



SISTERS ON THE GROUND

BY MAX POSNER



DRAMATISTS
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SISTERS ON THE GROUND was commissioned and originally produced by Playwrights Horizons Theater School (Jean Andzulis, Director), with funds provided by the Leading National Theatres Program, a joint initiative of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. It was directed by Ken Rus Schmoll, the production design was by Eric Southern and Jessica Pabst, the co-scenic design and technical direction was by Frank J. Oliva, the sound design was by Dan Rider, and the stage manager was Carolyn Emery. The cast was as follows:

BETH	Aubrey Elenz
HARRIET	Susannah L. Perkins
BEATRICE	Anne E. Hoeg
HANNAH	Siena D'Addario
BONNIE	Simone Black
ABIGAIL	Sarah Lowe
MARCY	Laurel P. Jones
DENNIS	Colin Barham
NADINE	Megan F. Ermilio
GEORGIA	Gabriel E. Kadian

SISTERS ON THE GROUND was further developed at the Educational Theatre Association's 2017 International Thespian Festival.

THE SISTERS

- BETH. 21. The realist. Stoic. The oldest living sister.
- HARRIET. 19. The revolutionary. Highly sensitive, chronically ill, brilliantly dictatorial.
- BEATRICE. 18. The introvert. Verbally apprehensive, creative.
- HANNAH. 17. The conformist. Devout and content.
- BONNIE. 16. In great dental pain. Low-maintenance.
- ABIGAIL. 15. The romantic. Constantly, irrationally optimistic.

THE OTHERS

- MARCY. 18. Sexually precocious. A prankster. Much discussed in town.
- DENNIS. 17. Sexually un-precocious. Works at his father's tavern. Harmless.
- NADINE. 27. Formerly wealthy and currently sad. Not accustomed to this dirt.
- GEORGIA. 19. A stranger running through darkness from darkness.

THE PLACE

A field of dirt with subtle slopes and mounds.
Patches of grass on it. A few rocks. The Northeast.

THE TIME

1825.

/// indicates the passing of time. While these shifts can be quick and subtle, we must feel the night jump forward.

THE SONGS

The songs were written by the playwright and are available as MP3s. They will be distributed in licenses for the play.

A NOTE

For most of the play, Bonnie suffers from major tooth pain. Maybe she says many of her lines with her mouth closed, so we hear the intonation more than the words themselves.

ANOTHER NOTE

This play occurs at night. Varying degrees of nighttime, from twilight to midnight to sunrise. The sun is never out. Except during the weddings, when, for some reason, a golden light swallows all. Our eyes need a moment to adjust to this world and this play; it's darkness, it's stillness, characters who lie down as often as they stand up.

DESIGNERS

The audience should surround the ground on all sides. Or, at least most of them. I would focus on making the ground as detailed and real as possible. The audience should be looking down at it, like the sisters are specimens under a microscope. Don't worry about the night sky—they will conjure the stars with their words and faces.

MAKING THE PLAY

These notes were given to the original cast by director Ken Rus Schmoll. Hopefully they are helpful to future directors.

The sisters are people who haven't communicated much, who don't have language. They have lived under dictatorial house rule. Martha, the oldest, was the sole conciliator, and now she's dead. So the sisters are learning about each other, discovering how to communicate with each other. Philosophizing is new. The sisters don't know how to enjoy leisure time. They don't even recognize it as leisure time. Avoid poetry, don't be oblique. Every moment has to be on-the-ground immediate, with real-life consequences.

Never forget the pull between the *inside* and *outside*. This tension holds the play together.

INSIDE = safety, home, comfort, suffocation, physical abuse, warmth (actual temperature), quiet, the known

OUTSIDE = danger, death, discomfort, expansiveness, individuality, solitude, cold, nature, the unknown

INSIDE = marriage, bundling, tradition, family, normal life

OUTSIDE = aloneness, self-sufficiency, free thought, growth, self, the whole world

When lost, four actions you might play:

1. You want to comfort the person you are talking to.
2. You want to pull the person you're talking to back from the brink of danger.
3. You want someone to truly know and see you.
4. You want to change the course of history.

Whenever sisters report something "Papa says" or "Mama says," think of this as possibly the first time Papa or Mama has spoken directly to them. Normally they would have spoken to and through Martha. The act of reporting what the parents say is not an everyday occurrence, but an Event.

Dennis knows them as the seven (now six) sisters who never speak to him or anyone in the village, who live in a strict household. He discovers them on their own, outside. He is perhaps usually very comfortable talking to people, but has to figure out how to reach them.

Marcy knows what it's like to live under strict rule too.

Nadine is looking for new friends out here in the middle of nowhere. The sisters (Beth and Hannah in particular) are uncomfortable around her not just because she is (or, was) from a higher class, but also because they have been sheltered.

About Georgia: The sisters treat Georgia in a way that they want to be treated by the adults, caregivers, in their lives. In modern terms, they don't want to "become their parents." They want to break the cycle of abuse.

Bundling: noun, verb, bun•dling

a former Anglo custom of a courting couple occupying the same bed while fully clothed, as for privacy and warmth in a house where an entire family shared one room with a fireplace.

—Dictionary.com

SISTERS ON THE GROUND

PART I

Past sunset.

*Six sisters roll a gigantic rock across a field of dirt.
This rock is so heavy, all twelve hands on deck.
With great difficulty, they roll it towards the center.
They stand, take a breath, rest.*

*They look at a loose rectangle of fresh dirt in the corner.
Martha, their sister, was just buried there.*

*Their hands return to the rock.
They roll it another four feet, it feels even heavier.
They quit, another breath.*

Silence.

