

GCSE

HARD TO SWALLOW

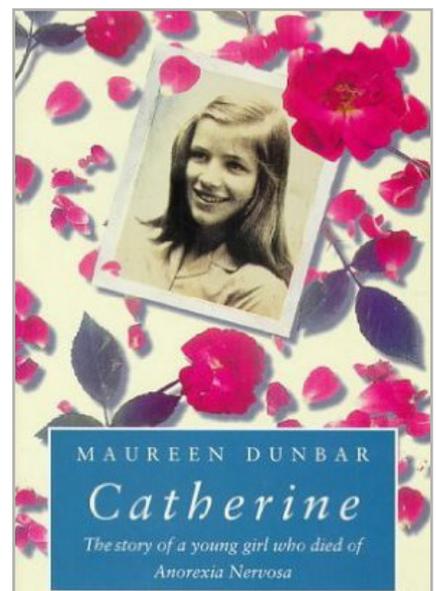
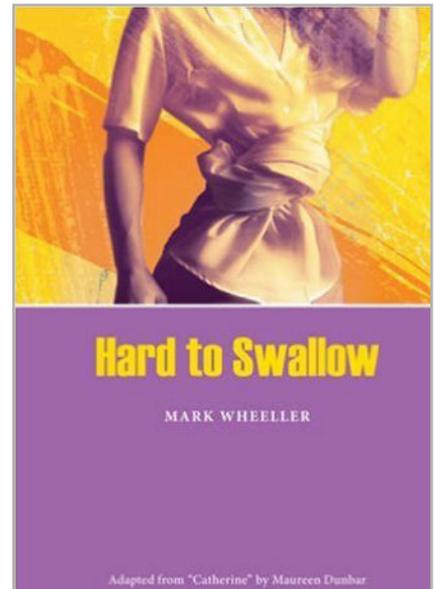
MARK WHEELER



INTRODUCTION

“*Hard to Swallow*” is a play based on Maureen Dunbar’s award winning novel and film “*Catherine: The Story of a young girl who died of Anorexia Nervosa*”. Catherine Dunbar died in 1984 after a seven year battle against anorexia nervosa. She was 22 when she died. In her novel her mother has written an extraordinarily frank and courageous account of her daughter’s illness. She not only deals with the ways in which Catherine’s illness affected her but also the effect it had on her family and how they reacted to it. Extracts from Catherine’s diary, over the course of her illness, give the reader further insight into the psychological trauma of anorexia.

Mark Wheeler’s play uses the words from Catherine’s diaries and also of those most closely involved and affected. The play has 31 characters in all: 6 female, 3 male and 22 characters of either sex. It can be performed by 5 actors (3 female and 2 male) when doubling. The author notes that the play has been performed in the past by an all female cast. The main characters are Catherine Dunbar, John Dunbar (Catherine’s father), Maureen Dunbar (Catherine’s mother) Simon Dunbar (Catherine’s older brother) and Anna Dunbar (Catherine’s younger sister).



It can be argued that this play challenges the stereotypical views of anorexia. People very often have pre-conceived ideas about the illness and that it occurs when someone is simply looking for attention. But this play shows the audience a family who is actually searching for answers about a condition that they know nothing about and in watching them battle with the problem, we come to realise that Anorexia affects people in different ways.

Anorexia nervosa has been increasingly diagnosed since 1950; the increase has been linked to vulnerability and internalization of body ideals. There is evidence for biological,

psychological, developmental, and sociocultural risk factors, but the exact cause of eating disorders is unknown.

Globally anorexia is estimated to affect two million people as of 2013. It is estimated to occur in 0.9% to 4.3% of women and 0.2% to 0.3% of men in Western countries at some point in their life. About 0.4% of young females are affected in a given year and it is estimated to occur ten times less commonly in males. Rates in most of the developing world are unclear. Often it begins during the teen years or young adulthood. While anorexia became more commonly diagnosed during the 20th century it is unclear if this was due to an increase in its frequency or simply better diagnosis. In 2013 it directly resulted in about 600 deaths globally up from 400 deaths in 1990. Eating disorders also increase a person's risk of death from a wide range of other causes including suicide.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY

Ann McFerran in *'Stage & Television Today'* described the play as 'elegantly structured'.

