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SHELAGH STEPHENSON
THE MEMORY OF WATER

EDITED BY STEVE LEWIS

B L O O M S B U R Y

SHELAGH STEPHENSON

The Memory of Water

with commentary and notes by
STEVE LEWIS

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Steve Lewis would like to thank Shelagh Stephenson for her helpful comments and Richard Johnson for access to his comprehensive archive of theatre programmes.

Shelagh Stephenson

- 1955 November: born in Tynemouth, Northumberland. Middle child of five sisters. Brought up Catholic.
- 1967 Attends Whitley Bay Grammar School, studying A levels in English, History and French.
- 1974 Studies Drama at Manchester University.
- 1977 Works as an actor in theatre and television, –87 including a season with the Royal Shakespeare Company (1981).
- 1989 *Lethal Cocktails*, a play for radio, broadcast.
- 1990 *Eating in Our Dreams*, a play for radio, with Anna Massey and Phoebe Nichols, directed by Jeremy Mortimer.
- 1993 *Darling Peidi*, a radio drama, directed by Jeremy Mortimer, broadcast on BBC Radio 4. About Edith Thompson and her lover Frederick Bywaters who were hanged for the murder of her husband in 1923.
- 1994 *The Anatomical Venus*, a play for radio, directed by Jeremy Mortimer.
- 1995 *Bonjour Tristesse*, a dramatisation of Françoise Sagan's 1950s classic story, broadcast on radio, directed by Eoin O'Callaghan. The cast included Emily Mortimer, Lindsay Duncan and Helen Baxendale.
- 1996 *Five Kinds of Silence*, the original radio version, broadcast, winning the Writers' Guild Award for Best Original Play and the Mental Health Media Award for Best Radio Play. Cast included Tom Courtenay, Lesley Sharp, Julia Ford and Sue Johnston, directed by Jeremy Mortimer. *The Memory of Water* produced in July at the Hampstead Theatre, London, directed by Terry

- Johnson with Haydn Gwynne, Jane Booker and Matilda Ziegler playing Mary, Teresa and Catherine. Writes two episodes of the BBC series, *Casualty*, entitled *A Taste of Freedom* and *Always on My Mind*.
- 1997 *An Experiment with an Air Pump* is the joint recipient of the Peggy Ramsay Award for new plays. *Five Kinds of Silence* awarded the Society of Authors Sony Awards for Best Radio Play.
- 1998 February: *An Experiment with an Air Pump* opens at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, directed by Matthew Lloyd. It transfers to the Hampstead Theatre in October with Barbara Flynn in the Susannah/Ellen role. *The Memory of Water* opens in a new autumn touring production, directed by Terry Johnson. Mary, Teresa and Catherine played by Samantha Bond, Alison Steadman and Julia Sawalha. *The Memory of Water* has its American premiere at New York's Manhattan Club.
- 1999 The touring production of *The Memory of Water* transfers to the Vaudeville Theatre in the West End. *An Experiment with an Air Pump* has its American premiere at New York's Manhattan Club.
- 2000 May: stage version of *Five Kinds of Silence* produced at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, directed by Ian Brown. *The Memory of Water* wins the Olivier Award for Best Comedy. November: *Ancient Lights* produced at the Hampstead Theatre, London, directed by Ian Brown.
- 2002 A radio version of *An Experiment with an Air Pump* broadcast on BBC Radio 3, directed by Eoin O'Callaghan. The film version of *The Memory of Water* is released, retitled *Before You Go*. The screenplay is written by Shelagh Stephenson; the film stars Julie Walters (Teresa), Victoria Hamilton (Catherine) and Joanne Whalley (Mary), directed by Lewis Gilbert and produced

- by Eoin O'Callaghan. October: *Mappa Mundi* is produced at the National Theatre's Cottesloe Theatre, directed by Bill Alexander. Writes episode one of a three-part television series *Helen West*, starring Amanda Burton.
- 2003 Wins the prestigious Sloan Commission Award in New York. *The Affairs of Men*, a two-part series for Four Boys Films, Los Angeles.
- 2004 *Life's a Dream* broadcast as a BBC Radio 4 Afternoon Play in May and *Through a Glass Darkly* on BBC Radio 3 in June, both directed by Eoin O'Callaghan.
- 2005 March: *Enlightenment* produced at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, directed by Ben Barnes. Marries Eoin O'Callaghan. *Not a Love Story*, film commissioned by Channel 4.
- 2006 *The Anatomical Venus*, film commissioned by Pacificus Productions.
- 2008 *The Long Road*, written for Synergy Theatre as part of the Forgiveness Project, produced at the Soho Theatre, London.

