

BREATH by NIKKI ATKIN-REEVES

CAST LIST

1. PROWL
WOLF
2. SCUTTLE
MISS MUFFET
MRS MUFFET
SPIDER
3. SNEAK
URSULA
GOLDIE
PRIMROSE
4. WHAT'S THE TIME, MR WOLF?
MRS WALL
VOICES 1 - 5
PIED PIPER
5. SPY
MILLER'S DAUGHTER
RUMPLESTILTSKIN

Written originally for a cast of seven, this is the minimum number for which it is suitable, if you are going to retain the ensemble / physical theatre feel of the piece.

The ratio of boys to girls is: 2M, 5F

Doubling for this number would be: M 1: Wolf /Pied Piper. M 2: Spider / Rumpelstiltskin. F 1: Miss Muffet / Mrs Wall. F 2: Mrs Muffet / Miller's Daughter. F3, 4 & 5: Ursula, Goldie and Primrose respectively.

The maximum number that it could be stretched to is 11: 4M and 7F, with all parts separated. Any number between these two would work as well.

This play would make a good examination piece.

With the physical approach required, the running time is approx. one hour.

EXTRACT ONE

MRS MUFFET

... you'll eat this, want to or not. You're wasting away before my eyes.

MISS MUFFET

No.

MRS MUFFET *suddenly losing her temper*

I don't care what you want to do, now take this bowl outside in the sunshine and eat. I can't stand to see you picking and pecking ... it puts me off my food. [*Lasciviously.*]

And I've got a healthy appetite.

MISS MUFFET

What is it?

MRS MUFFET

Cottage cheese. With pineapple. Now don't tell me that's going to make you fat, you stick insect. Go on, out in the sun; sit on the bank under the apple tree - you might get a bit of sun tan as well if you take that enormous jumper off. On second thoughts, not in front of me; I don't want to see those sharp little elbows. You can come back in when you've finished.

All now becomes very concentrated. Miss Muffet focuses on the bowl of cottage cheese. Her movements are slow and weak, reluctant.

The Spider appears behind her, on crutches. His movements echo the scuttle / stop movements of a spider. Spider scuttles forward, behind Miss Muffet. It should use the crutches in a spider-like fashion, moving a few steps at a time and stopping every few steps to get its breath. The first minute of the scene should be a slow progress towards Miss Muffet, with Miss Muffet totally unaware. The movement should make your flesh crawl.

SPIDER *in a slightly hurried, breathless voice*

What are you eating? What are you eating? [*Inane, irritating giggle.*] I know, it's your dinner. Your din-dins. Din-a din-a din-a Batman! Eat up!

Miss Muffet freezes, as though she has gooseflesh. She looks quickly over her shoulder, then continues with her languid examination of the cottage cheese.

SPIDER

Hullo. Hullo, hullo. [*No response from Miss Muffet.*] Hullo, hullo hullo, hullo, hello, hallo, hello, hullo.

More concentrated examination of Miss Muffet's cottage cheese by both of them. Their heads almost meet and Miss Muffet and the Spider both freeze, Miss Muffet momentarily, the Spider for quite a long period - up to 30 seconds.

MISS MUFFET

Go away.

SPIDER *doesn't respond for a couple of seconds, then scuttles to another position, behind her and just out of swatting range*

Be friendly, girly. [*Holds position for a second and then scuttles again, to just beyond reach.*]

MISS MUFFET

Please.

SPIDER

That's more like it. Ask me how long I've been here, ask me, ask me the duration of my tenancy. Go on, I bet you can't guess. Go on, have a guess, have a try, chance your arm. Girly? [*Stillness again. Miss Muffet's body language very much absent.*] Girly. Little girly, have a guess, have a little guess just for me. [*Miss Muffet moves away, curling over the cottage cheese.*] I bet I can guess what you've got in there. Hmmm.

MISS MUFFET *mumbling*

How long have you been here?

SPIDER *using crutches to spread out his shape and size*

That looks nice. [*Sudden scuttle towards her and then in front of her. Stillness. Hold it for a second.*] Were you talking to me? I didn't hear you. You're not very clear, are you? Hmmm? Hmmm?

Miss Muffet shrugs.

SPIDER

What? What? [*Holds a pose, spread out.*] What? What? What? What what which whom where? Hmm? [*Slight move towards her. Very sharply.*] Speak up.

MISS MUFFET

I don't know.

SPIDER

Have you got a cat?

MISS MUFFET

Mmm.

SPIDER

Got a little pussy cat? [*Sings out of rhythm.*] I love little pussy, her coat is so warm, And if I don't tease her ...

MISS MUFFET

Don't.

SPIDER

Temper temper, temptress! [*Holds pose very still, very threatening, then relaxes it, almost engulfing Miss Muffet.*] She'll do me no harm.

Miss Muffet tries to move away from the spider.

