

The mutant butterfly

By
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A very short stage play.

With many thanks for help

From

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This play is to be performed freely; there are no fees. You can't change the words, except for the names at the end of the play. You can make as many copies as you like, share it with friends... act it as often as you like, make paper aeroplanes out of it. If anyone wants to video your performance and put it on public display, that's fine by me. You can't turn it into a film; that right stays with the author.

If you'd like it sent as a pdf on the internet, just contact me at inoutpublic@aol.co.uk It may take a couple of days. I might be able to arrange a straight download later from my website.

The play is set in a future where the radiation from nuclear accidents and nuclear waste has rendered the earth uninhabitable, except for those people living in pod communities who can only venture outside if they are wearing protective clothing and breathing equipment.

It is about young people living in a society, where people are trying to make the best of what they have... but what if we hadn't given them this future and they could live on the ground and breathe the air outside and feel the wind on their faces?

The play uses a lot of mime and asks the audience to use their imaginations. It's meant to be adaptable so that it can be performed with the minimum of props... none if need be, or more if they want to make them.

Eleanor enters left, steps through an imaginary doorway, holding onto the doorframe and ducking slightly as she does so.

She pulls out a cloth from her pocket, or has it already in her hand and with her back to the audience, starts to polish the transparent panels of an imaginary dome. This is pure mime and she stretches up to reach the curved top, emphasizing its curvature. She works hard and quickly, rubbing one spot several times because something seems to be sticking to it.

As she reaches the front of the stage, she is now facing the audience, and as she rubs several of the panes she can clearly see something out there. She rubs some more, level with where the audience are sitting and speaks.

ELEANOR “I’m sure I saw someone out there, but it must be an illusion. The wind whips the fallen leaves into so many shapes – sometimes they look like people – no one lives outside – no one can live outside.”

She looks around her.

“I’ve started to clean the windows. I’m going to practice my class talk before anyone gets here.”

She puts the cloth down on the floor and turns towards the front of the stage.

“Hey Leaf People –you can be my audience.”

She pulls a couple of sheets of folded paper out of her pocket, unfolds them, looks towards the door to make certain that no one else is around and then begins. Some of the time, she reads from her papers.

“Our life, our home, our future.... A document for people yet to be born. This is so you will know what it was really like for us in the twenty third century.”

She laughs,

“Dear Leaf People, we live inside because it’s not safe for us to live outside. One day perhaps you’ll be able to, but not for many generations, unless you have better suits and filters than we have.

It’s not so bad. This is one of the best pod communities in the shine land. We don’t have countries any more, just pod groupings where people live, linked to each other. There’s a central dome where most things happen and families each have a smaller pod. There are much larger pods where the water is stored and where we grow food. We are very good at that!

As this is the shine land, we have lots of solar electricity, the walls are transparent solar panels and the electricity is stored in their frames. Other pod groups use wind power or wave power as well.

The next bit is boring, but my teacher said I had to tell you about the water.

It's all filtered from outside collecting pools, and then it goes through reverse osmosis to take most of the dissolved radioactivity out. The trouble is that it has tritium in it. Tritium is ordinary hydrogen with a couple of extra neutrons.

It forms radioactive water molecules that are chemically identical to ordinary water molecules, and it can't be taken out of the drinking water by any method we have –because you can't filter water from water..

What they do is this... Tritium has a half-life of 12 years and a bit, so they store the radioactive water in a tank for twelve years, then they pour it into another tank for another twelve years, and so on, until there is very little tritium left – It takes about 240 years, twenty half-life periods.

Eventually, we can drink it and use it in the pods.

The thing is that since tritium doesn't have a very long half-life, it should have stopped being a problem years ago. It's a bit of a mystery. Dad thinks there may be a lot of sporadic activity still going on at derelict nuclear power plants or abandoned waste storage sites. There are hundreds of them.

Anyway, above the tanks which are closed and have lower levels of tritiated water, they grow plants and we're allowed to run or roller blade round the outside maintenance paths. O.K. we just go round and round, but there are some good jumps where the level goes over the pipes.

