

RAISING OUR VOICES: DISCUSSION PAPER: THE KEEPER

Given by Chrissie Shaw (Researcher, Performer and Co-Writer) and Penelope Bartlau (Co-Writer and Director)

Intro: The Keeper is a play that was inspired by an exhibition presented by The National Archives, "Beacons by the Sea". Chrissie and other members of A Bunch of Posers (an entertainment troupe that has done quite a lot of performance at museums in Canberra, Australian War Memorial, National Museum, National Archives and Old Parliament House) were invited to perform at the launch of the exhibition, and took the roles of lighthouse keepers' wives. Chrissie undertook to do the research, and became hooked on the subject of lighthouse families, encouraged by a friend whose ancestors were the first lightkeepers on Cape Bruny.

Beacons by the Sea was an exhibition that not only showed the technical aspects of the work of lighthouse keepers, but had very evocative displays and audio-visual material giving information about the lives of lighthouse keepers' families over a period of 150 years. These added a very moving and personal aspect to the exhibition, p.

Chrissie received a grant (Pamela Denoon Foundation) to research the subject further. This research took her to several of the major institutions: the National Library, NSW State library, National Archives in Canberra and Hobart, Museum of Tasmania, Hobart Maritime Museum, and 2 lighthouses: Swan Island and Cape Bruny, where the then caretakers were doing their own research, an invaluable source of information. Chrissie also interviewed a number of people who had been lightkeepers, wives, and children of lightkeepers. Material in several publications also added to the store of information, and it is from all these sources that two plays, "Flotsam and Jetsam" and "The Keeper" were created.

The initial exhibition therefore became a springboard for two plays: First, the children's play "Flotsam and Jetsam" (Jigsaw Theatre) was performed in schools in the ACT and SA, at the Canberra Floriade, and at the National Maritime Museum and the Macquarie Lighthouse in Sydney, both during school holiday programs. "Flotsam and Jetsam" was presented at a former PICI Forum in Canberra, leading to the season at the National Maritime Museum. "The Keeper" (funded by artsACT) had its premiere in Canberra in February/March 2008.

The Keeper is based on real life events on a number of lightstations in Australia. The challenge for Chrissie and Penelope has been to create a gripping piece of theatre while paying full respect to the personal stories, and including historic material that contextualises these stories and informs the audience. It is not a piece of 'theatre verite', and adaptations of original research material have taken place in the interests of creating a cohesive narrative within a strong dramatic structure. The stories do ring true however, as was attested by audiences in Canberra and at Cape Otway lightstation (February/March, and August this year). Various performance styles are used to tell the stories, including song, direct narrative, documentary commentary and tabletop puppetry. These are what give the show its impact as well as its accessibility. The more gruesome events are presented either in song, or through puppetry, contrasting with the objective commentary throughout the show. The main characters' stories are revealed through the use of the table-top puppetry which gives the impression of being a child's game, but in fact is a medium for revealing some very extreme events.

The Keeper provides a dramatic and engaging context for exploring and celebrating a vitally important part of Australia's history. It is suitable for secondary school students as well as the general public, and much of the material revealed in the play has been a revelation to audiences in Canberra and in Victoria.

The play starts with a recital of the shopping lists that were telephoned to the government store by lightkeepers wives, and the theme of lists is carried through the piece to emphasise the everyday practicalities amongst the dramatic events that occur.

Scenes from the play (copyright, not to be reproduced or used in any way without permission):

THE KEEPER: A Gothic Tale of Light and Dark

by Chrissie Shaw and Penelope Bartlau

Set: A silver & teal screen, back lit with a reflection of water.

Centre is the playboard: a white bath covered in white salt crystals.

Table with musical instruments SR of bath. Stool SL of bath.

Box at back in front of screen for placing objects / puppets.

Audience enters in darkness with torchlight as guide.

Narrator reads out following list, in dim light, to an imagined person in a nearby back room. She is playing an unforgiving store-woman from the mainland, back in the early 20th century. This section functions like a traditional musical overture, it plays as people are entering & sitting. The list continues and if necessary repeats, until audience is in & settled.