Plot

Act One

Mary is lying in the bed of her mother, Vi, who has recently died. The scene is dreamlike because the Vi who appears is a ghost of Mary's mother when she was in her forties. A green tin box with chrysanthemums on it, containing some papers, is on Mary's mind and she asks her mother if she knows where it is, but Vi says she has no idea.

There is a blackout and when the lights come up, Mary gets up from the bed and starts rifling through some of the drawers. The phone rings and she speaks to someone she obviously knows (Mike who arrives later in the scene). The sound of the phone ringing has attracted the attention of Teresa who is Mary's elder sister. Teresa presumes that it was Mary's boyfriend on the phone and makes it clear that she does not approve of her younger sister going out with a married man. All Mary wants to do is get some sleep but Teresa wants to know where their younger sister Catherine is. This leads on to some confused reminiscences about their childhood.

Mary tries to settle back down in bed and pulls out a breast pump from under the covers which turns out to have been their mother's. Mary brings up the subject of their father's funeral and reminds Teresa that her mobile phone went off during the service. They differ in their memory of whether Teresa answered her phone or not. Mary is uncomfortable about sleeping in their mother's bed especially as she's found a toenail. Teresa picks up a medical book which Mary has brought with her and they argue about the fact that Mary cannot forget her work as a doctor and it was Teresa who had to look after their sick mother. They try to talk about funeral arrangements and their younger sister Catherine bursts in carrying lots of shopping. Catherine describes her journey in the taxi, complains about

a stomach pain and grabs the whisky. Teresa does her concerned-older-sister act, saying that they have been worried about her, but Catherine insists that she has merely been out shopping to cheer herself up. Mary just wants to go back to sleep.

Catherine wants to know if her Spanish boyfriend, Xavier, has phoned which leads to another argument. Catherine wants some painkillers which raises the subject of Teresa's belief in alternative medicines and therapies. As a qualified medical practitioner Mary has little time for unconventional medical treatments. Catherine goes off 'to have a hot bath and a joint' but soon returns to try out some of her new clothes when she finds there is no hot water. Teresa recalls how she and Frank, her husband, received the news about their mother's death at the hospital: Teresa's reaction was laughter. Teresa is tense and Catherine offers her a puff of the joint she is smoking.

During the next section the sisters talk about their mother who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease and Catherine is convinced that their mother hated her. She recalls a time when she was left on a beach as a child but Teresa insists that it happened to Mary. Teresa finds her lost organiser and wants to get on and organise the flowers for the funeral. The phone rings and Mary gets to it before Catherine, who hopes it is her boyfriend, but then the phone goes dead. Catherine recounts a story about a funeral she went to in Spain, while she makes a sandwich. Mary mentions to Teresa that she has been having dreams about their mother and they realise that she never talked to either of them about sex.

There is a banging at the window and it is Mike who has been trying to get in. He climbs in through the window and is introduced by Mary to Teresa and Catherine for the first time. Catherine recognises Mike from the television because he is a celebrity doctor. They talk and she bursts into tears, which Teresa and Mary recognise as her attempt to get attention. The phone rings again and Catherine answers it only to discover that it is Frank, Teresa's husband.

Mary and Mike are left alone. They soon get on to the

subject of Mike's wife. Mary is angry because Mike's reason for not wanting to leave his wife is that she is very ill but Mary has seen a photograph of them together at a party. Mike gets into the bed to keep warm but Mary sits primly on the edge of it. The subject of her patient with memory loss comes up and Mike makes reference to some experiments that suggest that water has memory. Mary tells Mike that she thinks she is pregnant but he says that he cannot be the father because he has had a vasectomy.

Teresa returns with black bin bags, followed by Catherine who is smoking another joint. They both jump to the conclusion that Mike and Mary have been having sex. Teresa starts to take clothes out of the wardrobe and Catherine rummages through them looking for things to try on. Mike is recruited to hold open the bags, one for rubbish and one for charity clothes. Teresa becomes light-headed from the drags she takes from Catherine's joint and before long she and Catherine are dressing up in their dead mother's clothes. Mary is exasperated and starts stuffing clothes into the bin bags, while discussing Mike's vasectomy which was carried out by a surgeon who is about to be struck off the medical register. By this time Mary has put on the dress that she dreamed her mother was wearing at the beginning of the play and Frank enters to witness all three sisters screeching with laughter wearing 1950s/60s dresses. Frank regales them with his tale of the terrible journey he has had from Düsseldorf, meets Mike and is persuaded to take a photograph of the three sisters. As they pose for the photograph, the ghost of Vi joins them and the lights fade on a still image of a mother and her three daughters.

