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The Cell

A Play

Robert Wales

Samuel French – London

New York – Sydney – Toronto – Hollywood



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ISBN 978-0-573-11074-0

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THE CELL

This play was presented at the Independent Theatre, Sydney, Australia on 24th February, 1966 with the following cast:

SISTER CATHERINE	Joan Winchester
SISTER LEONORA	Mavis Turner
SISTER VEYNARD	Heather Christie
MOTHER DENIS	Pat McDonald
FATHER MORRIS	Max Meldrum
EILEEN	Vivienne Nicoll
SISTER MATTHEW	Anne Hardy
SISTER GONZAGA	Doreen Warburton
FIRST GIRL	Mary Baldwinson
SECOND GIRL	Honey Andresson
NUNS	Jean Calver, Thais White

Directed by Peter Summerton

Decor by Michelle

The action of the play takes place in a Convent whose nuns care for delinquent girls.

ACT I	Prologue	The Chapel early morning
	Scene 1	The Convent mid-morning
	Scene 2	Mid-day
	Scene 3	Late afternoon
ACT II	Scene 1	Morning a few days later
	Scene 2	Late that afternoon
	Scene 3	The Convent Refectory and Sister Leonora's Cell - evening
ACT III	Scene 1	The Convent a few days later - morning
	Scene 2	A few days later - afternoon
	Scene 3	A few days later - night

Introduction

When writing a play, it is always the story which interests me first; a story has somehow arrived and, over some time, become increasingly disturbing - it refuses to go away. But it is not until the play is well under way, when the characters have assumed a life of their own, that the situation, one finds, demands a much closer examination, that themes begin to emerge.

The themes of 'The Cell' were not inserted, therefore, but were inherent in the beginning, although no conscious mind was at that time given to them. They were, indeed, what made the simple story disturbing; the simple story which can be taken as the lowest level of the play's action.

There are, of course, quite a few sub-themes, such as the relationship between the delinquency of the girl, Eileen, and what could be taken by some as the delinquency of Sister Catherine. Their causes cross paths, with responsibility being taken away on the one hand and given on the other in the scene between the two characters in Act II, Scene 2.

There is also the question of what is regarded as 'weakness' and what as 'strength' in our society, shown both in the action and in the dialogue.

Such inner themes, however, should present little difficulty to either reader or producer, but it would be as well to confess here for a better understanding of the play overall, that it was not until it was almost finished that I myself began to see what the main theme really was; the theme that is not directly stated in words but is nevertheless contained in the whole action from beginning to end. It is 'The Christian Dilemma', the duplicity of purpose in a Christian society, its material ambitions in direct conflict with its ideals. And here there may even be a wider application - a society destroying its ideals in the effort of protecting them.

For the most part, however, we in the Western world have been raised in a Christian-based society and it is for this reason that the play is set where it is - in one of the cores of Christianity, amongst people who have renounced the material world outside to reach for their godheads, only to find that the human condition still dominates them both.

Robert Wales.

THE CELL

The play is set in a convent of an order which cares for delinquent girls; girls who, considered by court and welfare authorities to be worth the risk of more temperate treatment, are released into the bond of the nuns rather than sent to prison. However, in appearances at least, there is little difference, for this is a place of high walls, shadows, locked doors and carried keys.

All the action takes place within the confines of the convent proper; an old building whose stones echo cries forgotten and cries of silence, backwards and forwards across its rooms, through doorways and rounding corridors but inescapably returning whence they came to be sheltered once again in the stone to await their resurrection.

But if the walls confine, the unseen ceilings seem infinite, and it is to here that the hands stretch out towards the darkness.

ACT ONE

Scene 1

The Matin bell tolls as the curtain rises on a darkened stage. The chants of nuns are distantly heard in hymn and a light begins to come up on SISTER CATHERINE, high above the main set. As the light rises the chanting of the hymn is clearly heard and moves easily into the same pitched chanting from the prayer of punishment and petition.

The chorus is relaxed and smoothly beautiful but SISTER CATHERINE's voice is slower and more deliberate, and bears an edge of desperation.

S. CATHERINE (chanting) To you, O Lord, I cried out.

CHORUS Come. Let us sing joyfully to the Lord.

S. CATHERINE With the Lord I pleaded;
What gain would there be from my life blood?

CHORUS Let us sing joyfully to the Lord.

S. CATHERINE From my going down into the grave?
Would dust give you thanks?

CHORUS Come. Let us sing joyfully to the Lord.

