Acting Edition

THE WHISTLING

by Duncan Abel and
Rachel Wagstaff

Based on the novel by
Rebecca Netley

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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THE WHISTLING was originally produced by The Mill at Sonning Theatre, and premiered there on 27th September 2024. The cast and creative team were as follows:

GREER ..... Raghad Chaar
MISS GILLIES ..... Stephanie Farrell
ELSPETH ..... Rebecca Forsyth
AILSA ..... Heather Jackson
HETTIE ..... Nadia Kramer
PATERSON / DOCTOR / ROBERT ARGYLE ..... Jonny McGarrity
BRIDGET ..... Susie Riddell
MARY ..... Sophie Bidgood, Ivy Evans, Saffron Haynes

Writers ..... Duncan Abel and Rachel Wagstaff
Director/Joint Movement Director ..... Joseph Pitcher
Joint Movement Director ..... Alex Christian
Set Designer ..... Diego Pitarch
Costume Designer ..... Natalie Titchener
Composer & Sound Designer ..... Simon Arrowsmith
Lighting Designer ..... Richard J. Jones
Illusionist ..... Guy Barrett
Casting ..... Pearson Casting CDG CDA CSA
Children's Casting ..... Amber Edlin

CHARACTERS

ELSPETH SWANSOME – Elspeth carries the grief of her recently deceased sister with her. She is at a new beginning in her life, but a fish out of water. She has within her an inner strength, but it is only through her developing love for Mary that she can access it.

MARY – Mary is silenced by the threat of violence. This fear is a constant shadow over her. She is weighted by grief. Despite her silence, Mary is clever.

MISS VIOLET GILLIES – Miss Gillies embodies Iskar House – longstanding, stoic in the face of adversity but, beneath the façade, lives something fragile. The scars on her face are a permanent reminder of a troubled past.

GREER – Greer embodies the world-weariness of the island. She works hard for little reward. Life has made her tough, but her love for Mary is genuine, even if she has strange ways of displaying it.

BRIDGET ARGYLE – Bridget takes pride in her role as the minister's wife and enjoys the access it gives her to the islanders and their secrets. Beneath her welcoming and cheery exterior, she is cunning, a plotter.

ROBERT ARGYLE – Robert takes pride in his position as minister on the island. Although compassionate, he is staunchly ideological, and as a community leader, shapes the island around his worldview.

REID PATERSON – Paterson is the island's shop owner. He is frustrated by the lack of opportunity on the island for female company. His approach to young women is uncultured and slightly intimidating. Despite his flaws, Paterson appreciates the beauty of the island.

AILSA – Ailsa is on the outside, thought of as a witch-like woman. She takes no part in the church, having put her beliefs in nature. She is as weather-beaten as the island itself. Beneath her slight eccentricity is a caring and loyal soul.

HETTIE – The spirit of Hettie appears through song and movement. She is a young woman, broken by the island.

DOCTOR

SHADOWS OF ISKAR HOUSE

SPIRITS

ISLANDERS

SETTING

The Island of Skelthsea. A fictional Scottish Island. 1860.

AUTHORS' NOTES

Shadows of Iskar House are non-literal, non-speaking shadows of the house. They move gracefully and balletically and are unseen by the characters. They are at one with their environment; they are at one with the music and dialogue.

The shadows, spirits and all other roles should be played by members of the company.

With grateful thanks to: Rebecca Netley; Dan Usztan; Adam Rolston; Sally Hughes; Joe Pitcher; Ben Keiper and the team at Concord; and our actors, creative team and crew.

ACT ONE

(Seagulls scream and cry. Waves break on rocks. A whistling wind.)

(Finally, darkness begins to fall, the gulls fade away, leaving us with the sounds of the waves.)

Scene One

(A Scottish folk/shanty song is sung by the cast.)

*(***HETTIE** *alone. Deep in the sea. She floats, dances, balletic and beautiful. Something violent arrests her movements.)*

(Sounds of a steam boat. A boat's bell.)

*(***HETTIE** *disappears.)*

(The Island of Skelthsea.)

(Late evening. Darkness. Mist. Waves against the shore.)

(In the mist, a woman appears, holding an oil lamp. **GREER***.)*

(A boatsman/woman appears, throws a rope over the mooring post.)