The author has used the Billy Goat scenes as book ends to the play. This is an adaptation of the Norwegian Folk Tale- *'Three Billy Goats Gruff'*. In many renditions of this tale there is a baby or child goat, mama goat and papa goat. There is no grass left for them to eat near where they live, so they must cross a river to get to a meadow or hillside on the other side of a stream in order to eat and get fat. To do so, they must first cross a bridge, under which lives a fearsome troll who eats anyone who passes that way.

When asked for the significance of these two scenes, the author Mark Wheeler replied:

“ The significance of the Billy goats. I can't remember how they came about but I love nursery rhymes and different ways of looking at them. I remember a book called Shockheaded Peter at my uncles that was for children but it had quite an

impact... also those big dogs in the TinderBox. I'm a big David Bowie fan... Ashes to Ashes, the children's song type thing and love how that little tinkly tune touches something of the child in me... yet it's about something else. It reaches something quite primeval. We had, at one point a Billy goat scene to parallel each scene. In the end the play was too long so I reduced it using the Two Touch technique. This was the result. I liked the idea of surprising the audience. When they came to see a play such as HTS they will have preconceptions of what it's going to be about and I wanted them to be completely thrown off by this opening. "This isn't what we were expecting!" I wanted them to be thrown into confusion. I didn't want them to be left there (I hate that happening) so, at the end when they have seen the play they will understand the allegory. By inserting the verbatim sections into that scene it elaborates on it and hopefully the links become clear. The audience realise what they have learnt. ”

The adaptation of the tale aptly illustrates parental pressure on youngsters – a trigger of the syndrome- and the reluctance to relinquish childhood. It also emphasises optimism in the fact that Jo the goat with Mummy and Daddy Goat succeed in crossing the bridge. Through Patricia and Jo the goat we can see that there is hope and people can recover.

The structure of the play is such that naturalistic scenes of Catherine's story are brilliantly counterpointed by more stylised ones in which the cast enacts some of the psychological causes of anorexia. Vera Lustig in 'The Independent' comments: "...*naturalistic scenes flow seamlessly into sequences of highly stylised theatre...such potent theatre!*"

When teaching the play the author's stage directions must be adhered to. For example, at the beginning of The Brussels Sprout Scene, the directions state: "*The whole of this scene is performed stylistically with people frantically changing roles, playing scenery, properties and characters*"

On the other hand at the beginning of Section 9-'Bingeing' the stage directions state: "*This is one of the few scenes to benefit from naturalistic staging*".

It's worth noting here that in one previous production of the play a few years ago there was a cast of about 30. Most of the cast didn't have lines. They provided a highly charged chorus who magnified the feelings of the central characters by some incredibly imaginative use of their bodies and physical relationships. Again, in a more recent production they used a chorus of people to support the emotional lines very effectively.

THE CHARACTERS

When teaching the students about the different characters and how to portray them once again the author's stage directions must be looked at carefully. The author is very detailed in his stage directions, for example, in *The Brussels Sprouts Scene*, he very carefully refers to the contrast in pace:

"The contrast in pace immediately following the lines "...successful in my quest.." and "I hate you" should provide dramatic 'moments' highlighting the manner in which Maureen feels she has been let down or let down her daughter."

In the same way the author gives the actress playing Catherine detailed stage directions in this section:

"Throughout the scene Catherine should be staged doing a repetitive action such as laying and re-laying the table or brushing her hair. She begins the scene doing this action slowly and calmly (although obsessively) gradually becoming more frustrated leading finally to her angry outburst on her line "Mummy, you're late!"

Portraying the main characters in the play can be challenging because they are expected to interact with each other and interact with the audience. The situation of the family is very strained and emotional throughout and the actors will have to try and identify with their characters.

Getting to know their characters is important and the technique of 'hot-seating' would benefit each actor in this respect.

John, the father, is a complex character. At the beginning he seems to blame Catherine and his reaction to her is anger rather than sympathy. The actor playing the part of John could be asked a series of questions including:

- What was your initial reaction to Catherine refusing to eat?
- Did you blame her at all?
- Did you blame yourself for her condition?
- Did your relationship with her change during the course of her anorexia?