S. CATHERINE Or proclaim your faithfulness?
Hear, O Lord, and have pity on me. (She throws herself suddenly to her knees as the CHORUS begins again.)

CHORUS Let us sing joy -

S. CATHERINE God, help me, help me!

(The CHORUS suddenly stops. SISTER CATHERINE hesitates, then throws her face into her hands with a short cry, stopped almost where it began. The light immediately goes and the steady ticking of a clock begins, fading as the lights slowly rise on the set. This comprises the MOTHER SUPERIOR's office, corridors, the front door, another door leading from a corridor, and some way back, part of a stairway. SISTER LEONORA, a very small and birdlike woman, is standing at a small window in a corridor, temporarily holding open its curtains. Another nun, SISTER VEYNARD, of medium height and stout, enters from the far end of the corridor. SISTER LEONORA lets the curtains quickly fall but when she sees who it is, opens them again, looking out.)

S. LEONORA I knew the weather was going to be like this when I woke up this morning. You can tell. I mean they can tell.

S. VEYNARD They?

- S. LEONORA I wonder who it can be?
- S. VEYNARD It might be the new girl. I'd better ring.
(But she is stopped by SISTER LEONORA grabbing at a chair.)
- S. LEONORA New girl? (She hurriedly pushes the chair under a small Gothic window.) Nobody told me there was one coming this morning. (She scrambles up on to it.)
- S. VEYNARD I wish you'd stop playing Mata Hari when I'm around, making me your accomplice. (She goes quickly to the doorway to make sure nobody is coming, as curious as SISTER LEONORA but attempting not to show it.) And for heaven's sake, don't you fall.
- S. LEONORA (reaching on tiptoe to peep out) It's not our car.
- S. VEYNARD Ours is in the garage being fixed. Sister Matthew did something to the clutch.
- S. LEONORA But it's black.
- S. VEYNARD If the truth be known, she probably wore it out. I can sympathise with it.
- S. LEONORA I think it's the Police car.
(The car has stopped and SISTER LEONORA is craning her neck to keep it in view.)
- S. VEYNARD You think or you're sure?
- S. LEONORA It's got the police sign on top.
- S. VEYNARD You're becoming a real old cynic, too, aren't you?
- S. LEONORA They're getting out - well, yes, it must be, it is - there's Father Morris, bless him, smiling like a spring sunrise.
(Door slam.)
- S. VEYNARD You'd better hurry up and get down before you get caught.
- S. LEONORA I think I can see -
- S. VEYNARD And I think I can hear somebody coming - it's probably

Mother.

S. LEONORA (almost falling in her haste to get down) Mother?
I must get on, Sister Veynard, I have so much to do.
(She hurriedly replaces the chair where it was.)

(SISTER VEYNARD, putting down the bell, hurriedly
wipes the chair with a handkerchief.)

S. VEYNARD Fine kind of spy you'd make, leaving your dirty
footprints all over the place.

S. LEONORA I must find something for the girls.

(MOTHER DENIS has already appeared and is making
towards the office. SISTER LEONORA is making her
way out of it and almost crashes into her.)

M. DENIS What are you doing?

S. LEONORA Nothing, Mother.

(MOTHER DENIS sees SISTER VEYNARD inside.)

S. VEYNARD (in explanation) I was just passing and heard the
gate bell and since you weren't here -

(The door bell interrupts SISTER VEYNARD.)

M. DENIS (to SISTER LEONORA) Fetch Sister Matthew and
hurry up.

S. LEONORA (pleased to be off) Yes, Mother. (She hurries
out of sight in her birdlike way round a corridor.)

(MOTHER DENIS unhurriedly makes her way to her desk
to sit down and study a sheaf of papers. SISTER
VEYNARD nervously waits and watches her.)

M. DENIS If you heard the gate bell, why didn't you ring for me?

S. VEYNARD I - I was just about to, Mother.

M. DENIS You must be feeling very slow this morning, Sister.

S. VEYNARD Yes, Mother. (She makes to go.)

(The doorbell rings again.)

M. DENIS You'd better stay now in case I need you. (There
is a short pause while she reads.) They're nearly

an hour early. Those people are always either early or late but never on time.

S. VEYNARD Is it - is it the new girl, Mother?

M. DENIS You seem well informed.

S. VEYNARD Do you want me to go and get Sister Catherine?

M. DENIS (with a sudden flare) No, I don't want you to go and get Sister Catherine!

(The doorbell rings again. MOTHER DENIS calms herself.)