It's supposed to be like a park and you can hear the sounds of outside, because they put audio sensors in. The elders said that we should be aware of the outside world. Nothing much grows there except black mould and some strange amoeba like things in the water puddles. It's a bit like the beginning of evolution on earth out there – The only difference is the dead trees and the leaves - generations of them that aren't eaten by microbes – because those microbes don't exist yet.

If we ever don't need a couple of these tanks, we'll be able to grow trees in the park – real ones – and keep one of the tanks to swim in! I'd love to be able to meet someone special under a tree and maybe sit on the grass, just for a little while. You probably do that already, leaf people!

That's some of where we are now.

I should mention mutants, my brother is one. They aren't called "mutants" any more. They call people with abnormalities "progressives" because they are suffering from mutated genes which have been passed down from successive generations and got worse. My brother says he'd rather be called a mutant.

The problem is that we have such a large recessive gene load, no one knows what genetic defects are going to appear in future.

No one is stopped from having babies – that wouldn't be kind – and anyway, the people who are mutants might just not carry some recessive gene that the rest of us do.

Anyway, we keep all the nuclear radiation out now, low level and high level. We've learned! We eat really good food which is grown in radiation free soil and water. I do hope your lives are better because of what we are trying to do now.

The best time is Christmas, all the carols and hymns we sing... Some of them have been sung for hundreds of years and maybe you will still be singing them. On Christmas Eve we turn on all the outside audio so that the sound goes out into the darkness. We know there's no-one out there, all the work parties have come in...but we just want to share all that joy and peace and love with the rest of the universe."

She looks up.

"I hope it was all right, leaf people."

She spreads out her hands

"As you're still here, do you want to know why I'm here?"

This is an old pod, and we've been given it as a meeting place, to grow what we like, make music, do what we want – That's why I've started to clean it."

She points to the side.

"Here, we have deep boxes full of soil, above the ground, and all the necessary animal and plant life. The worms eat the old vegetation and turn it into perfect fertiliser. At night time they come up to the surface and meet each other and explore, under a glassy and sometimes, star filled sky...They love it.

Here..."

She points, then pulls out another sheet of paper from her pocket and reads it,

"We're going to grow marigolds, ginger, rosemary, lavender, tomatoes, peas, blueberriesAnd here...."

She points further along and then looks down again.

"We're going to grow an Areca palm for oxygen in the daytime.

She points further along again and consults the paper sheet,

and here....

we're going to grow a snake plant.."

She smiles at the audience

"..for oxygen at night t...."

There is a sudden noise to the left. She spins round,

“What was that?”

She looks round to where the door space is

“It’s closed.”

She rushes over and pushes her hands on the imaginary door.

“It’s shut! .. On its own!”

She pauses and then exclaims

“Red button.”

See props list.

She goes to the red button next to the door and pushes hard. She looks at the door.. Nothing happens. She tries again and looks at the door... Nothing happens.

She bends down and looks at the instructions underneath; they are in Italian, German and Norwegian.

“They’re in three languages and I don’t speak any of them.”

She unhooks the notice and faces the audience.

“Is this French?”

She reads it out slowly

“‘Premere il tasto tre volte e far scorrere verso destra.’
‘Tre’... Is that ‘Very’?”

She tries pushing again - hard. Nothing happens.

“I’m stuck! The door seals if there is a radiation leak.”

She peers through the door.

“The door is open the other end. It is, I’m sure.”

She looks again.

“That means that the radiation is in here – it is – it has to be.”

She looks about her.

“I can’t taste it, I can’t see it, I can’t smell it, I can’t hear it – so how do I know where it is or how much it is? – I don’t.”

She goes back to the red button and pushes it again, hard. Nothing happens.
She looks around her and then goes to the pane she had been rubbing the hardest.

“Perhaps that’s it!... I could put the cloth over it!

She goes towards the cloth and then stops.

“What if that’s already radioactive?”

She is starting to get very upset.

“I don’t want to die young of cancer, like Mike and Sophie. I don’t want my babies to be mutants.

What’s Mum going to say?”

She pauses and puts her hand over her eyes. Then she takes her hand away and speaks more steadily.

“O.K. ...

Gamma rays....Go through stuff, anyway.

Beta particles Stopped by thin sheet of aluminium, but can cause mutations and cancer if swallowed or breathed in.