(Passengers begin to hoist themselves up onto the island. They are wrapped in coats, hats and hoods. They carry cases, oil lanterns.)

(A young woman, **ELSPETH SWANSOME***, carrying a single case, climbs up onto the island. She is not used to boats.)*

(She puts down her case, unsure where to go.)

ELSPETH. *(To one of the disembarked passengers.)* Excuse me, do you –

(But the passenger is too focused on his/her own business to notice.)

(Through the thick mist, **GREER** *sees* **ELSPETH**. *A sense of foreboding. Unwelcoming.)*

GREER. Miss Swansome.

ELSPETH. *(Uncertain.)* Good evening? Miss Gillies?

GREER. *(Stony, unsmiling.)* Miss Gillies is back at the house.

ELSPETH. Oh. Thank you for meeting me. I'm Elspeth. Elspeth Swansome.

GREER. It's this way.

*(***ELSPETH** *picks up her case. It's heavy.* **GREER** *does not offer to help.)*

ELSPETH. Is it far to the house?

GREER. I expect you're used to carriages in the city.

ELSPETH. No, I –

GREER. Everywhere's a walk on the island.

ELSPETH. How long have you been on the island, Mrs…?

GREER. My name's Greer. I've been here all my life.

ELSPETH. And you live at Iskar House?

*(***GREER** *grunts her assent.)*

So you know Miss Gillies well?

…And Mary?

GREER. Watch your step. It can be treacherous round here. The whole island can be at dark.

*(***ELSPETH** *already having second thoughts.)*

ELSPETH. What's it like? Living on the island, I mean.

GREER. If you can't fit in, you'll get lonely.

ELSPETH. I believe loneliness is something you carry with you.

GREER. Well, I hope you're not carrying too much. There's more than enough here as it is.

ELSPETH. Do…do the boats come back often to the island?

*(***GREER** *stops and looks at* **ELSPETH**.*)*

GREER. You'll be able to leave soon enough. They always do.

Right, nearly there.

Try not to stare, when you meet Miss Gillies.

ELSPETH. Why would I stare?

GREER. Everyone stares.

(Lights up on the interior of Iskar House.)

*(***ELSPETH** *and* **GREER** *are now face-to-face with* **MISS GILLIES**. *She is clearly hiding one side of her face from* **ELSPETH** *[and from us]. She wears a medical mask on the hidden side of her face.)*

Scene Two

(Iskar House. Continuing from Scene One.)

(Iskar House is a burnt-out house. The characters, however, see it as opulent, well-furnished, except for **MISS GILLIES***, who sees the house in its burnt-out state.)*

MISS GILLIES. Greer, take Elspeth's case up to her room, please.

ELSPETH. Oh, no. I can –

MISS GILLIES. *(Assertively.)* Miss Swansome…has hours of travelling behind her. *(To* **ELSPETH***.)* I can see you're tired.

I'm Violet Gillies. Mary's aunt.

ELSPETH. Elspeth.

MISS GILLIES. Iskar House doesn't always appear the most welcoming; we don't waste light, and it's too big for those of us who remain. But you are welcome, Elspeth. Hettie chose a bad time to leave us.

ELSPETH. Hettie. Was she the previous nanny?

*(***GREER** *is hanging on a bit too long, eavesdropping.)*

MISS GILLIES. Thank you, Greer.

(Displeased to be excluded, **GREER** *exits with* **ELSPETH***'s case.)*

ELSPETH. I was very sorry to read of little William's passing. Poor Mary. To lose her mother and then her brother.

You didn't say in your correspondence exactly how he –

MISS GILLIES. What Mary needs more than anything is to look to the future. She has suffered far too much grief to spend her time wallowing in the past.

From your correspondence I gather you, too, have lost those close to you.

ELSPETH. I had a sister. Clara. She –

*(***MISS GILLIES** *involuntarily touches her face.* **ELSPETH** *sees the medical mask [as do we]. It surprises* **ELSPETH**.*)*

(Trying to recompose herself.) Perhaps…perhaps you're right. It doesn't do to live in the past.

MISS GILLIES. No need to be abashed, Elspeth. There was a fire here at Iskar House when I was sixteen. I was badly burned. I'm accustomed to the response this brings [face mask].

