



SKIN A CAT

BY ISLEY LYNN



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SKIN A CAT
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for Geoffrey

and myself

SKIN A CAT was first performed at the VAULT Festival (Mat Burt, Andy George, and Tim Wilson, Festival Directors) in January 2016, produced by Sophie Cornell for Essee Productions, Cara McAleese, and Isabelle Dixon. It was directed by Blythe Stewart, the scenic and costume designs were by Holly Pigott, the lighting design was by Harrison Routledge, and the stage manager was Holly Marsh. The cast was as follows:

ALANA Lydia Larson
WOMEN Jessica Clark
MEN Jassa Ahluwalia

SKIN A CAT was produced at the Bunker (Joshua McTaggart, Artistic Director; Joel Fisher, Executive Producer), produced by Zoë Robinson for RIVE Productions, in October 2016. It was directed by Blythe Stewart, the scenic and costume designs were by Holly Pigott, the lighting design was by Harrison Routledge, and the stage manager was Kristy Bowers. The cast was as follows:

ALANA Lydia Larson
WOMEN Jessica Clark
MEN Jassa Ahluwalia

SKIN A CAT toured the UK in 2018, produced by Zoë Robinson for RIVE Productions. The director of the touring production was Blythe Stewart; the scenic and costume designs were by Holly Pigott; the lighting design was by Lucy Adams. The cast was as follows:

ALANA Lydia Larson
WOMEN Libby Rodliffe
MEN Joe Eyre

THANKS

To Playdate (CA, PC, SK, SL, VP, DR) and Crowther Club (JB, SH, AW) for letting me sob on their shoulders and always being first in the ticket line. To Inua Ellams and Leo Butler for knowing the value of a good quote from a good name. To Tell Tales (EK, FK, GM) and IdeasTap Takeover: Love (GB, FF, SK, GM, KPW) for helping me test sex on stage. To Blythe Stewart for immediately and completely getting the play, and being the first to put her money where her mouth was. To the SAC Creatives (JA, JC, ID, LL, RL, HP, ZAR, HR, BS) who put literal blood, sweat, and tears into the production. To Peggy Ramsay for providing writers with serious support without bullshit. To Vinay Patel for the big bucks. To the private donors that got us up and running. To the VAULT Festival for being a genuine hub of genuine risk-taking (and for the cool award). To all the play's early champions (SG, LK, NT, CW) for buzz and boost. To Jonathan Kinnersley for being an incredible ally. To the NHS for making everything within reach. To Marie Stopes for the play's ending. To my parents and brother who understand the need to make space for difference. To my family for inexhaustible love and pride and support. To all the friends and all the lovers who made it into this play (and those that didn't) for their overwhelming acceptance. And to Geoffrey for everything, all of it, every single bit.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

My experience of sex never matched up with what I saw in film, television, books, or the stage. Particularly where virginity was concerned, I was baffled as to how all the drama was in the lead up to the act, but not during. For me it had been the opposite. Not sexy. Not fun. Not what I expected or was taught would happen if I'd chosen the right dude to Do It with. I remember watching the movie *Kinsey* with my first proper boyfriend and both of us leaning forward in our seats when the primary couple is told by their doctor that there's a solution for their painful intercourse, but of course the camera cuts straight to a blissful and giggling post-coitus, with no detail about what they'd done to achieve it (and of course frantic googling afterwards wasn't fruitful either). So in a way this play is the missing part of the film I wished I'd seen at 16. Almost a decade later I figured that if we still weren't talking about how uneasy sex could be for some people (a surprising number in fact) then I probably should.

So I did. The whole play was very easy to write, but the script still suffered from what I now think was symptomatic of the story it told—I sent it to every venue and company I could, and most feedback was geared towards making the play something different to what it was, making it more like other plays. But I was by this point very clear that the whole point was that this play was not and should not be like other plays, because this story was not like other stories, and that's why it was important to me to tell it. When Blythe Stewart read it and immediately understood this I practically fell over myself in begging her to direct it. This turned out to be a smart move, because with grit, favours, our own bank accounts, our own bedding as set and the costume designer's own bra in the costume, we brought *Skin a Cat** to the VAULT Festival, sold out every night, and were given the Pick of the Year Award before being offered the opening slot of the brand new Bunker Theatre.

* One of the weirdest reactions I've ever received to telling someone about the particulars of my sex life was from one of my ex-boyfriends' mother, who responded with caring nonchalance: "Well there's more than one way to skin a cat." I'd never heard that phrase before and it took some explaining, but it was (in so many ways) perfect.

I wish I could tell my 15–25-year-old self that one day all this horrible vagina stuff was going to make a great play that people would praise and thank me for (praise is really the only reason I do anything). But more than that I wish I could have known then what I know now—that I was not alone, and that it would be okay. I'm very honoured to be able to, through jokes about willies and bums and flaps, tell other Alanas out there that it's going to be okay.