Please answer the door.

(SISTER VEYNARD goes to do so. MOTHER DENIS looks up and watches her go. SISTER VEYNARD reaches the door, waits a moment, opens it cautiously at first, then more widely. Revealed is FATHER MORRIS standing beside a girl of about sixteen. Directly behind her stands a Detective. The girl is obviously nervous but at the same time is attempting to appear a little impudent: that she takes all this kind of thing in her stride.)

S. VEYNARD (as a greeting) Father, Sergeant. Please come in.

F. MORRIS (cheerfully) Good morning, Sister Veynard, you're looking a masterpiece of health as ever. Here is a brand new daughter for you and a pretty one she is, too. (He goes to enter, his arm on the GIRL.)

(The GIRL is reluctant.)

Come on, it's all right, nobody's going to hurt you.

(The SERGEANT gives the GIRL a bit of pressure from behind, enough to push her in.)

S. VEYNARD (to the GIRL) And how are you, my dear?

DETECTIVE I'll wait outside in the car, Sister.

S. VEYNARD As you wish, Sergeant, as you wish. (She gently closes the door.)

(FATHER MORRIS eyes the girl who looks as if she's waiting to be attacked, darting glances this way and

that.)

F. MORRIS (to SISTER VEYNARD) Where's Sister Catherine?

S. VEYNARD I don't know, Father.

F. MORRIS I haven't seen her for some time. She's not ill or anything?

S. VEYNARD Oh, no no no.

(MOTHER DENIS is still sitting in her office, waiting.)

F. MORRIS (to the GIRL) They'll look after you well here. A lot of the girls like it so much they come back every year for the Christmas party. (He gives a little laugh.)

S. VEYNARD (leading the way) Mother's in the office.

(FATHER MORRIS goes to follow but the GIRL doesn't move.)

F. MORRIS (smiling encouragingly) Come on, it's all right.

(They enter the office and MOTHER DENIS rises.)

M. DENIS Good morning, Father.

F. MORRIS Good morning, Mother. We're a bit early I'm afraid, but it couldn't be helped and here we are. (He smiles at the GIRL.)

M. DENIS (holding out her hand) Come here, child.

(The GIRL doesn't move.)

S. VEYNARD (kindly) Go on.

(But still the GIRL stays and SISTER VEYNARD puts out a hand to touch her lightly for encouragement. But the GIRL's immediate reaction is to suddenly turn and flee for the front door. SISTER MATTHEW, a big-boned woman, is just coming down a corridor. The others, taken off guard, hurry out of the office after the GIRL, almost bumping into SISTER MATTHEW who is already running towards her.)

M. DENIS Get her, Sister Matthew - catch her!

(Almost as soon, SISTER MATTHEW is on the GIRL at

the front door.)

GIRL Take yer hands off us - get to hell! Leave us alone!

(SISTER VEYNARD has also got hold of the GIRL and they struggle. FATHER MORRIS, rather inadequately, joins in, but MOTHER DENIS just watches anxiously.)

F. MORRIS What's the matter? I told you nobody would touch you - there's nothing to be frightened of!

GIRL Take yer hands off me, you bastards! Let us go!
(She tries to spit and bite at SISTER MATTHEW.)

S. MATTHEW Calm yourself down and stop being a stupid little idiot!
(SISTER CATHERINE has appeared unnoticed on the staircase and stands there.)

S. VEYNARD A tantrum 'll only make it worse for you - now -

F. MORRIS Please try and behave yourself -

GIRL Bloody filthy bastards!

S. MATTHEW If you don't come to your senses -

S. CATHERINE (from the stairs in what is not so much an order as an appeal) Eileen!

(The GIRL suddenly stops struggling to turn towards the voice that spoke her name but is still held. SISTER CATHERINE descends the last of the stairs and comes silently towards her. They all watch her in silence as if hypnotised. She goes right up to the GIRL and the restraining hands slowly fall away.)

Come with me, Eileen. (She leads the GIRL away up the corridor towards a door, opens it and lets the GIRL go first.)

M. DENIS Sister Catherine!

S. CATHERINE (without turning) Yes, Mother?

M. DENIS I'd like to see you when you're finished.

S. CATHERINE Yes, Mother. (She goes through the door and closes it behind her.)

(The lights fade to darkness.)

Scene 2

MOTHER DENIS is sitting alone in her office, hands clasped together before her on the desk, waiting. In a moment SISTER MATTHEW enters from a corridor and is passing the office when she sees MOTHER DENIS sitting there. She stops. MOTHER DENIS begins to rise but sits down again.