Narrator: Order 21597:
 For Williams family, at Cliff-top:
 2lb sugar
 One packet baking soda
 One large can machine oil fine grade
 One 10lb sack of flour
 2 bars Sunlight Soap
 Dr Thars Ointment
 One bottle of Castor Oil
 One pair ladies Wellingtons, size 5

 Order 45006:
 For Gooding family, on Bluff:
 Epsom Salts
 Beeswax
 Brasso
 Mercurochrome
 3lbs Leaf tea
 Calamine Lotion
 Milk of Magnesia
 Cod Liver Oil
 Powdered milk
 Velvet Soap
 Desiccated coconut
 Kerosene
 3 lbs sugar

Narrator: Order 32649:
 For Warner family, on Rocks:
 4 lbs sugar
 Persil, 2 boxes
 Borax
 1lb sultanas
 Ammonia
 Solvol cakes x 3
 Lux soap flakes
 Reckitt's Blue bags
 Rawleigh's Linament
 Rinso, 1 box

 Order 17603:
 For Steele family, on Spit:
 Linseed Oil
 Kiwi shoe polish
 Baking soda

Steel Wool
Cotton wool
Hill's Corn Cure
Nicholas Aspro Tablets
Candles
Lactogen
Pear's Soap
5 lbs sugar

The Ballad of the Head Light Keeper's Daughter (following) is sung unaccompanied. A long wooden stick is used as puppet to tell story throughout song. The stick becomes a boat, door, bath, drowning mother, drowning girl, sinking ship etc, and is used as an instrument for keeping rhythm.

Narrator: A story I will tell to you, a story sad but true,
About a Head Light Keeper, about his lady too;
Were sent to old Tasmania for a term of years three
To live upon an island, in the middle of the sea.

Narrator: *(Song ctd.)* The lady was a Londoner, had seen a better life.
Because of love alone she had become a Keeper's wife.
Their only child, a pretty young girl, she was their joy and pride.
Their lives were blessed with happiness, that cannot be denied.

They'd been upon the island for nigh upon a year.
The wife grew very tired of a life so hard and drear.
She mourned the erstwhile comfort of her Mother's home and hearth,
And murmured in a plaintive tone "I wish we had a bath!"

Her loving mate moved Heaven and Earth to give her a surprise,
And in six months there came a ship, you should have seen her eyes
When she saw the bath in all its glory standing on the shore!
But when it was carried up to her house it wouldn't go in the door.

The bath went in the storage shed behind the house next door.
Mother and the daughter both, could not have relished it more!
Their joy was soon brought to an end on a wild and stormy night,
When a ship was cast upon the rocks. It was a cruel sight.

The boats were put out from the shore: these anguished souls to save
The mother and the daughter's boat, was tumbled in a wave
The mother was rescued from the ocean by her husband's hand
He caught her by her long, long hair, and dragged her back to land;
But the daughter's many petticoats, in the water pulled her down
And she sank like lead beneath the foam, and under the waves did drown.

Narrator: *(To Audience)* Life on the lighthouse islands was tough. The Government imposed strict rules on Lighthouse Keepers and their families. Keepers were often poorly paid,

and poorly served by the authorities. The work was taxing, the life, isolated. Contact with the mainland was limited: supply ships providing the greatest connection to the outside world.

Narrator: Supplies would arrive - when weather allowed: frequently the wait between deliveries was very long. Supply orders were often sent by pigeon post.

The women used pigeons to send messages to each other, even to pass on recipes. Keepers' wives were responsible for domestic, educational, and medical duties. Occasionally Keepers' wives would stand in for their husbands on lighthouse duties. Children were schooled by their mother, or sometimes by a schoolmistress – and later by radio. They had few toys to play with, making their own games with what they found on their island homes.

Throughout the next scene, the narrator uses objects like shells, stones, sea-sponge, dried seaweed etc as puppets. Sanded back, wooden Babushka Dolls are used as puppets for the characters of Connie and Dolly and some. As salt is swept into shape of Island #1, objects appear: shells, sea-sponge, seaweed etc. Narrator introduces the puppet, Connie.