CHARACTERS

ALANA, ages 9–25, played by someone 25 or older, very plain

MOTHER, Alana's mother

JESS, 15

SIMON, 17

KEVIN, 19

NATHANIEL, 16

PETER, 16–19

SALLY, 18–23

JOHNNY, 18–23

MARK, 20s

DOCTOR, female, 30s

GERRY, 50s

WAITRESS, 20s

PSYCHIATRIST, female, 40

Suggested doubling: Alana plays herself, one actor plays all male characters, one actor plays all female characters

A NOTE

This play is unashamedly autobiographical. That said, not all of it is true. I'll happily answer any questions that come up with regards to its staging, production, etc. Please don't hesitate to ask them.

KEY

/ marks the point of interruption in overlapping dialogue

... at the end of a line indicates a trailing off

... at the start of a line indicates thought about what is about to be said

— at the end of a line indicates an abrupt halt

If a character's line ends with — and their next line begins with — then the lines run on as one without pause

(?) indicates a question that is not genuine

[] indicates speech which is not said out loud

“We are the only authority on what is good for us. Once we see this, we feel an enormous peace and freedom.”

—Hugh Prather

“You alone are enough.”

—Maya Angelou

SKIN A CAT

A bed.

Alana enters, sees the bed.

ALANA. (*To the audience.*) Oh, this is—I thought—no I guess that's a cliché.

Sits.

Comfy. We won't have to...will we? No, good, okay then. Lovely. Sorry, I'm...nervous. But I'm, fully up for it. Definitely. And look just before I get started I just wanted to say something. I want to... This is really hard for me. This is what I've spent the last—a long time—...this is basically my worst nightmare. Um. But I'm going to try. Because I think it's a good idea. So I'll just—[start]? Shall I?

I'm going to try and tell you everything. I'm going to try.

Okay. Um. Right.

I don't actually know where to start...

Yes I do.

MOTHER. Excuse me, do you have a pad on you? A sanitary pad? No? Thank you. Excuse me, you don't happen to have a pad on you? For women? I'm sorry, excuse me, I'm trying to get hold of a pad—feminine emergency. No, a tampon won't do I'm afraid. Thanks anyway. Excuse me, I'm sorry to interrupt, I was just wondering if anyone in your party had a pad, like a sanitary pad? No? Would you mind asking around? No no, I really need a pad.

ALANA. My mum's on holiday, on an island resort, and she's trying to find someone, anyone with a pad she can use. It's not for her. It's for me, back at the cabin with a folded wad of toilet paper wedged into my pants. I'm nine years old, and I'm having my first period.

I don't remember how I discovered it exactly... I remember the

chaos that followed. Dad wasn't there. I mean, ever, he wasn't around. Never met him, and never wanted to, really. Easier. I figured if he hadn't been in touch he obviously didn't want to be. Or maybe he was dead. Anyway eventually one of the dive masters gave her some and by the next day they had all pooled their resources and come up with a rainbow of different brands for me to use. I thought that was fun, at first. But then I realised that my becoming a woman was ruining my mum's holiday a bit.

We did not talk about it. I had no idea what was going on. I felt very—wrong. Very bad. Why was this happening? Was I sick? Was I broken? Why wouldn't Mum talk to me? Why didn't she want anyone else talking to me either? Why did she look at her menu so much, out at the sea so much, at me so little? Why did she finish the books she brought so quickly? I was left to figure it all out by myself. MOTHER. No more swimming.

ALANA. That's all she told me. So I studied what was left on the scratchy pads every few hours—red blood, yes, but brown too, and sometimes like clumps of jam. Sometimes little stringy aliens, stranded on the padding. They looked like biro marks, when you're not really writing you're just thinking, or on the telephone—my mum does that a lot, doodling her conversation. But now, she was silent and her hands were very still.

I thought this was going to be the way things were, forever, from here on out. I'll be bleeding for the rest of my life. I thought I'd never see my friends again. I thought maybe I was a witch—and that was a little exciting at first, I'll admit, but not after the first few days.

Thankfully, it stopped. Then started. Then stopped again and started again and I ruined a few good dresses before my mum sat on my bed with me and said:

MOTHER. It's called getting your period.

ALANA. (*To Mother.*) What is it?

MOTHER. It's menstruation.

ALANA. What's that?

MOTHER. It's natural.

ALANA. Oh.

MOTHER. Everybody does it.

ALANA. Everybody?

MOTHER. Every girl.

ALANA. Boys?

MOTHER. Not boys.

ALANA. Not boys?

MOTHER. No.

ALANA. Weird.

MOTHER. So there's nothing to worry about.—

ALANA. But / ...

MOTHER. —It's perfectly fine, bound to happen one day.—

ALANA. But / ...

MOTHER. —You were just early, of course.

ALANA. But what's happening?

MOTHER. (*Sighs.*) Inside you—there are—you know where eggs come from?