ELSPETH. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to –

MISS GILLIES. If it's any consolation, I feel as much guilt for causing awkwardness in people as they do for displaying it.

As for your own grief, it gives me no pleasure, of course, but I do wonder if you're perhaps better equipped to deal with Mary. I'm not used to children and their –

You look lost already.

ELSPETH. I'm just trying to imagine myself here.

MISS GILLIES. I expect to you this house seems lavish. These paintings and wall hangings. The polished furniture.

(There are no paintings, wall hangings or polished furniture in the set.)

ELSPETH. It's all very lovely.

MISS GILLIES. To some, maybe. Years may have passed since the fire and restoration. But still, all I see is the black skeleton of the house. The charred timber, the singed furniture.

(This affects **ELSPETH**. *Lost to her own thoughts. Touching the burnt timbers.)*

Well. Best not to dwell.

(Beat.)

ELSPETH. You've shown faith in me. I... I hope I'm equal to the task.

Will I meet Mary this evening?

MISS GILLIES. Mary's at rest now. But you'll meet her in the morning. Elspeth, there's something I need to tell you about Mary. I didn't mention it in our correspondence because I thought it might dissuade any prospective nanny – there's not many would want to leave the bustle of Edinburgh for the likes of here.

ELSPETH. And what is it, Miss Gillies?

MISS GILLIES. ...Since the death of her brother, Mary hasn't spoken a word. We've tried and tried. I've offered rewards; I've tried punishing her. But not a word passes her lips.

She has been seen by a doctor from the mainland. He seems to think...

(A new presence should be felt.)

Is that you, Greer?

(Silence.)

The house certainly has its creaks and cracks.

ELSPETH. What about the doctor?

MISS GILLIES. At first, he thought her condition would be temporary. But it has persisted longer than anyone imagined.

(From a surprising entrance, **MARY** *appears.* **MARY** *is nine years old. She wears her nightdress and holds an old, tatty, cloth doll [Bobbity]. Her entrance is unseen by* **ELSPETH** *and* **MISS GILLIES**.*)*

If she doesn't improve, there's a facility on the mainland that the doctor recommends.

ELSPETH. An asylum?

MISS GILLIES. Perhaps your being here will help her to avoid –

(Seeing **MARY**.*)*

Oh, Mary. What are you doing up?

MARY. ...

MISS GILLIES. Have you been sleepwalking again?

(To **ELSPETH**.*)* She does this from time to time. And we find her somewhere in the house. She has no idea how she got there.

(Quietly. Tentatively.) Mary, this is –

(Suddenly, loudly, **GREER** *comes running down the stairs.)*

GREER. Mary's out of her room! Miss Gillies, Mary –

MISS GILLIES. She's here, Greer.

*(***GREER** *stops. Relieved.)*

(Beat.)

ELSPETH. Mary, I'm Elspeth. Your aunt has asked me to come to stay here with you all. I hope you and I will have lots of fun.

MISS GILLIES. *(To* **MARY**.*)* This is the lady I told you about.

ELSPETH. *(Smiling, at* **MARY**.*)* I'm relying on you to show me around the island. I've always wanted to go fossil hunting. You'll have to teach me.

MARY. …

MISS GILLIES. Elspeth's from Edinburgh.

ELSPETH. And who's this, Mary?

*(***MARY** *clutches Bobbity more tightly.)*

MISS GILLIES. That's Bobbity. You'll rarely see her without it.

ELSPETH. Well, it's nice to meet you, Bobbity. And it's nice to meet you, Mary.

*(***ELSPETH** *stands alone.)*

(The sound of a whistle. Eerie. Haunting. **ELSPETH** *unsettled.)*

MISS GILLIES. Right, let's get you back to bed.

ELSPETH. I could take –

GREER. I'll do it. Come on, Mary.

*(***GREER** *takes* **MARY** *by the hand, and they exit.)*

*(***ELSPETH** *and* **MISS GILLIES** *alone.)*

ELSPETH. I think Greer doesn't like me very much. I don't know if I accidentally offended –

MISS GILLIES. You'll get used to her. There's a lot to get used to here. Let me show you to your room. You'll need your sleep.

