

The Furrow

An extract from the play by Phil Tong

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ACT ONE SCENE ONE

THE ACTION TAKES PLACE IN AN ANGLO-IRISH HOUSEHOLD IN 1912. IN THE BLACKOUT WE HEAR THE RINGING OF A SMALL HAND-BELL. THE LIGHTS COME UP TO REVEAL A CHILD'S NURSERY. THERE IS A FADED, DUSTY, EDWARDIAN QUALITY ABOUT THE ROOM AND THERE IS A LARGE ROCKING HORSE IN THE CENTRE OF THE ROOM. ALSO, ON A TALL STAND NEAR THE WINDOW IS AN ELABORATE BIRD CAGE WITH A CANARY INSIDE. THE BACK WALL OF THE NURSERY IS HALF PANELLED WITH THE TOP PORTION COMPRISING A FROSTED GLASS SCREEN; THIS GLASS PARTITION ALLOWS THE AUDIENCE A SENSE OF MOVEMENT ALONG THE TOP CORRIDOR OF THE OLD HOUSE. A YOUNG WOMAN, NIAMH, STANDS LOOKING OUT OF A LARGE OPEN WINDOW. THERE IS JUST THE SUGGESTION THAT SHE HAS BEEN CRYING AND IS PERHAPS WIPING A TEAR AWAY AS SHE STANDS AT THE WINDOW.

OFFSTAGE THE SMALL HAND-BELL RINGS AGAIN AND REPEATS AT INTERVALS. THE YOUNG WOMAN DOES NOT MOVE. AFTER A SHORT WHILE A YOUNG BUT CRIPPLED WOMAN IS SEEN TO MOVE DOWN THE CORRIDOR AT THE REAR OF THE NURSERY AND THEN DISAPPEARS INTO ANOTHER OFFSTAGE ROOM. WE HEAR THE SOUND OF WOMEN'S VOICES BUT EXACTLY WHAT IS SAID IS NOT DISCERNIBLE. AFTER A SHORT INTERVAL THE WOMAN, DEIRDRE, MOVES BACK ALONG THE CORRIDOR, STOPS AND THEN TURNS AND HEADS BACK TOWARDS THE NURSERY. WE HEAR THE TAP OF HER STICK IN THE CORRIDOR UNTIL SHE FINALLY ENTERS THE ROOM.

DEIRDRE

She's been ringing that bell for the past ten minutes. Can you not hear?

*NIAMH DOES NOT ANSWER AND
CONTINUES TO LOOK OUT OF THE
WINDOW.*

DEIRDRE (CONT ' D)

I said...

NIAMH

I heard.

DEIRDRE

Then why didn't you go to her?

NIAMH

You know why.

DEIRDRE

It's hard for me to get up and down those stairs quickly.

NIAMH

You manage well enough.

DEIRDRE

But sometimes it would be nice if you'd take a turn.

NIAMH

If it's a problem, I'm sure Mrs. O'Connell can set a maid to it.

DEIRDRE

You know that's not what I meant. If just once in a while...

NIAMH

She likes it best when you go.

DEIRDRE

You don't know that.

*NIAMH IS SILENT. SHE REFUSES TO
ANSWER*

DEIRDRE (CONT ' D)

And what happens when I'm not here?

NIAMH

You're always here.

DEIRDRE

But if I'm not?

NIAMH

It won't be my problem after tomorrow.

DEIRDRE

You can walk away just like that?

NIAMH

Yes.

DEIRDRE

Whatever's happened in this house, Niamh, she's still family.

NIAMH

Not to me.

DEIRDRE

She'll always be your mother.

NIAMH

She gave birth to me. That's all.

DEIRDRE

You can be very cruel sometimes.

NIAMH

No, Deirdre; cruel is what she is. I'm just indifferent.

DEIRDRE

Why can't you just see things from her point of view? She never recovered after your birth...

NIAMH

And I've been blamed ever since.

DEIRDRE

Nobody blames you, Niamh. But she's sad.

NIAMH

We're all unhappy in this house.

DEIRDRE

She wanted so much for us all .

NIAMH

A touching thought.

