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UGLY SISTERS

by Charli Cowgill and Laurie Ward

SAMUEL FRENCH

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NOTE

This edition reflects a rehearsal draft of the script and may differ from the final production.

UGLY SISTERS was first produced by piss / CARNATION at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2024. The performance was directed by Joanna Pidcock, with sets and costumes by Cara Evans, lighting design by Edward De'Ath, and sound design by MILKBOY. The Producer was Bronagh Leneghan, and the Production Stage Manager was Daze Corder. The cast was as follows:

GERMAINE GREER . . . . . Charli Cowgill/Laurie Ward
FLAPPING DRAPERIES . . . . . Charli Cowgill/Laurie Ward
STAGE MANAGER . . . . . Daze Corder

CHARACTERS

(by order of appearance)

GERMAINE GREER – F, multiple ages, played by a trans woman

FLAPPING DRAPERIES – F, multiple ages, played by a trans woman.

STAGE MANAGER – should be the production's actual stage manager

Other figures appear throughout the course of the play to be played by the two performers, such as the **MC** and the **BACKUP DANCER**. These are not characters as such, but figures of fantasy, forces of stagecraft, or human props in the scene.

AUTHORS' NOTE

Ugly Sisters draws inspiration from an article penned by Germaine Greer in 1989 entitled "On Why Sex Change Is A Lie". In this article, Greer depicts an interaction on the day *The Female Eunuch* was issued in America, in which a transgender woman rushes up to her and grabs her by the hand. We have never heard from this woman. It has only been possible to see her in the seconds on the page in which Greer gives her life: twenty years after the event. We do not know if she is still alive, or if she ever existed. When we read the text, we were restless to make sense of this interaction and this relationship. What emerged was something of an unrequited love story.

This work would not have been possible without the support we have received both from the Untapped Award and from Camden People's Theatre, New Diorama Theatre, Shoreditch Town Hall, and Underbelly. We want to thank Danielle James, Fran Charmaille, Joanna Ward, Roz Kaveney, and Travis Alabanza for their ingenuity and insight. We are also completely indebted to Joanna Pidcock, our director and dramaturg: Joanna, you are a force of erudition.

PROLOGUE

(Through the show's preset, **GERMAINE GREER** *and* **FLAPPING DRAPERIES** *stand across from one another, in silence.* **GERMAINE** *is clad in an Adult Human Females t-shirt, a grey pussycat wig, and pearls. She is inexplicably wearing eight-inch pleaser heels.* **FLAPPING** *is wearing an overly-prissy princess dress, with long synthetic hair extensions and a pair of false eyelashes. Her lips are separated with a pair of bright red "sissy lips".* **GERMAINE** *is holding a leaf blower. They are locked in one another's gaze, teeming both with a sense of eroticism and violence.)*

("L.O.V.E." by SOPHIE plays. [*] *Smoke is pumped into the space as captions are projected along with the sound of the bass:)*

(Projected:)

[In 1970, legendary feminist Germaine Greer publishes The Female Eunuch. *It quickly emerges as a revolutionary, era-defining work of feminist thought.]*

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[On the day The Female Eunuch *is issued in America.]*

[Germaine Greer speaks in a Town Hall debate.]

[On the day of the debate, she meets a transgender woman.]

> *(***GERMAINE** *begins to blow the leaf blower at* **FLAPPING**. *It is like* The Birth of Venus *restaged as a low-budget music video.)*

[The transgender woman grabs her hand.]

[(thank you)]

[(thank you so much for)]

[Twenty years later, Germaine Greer recounts the meeting in an article. The words you are about to hear come from this article, unedited.]