ALANA. Chickens?

MOTHER. Yes, well, you're / ...

ALANA. I've got chickens?

MOTHER. No, you're like a chicken.

ALANA. No I'm not.

MOTHER. Because you've got eggs too.

ALANA. ...What?

MOTHER. Inside you.

Beat.

ALANA. How do we get them out?

MOTHER. They're coming out now.

ALANA. In the—?

MOTHER. Yes.

ALANA. Doesn't look like eggs.

MOTHER. That's because they're so tiny you can't see them.

ALANA. But why am I bleeding?

MOTHER. Because—because every egg has a little cushion, and when it comes out it takes the cushion with it and that's where all the blood comes from.

ALANA. Like a waterbed.

MOTHER. Exactly.

ALANA. (*To the audience.*) I had been begging for a waterbed.

(*To Mother.*) Can't I just—keep them inside?

MOTHER. No.

ALANA. Why not.

MOTHER. You just can't.

ALANA. But why can't I?

MOTHER. Because then you'd be full of eggs!

ALANA. I don't mind.

MOTHER. Look—those eggs, if they stay in there, they go bad.

ALANA. Why?

MOTHER. Because they don't turn into babies.

ALANA. Babies?!

MOTHER. That's where babies come from, there, you might as well know.

ALANA. Why don't they turn into babies?

MOTHER. You don't want babies do you.

ALANA. Why not!

MOTHER. Because then you'd have to give birth!

ALANA. Birth?

MOTHER. Oh my god, look, I'll buy you a book.

ALANA. (*To the audience.*) And that was that. And that was all. But now, at least, I knew: I was normal, I was full of eggs, and they wouldn't turn into babies. That was some reassurance.

I started to notice...lots of things. All at once it was like my legs, boobs, hips, shoulders, everything was ballooning out. More new dresses. I spent a lot of time looking in the mirror. I don't know

how much is normal, but I'm pretty sure, mine was too much. But I tried to avoid...

She indicates her vagina.

It was the ugliest thing I'd ever seen! In my life! No wonder it's so hard to get a look at, who would want to see that every day! I don't know how it had escaped my attention until this point, but now I really took it all in and I was suddenly deeply embarrassed that my mother had seen such an awful, gross, flappy part of me. Had interacted with it, had washed it and wiped it and streaked it with ointment, had intimate knowledge of its wrinkles and folds... And I was ashamed that I had let her do it.

I started locking the toilet door. Mum removed the lock. I hated her for that. I hated her for a lot of things. I think most girls do, isn't that right? Their mothers, not my mother, not everyone hates my mother, just me.

Look I'm going to jump ahead a bit here because I didn't have my first boyfriend until I was fifteen because my best friend was gorgeous, big boobs on top of skinny ribs so when we were out together no one paid attention to me.

JESS. Guess what.

ALANA. *(To Jess.)* What?

JESS. Guess.

ALANA. No.

JESS. Go on.

ALANA. I don't know, you've given up smoking.

JESS. I had sex with Si.

ALANA. What!

JESS. Yeah.

ALANA. What like full sex?

JESS. Full sex.

ALANA. What was it like?

JESS. Incredible. I came four times. I think I'm a nymphomaniac.

ALANA. *(To the audience.)* She was lying. About the orgasms. It

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1 man, 2 women (doubling, flexible casting)

Every teenager thinks they're the only one not having sex. But for Alana, it may well be true. Every time she gets close to doing it, something just seems to get in the way... Soon she can't help wondering: Is it this tricky for everyone else? Because no one ever said it was going to be this complicated. With a kaleidoscope of off-kilter characters, SKIN A CAT follows Alana on an awkward sexual odyssey: from getting her first period at nine years old and freaking out her frantic mother, to watching bad porn at a house party with her best friend's boyfriend, to a painful examination by an overly cheery gynaecologist—all in the pursuit of losing her virginity and finally becoming a woman. Whatever that means...

"...written with considerable charm and a laugh-out-loud comic edge... The piece has an endearing unfettered honesty... the play swerves unexpectedly and avoids becoming an issue piece, becoming an altogether more interesting meditation on difference and the crushing pressure to be what is considered normal in a highly sexualised culture."

—**The Guardian (UK)**

"...frank and funny... Lynn's play is eloquent and insightful about the pressures people place on themselves... Frequently hilarious, it's also refreshingly honest and open...this is bold and genuinely exciting writing..."

—**The Stage (UK)**

"...Beyond its silly and plentiful humour is a genuinely moving and effortlessly charming [play]... Lynn deliberately blurs the line between the clinical and the erotic."

—**Time Out London**

"SKIN A CAT should be compulsory viewing for anyone under 25. Scratch that, it should be compulsory viewing for everyone. ...Lynn's play educates as much as it entertains. ...Few plays capture the excitement and the frustration of blossoming teenage sexuality so accurately."

—**AYoungerTheatre.com**

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