DEIRDRE

Her heart is broken.

I doubt that. **NIAMH**

SILENCE

She asked after you today. **DEIRDRE**

Really. **NIAMH**

Wanted to know about the wedding. **DEIRDRE**

Why? **NIAMH**

She wants to be brought down for the ceremony. **DEIRDRE**

I don't want her there. **NIAMH**

She asked me not to say anything. **DEIRDRE**

You should have taken her advice. **NIAMH**

You've got her wrong. Despite everything, she still cares about you. **DEIRDRE**

I'm not interested. **NIAMH**

She's picked out a dress to wear, already. **DEIRDRE**

NIAMH LOOKS HORRIFIED.

Surely, just for one day... **DEIRDRE (CONT'D)**

I said no. **NIAMH**

I'm sure it's what father would want. **DEIRDRE**

NIAMH

I doubt that; a woman beside him who's been a stranger for the last seventeen years.

DEIRDRE

Not by her choice.

NIAMH

You can't be blind to the way things are.

DEIRDRE

They're still husband and wife.

NIAMH

In name only.

DEIRDRE

He still visits her everyday.

NIAMH

Duty. That's all.

SILENCE. DEIRDRE RECONSIDERS HER APPROACH

DEIRDRE

You should spend some time with her. She might have been confined to her bed all these years, but she still knows a thing or two about this family and about what goes on in this house.

NIAMH

I doubt that.

DEIRDRE

You might be surprised.

NIAMH

More stories, Deirdre? Don't you think there's been enough of those in this house?

DEIRDRE

Talk to her.

NIAMH

I don't want to.

DEIRDRE

Is it so wrong for us to behave like a normal family on your last day in this house?

Nice dream.

NIAMH

Please!

DEIRDRE

Don't beg, Deirdre; there's nothing so unattractive as a cripple begging.

NIAMH

SILENCE

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that.

NIAMH (CONT'D)

No. You shouldn't.

DEIRDRE

Forgive me.

NIAMH

Maybe. But forgiveness comes at a price.

DEIRDRE

No.

NIAMH

If you could just see your way...

DEIRDRE

I can't.

NIAMH

Why?

DEIRDRE

You wouldn't understand.

NIAMH

Why? Because I'm so dull and damaged?

DEIRDRE

That's not what I meant.

NIAMH

SILENCE

DEIRDRE

I know you and father are close.

NIAMH

No more than you and mother.

DEIRDRE

It's not the same though, is it?

NIAMH

I don't know what you mean? He confides in me. That's all. We talk.

THEY EXCHANGE A LOOK. SILENCE.

NIAMH (CONT'D)

And please don't take that tone when you speak of him. He deserves more respect. Everything we have; this life, the estate, it's all down to him.

DEIRDRE

Most of it inherited, or by courtesy of his 'prominent friends'.

NIAMH

And when did that become a crime?

DEIRDRE

Things are changing in this country, Niamh.

DEIRDRE (CONT'D)

The time's not so far off when...

NIAMH

All I see is a man who has devoted his every waking hour to building a good life for us here.

DEIRDRE (CONT'D)

But not for me.

NIAMH

You're as bitter as she is.

DEIRDRE

Don't I have cause?

NIAMH

You speak to me about forgiveness? Your accident was not his fault.

DEIRDRE

All I wanted was to please him.

NIAMH

So we're not so different then. Are we?

DEIRDRE REFLECTS

DEIRDRE

I never liked horses. Hunting. The doctors said I might lose this leg.

NIAMH

But you didn't.

DEIRDRE

No. It wasn't my leg I lost that day. And with your birth, mother joined me in 'splendid isolation'.

NIAMH

She still has his name, her home.

DEIRDRE

And very little else.

NIAMH

What does she expect? There's no comfort for him with her anymore.

DEIRDRE

Or maybe he just prefers to look elsewhere.

NIAMH

He's allowed his needs, Deirdre.

DEIRDRE

We all have needs.

NIAMH

So you do understand.

DEIRDRE

Oh I understand; the sound of footfall on the landings at night. You should know the creaking of floorboards in this house allows none of us any secrets. Do you never think how she might feel?

