister. You were here -- you didn't speak. Were they your sisters, too? Leave me alone.

ERICA

That's your answer for everything, isn't it. "Leave me alone." That's all you care about -- being left alone. I can see you -- huddled beneath the covers of your bed while your husband

and your mother fight the Nazis. Just leave you alone and all is well. That's a creed worth following.

SEENA

Leave me alone!

ERICA

I wish I could. But, we're the only ones left. If we don't talk -- if we don't learn all we can about each other, we might as well be dead.

Sound of firing squad in the distance.
Silence.

SEENA

We're already dead.

Pause

ERICA

She gave witness to motherhood. Are you a mother?

SEENA

Ha.

ERICA

Let's try another trait. Are you honest?

ERICA

How should I know?

ERICA

If I slipped in the mud and fell, would you help me up?

SEENA

There's no mud here.

ERICA

If I wanted to kill myself, would you help me into the noose?

SEENA

I don't have any rope. What is the point of all this?

ERICA

I wouldn't help you with your noose.

SEENA

I wouldn't ask for your help! Just --

ERICA

I know. Leave you alone.

(pause)

Are you married?

SEENA

Yes.

ERICA

Excellent. That is marvelous. I was engaged. If this keeps up, we'll be old friends before long.

(pause)

It's a strange predicament, isn't it. Here we are, alive, breathing -- at this moment, anyway. And we insist on referring to ourselves in the past tense. You were married, I was engaged . . . It doesn't make sense.

SEENA

You need a rest.

ERICA

Leave me alone.

SEENA smiles.

SEENA

Are you a Christian? Protestant?

ERICA

What do you mean?

SEENA

Catholic?

ERICA

I don't understand.

SEENA

You claim you're not Jewish. I thought you might be a Christian.

ERICA

I don't see what that has to do --

SEENA

Obviously nothing.

ERICA

If I'm to speak up for you, what am I going to say? I don't know you.

SEENA

Say that I'm a stupid woman.

ERICA

I didn't mean that.

SEENA

You're right. Otherwise, why am I here?

ERICA

Were you a good mother?

SEENA

All of us were good mothers. Even the mothers of Nazis were good mothers. It's an expected trait.

ERICA

Unless you're unmarried. . . Like me.

SEENA

Shut up. I want to sleep.

ERICA

They are going to put twenty bullets through your heart. You'll sleep most soundly soon enough. Tell me about yourself. I want to speak up for you. In your favor. I need something to say.

SEENA

Why?

ERICA

Because. . . Because I have to. I don't know why. I don't even like you.

SEENA

All the more reason to leave me alone.

ERICA

Then damn you. Damn.

Silence. She climbs onto the table and tries to turn out the light.

SEENA

What are you doing?

ERICA

I want the light out.

SEENA
It won't go out.

ERICA
How do you know?

SEENA
I tried.

ERICA
I could shatter the bulb.

SEENA
Do and they'll make you eat the pieces.

ERICA
If it's dark when they come back, we could take them by surprise.
They won't see us.

SEENA
I'll tell them where you are. What is your name?

ERICA
Erica -- Erica von Kliest. Why?

SEENA
Do you believe in Heaven, Erica von Kliest?

ERICA
I don't know. My believing in it doesn't make it so. If it's
there, it's there whether I believe in it or not. Do you?

SEENA
Once upon a time, yes. But now? No, there is no heaven. Only
silence. Lots and lots of silence. If it is that way, I long
for it.

ERICA
If they come for me next, will you speak up for me?

SEENA
How can I? I just learned your name. I don't know you.

ERICA
I'll tell you anything you want to know. Ask me something.
Anything.

SEENA
Do you pray?

ERICA

What has that to do with anything?

SEENA

Nothing. Do you?

ERICA

Sometimes. Yes, I suppose you can call thinking a sort of prayer. I do a lot of thinking. . . Especially at night after everyone's gone to sleep.

SEENA

No, it's not the same. Prayer is seeking something, asking for something from a being greater than yourself. Prayer is something -- quite special. It has nothing to do with controlled thought. When they take me, will you pray for me?

ERICA

I -- I -- sure. Glad to.

SEENA

Tell the truth. Will you?

ERICA

Why not? I mean. . .

(pause)

I can't. I don't know how.

SEENA

Thanks, anyway.

ERICA

I'm sorry. I just couldn't. . . I mean, I never have. . . I don't see how I could start now. Maybe if you taught me, told me what to do, what to say. . .

SEENA

Forget it.

ERICA

Please. Teach me.

SEENA

Leave me alone.

ERICA

I want to pray for myself. Please?

(pause)

You're scum. I hope they come for you next. You're scum!

SEENA

If I knew how to pray, I'd teach you. That's the God's truth. I don't know how myself.

ERICA

I thought you were Jewish.

SEENA

By birth, yes. Judaism is a man's world. Oh, I believe, but I left it all to my husband and my father. . . I never took interest in any of that.

(ERICA laughs)

What's so funny?

ERICA

Now I know what I can say in your favor.

SEENA

I don't want you saying anything.

ERICA

But I must, don't you understand? I have to.

SEENA

I understand.