[The article is titled:]

["ON WHY SEX CHANGE IS A LIE"]

> *(The final slide stays on screen, begins flashing, glitching, as* **GERMAINE** *points the leaf blower down, underneath* **FLAPPING***'s dress and tries to upskirt her with something between curiosity and malice.* **FLAPPING** *uses her hands to stop the dress flashing: Marilyn Monroe.)*

ACT ONE

Germaine

*(***GERMAINE** *begins to dictate from the article just mentioned.* **FLAPPING** *is stirred by Germaine's words into movement, as if Frantic Assembly had choreographed Germaine's memory. She appears like a horrible creature emerging from the depths.)*

*(***FLAPPING** *exposes her breasts and shakes them. She is donning women's liberation nipple tassles.)*

*(***FLAPPING** *bows her head and continues to jiggle her breasts offstage.)*

*(***GERMAINE** *steps to the front of the stage. She gives a thumbs-up to the technician.)*

(An audio retrospective on the career of **GERMAINE GREER** *plays.* She listens, proudly, to content relating to her meteoric rise as a feminist in the 70s. But the audio begins to become fixated on her transphobia, and becomes corrupted. At this stage,* **FLAPPING** *enters, tip-toeing on with a leaf blower and*

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a thirst for vengeance. **GERMAINE** *becomes aware of* **FLAPPING**, *stupefied by her presence. This wasn't supposed to happen.* **GERMAINE** *attempts to escape from the clutches of her enormous, knuckley, hairy, be-ringed paws, but it is too late. The tragic fall of* **GERMAINE GREER** *has been set into motion:)*

*(***FLAPPING** *kills* **GERMAINE** *with the leaf blower.)*

(The house lights go up. This wasn't supposed to happen. **FLAPPING** *is mortified.)*

*(***FLAPPING** *looks to the* **AUDIENCE** *for help.)*

FLAPPING. Oh my God. No guys – this isn't – this wasn't – oh my God. Will somebody help me? We have to do something – I mean it's Germaine. Her body – it's going to bake under the stage lights.

*(***FLAPPING** *tells the audience she is responsible for burying* **GERMAINE***'s body and needs the* **AUDIENCE***'s help. She gestures toward a plot of earth in the corner. She picks out a couple of* **AUDIENCE MEMBERS** *to process* **GERMAINE***'s dead body around the theatre, ceremonially. She goes to the mic to sing "Dido's Lament", but she has changed the lyrics to one word: Germaine. Once* **GERMAINE** *is lowered into the Earth,* **FLAPPING** *gives the* **AUDIENCE** *bags of dirt. One by one, the* **AUDIENCE** *throws the dirt over* **GERMAINE***'s body to bury her.* **FLAPPING** *goes to give a eulogy.)*

On the day that *The Female Eunuch* was issued in America, I met Germaine Greer. She was everything you saw on the television: electric and daunting and pure steel.

So I was quite nervous, actually, when I met her! I'd dolled up – I mean, *really* dolled up – because I thought – there is no way I am going to let *Germaine Greer* see me with a face full of stubble. I even put on a pair of false eyelashes.

She smiled, which I wasn't expecting. I mean – *Germaine Greer*. You always saw her debating ruthlessly with men. And in the end, they would always submit. I forgot that a woman that intelligent had to be kind. Thank you, I said to her, thank you so much for everything you've done for us girls.

(She goes to seal the coffin.)

Goodnight, Germaine.

(She picks up a fistful of soil.)

We weren't ready for you.

(She chucks soil onto **GERMAINE***, with disrespect. Lights slowly fade onto the coffin.)*

*(***GERMAINE** *is resurrected. She lip syncs to the voice of Alyssa Edwards:*[*]*)*

("Purrr" by Slayyyter begins.[**] **GERMAINE** *serves pure, unadulterated cunt. At some point, a* **BACKUP DANCER** *enters [who*

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formerly played **FLAPPING***] in a matching Adult Human Females tee. It is a TERF lip sync extravaganza. They end in a fierce pose. The house lights come up. The* **STAGE MANAGER** *enters with two stools. It turns out that the* **BACKUP DANCER** *is actually the* **MC** *of a conference.* **GERMAINE** *sits with the* **MC**. *Some ad-lib ensues – "could we get some microphones in here; thank you" etc. They are setting up for a Q&A.)*

MC. Germaine Greer – thank you so much for what we just saw. To introduce, quickly, Germaine Greer is a thinker who has left an indelible mark on feminist criticism. Her seminal work *The Female Eunuch* was published in 1970 and quickly emerged as a revolutionary manifesto in feminist thought. Known for her sharp wit, Greer is an internationally esteemed – and feared! – debater and speaker. Germaine Greer – welcome.