Narrator: (To Audience) Connie.

Connie: I live on an island with rough sea all around. I play with the curls of white water as they wrap themselves around the rocks on the shore. I play with penguins - they are my friends, and so are the other sea birds. I find treasure on the sand –The skeleton of a bird with wings like bony fingers. I once found a box made of wood; the lock was all rusted. I took it home and opened it with my penknife, but it was empty. My older sister Dolly prefers to stay indoors. She likes the wooden box and wants to keep it for herself – so I hid it in the bottom of my cupboard. I keep my most secret possessions in that box.

Narrator takes out grey, angular rock that becomes the house, and the crystal stone for a stove, keeping Connie's voice speaking as she does so.

Connie: We live in a cottage quite close to the lighthouse. The cottage is very old. It's made of stone painted white. The kitchen has a fuel stove where my mother cooks all the meals. Dolly and I shared a room before she went to boarding school. She's four years older than me. She has beautiful blonde curls – even the salt doesn't diminish the beauty of her hair. *(Pouring a handful of rock salt on Dolly's head)*. The salt wrecks my hair, to my mother's chagrin – but I don't care. *(Connie cartwheels through the air)* I love the air, the never-ending wind - and the sea with its treasures and its ferocity.

Connie: My father's job is to keep the light going: to warn the passing ships about the rocks that hide under the waves. My mother taught Dolly and me to read when we were very little. She showed us how to add and subtract *(put the shells in a row)*. One, two, three. Dolly prefers to count with spoons and forks from the kitchen drawer. We make up stories about the people on the passing ships: *(the two*

puppets slowly watch ships passing). Where are they from? What do they do? How do they speak?

My mother says living on this island is like being on a ship in a bottle – find the opening and you're free!

My mother can speak French and taught us: (*puppets speak to each other*) Voulez vous passer moi le beurre, s'il vous plait? (*Connie echoes*) Voulez vous passer moi le beurre, s'il vous plait? (*Narrator picks each puppet up in turn, putting Dolly in the left pocket and Connie in the right*).

We play music, and sing songs in strange tongues. (*Narrator speaks to audience*) And we make up our own songs. (*Move to glockenspiel table*).

SONG: OUR OWN LAND

(Accompanied by glockenspiel)

Narrator: Our home is on a painted sea,
A ship is where we dwell.
Its mast, the tower that shines at night,
Its sails, the flags that flutter bright,
But just where she is sailing to
We can never tell.

A painted ship on a painted sea
A toy from a sailor's hand.
We're held inside the magic glass
And, as we gaze upon the stars
We wonder if we'll ever find
Our way to our own land.

Narrator: (*To Audience*) Visitors to the lighthouse were few and far between. You had to get a permit to visit. To get onto a lighthouse island was often treacherous. Sometimes you had to be lifted up by flying fox on to a rocky ledge. Sometimes you had to ride a trolley up a steep incline. Sometimes you had to jump from a ship to a rocking rowboat. A visit was certainly not for the faint-hearted.

Narrator crosses to stage right, and makes a puppet character out of her right hand. This character dares to jump onto the lifeboat – quite a feat.

Narrator: (*To Audience*) To get to Connie's lighthouse, visitors had to arrive on the supply ship. The supply ship took anchor a mile from the shore. From the supply ship you took a lifeboat. To get from the supply ship to the lifeboat you had to climb down a rope ladder, slung over the ship's side. The weather was always rough: the ship and the lifeboat would hurl up and down. With your heart in our mouth you would wait for the right moment to jump down from the ladder. To fall was perilous. You jumped when you were told.

Narrator introduces the Visitor - this puppet is a large, fancy orange feather.

Narrator: *(To Audience)* The visitor came on the supply ship. I don't know how she jumped when she was told. *(Visitor picks her way up the path, stumbling and exclaiming: teetering and tottering, sniffing with indignation)*. The men tried to help her, but she waved them away with white-gloved fingers *(More teetering up the path)*. Tea.