Alpha particles...stopped by clothes or outer skin. Can cause mutations and cancer if swallowed or breathed in.”

She pulls the neck of her T shirt.. or whatever she is wearing up over her nose and mouth and goes to the door. She puts her hands over her face and stands there, forlornly.

There is a silence, then from left hand side of the stage a figure emerges. It’s Julio. He’s running, stooped, as fast as he can towards the door. He is calling her.

“Eleanor, Eleanor, come out.”

He puts his hands, flat, up against the imaginary door to try to push it sideways. She does the same from her side, but it doesn’t move. He points to the red button.

“Push it!”

She holds up the instructions for him to see.

He translates it –

“Go on! Push three times and then slide to the right!”

She mouths

“I can’t hear you!”

And cups her hand behind one ear.

He shouts

“Push three times and slide to the right.”

She shrugs her shoulders.

He kicks the side of the corridor he is in, savagely.

“This audio is so old – Please, if anyone can hear, shout with me... ‘Push three times and slide to the right’.

He looks wildly out in the direction of the audience, to get them to shout.

“Now.....

Push three times and slide to the right!”

This time, he also mimes the actions for her, holding up his three fingers in succession. She listens, follows his hand movements, and the door slides open. He goes forward to pull her out. But she stops him.

“I’m contaminated.”

She walks through the doorway and asks

“Have you got a ring on? I took mine off because I was going to clean.”

He holds out a clenched fist with a large red ring on it.

See props.

He runs it up and down starting from her head.

JULIO “It’s not changing – Look – It’s red.”

He shows her.

JULIO “Hold out your arms and turn around.”

She does so and he scans her again.

“Nothing.”

ELEANOR “What about my hands?”

He scans them.

JULIO “Nothing.... Give me your hand.”

She holds it out and he takes it- the ring is still red. They look at each other.

JULIO “Why did the door close?”

ELEANOR “I cleaned some of the windows... Maybe I let a bit in.”

JULIO “I don’t think so... The sensors are in the frames, not on the inside or the outside.”

ELEANOR “Maybe I pressed hard enough for the radiation to get in, but not all the way in... then when I stopped pressing, it sealed a bit.”

JULIO “That’s probably it!”

He hugs her and she hugs him too.

ELEANOR “Thank you!”

Some young people come down the corridor. ((I have called them X (N) because it’s up to you to share out the lines between the actors you have. You can give them their names.))

X ”What happened?”

JULIO “The wall isn’t secure and the radiation probably got half way in. It’ll have to be fixed before we can use the pod.”

X2 “What are we going to do now?”

X3”Let’s go and see the butterfly.”

X4 “Why do they call them butterflies when they don’t fly?”

X5 “This one does!”

ELEANOR “Really?”

X6 “Yes! It’s a mutant.”

X7 “Does it fly the way they do in films?”

X5 “It’s got one wing bigger than the other, so it goes round in circles., but it will sit on your finger to be lifted onto a flower full of nectar and then it sort of spirals downwards.

X8 “ And then?”

X6 It either climbs up the stalk, the way they usually do, or it climbs onto your finger... it’s very friendly... and waits to be picked up and put on another flower.....

X3 “Maybe it’ll meet another mutant and someday their offspring will emerge from their chrysalides with two large wings.... And really fly!”

They turn round and make their way back down the corridor. Julio and Eleanor linger. X3 looks round.

X3 “Come on you two.”

ELEANOR “I wish...

She looks out of the wall

.. I could live out there, could live on the ground and breathe the air outside and feel the wind on my face.”

JULIO “Maybe we’re lucky. At least we know what the risks are. Our ancestors lived out there and most of them didn’t know what was making so many of them ill.... Perhaps one day, in thousands of years, our children’s children will live outside again...”

ELEANOR “...And they’ll dance with the butterflies.”

They exit left, holding hands.