SPIDER

You'll do me no harm. [*Pause.*] You're ill. Weak. Pale and interesting. Thin and pale and eating curds and whey.

MISS MUFFET

Cottage cheese with pineapple.

SPIDER

I know what I know. How long have I been here, huh? How long do you think, little girl with the broomstick arms and the sicked up curds and whey? What do you think? How long? Give it your best shot. Have a try, give it a whirl. Give it a whirl, little girlie.

[*Suddenly Spider stops, cocks head to one side. Listens. Suddenly moves. Stops. Tense. Sound of crutches clashing together. Then Spider makes another move, sideways, scuttling.*] Give us a bit.

Miss Muffet moves away, shrugged over her cottage cheese.

SPIDER

How long have I been here?

MISS MUFFET

I don't know. I've got to go in.

SPIDER

No you haven't, you want to talk to me.

EXTRACT TWO

PRIMROSE *quickly recovering her composure*

You don't seem the sort of woman who would tolerate gloom.

URSULA

I'm not.

GOLDIE

Nor the type that would wallow in self-pity ... even after a personal tragedy.

PRIMROSE

A divorce, for instance. More tea?

URSULA

No, thank you. Um, I think it might be time for me to go now. Thank you for the tea.

PRIMROSE

I think you should stay. Help yourself to a custard cream.

GOLDIE *playfully*

Don't take off the top and nibble out the centre.

PRIMROSE

Not in polite company.

GOLDIE

Only in the privacy of your own home.

URSULA *looking at her watch rather too briefly to be convincing*

Oh dear, is that the time. Time for me ...

PRIMROSE

... Treatment?

URSULA

Tea. [*She gathers up her bag and begins to make her way out of the door.*]

GOLDIE *with an edge to her voice*

Stay. You haven't seen all around the house. We want you to have a good look round.

PRIMROSE

Oh, yes. Give us your opinion on the decor. We've had a fresh lick ...

GOLDIE

... of paint. Come up and see the bedroom. You can surely spare us five minutes.

PRIMROSE

After all, we've given you your favourite tea and a cushion to sit on.

GOLDIE

We've shown you every consideration ... because you've not been happy, have you?

URSULA

I'm sorry, I really must go. I'm expecting a telephone call.

PRIMROSE *to Goldie*

From her ex, no doubt.

GOLDIE

Stuart.

PRIMROSE

Stuey baby! [*Both women look at each other and laugh.*]

URSULA *beginning to panic*

How do you know about this?

PRIMROSE

Don't get upset.

GOLDIE

No harm done. Now come upstairs and see our bedroom. [*Pause.*] It's adjacent to yours. [*Pause.*] Come and see our new bed linen; it's from Marks and Spencer and I know you like M and S.

PRIMROSE

Or is it S and M?

URSULA

Please. Let me go home.

GOLDIE *more savagely*

Come and see our bed linen. Come on, up you come. Do you recognise the prints?

PRIMROSE

Why keep your good taste to yourself? We love your prints. And your three piece suite. And your bathroom suite. Your bedroom suite ...

GOLDIE

... we're not so sure about. What made you choose mahogany when you could have stuck with the walnut? Mrs Hickmott paid two thousand pounds for that built-in wardrobe; there was no need to replace that.

PRIMROSE

Because it hardly co-ordinates with the wallpaper, my dear, now does it?

GOLDIE

Well? Does it? Or does Terry like it?

Ursula is becoming very uneasy and spends this section trying to escape from the clutches of the sisters.

PRIMROSE

Oh, yes, Goldie; I forgot about Terry. He came to fit the wardrobe, didn't he? [*To Ursula.*] Or was he the one who mended the chair? You know, that chair was just right, neither too hard nor too soft. I don't know how you can bear the other chairs; I wouldn't give them house-room.

GOLDIE

Did your husband know about Terry?

Ursula makes a run for it but is caught by Primrose.

PRIMROSE

Now I really must insist that you give us an opinion on our new duvet. Up you come.

They move as though to an upstairs room.

GOLDIE

There now - what do you think?

URSULA

It's very nice.

PRIMROSE

Of course it's nice, it's just like yours.

GOLDIE

Not quite, Primrose, not quite. [*To Ursula.*] Slip in.

URSULA

What?

GOLDIE *correcting her faux genteel manners*

Pardon?

PRIMROSE

Slip in. Go on, right in. Under the covers you go! [*Ursula slips in under the covers as she is prodded under by Primrose.*] Pop your clothes off - you'll feel more comfortable. [*To Ursula, aggressively.*] I said, take your clothes off. [*Shouts.*] Now! [*To Goldie.*] She's very liberated, our neighbour; she sleeps 'au naturel.' [*To Ursula.*] That's a girl - all of them. [*Ursula removes clothing from inside the duvet.*] Good. [*To Ursula, who is lying terrified beneath the duvet.*] Turn over onto your stomach.