Narrator introduces Connie puppet to this scene. Then an old wooden fan is flicked open and waved, helping visitor keep herself upright and comfortable in these dank conditions.

Narrator: *(To Audience)* She presses her hair into place. The visitor with the white gloves then tells a story about the bath at Connie's house. She had heard the story from her cousin:

Visitor: A man, *(snooty sniff as she fans herself)*. Tragic. The bath. So awful. Unimaginable *(sniff)*. The poor wife left behind *(sniff)*. So sad.

Narrator: As she tells the story Connie's eyes widen and her face turns white.

Visitor: It's only a story dear! Oh, perhaps I shouldn't have told *(sniff)*. It's just a story! *(Exit visitor and fan)*

Connie: But I knew it was true because I had seen him. I had seen the man in the bath. When I went in there, I saw him like a shadow. *(Narrator uses her right arm as the man's ghost, appearing from within the bath, as Connie, terrified, is manipulated in the left hand)*. He wasn't actually in the bath; he was floating above it, looking down into it with a sad expression on his face. He turned and looked at me and then he faded into the dark of the room. I couldn't move. I managed to open the door and I ran. I ran and ran till I reached the edge of the island and I kept running into the sea. I let the waves take me as their own.

Paddy appears from the salt as a large mother-of-pearl shell just in time to rescue Connie.

Connie: Paddy, the Head Keeper's boy saw me, and caught me. I tried to get away from him. I didn't want to go back into the house – into that bath. After that my mother always let me wash in the basin, in front of the fire in the kitchen.

Paddy disappears

Connie: The man in the bath was my secret. My secret with Mama. Our secret we had to keep. I never told anyone. I never went into the bathroom again.

Through this next list, the narrator removes the items from the last scene, dictating the list in the cool, removed tone of the store-woman. She then reconstructs the salt crystal into the shape for the school scene.

Narrator: Small metal tub

Wooden chairs
Yellow dresser
Ever-hot stove
Built in cupboard
Brown linoleum
One window blind
One plain rug
One brush for sweeping.
One plain rug
One brush for sweeping.

Connie: Papa makes the big light turn on the outside, keeping all the world safe. Mama's job is to keep the light going on the inside – both her own and her children's. I guess we all run out of fuel sometimes.

Narrator: *(To Audience, placing an old wooden box on the playboard)* Connie was eleven when she left the Island for Boarding School. Dolly was four years ahead of her and well settled with the other senior girls. Connie felt alone. The Head Keeper's boy Paddy had sent a present with Connie, for her to pass to Dolly. She gave it to her right away. Dolly laughed at Connie and told her to go away as the gift was none of her "beeswax". Connie peeped through a crack in the door. *(Peep through an opening in the lid of the wooden box, to imply Connie eavesdropping)*. Paddy had sent Dolly a music box. Connie went away, to her room and unpacked.

Narrator picks up pieces of rock salt, each one as if it is an item being unpacked from the suitcase, placing them in her left hand, then patting them neatly into Connie's new room in the salt.

Narrator: Brown Leather Suitcase.

One tunic
Three white blouses,
One blazer, One tie
Two hats – one Summer, one Winter
pair of gloves
nightdresses,
singlets,
bloomers,
petticoats,
socks
black stockings
And a dress for special occasions

(To audience) She was wearing her one pair of shoes.

They pinched her feet.

Connie had left her wooden box filled with her most secret possessions behind. She felt homesick.

Narrator: *(To audience, but observing Connie's passage)* She followed the other new girls *(an old wooden ruler, guiding these four different sized puppets)* down to the hall. The headmistress took them on a tour and showed them a blackboard with all their names on it. *(The headmistress is a large wooden puppet, otherwise identical to the schoolgirls).*

Headmistress: *(Puppet, standing on the wooden box, now a teacher's podium)* This girls, is your bath roster. We have only four baths here so you must take your turn according to the roster.

Narrator: *(To audience)* Constance spoke up.

Connie: I don't have to have a bath. I have never had a bath and I never will have a bath.