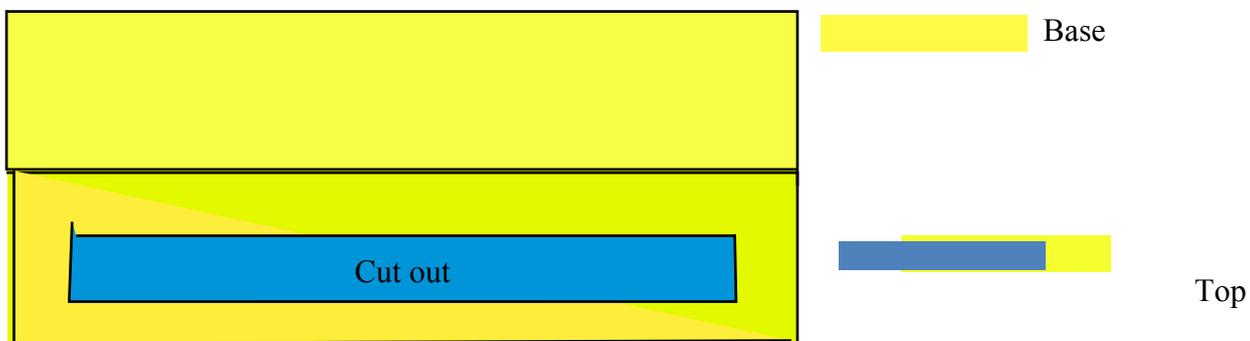
Props.

One cleaning cloth.

A red button. This is the only difficult thing to make, because it is going to have to be supported properly, so that the notice can hang below it. I'd suggest a waist-high length of wood attached to a firm base. Eg, the bottom of the wood could have supports, like a netball post, or it could be held firm in a deep cardboard box with earth around it. Whatever happens, make sure that it is stable! If you are performing outside, a wooden stake in the ground would be excellent. If you can't manage these props, it doesn't matter. Mime is so powerful. Just place the instruction sheet on the floor by the side of where the door entrance is going to be, it will delineate where the door is for you as well. You can push an imaginary red button just as well as a real one.

If I just had some card to make the red button and its' holder, this is what I might do... but I haven't tried it out yet.

Your red button base and top holder



Your red button slider



Red Button

- 1) Cut out area shown on top holder
- 2) Fold top and base at join.
- 3) Insert slider
- 4) Position red button on slider so that it aligns with cut out.
- 5) Attach button to slider, but leave right hand end of oval loose, so that you can pull it to the right.
- 6) Seal side edges of top and base.
- 7) Make sure that you have left space to attach it to post.
- 8) Invent a better way of doing it!

One notice in Italian, German and Norwegian.

Premere il tasto tre volte e far scorrere verso destra.

Dreimal drücken und dann nach rechts schieben

Push tre ganger, og skyv til høyre

One red ring.

Notes for Eleanor.

Thank you for taking on this role!

I've tried to cut down the lines you learn to the minimum, that's why the longest speech is read (as well as being acted by you.)

You might find it useful to have the lines which follow your speech, printed on the paper as well, to help you remember what to say afterwards.

e.g..... the rest of the universe.”

She looks up.

“I hope it was all right, leaf people.”

She spreads out her hands

“As you're still here, do you want to know why I'm here?

This is an old pod, and we've been given it as a meeting place, to grow what we like, make music, do what we want – That's why I've started to clean it.”

She points to the side.

“Here, we have deep boxes full of soil,

And, when you are reading from the second piece of paper, do the same thing...

She points further along again and consults the paper sheet,
and here....

we're going to grow a snake plant..”

She smiles at the audience

“..for oxygen at night t....”

There is a sudden noise to the left. She spins round,

“What was that?”

She looks round to where the door space is

“It's closed.”

She rushes over and pushes her hands on the imaginary door.

“It's shut! .. On its own!”

She pauses and then exclaims

“Red button.”

On one side of the printed notice will be the instructions to open the door in three languages, that's what the audience see. However, on the other side, I suggest it might be helpful to have your lines and you can look at these instead (!)

.....“They're in three languages and I don't speak any of them.”

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She looks again.

“That means that the radiation is in here – it is – it has to be.”

She looks about her.

“I can’t taste it, I can’t see it, I can’t smell it, I can’t hear it – so how do I know where it is or how much it is? – I don’t.”

Only you know how much you want, but it might give you an idea.

The rest of the play has more action, so it might help you...

Best wishes.