Act Two

Scene One

Mary is alone with Vi and asks her again if she knows the whereabouts of the chrysanthemum tin. Vi cannot understand how her three daughters have turned out the way they have and why they remember things differently

from how she does. They seem to have forgotten everything she did for them when they were growing up and instead focus on what was wrong with their childhood. Vi says she is proud of Mary's achievements but that Mary has no humility and is ashamed of her own mother. Vi says that she and Mary have more in common than Mary would like to believe.

Scene Two

Catherine is praying for the phone to ring. When Mary enters, Catherine gives in and dials Xavier's number. She gets through to someone in Spain but is cut off. Teresa and Frank enter and Catherine pretends that she has been speaking to Xavier. Teresa gives Mary a florist's catalogue and organises Frank to take the black plastic bin bags out to the car. Catherine meanwhile is providing reasons why Xavier might not make it to the funeral. Mike has been having a hot bath and comes in with a towel around him, holding his clothes. Mary makes her choice of funeral flowers but Catherine refuses to choose a wreath and shuts herself in the wardrobe. Frank suggests that she should stay off the drugs and she shoots out of the wardrobe when the phone rings: it is Xavier calling her. It is apparent from Catherine's reaction that Xavier is ending their relationship but, when she gets off the phone, she simply announces that he will not be attending the funeral.

Catherine tries to pretend that she is not upset but eventually she shows her emotions by throwing a tin across the room, narrowly missing Frank, and bursting into tears. Before rushing from the room, Catherine lets the assembled company know that she has been to a therapist and that Xavier is one of a long line of men who have treated her badly because, she says, she is too giving. Mike expresses some sympathy for Catherine only to be shot down by Teresa who, fuelled by a glass of whisky, reminds him that he has been 'two-timing his wife'. Frank tries to apologise for Teresa's behaviour but she is in full flight, suggesting to Mary that they are just like their mother who always took

their father's side even though he spent most of his life ignoring her. Teresa brings up the fact that their mother managed to hide Mary's teenage pregnancy from their father and that the baby was adopted. Taking more drink, Teresa shows all the resentment she feels about the way Mary received preferential treatment as a child. Upset by Teresa's verbal attack on her, Mary walks out, followed by Mike, leaving Frank and Teresa alone together.

Frank chastises Teresa for her drunken behaviour and she starts to cry. The exchange between husband and wife provides an insight into their marriage. Frank is fed up with trying to sell their health-food products and Teresa feels that he is not the 'witty and entertaining' man she thought she married and suspects him of having an affair. Teresa reacts to Frank's idea of giving up his role in their health-food business to run a pub by rushing out of the room to be sick, passing Catherine on the way. Catherine asks Frank's advice about Xavier and ends up settling her head in his lap. Catherine accuses Frank of being like all men and misreading the signals after she has hugged and kissed him. Mary and Mike return and are left alone by Catherine and Frank.

Mary has found the tin she has been looking for and explains to Mike that she wants to get in touch with the boy she had when she was fourteen: she finds his birth certificate in the tin. Mary is pleased that she is pregnant but Mike makes it clear to her that he does not want any more children. Frank and Catherine return with the news that Teresa has arranged for their mother's coffin to be brought to the house for the night before the funeral.

Scene Three

It is the next morning and the closed coffin is in the room. Teresa gets off the phone and explains to Catherine that the funeral director is short-staffed. They discuss the size of their mother's coffin and Catherine's lack of success with boyfriends. Teresa says she has found the right man in Frank but Catherine says that he reminds her of their father.

Mary arrives dressed for the funeral having spent the night in a hotel. Catherine goes off to get dressed. Teresa apologises to Mary for her drunken behaviour and Mary retrieves the tin from under the bed. Teresa grabs the tin from Mary and they fight over it. Mary wants to know the reason for Teresa's odd behaviour. Teresa is forced to reveal that Patrick, the boy Mary bore when she was fourteen, was killed in an accident and that she and their mother have known about it for some time. Teresa leaves to help Frank find his trousers.