Anna, the younger sister, is another challenging character to play. The actress playing this part, in order to get to know the character, must look at her lines carefully and interpret what they say about her. She seems angry towards Catherine and some of her lines are rather cruel and hateful towards her sister:

"Your obsession is ruining our lives. I hate being your sister"

"How am I meant to concentrate on my A levels with all this going on"

"She's so manipulative, she twists all of us round her little finger. Maybe it would be better if she did die"

And yet towards the end of Catherine's life she says this:

"I wanted to show her how much I cared"

When asked about her character one actress described Anna as follows:

"She is a hardworking girl who is sometimes unable to come to terms with her self high expectations, this is because she thinks of herself as being perfect which was triggered by her being good in literally every subject that she has done in education and when something"

doesn't go as planned she breaks down because she is unable to control outside things that change on their own. An example of this in the play would be in section 11 shortly after Catherine's second suicide attempt when Anna has an argument with Catherine when Catherine demands to see her weight on the weighing scales, here Anna refrains and says: "She's ruining everything for us how am I meant to focus on my A levels with everything going on. I would also describe her as a control freak because the fact that she can control her studying regime makes her feel invincible and it works out well for her, so she tries to do so in real life because it is the only thing that makes her feel comfortable because she likes everything to be the way she sets it."

[Acting Auditions with Gary Willis]

It would benefit each actor portraying the main characters to prepare a similar description of their characters, again looking carefully at the words the author has given them.

THE STAGING OF THE PLAY

The play has 14 different sections and this suggests that the set should be minimal. They vary from the household to the hospital to a general location.

The staging of it could work well on a thrust stage with the audience on three sides – thus becoming more involved in the action- with a screen in the background to display the slides referred to in Section 10.

Alternatively it could work just as well on a proscenium stage.

One production in the past had a grand dining table centre stage with grand chairs around it. The table and chairs were used in a variety of ways... not just as table and chairs but it seemed to be a most appropriate symbol for the whole play and instantly located mealtimes as a focus. The cast acted on and under the table at various times.

In another recent production of the play the floor of the stage was black and white squares with 3 black blocks on three of the squares. For costumes all the cast were in black with white

gloves... they added a few extra items when they were playing defined characters.

What's unique about Mark Wheeler's play is that a director is allowed to give his own interpretation of the play and very often find things that the author possibly didn't know were there.

Teaching this play gives the teacher the opportunity to introduce the students to a variety of theatrical styles, genres and techniques. They can be introduced to more than one theatre practitioner. There are Brechtian elements in the play in addition to the Grotowski technique of using actors as props. *Section 8: The Brussels Sprouts Scene*, in particular gives the cast the opportunity to act in the genre of physical theatre and they are expected to employ the technique of Grotowski:

e.g. the stage directions makes it quite clear that in this scene- *people frantically, changing roles, playing scenery, properties and characters.*

Another example, later in the scene, is this stage direction:

Cast make a car...with features such as windscreen, wipers etc.

When considering the use of sound in the play it must be remembered that there are stage directions for the actors themselves to create certain sound effects, for example in Section 11 the actors are asked to make the sound of a food processor, a human pedal bin, a car horn and the popping of a champagne bottle. However, there is one sound that occurs frequently during the play, which will not be made by the actors, and that is the sound of a musical box (Pages 21, 27, 30, 35 and 45). On page 27 it suggests that the sound of the musical box creates '*another worldly atmosphere*'. When analysed, the use of the musical box occurs when there is a change of mood or of going back in time.

The use of lighting for the play can be challenging. The lighting designer will want to show the difference between some of the naturalistic scenes and the stylised scenes. The use of colours

to convey the tension in some of the family scenes would be effective. Because of the episodic nature of the play and the different locations the designer can decide to light parts of the stage in some sections, create shadows, and use profile spots when individual characters address the audience.

It's not surprising that 'Hard to Swallow' with its varied and challenging opportunities for directors and young actors to experiment with different theatrical styles and techniques and interpretations has gone on to be performed all over the world to much acclaim.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Cover of *Hard to Swallow* by Mark Wheeler (DBDA, 2000)

Cover of *Catherine: Story of a Young Girl Who Died of Anorexia* by Maureen Dunbar (Puffin Books, 1987)

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