*They stare at the spot where Martha lies buried underground.
Could it be any further?
They roll again, with oomph; so close.
Finally the rock is on top of Martha's grave.
A makeshift headstone for their sister.*

They exhale.

*Beth stands stoic before the rock, before her sister.
Abigail, Hannah, Bonnie, and Beatrice follow her lead,
showing reverence for poor Martha.*

*Harriet breaks from sisters.
She lies flat on the ground, face-up, in her dress.
This is a strange and sacrilegious thing to do.
Sisters are alarmed, unsure of how to proceed.
They willfully ignore her.
All but Harriet face the grave.*

BETH. Lord she was good.

The quiet of not knowing what to say.

She...

Beat.

BEATRICE. She was.

BETH. She was the... She was the best.

When God made Martha he...

Beth can't think of anything.

HARRIET. (*From ground.*) He what?

BETH. He...

HANNAH. He Broke The Mold.

ABIGAIL. He did.

BETH. (*Relieved to have an end to the sentence.*) He broke the mold!

Beat.

BONNIE. He breaking lots of molds?

HANNAH. God's got technique.

The quiet of imagining God making people out of molds.

BEATRICE. Does seem a little inefficient. Making a mold, making a person, Breaking that mold. Making Another Mold, making Another Person, breaking *that* mold then making *another*—

ABIGAIL. (*Earnestly.*) What's a Mold?

Poor young Abigail. How to explain.

HARRIET. (*From ground.*) God stopped using molds, he wanted people to make themselves. You know how people get made now, right? Beth knows, she's done The Thing!

HANNAH.

You've done The Thing?

ABIGAIL.

Beth!

BONNIE.

You have?

BETH. I have *Not*.

You know you can't be listening to her!

HARRIET. (*From ground.*) You all know the details of The Thing right? Beatrice does.

Sisters look to Beatrice, who looks away.

Hannah?

HANNAH. Yes.

HARRIET. (*From ground.*) Bonnie?

Bonnie nods.

Abigail? Abigail doesn't! Beth tell her.

Abigail turns to Beth. Beth does not know where to start, but opens her mouth to try.

If Beth won't say how people get made I'll give you a hint. Man has to eat a Raccoon, Woman has to eat a Worm, and they both have to pray to The Devil.

HANNAH. Lord Help!

ABIGAIL. (*To grave.*) Oh Martha you were always there to clarify!

Abigail breaks from sisters, walks to Harriet. Standing above her:

But Harriet. Is heaven a wheel?

Sisters, looking at the boulder:

HANNAH. We'll buy a gravestone when the Corn comes, Mama says.

BEATRICE. The babies got real stones.

HARRIET. (*From ground.*) And they didn't even have names.

BETH. First one had a name—Emily.

BEATRICE. *Ellory.*

HARRIET. (*From ground.*) Mama learned.

BETH. Don't Name A Thing Until It Talks.

With some ceremony, they each touch the rock, a last farewell. They begin moving towards their tiny, unseen house.

BONNIE. Owww

BEATRICE. Bonnie?

BONNIE. My tooth hurts.

*The sisters are almost offstage.
Except for Harriet, who remains on the ground, looking up,
mesmerized.*

BETH. Harriet.

HARRIET. (From ground.) I'm staying.

Beth looks down at her. She is the oldest now.

BETH. You Can't.

*Harriet doesn't care.
Abigail, Beatrice, Hannah, Bonnie witness the standoff.
Slowly and curiously, they tread back to the center of the ground.
The scuttle of a critter.*

ABIGAIL. You hear that?

HANNAH. Lord help!

Sisters clump frightened above Harriet.

ABIGAIL. Something's coming!

HANNAH. Let's go indoors!

The rattle of more critters.

ABIGAIL. You hear *that*?

HARRIET. (From ground.) Sssshhh.

*At once, all five drop onto the dirty ground, joining Harriet.
This is new and miraculous.
They're looking at the stars.*

HANNAH. Lord Wow.

HARRIET. I *know*.

HANNAH. Whoa.

BETH. Oh My Wow.

BONNIE. (Holding the side of her jaw.) Ow.

Dennis, a small adolescent, carries an enormous barrel across the field.

Sisters clench, terrified.

He notices them on the ground.

Then, he notices Martha's burial site, puts it together.

DENNIS. She Was Good.

Sisters ignore him, frozen.

He exits.

///

Night has blackened, they are still outside.

Sisters sing a hymn as they drift to sleep under the stars.

By the final verse, all but Harriet are sleeping.

Oh Abraham

BETH, HARRIET, BEATRICE, BONNIE, HANNAH, ABIGAIL.

Oh Abraham

Do you need help

Do you need time

Can I ask you

Oh Abraham

Am I off pitch

Are you upstairs

Am I outside

I have to tell you my dream

I was entirely green

There were eight children

Green green green

I had no clue what to do

Oh Abraham

Can you make sense

Of all my dreams

I need your help

Oh Abraham

Butter is my work

SISTERS ON THE GROUND

by Max Posner

1 man, 9 women

Massachusetts, 1825.

Martha was buried by all six of her sisters, including me. That spring, we started sleeping outdoors. We didn't go back inside. What with Papa. Harriet got cholera. Beth got Married. Hannah began bundling. Abigail got drunk. Lying on the dirt, facing the sky, we started saying sentences to each other.

Also by Max Posner

JUDY

SNORE

THE TREASURER

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