- M. DENIS Sister Matthew. For a moment I thought it was Sister Catherine.
- S. MATTHEW (still from the door) Hasn't she been yet, Mother?
- M. DENIS No, not yet.
- S. MATTHEW (entering) She's certainly taking her time. I only hope it isn't deliberate. Do you want me to go and find her?
- M. DENIS No thanks, Sister, you've got enough running around to do as it is.
- S. MATTHEW It's no trouble, Mother. I have to go back down to the laundry in any case and on the way I can -
- M. DENIS There's no urgency. I said when she was finished.
- S. MATTHEW Surely she's finished by now. She took the girl through the laundry ages ago and she's had time to show her everything else a dozen times by now. She's got no right to keep you waiting like this. I'll go and get you a cup of coffee. (She begins to leave.)
- M. DENIS No wait.
- (SISTER MATTHEW stops.)
- Just come and sit down by me here.
- (SISTER MATTHEW slowly returns and does so.)
- It's strange, you know, Sister, but you help calm me so much more than a cup of coffee can ever do - just being by my side.
- (SISTER MATTHEW has put her hands on the desk and MOTHER DENIS stretches out one of hers to meet them.)

Perhaps it's because I know I can rely on you so much. A few moments ago I was really beginning to lose patience sitting here, but already I've regained it.

S. MATTHEW You flatter me, Mother. I only try to do what's best.

M. DENIS Yes, I know.

S. MATTHEW We all try to help you carry some of the weight of your responsibilities as Reverend Mother.

M. DENIS But you do far more than your share.

S. MATTHEW As I said, I only try - (She breaks off as their eyes meet.)

(There is a long pause before something intangible breaks the short spell and MOTHER DENIS withdraws her hand.)

M. DENIS You were right about Sister Catherine. She just won't be eased out of her position in any civilised way. This morning made that quite obvious. I'd told her nothing about that girl coming but she must have come in here and gone through my papers.

S. MATTHEW And Father Morris thinks she's so wonderful.

M. DENIS (rising) And no doubt myself a fool. (She moves away from the desk a little, not looking at SISTER MATTHEW now.)

S. MATTHEW (remaining seated) I'm sure he'd never think that, Mother.

M. DENIS The point is, Sister, that it leaves me with no alternative but to directly order Sister Catherine to other duties. And since she's been in charge of the girls for so long, even before I was appointed here as Superior, I find it a very difficult thing to do. But you do believe I'm right in doing it?

S. MATTHEW I'm sorry, Mother, but I feel in a decision like this -

M. DENIS (turning to SISTER MATTHEW) It's quite all right, I understand.

S. MATTHEW And besides, who'd you get to put in her place?

(Slight pause.)

M. DENIS (smiling) Yourself, Sister Matthew. The most capable Sister I have.

S. MATTHEW (coming to her feet) Me?

M. DENIS (with a short laugh) You haven't got any undue sentimental attachments to the steam of the laundry, have you?

S. MATTHEW (suppressing her elation) No, of course not, but -
(She breaks off.)

M. DENIS You're worried about the hurt to Sister Catherine.

S. MATTHEW Yes - yes, I am.

M. DENIS It hurts me, too, Sister, but we have to learn to accept our hurts. Kindness is a wonderful thing to have, but without strength it can lead to disorder and chaos. And we, Sister, are of an order.

S. MATTHEW Mother, I know I've had to point out a few of Sister Catherine's faults in the past and it makes me feel rather badly about it now.

M. DENIS Please don't feel that.

S. MATTHEW But I only did it to protect you. When I came here it was difficult to tell who was Reverend Mother the way Sister Catherine was looked on by the others. I only did what I felt was my duty.

(SISTER LEONORA has appeared in the corridor, a piece of coloured cloth in her hand. MOTHER DENIS walks up to SISTER MATTHEW, smiling.)

M. DENIS I'm very grateful you realised it and I value your loyalty highly.

S. MATTHEW Thank you, Mother.

M. DENIS (touching SISTER MATTHEW gently on the arm)
Very grateful. (Her smile fades as the figure of SISTER LEONORA catches her eye and she quickly moves away from SISTER MATTHEW towards the door.)
Sister Leonora! (She returns to her desk.)

(SISTER LEONORA comes to the door but doesn't enter.)

S. LEONORA

Yes, Mother?

M. DENIS

Come in, Sister.