GERMAINE. Thank you.

MC. Could you tell everyone a little more about what we just saw?

GERMAINE. Well – it's an interpretive dance and spoken word piece about perspective.

(Pregnant pause.)

Could I get a glass of water?

(The **STAGE MANAGER***, quickly, unrealistically quickly, brings a glass of water.* **GERMAINE** *takes a sip,* **MC** *goes to speak, and* **GERMAINE** *continues.)*

Marx has a saying for it – that everything happens twice. The first time is tragedy; the second is farce. Now that's neither here nor there, but the difference between those two is perspective. And the first time

this happened to me I was really quite – disturbed. So I thought – if I make this a second time, with that distance from the event, then really I'll be able to laugh.

MC. It strikes me that humour, or laughter, as you say, is important to your work?

GERMAINE. Well yes! I mean – laughter, frankly, is a function of catharsis. So when we're laughing, we're purging something quite nasty out of us.

MC. And what are you calling the piece?

GERMAINE. I'm calling it – *Mrs Doubtfire*.

MC. So what was the impetus for this piece – why did you create this work – why now?

GERMAINE. Well, there is something deeply dissociative about being a feminist in today's climate.

MC. Can we speak more about that, now?

GERMAINE. Well because on the one hand, since I begun getting asked about transgenderism in the mainstream, I kind of, became blacklisted, in a sense. But at the same time – I was also asked to come and speak a lot more in that period, in the transgender tipping point, as it were – But really, I just don't care about all of that!

MC. I think that that frustration really comes out in the work.

GERMAINE. Well theatre is ephemeral. But I really wanted to stage this – this scandal – that femininity – the big hair, the false eyelashes, the poofy dress – is being repackaged and sold to us as the real deal. When we – you and me – we all know that it's not! And so I wanted to stage this fall – not just the fall in *my* experience, but also in *standards*. And it is that person who gets the last word. And gets to throw the dirt on me.

MC. But then you come alive.

GERMAINE. Right.

MC. Which is you offering a sense of hope?

GERMAINE. Well – that these people are not going to put a stop to me living my life. I refuse to be buried. I am a woman!

MC. Right. We are women.

GERMAINE. And there are parts of that experience that *can't* be de- or re-gendered. You know, we went through female puberty, and this change even continues to characterise us as women – there is a distinctly sonic dimension to gender, for instance. And we never talk about it, but there is a fact that when all of us speak, our voices produce a frequency – and a pitch – and a resonance. Because the larynx – it changes during puberty. There is that ephemerality again, that I was speaking about. And strangely this ephemerality simultaneously unites and divides people – where, for example – everyone can see that you've got tits, you've got a bloody marvellous fringe, your cheeks have filled out nicely from I would guess one to three years of synthetic estrogen, but as soon as I hear your voice I experience a particular moment. Aristotle had a word for it, in fact – he called it *anagnorisis*. It means recognition – it means a change from ignorance to knowledge. And in that moment, when you speak, I know that you are a man.

> *(The* **MC** *looks ill. What did they just say? Did I just hear that correctly?* **GERMAINE** *smiles, as if completely undisturbed by the rhythm of her own speech.)*

And this is very interesting to me – and something I was talking about years and years ago – nearly fifty years ago, can you believe that, in *The Female Eunuch*. As soon as you make an utterance – a speech-act, so to speak, there is a literal yet ephemeral dimension of gender which is opened up – or a possibility that is closed down – and a truth that is illuminated. In short,