The lights change and Vi enters to look at herself in the coffin. Vi explains that she thought it best not to tell Mary about Patrick's death because Mary was in the middle of her finals. She blames Mary for being distant. Mary asks Vi what it was like during the last months of her life with most of her memories gone. Vi leaves, saying that she forgives Mary and Mary breaks down in tears. Teresa and Frank come in and Teresa's idea of helping Mary in her grief is to provide Rescue Remedy and aconite. Mary announces that her pregnancy was not real and Catherine enters wearing an inappropriately short skirt. Frank takes a phone call from the undertakers who are on their way but require some extra help. They have a drink and make awkward remarks about the coffin until the hearse arrives. Mike and Frank clumsily carry the coffin out of the room and the sisters share a memory of their mother as they put on their coats. Frank and Teresa leave for the funeral with Catherine; Mary and Mike remain behind for a moment. Mary knows that, like the idea of water having a memory, a memory of her mother will always be with her. She gives Mike one last chance to make a decision about leaving his wife to be with her but he fails to commit himself. They leave for the funeral.

Commentary

Background

Writing in the *Spectator*, Sheridan Morley observed, 'If 1999 carries on the way it has started, theatrically this new year is going to be a rough one for the male of the species; five of them turn up in the first two plays of the season, Liz Lochhead's *Perfect Days* and Shelagh Stephenson's *The Memory of Water*, and all are a complete and utter waste of space.' These two plays, notably by female playwrights, were produced in London's West End after considerable success in Edinburgh and Hampstead respectively and mark the end of a decade that will probably be remembered best for the notoriety of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) and the unprecedented international commercial success of Yasmina Reza's *Art* (1996). At the time of Shelagh Stephenson's professional stage playwriting debut established playwrights like David Edgar (*Pentecost*, 1995), David Hare (*Skylight*, 1995) and Pam Gems (*Stanley*, 1996) were having their latest works premiered. New writers on the scene included Patrick Marber (*Dealer's Choice*, 1995) and Mark Ravenhill (*Shopping and Fucking*, 1996).

The Memory of Water had a comparatively quiet reception in the summer of 1996 compared with the outraged reaction by most of the press to *Blasted* the previous year which was due mostly to that play's depiction of the brutality of a male journalist towards a young woman and its scenes of anal rape and cannibalism. Established playwrights including Edward Bond and Harold Pinter publicly defended Kane's play and admired the talent of the then twenty-four-year-old playwright. During the time of the revival of *The Memory of Water*, Sarah Kane committed suicide (in February 1999) having suffered from severe depression for most of her life. *Art*, on the other hand, is considered to be a much more lightweight work and owes much of its success to the

producers' idea of re-casting the three male roles with different star names from the world of television and film every six weeks. Sheridan Morley dismisses *Art* as 'coffee-table theatre, the snob hit at its most snobbish, nicely short so that tired businessmen and their clients can make it into a restaurant by 9.30 pm' (Morley and Leon, *A Century of Theatre*, Oberon Books, 2000). However, the principle of using three star names in the leading roles was applied to the revival production of *The Memory of Water* and helped to bring Shelagh Stephenson's work to the attention of a much wider audience.

What is significant about the position of Reza and Kane at the end of the 1990s is the fact that they are equal to their male counterparts. This was far from the situation, though, in the late 1970s, when Shelagh Stephenson, as a drama student at Manchester University, encountered few plays by women. With some notable exceptions, Aphra Benn (1640–89) and Fanny Burney (1752–1840) among them, there are not many women dramatists in the history of British theatre prior to the twentieth century. It was during her time as an actress in the early 1980s that Shelagh Stephenson discovered the work of Caryl Churchill, who led the way as a female playwright with successes such as *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982). Like Churchill in the early part of her career, Stephenson started writing plays for BBC radio and it was through this medium that she developed and honed her skills as a playwright. After eight years of practicing her craft as a writer, her first stage play, *The Memory of Water*, emerged and was well received when it was produced at Hampstead Theatre in 1996.

I looked upon it [her time spent writing for radio] as a carpentry apprenticeship. I knew that eventually I was going to write plays for the stage. I was also convinced – much more than my bank manager – that one day it would all work out. But I was prepared to be patient. (Interview with Lyn Gardner in the *Guardian*, 1999)

Working in the theatre as an actress for ten years, whatever

she might have felt about her acting ('I was a very bad actress. And I always wanted to be a writer really. Acting was just a way of putting off the fatal moment', interview for the Watford Palace production, 2005), this must have stood her in good stead in making the transition from radio to stage, where the way of working is a much more collaborative process between writer, actors and director. As an actress she came to playwriting with the first-hand experience of the way in which a script needs to be shaped in rehearsal and how much of it can be open to interpretation. In her introduction to the first collected volume of her plays (Methuen, 2003), Stephenson has this to say about the writing process:

When you're writing a play, you have a tenuous notion of what it might be about, the world you feel you are exploring. When you've finished it, you read through and feel uncertain as to whether you've achieved a tenth of what you set out to do. The issue is clouded by the fact that at this stage, you can't remember in any truthful way what galvanised you in the first place. All you can do is ask yourself: does it have three-dimensionality, rhythm, dramatic drive and structure? Does it deal with truth? With luck you may be able to say 'yes' to most of these questions. By the time you get into rehearsals, you've handed the remaining intractable problems over to the actors and director. Collaboratively, you try to bring the play to its full potential. Sometimes it works better than others: it can be a dispiriting business. But it can also be a joyous one.