ERICA

If they come for me next, tell them I'm the sole support of my mother. She's sick and a widow. That my father was killed at Verdun leading a German attack against the French entrenchment. Tell them, will you? It's not much. Tell them I'm engaged to a chemistry student, all right? Because I am. . . I was. . . I'm here while he studies at the university. But I have to go back home to my mother, poor thing. She misses me. I'm not a bad sort, not really. We haven't hit it off so well, but I get edgy. But don't we all? I've taken excellent care of my mother. . . I don't know how she would get on without me. I haven't seen her in six months and she needs me. . . That's not a lie. She needs me! Will you tell them?

SEENA

I'll tell them.

ERICA

Will you honestly?

SEENA

I'll tell them.

ERICA
 How can I thank you? You'll really speak in my favor?

SEENA
 Yes.

ERICA
 Thank you, thank you. . . What can I do for you?

SEENA
 Leave me alone.

Long pause.

ERICA
 Would you care to practice?

SEENA
 Practice what?

ERICA
 What you're going to say. You could tell me what you're going to say, as though I'm the German. That way, we can see if you've got it right. You can call me Rica, if you want. All my friends call me Rica.

(sound of key in the lock)

Oh my God. . . Oh my God. . . Oh my God. . .

NAZI MAJOR enters, followed by the GUARD.

NAZI MAJOR
 Erica von Kliest?
 (silence)
 Erica von --

ERICA
 Yes.

NAZI MAJOR
 You have been tried and found guilty of the crime of treason against the Third Reich. You have been sentenced to execution by firing squad. Do you have anything you wish to say?

ERICA
 Yes, I do. I don't know what's going on. I don't even know what the Third Reich is, for Heaven's sake. I'm not political. I'm a-political. How can I have done anything against --

NAZI MAJOR

Is that all?

(to SEENA)

Is there anything you want to say in favor of Erica von Kliest?

SEENA turns away. Silence.

ERICA

You promised.

(silence)

You promised!! You said you'd tell them. Tell them I'm not one of you! Tell them -- tell them!

Silence.

NAZI MAJOR

Take her away.

Erica is taken out by the Guard followed by the NAZI MAJOR. The door is locked. ERICA's voice is heard as she is dragged away, screaming. A deep silence begins. SEENA sits on the bunk, closes her eyes. From a distance comes the sound of a firing squad. Total silence. After a time, SEENA rises, paces the room. She stops at the table and begins beating it with her open palms, developing a rhythm, filling the quiet with her sound. She stops and listens to the quiet. She sits, puts her head in her hands. In a moment, she rises, and addresses the silence.

SEENA

My name is Catherina Meyerson Palkovic. I am thirty-one years old and have lived out my life without once leaving the side of my loved ones -- my father, my mother, my husband, my child. . . Now I am here. I am here because I was born a Jew. And I have never lived the life a Jew must live. I have remained on the neutral ground. I have been peripheral. I wanted not to be seen or heard by You. And now I am here. This is where my lack of faith has brought me. There is only You and me now, and I don't even know who You are. I've never needed You before. And now You're all I have. That is the irony of it. It's almost funny, but I'm too frightened to laugh. Is it such a sin to be a Jew? Is it so unforgivable that you should deign to punish us in this way? I am Me. . . I am a Woman with skin and hair and feelings -- and children with many more potential children

inside me! And I don't understand my crime. Is it just being that is the crime? If I'm going to die, I would really like to understand. . . Enlighten me. Help me to. . . to. . .

The door opens and the NAZI MAJOR enters followed by the GUARD.

NAZI MAJOR

Seena Perselleski.

SEENA

What?

NAZI MAJOR

Seena Perselleski.

SEENA

There is no one here by -- I'm Catherina Meyerson Palkovic.

NAZI MAJOR

Seena Perselleski!

SEENA

There must be a mistake.

NAZI MAJOR

Answer when you are called.

SEENA

But I'm Catherina --

NAZI MAJOR

Seena Perselleski!

SEENA

Yes.

NAZI MAJOR

You have been tried and found guilty of treason against the Third Reich. You have been sentenced to execution by firing squad. Do you have anything to say?

SEENA

My name is Catherina -

NAZI MAJOR

Do you have anything to say!

SEENA

No.

NAZI MAJOR

Take her away.

SEENA

Wait. You didn't ask if there was someone who might speak in my favor.

NAZI MAJOR

You had your opportunity.

SEENA

But you haven't asked --

NAZI MAJOR

You had your opportunity and you let it slip away. Take her out.

SEENA

(to GUARD)

Will you speak for me?

GUARD

These stinking women. . .

NAZI MAJOR

Take her out.

(The GUARD takes SEENA away.)

You, come here.

(RUTH enters, bucket and rags in hand)

I want this cell scrubbed until it shines and I can comb my hair in my reflection. When you've finished, start on the hall. I'll send someone for you later.

RUTH

Yes, sir.

NAZI MAJOR

By the way. . .

RUTH

Sir?

NAZI MAJOR

I have good news for you. I've reduced your sentence to ten years, light labor.

(pause)

You don't have to thank me.

RUTH

Thank you, sir.

NAZI MAJOR

You see? We're not really so bad, are we.

He leaves. RUTH scrubs the floor. The sound of a firing squad is heard. The lights fade.

End of Play.

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