*(***ELSPETH** *and* **MISS GILLIES** *exit.)*

(A soft musical wind blows over the island and through the cracks and windows of the house.)

(A ghostly curtain billows in the wind of an open window.)

(Suddenly, **ELSPETH** *and* **MISS GILLIES** *enter through a doorway. We are now in* **ELSPETH***'s room.)*

(Mid conversation.) All the rooms we use are this side of the house. Please don't go to the East Wing. We call that William's wing. He used to like playing there. But it's in disrepair. The salt water from the sea corrodes everything on an island like this. This will be your room.

ELSPETH. Is this where Mary's previous nanny slept?

MISS GILLIES. *(Almost too quickly.)* No.

No, she was upstairs. I think this room is warmer. You have everything here you need, I believe. And we'll see you for breakfast.

*(***MISS GILLIES** *goes to leave.)*

ELSPETH. But Miss Gillies –

*(***MISS GILLIES** *turns back.)*

Mary. What…how would you like me to proceed?

MISS GILLIES. When Hettie left us, Mary took it badly. She needs to laugh again. She loves to walk on the beach, to see the seals and the gulls.

ELSPETH. And schooling?

MISS GILLIES. I have her for lessons in the morning. You'll look after her till bedtime. Although she doesn't talk, she is clever. Very clever.

*(***MISS GILLIES** *goes to leave.)*

ELSPETH. And…

*(**MISS GILLIES** turns again. Growing impatient.)*

I'm sorry.

MISS GILLIES. What else?

ELSPETH. No one has told me exactly why the previous nanny left in such a hurry.

MISS GILLIES. Hettie vanished without a word of goodbye. Not to me. Not to the children. Why she did so… You'd have to ask her.

Goodnight, Elspeth.

*(**MISS GILLIES** exits.)*

*(**ELSPETH** stands alone.)*

(She unpacks her clothes into a drawer. In the drawer she finds something. A stone wrapped in hair. Music indicates the weirdness of this.)

*(As she holds it, the hair unravels and the stone drops loudly on the floor. A slight shock for **ELSPETH**. And then the weirdness of holding some long stands of hair. She re-wraps the stone in the hair. She throws it out of the opened window, and closes it.)*

*(**ELSPETH** finishes her unpacking.)*

*(The sound of a whistle. Eerie. **ELSPETH** stops what she's doing. Suddenly, she feels cold. She listens.)*

(Creaks from above. More noises.)

(A lullaby is softly hummed from somewhere. Intermittent, from various places:)

HETTIE.

I WALK WITH MY LITTLE LANTERN
MY LANTERN MYSELF AND I
IN HEAVEN THE STARS ARE SHINING
DOWN HERE WE'RE STARS TO THE SKY.

ELSPETH. Mary? Is that you?

(Silence. **ELSPETH** *takes off her shoes. Puts them beside her bed. She takes off her locket, regards it tenderly, then puts it in her shoe.)*

(She hears more creaks.)

Greer?

(She hears someone singing snatches of the lullaby. Increasingly eerie.)

*(***ELSPETH** *goes looking. Out of her room.)*

(Goes back to her room.)

(The window is open again. How is that possible? The curtain flapping. Again, she closes it, decisively this time.)

(Sits on her bed.)

(She reaches for her locket, but she already took it off. She reaches for her shoes – but they have been moved. She's confused. We should share in this confusion; the shoes have definitely moved.)

(She takes out her locket. Opens it. Looks at it. Kisses the picture.)

I love you.

(Puts the locket back.)

(Slowly, darkness falls.)

(Allows herself to fall asleep.)

(Music. **HOUSE SHADOWS** *enter, lightly, beautifully. The roaring of flames.* **ELSPETH** *dreams of a house fire.)*

(Beat.)

(Suddenly, seagulls scream. Morning light pours in. The sound of waves and gulls.)

Scene Three

(The beach. Waves and wind. Gulls screaming.)

*(***ELSPETH** *and* **MARY** *enter, walking slowly along the beach.* **ELSPETH** *trying very hard to connect with* **MARY**.*)*

ELSPETH. It's good to be out of the house a while, isn't it?

MARY. …

ELSPETH. I love how the tide washes the sand endlessly new. A clean start.

*(***MARY** *stops to consider this.)*

Now, Mary. Your aunt says you are not normally allowed sweets, but I think we can allow ourselves a little treat, don't you?