With *The Memory of Water* Stephenson was particularly fortunate to work with Terry Johnson who is not only an experienced theatre director but also a highly accomplished and successful playwright in his own right, whose plays include *Insignificance* (1982), *Dead Funny* (1994) and *Camping, Cleo, Emmanuelle and Dick* (1998) which, like *The Memory of Water*, won the Olivier Award for Best Comedy two years earlier. The play was nurtured in the subsidised theatre sector at Hampstead Theatre, which has a policy of developing and producing new writing, and it achieved both commercial and further artistic success in the West End and on tour, casting 'big names' in the roles of the three sisters.

Alison Steadman, who played Teresa, was well known through her work with the writer/director Mike Leigh, having created the role of Abigail in *Abigail's Party*, and also through starring with Colin Firth as Mrs Bennett in the BBC's acclaimed 1995 version of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Julia Sawalha was cast as the youngest sister, Catherine, having played Lydia Bennett opposite Alison Steadman in the same production of *Pride and Prejudice*, and Saffron in Jennifer Saunders's television comedy series, *Absolutely Fabulous*. The part of Mary was played by Samantha Bond who reached international fame through her appearance as Miss Money Penny in the four James Bond films, starring Pierce Brosnan, made between 1995 and 2002. The calibre of this cast and the publicity the play received as a result contributed to the play's success and helped to boost both audience and press attention.

However, Stephenson is somewhat self-deprecating about her achievement with *The Memory of Water* when she says, 'It was a good first play, no more. I'm only proud of bits of it. It was a play I had to get out of the way. Afterwards I thought, now I can write what I want' (Lyn Gardner interview, 1999). Between *The Memory of Water*'s first Hampstead production in 1996 and the 1999 revival, Stephenson was hard at work on her next three plays, *An Experiment with an Air Pump* (premiered at Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre in February 1998), a stage adaptation of her radio play *Five Kinds of Silence* (Lyric Hammersmith, London, May 2000) and a new play for the Hampstead Theatre, *Ancient Lights* (November 2000).

From July to October 2000, Shelagh Stephenson kept a diary account of her writing activities which provides an interesting insight into the way she approaches her work. At the time the diary was written, she had just completed the script for *Ancient Lights* and was starting work on her next play, *Mappa Mundi*. The diary as a whole captures the way in which she becomes obsessed with ideas and how some work and others just take her down blind alleys. It also conveys the difficult process of writing a play and how walking the dog and other displacement activities are

preferable to the task of sitting down and working. At one point she asks herself: 'How *does* one write a play? How did I write the other ones? I can't remember. Shall I start at the beginning and plough on until the end? I think that's how I wrote *An Experiment with an Air Pump*. I also recall that I was stuck on page six for six months.' The interesting thing about *The Memory of Water* is that, apart from the reference in the title, there is very little in the play that is based on detailed research, unlike Stephenson's later plays. While it is not necessarily autobiographical, the personal experience of losing her own mother when she started work on *The Memory of Water* and being one of five sisters inevitably had some influence on her writing. In an interview for the programme of the 2005 Watford Palace production, Stephenson says, 'The characters in the play aren't consciously based on my own experiences. On the other hand, they must come into it somewhere.'

Genre

The fact that *The Memory of Water* won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Comedy would suggest that the play could simply be classified as such, but if it is a comedy, it is not one with a happy ending nor is it one that uses subject matter (death) usually associated with laughter. The play is comic in the sense that there are many humorous interchanges between the characters and some extremely funny lines but the overall tone of the play is somewhat melancholic. The opening scene between Vi and Mary is set in the hinterland of dreams and, although it is not immediately apparent that Vi is Mary's recently deceased mother, her description of the house disappearing into the sea sets up an atmosphere of loss:

Vi The sea. Fifty yards closer. It'll take the house eventually. All gone without trace. Nothing left. And all the life that happened here, drowned, sunk. As if it had never been. (p. 1)

However, six lines later, Vi is reading the titles of the heavy medical books that Mary has on the bedside table and the