(But SISTER LEONORA remains nervously in the doorway, both hands on the piece of cloth.)

S. LEONORA

You wanted me for something, Mother?

M. DENIS

I said, come in - and stop twisting and fiddling with whatever it is you've got there.

(Nervously, SISTER LEONORA enters.)

S. LEONORA

(to SISTER MATTHEW) Good morning Sister Matthew, isn't it such a beautiful day?

S. MATTHEW

Yes, it is, Sister Leonora.

M. DENIS

I believe you've got something to tell me, Sister.

S. LEONORA

Me, Mother?

M. DENIS

What have you been up to?

S. LEONORA

Nothing, Mother. I was just looking for some scraps for the girls' sewing class. Just little bits, you know. It seems such a pity to be wasting the new material Father Morris kindly got me when they're not very good. (She rambles on nervously.) It's something for them to learn on, you know, and a lot of them don't show a great deal of interest. I don't suppose you can blame them really, knowing what girls are if they haven't been used to working and after a day in the laundry when they're maybe a little bit tired and not very good to start with -

M. DENIS

I wasn't talking about your sewing class, Sister, but I'm being very patient.

S. LEONORA

Yes, Mother, it's very stupid of me. I'm sorry. It seems to occupy so much of my mind when I'm not busy in the kitchen. (To SISTER MATTHEW.) The girls, you know, seem to have had so many other little interests - it's difficult for them to set their minds - Yes. Very difficult. But I must say it helps to keep them busy and nature seems to think that all things are

meant to be kept busy.

S. MATTHEW

I understand, Sister.

S. LEONORA

Yes. (She cannot think of anything more to say.)
Very busy. Yes.

(There is a pause.)

S. MATTHEW

(to SISTER LEONORA) I think Mother would prefer
it to come from yourself.

S. LEONORA

From myself?

M. DENIS

I delegated Sister Matthew to inspect the cells this
morning. Yours was not overlooked.

(SISTER LEONORA looks nervously from SISTER
MATTHEW back to MOTHER DENIS then rushes it out.)

S. LEONORA

Mother, I couldn't help it, she just came in my window
about a month ago without a word - she didn't say - I
mean there she was the little thing settling herself in
without any kind of permission - there was nothing I
could do. Then she started going out and getting little
things, little bits of sticks and mud from everywhere to
build her nest and - now she has little ones. Three -
pretty little eggs, Mother.

M. DENIS

And you tried to hide it all by putting a picture of our
Holy Mother over it. That, Sister, is a deceit.

S. LEONORA

Yes, Mother, but -

M. DENIS

There are no buts! It is a deceit.

S. LEONORA

Mother, I prayed for a solution.

M. DENIS

Was your prayer answered?

S. LEONORA

Not yet, Mother, but -

M. DENIS

Then your solution is in my hands as it should have been
in the first place. Take the nest down and scrub your
wall.

S. LEONORA

Take it - down? - But, Mother, she went out and got
every tiny bit of everything, day in, day out, every bit
with care and putting it all together -

- M. DENIS I've been more than patient with you, Sister -
- S. LEONORA But she trusts me, Mother - you must understand -
- M. DENIS For heaven's sake, Sister, if you want to start an aviary the garden is the place to do it.
- S. LEONORA I don't want an aviary.
- M. DENIS I won't discuss it any longer! You've been told what to do.
- S. LEONORA But -
(SISTER CATHERINE has appeared and is making her way to the office.)
- S. MATTHEW (attempting to quieten SISTER LEONORA) Sister Leonora.
- S. LEONORA (turning to SISTER MATTHEW) But she trusts me.
- M. DENIS I'll put up with no more nonsense!
- S. LEONORA (in her final stand for the bird) Sister Catherine said -
(SISTER CATHERINE arrives in the doorway as MOTHER DENIS thumps the table in anger.)
- M. DENIS I am the Superior here! (She sees SISTER CATHERINE standing there and there is a pause.)
- S. LEONORA (quietly) Yes, Mother.
(SISTER LEONORA rounds SISTER CATHERINE glancing at her standing there, upright, looking directly at MOTHER DENIS. SISTER LEONORA goes off out of sight.)
- S. MATTHEW You'll excuse me, Mother.
(Still MOTHER DENIS says nothing and SISTER MATTHEW goes. When she has gone SISTER CATHERINE closes the door and turns to face MOTHER DENIS again.)
- S. CATHERINE You told Sister Leonora to destroy the nest in her cell?
- M. DENIS I did.

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