MARY. …

ELSPETH. *(Taking wrapped sweets from a pocket.)* Let's see. These are chocolate, and these are toffee. Which do you prefer?

*(***MARY** *shrugs.)*

I know. Have this one now, and let's put the other in your pocket for later.

(As **ELSPETH** *goes to put the sweet in* **MARY***'s pocket,* **MARY** *flinches away.)*

(Beat.)

*(***ELSPETH** *tries to take it in her stride.)*

Here. Save it for later.

*(***MARY** *puts the sweet in her own pocket.)*

Oh, look. They're tying up the boats; does that mean they're expecting a storm? Look at the clouds forming.

(They stop and look out at the sea.)

Your aunt said that you like to watch the seals. I've only ever seen them in pictures. Do you see many from here?

*(***MARY** *points.)*

On those rocks? Where that man's fishing?

Oh dear. I think he thought I was waving at him.

*(***ELSPETH** *trying hard. But already running out of things to say.)*

And the birds. Your aunt said you like the…

(But **MARY** *has wandered to the sea. She picks a stone off the beach and, inexpertly, throws it into the sea.)*

*(***ELSPETH** *re-joins* **MARY**.*)*

I don't know the names of many birds, I'm afraid. *(Pointing.)* I think they might be… Are they swallows?

*(***MARY** *has no response.)*

*(***ELSPETH** *defeated.)*

I understand you were close to your previous nanny. I … I wonder how you ever communicated.

*(***MARY** *turns away.)*

No. I'm not trying to get you to speak.

*(***MARY** *turns back.)*

I'll never ask you to speak simply because…because it's easier for the adults. Mary, when I received the letter from your aunt explaining that you lost your mother

last year and then your brother so recently... I knew that you and I shared something, something that lives within the silence inside us. You see, I lost my sister not long ago. And she whom I had grown up with and cared for when she was sick and played with and read stories with and, oh, all sorts of nameless and endless things, would never come back to me.

I can't make William return. But if I can help you through what I went through when Clara died, I will give you my all.

*(***MARY** *is listening.)*

*(***ELSPETH** *smiles a sad smile.)*

You can speak to me anytime you want to, but I promise, I will never ask you to.

*(***MARY** *bends down and writes something with her finger in the sand. When she is finished,* **ELSPETH** *leans over to read.)*

"Swifts" (?)

Oh, they're swifts!

*(***ELSPETH** *and* **MARY** *look up to the sky.)*

I can see I'm going to learn a lot from you. I bet there are things all along this beach you could show me.

(She looks along the beach, into the distance.)

I wonder what that woman's doing? Do you see? Where the sea meets the sand. She looks like she's collecting something. A treasure hunter, maybe.

(Suddenly, a man enters. He holds fishing tackle and has a few dead fish hanging from hooks [macabre]. He is **REID PATERSON***.)*

PATERSON. So…*you're* the new nanny at the big house…

*(***PATERSON** *looks* **ELSPETH** *up and down.)*

*(***ELSPETH** *nods and pulls her coat tighter.)*

I'm Reid Paterson. I own the shop. Anything you need…or *want*…just come by.

ELSPETH. Thank you. *(Calling.)* Mary…

PATERSON. Have you got any word from her yet?

ELSPETH. I'm sure she'll speak when she's ready. We're just on our walk, so…

Come on Mary.

*(***ELSPETH** *begins to walk away, but* **PATERSON** *puts a hand on her.)*

PATERSON. You didn't tell me your name.

ELSPETH. El– Miss Swansome. I think we'll be late for church if we don't keep –

PATERSON. The last one. Hettie. She was very pretty. But she told lies. *(He moves in too close.)* Lies on an island like this are poison.

ELSPETH. Well. I'm neither pretty nor a liar, so the island will be spared. Come Mary.

PATERSON. Oh, look. It's the last of the Bo'ness Witches.

*(***PATERSON** *points to the woman in the distance. She is* **AILSA**.*)*

I'd make a run for it before she puts a spell on you.

I'll look out for you, *Elspeth*, at the shop.

*(***ELSPETH** *watches him leave in silent discomfort. When she turns back, the woman is picking up seaweed.)*

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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