NIAMH

Tomorrow I'll be gone, and none of this will matter any more.

DEIRDRE

Not to you, maybe.

SILENCE

DEIRDRE (CONT'D)

It seems your 'husband to be' has already arrived with his party downstairs.

NIAMH

I know. I saw them from the window.

DEIRDRE

They say it's bad luck to see your husband before a wedding.

NIAMH

What difference can one more misfortune make?

DEIRDRE

I had hoped that tomorrow might be a good day for all of us.

NIAMH IGNORES THIS AND WALKS BACK TO THE WINDOW AND STARES OUT.

DEIRDRE (CONT'D)

You still miss Aine?

NIAMH

We were like sisters.

DEIRDRE

I know.

NIAMH

And still no one will tell me why she was sent away.

SILENCE. NIAMH SENSES SOMETHING IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN AND SLOWLY TURNS TO DEIRDRE.

NIAMH (CONT'D)

Do you know something? If you do, tell me. I asked father to have her brought back and he said he couldn't; that mother would never allow it.

DEIRDRE

He's right; she was adamant.

NIAMH

Does she really hate me that much?

DEIRDRE

You might not want to believe it, but she only has your best interests at heart.

NIAMH

How can you say that when I've had to prepare for this wedding alone?

DEIRDRE DECIDES ON A NEW APPROACH

DEIRDRE

I used to wonder sometimes how different things might have been if you and I had been closer. But maybe you might think better of me now.

NIAMH

Why?

DEIRDRE

You'll find out.

NIAMH

Tell me! Deirdre?

DEIRDRE

It'll spoil the surprise.

NIAMH

Please?

*DEIRDRE CONTEMPLATES THE MOMENT
BEFORE SPEAKING AGAIN*

DEIRDRE

I spoke to mother a few days ago. Asked her to reconsider; to let Aine return. At least until after you're married.

NIAMH

Why would you do that?

DEIRDRE

You were so unhappy.

NIAMH

Its not troubled you before.

DEIRDRE

As you say, the two of you were like sisters. This wedding is going to be a grand affair, a big occasion for the whole family. There are a lot of guests invited. Important people. And if it's all going to happen without a hitch, I simply suggested that it might help if you had Aine with you.

NIAMH

So? What did she say?

DEIRDRE

She agreed.

NIAMH

I don't believe you.

DEIRDRE

Why would I lie about it?

NIAMH

You're teasing me!

DEIRDRE

I just thought that if you had Aine back you might be more willing to let mother attend the ceremony. It's a small concession to have your friend returned, surely.

NIAMH

And if I still say no?

DEIRDRE

I don't believe you're that hard hearted.

SILENCE. NIAMH DOES NOT QUITE KNOW WHAT TO SAY.

DEIRDRE (CONT'D)

Will you, at least, think about it?

NIAMH STEPS BACK TO THE WINDOW

NIAMH

I had a dream last night. As I watched from this window, a big black car drove in through the gates, up the drive and pulled up outside the front door. The door opened and Aine stepped out.

DEIRDRE

I wondered why you were in here.

NIAMH

I thought that if I came and stood here...

DEIRDRE

I can't promise she'll arrive in a big black car.

THEY BOTH SMILE AT THE THOUGHT

DEIRDRE (CONT'D)

You and I haven't been in here for a long time. Not since we were small children, in fact.

It's still the same.

NIAMH

And we still fight.

DEIRDRE

THEY HOLD A MOMENT

And tomorrow you'll be gone.

DEIRDRE (CONT'D)

I will. A new life.

NIAMH

THE HAND BELL RINGS ONCE MORE

She's calling again; I should go to her. Can I give her any news?

DEIRDRE

I'll think about it.

NIAMH

THE BELL RINGS AGAIN. DEIRDRE SMILES.

Thank you.

DEIRDRE

DEIRDRE EXITS. SHE'S THOUGHTFUL. NIAMH WATCHES HER GO AND THEN TURNS BACK TO THE WINDOW.

LIGHTS FADE SLOWLY TO BLACK.