Headmistress: Your sister Dorothy never gave us this trouble Constance. I expect you to be as well behaved as she is.

Narrator: *(To audience)* However the headmistress had noted the strangeness of the lighthouse children: Dorothy, although a very good student, still was a peculiar child. With all the lighthouse children, the headmistress fancied she could see the webs between their toes and gills on their throats.

Connie's mother wrote a letter, imploring *(narrator plays mother)*:

"For the while, I ask that you indulge Constance in this. She is not a spoilt child, and there is very good reason for her apparent eccentricity. I realise that at a school such as yours there is a necessity for the girls to cooperate in keeping routines, as Dorothy has done. But I beg you, in the case of Constance, to bend the rules, just a little".

Narrator: *(To audience)* Death was ever present on lighthouse islands. Apart from deaths of island inhabitants, bodies were also brought in from ships and from shipwrecks. A graveyard on each island was a necessity. To keep up religious practice was a strict rule for Light Keepers and their families.

Narrator: *(To audience, using the wooden box / teacher's podium as a mini pulpit)* If a priest couldn't attend a lighthouse station, it was the job of the Principal Light Keeper to conduct religious services, including funerary rites. *(Narrator knocks the headmistress off her perch and converts the wooden box / teacher's podium into a coffin by ceremoniously placing her inside it).* Coffin wood was rationed, and they were always running out. Keepers had to dismantle the furniture to make a coffin. Once, a keeper made a coffin from the kitchen table, to bury his wife. Another used the kitchen dresser. *(Taking wooden box / teacher's podium / coffin, and now indicating that this is a kitchen dresser and then placing it downstage on the floor).* The island where Connie was raised had its own story.

Some years earlier, a man on the island, a lighthouse keeper, died: Some said of a broken heart - as his only daughter had been swept out and lost in the sea while trying to rescue passengers from a sinking ship. His wife wanted to bury her husband at home, on the mainland, to be near her. She would take his body on a passing ship. For twelve days and twelve nights she kept a signal: *(standing on the wooden box)* "Help" - "Help" – "Help". But no ship would stop. Each ship passed her by, for landing could be treacherous. While waiting, to keep his body cool, the widow had laid her husband – the Keeper with the broken heart - in the bath: the coolest place on the island.

Narrator: *(To audience)* She kept his body there for those twelve days waiting for a ship. All had passed her by. After twelve days *(stepping down from box)* she took a spade and dug a grave in the rocky ground, and said goodbye to her beloved.

Salt is dug, into a grave. Lifted up and let sift through hands into grave, grave closed.

Connie: I saw the man in the bath. When I went in there, I saw him like a shadow. Dolly never knew about him. It was my secret, with my mother.
I never told. I never went into the bathroom again. My mother let me bathe in the kitchen, in a basin.

Narrator: *(To audience)* At boarding school, Connie was likewise accommodated. Dolly always resented her for this apparent indulgence.

END OF EXTRACT FROM PLAY

A brief précis of rest of story is given, followed by discussion as to how we can work in collaboration with Institutions (not just museums but libraries) to present the show in contexts that are relevant...

Ideas:

A good way to put historical events into a personal context. **Personal artifacts and oral histories can be displayed as in the 'Beacons by the Sea' exhibition.**

How the requirements of this important service impacted on the lives of those employed and their families. **This is evident in log books as well as personal letters and accounts of lightkeepers.**

How the service's administration often worked against the welfare of the people it had in its employ. **Rules and regulations are very draconian, and many accounts tell of extreme hardship brought about by inflexibility of government agents, as well as their inability to visualize the in situ conditions and implications of the edicts and refusals that occurred.**

Invites further exploration of the place that lighthouses played in Australia's economic development: the 'streetlights on the highway of the sea'...the roles of the keepers in sea rescue as well as the maintenance of the station and the light itself. **Personal accounts of wrecks and rescues, the role lightkeepers played in the burial of the dead and the care of**

the survivors is all documented. Maps show the location and frequency of wrecks around the coastline.

DVDs were supplied, both of the whole show and a 'shorts' version.