URSULA

Please let me go. Your duvet cover is beautiful. Now please let me go home. I'm expected.

GOLDIE

Tut tut, you're telling fibs.

PRIMROSE

Little white lies.

GOLDIE

'Of course there's no one else, Stuart, it's just that I think we need our own space.'

PRIMROSE

'No, I'm not trying to get rid of you, Terry, it's just that I have to be up early in the morning.'

GOLDIE *to Ursula*

Feeling nice and comfortable? Bed linen soft? No friction? Good. [*Ursula tries to get up.*] No, stay there. I want to ask your opinion on something else...

EXTRACT THREE

4.WHAT'S THE TIME, MR WOLF?

Starts as if a continuation of the previous scene. Ursula has exited and as the dialogue between Primrose and Goldie comes to an end, she puts up a 'For Sale' sign. The sign is taken from her by Mrs Wall, who places the sign down on the

ground and waves goodbye to Ursula.

Slowly the rest of the cast move towards her, crouching, vulpine. The basis of the scene is the children's game, 'What's the time, Mr Wolf?' There should be a sound of feet, the slow creeping progress towards Mrs Wall. A single voice asks:

VOICE 1

What's the time?

MRS WALL *in a kindly manner*

Mrs Wall. [*Extends her hand as though to shake hands. It is not taken. Still smiling.*]

One o'clock.

Voice 1 freezes. The others behind follow suit.

Mrs Wall turns back to a mime of putting the house to rights - ironing, hanging curtains, cleaning. The wolves move towards Mrs Wall again, following her in a stream, so that whenever she changes direction she has a stream of wolves in her wake.

VOICE 2

What's the time, Mrs Wall?

Mrs Wall stops what ever she is doing, looks at her watch and then expectantly up at the face of the interrogator, as though expecting to start a conversation.

MRS WALL

Two o'clock. [*Still smiling, Mrs Wall indicates the threshold of her house, welcoming.*]

Voice 2 freezes; the other wolves follow suit. Voices 3 and 4 tail Mrs Wall stealthily and, when she looks at her most vulnerable, ask:

VOICES 3 & 4

What's the time, Mrs Wall?

MRS WALL

It's half past two. I'm new in the neighbourhood. I don't suppose you could tell me where I can get vacuum bags locally?

Voices 3 and 4 freeze. Mrs Wall moves back to her cleaning but then turns around quickly as though suspicious that she is being trailed. Voice 5 creeps up, then calls:

VOICE 5

What's the time, Mrs Wall?

MRS WALL *with irritation in her voice*

It's three fifteen. How do you know my name?

Same routine. Voice 5 freezes. Mrs Wall turns her back; the wolves creep after her.

VOICES 1, 2 & 3

What's the time, Mrs Wall?

MRS WALL

It's four o'clock. Look, what's the matter with people round here? Haven't you heard of clocks?

Voices freeze.

VOICE 4

What's the time, Mrs Wall?

MRS WALL

Who are you? Why do you want to know the time? I haven't got anything worth stealing, I've only just moved in - ask anyone. I haven't even got a fridge yet.

VOICE 4

What's the time, Mrs Wall?

MRS WALL *with an attempt at humour*

Time you got yourself a watch.

She looks around, hoping to see a smile on the Voice's face, but there is nothing - just a freeze.

Long pause while she looks for movement or some kind of emotional response to her face. Nothing.

MRS WALL

Look, it's four o'clock, okay? My husband will be home soon and I suggest that you don't keep plaguing him with these silly requests. He's probably had a hard day and won't be in the best of tempers. *[No response. Last ditch attempt to get them to go away.]* He's a wrestler!

Mrs Wall starts making her husband's evening meal and again is trailed by the wolf pack.

VOICES 3 & 5

What's the time, Mrs Wall?

MRS WALL

Clear off! I'm not going to tell you the time, I don't care how many times you ask me - I'm not going to tell you. *[Pause.]* Well, go on; ask me.

Pause. Then slowly and dully, all the Voices begin to ask the time at once, not in unison but overlapping and all at different speeds, so that the effect is disorientating and alarming.

VOICES 1,2,3,4,& 5

What's the time, Mrs Wall?

Mrs Wall scurries about distracted - contrasted to the stillness of the Voices. She mimes taking off her watch and throwing it against the wall. The Voices continue.

Against the sound of the Voices, a single figure moves in, sidling past the Wolves/Voices and approaching Mrs Wall head on, so that it can be seen all the time. As the figure moves past the Voices they subside slightly. The Pied Piper is charming, rather upper class, insouciant.

PIED PIPER

Need a hand?...

EXTRACT from Production Notes

PRODUCTION NOTES + TECHNICAL CUES, ETC.

INTRODUCTION: THEMES, THE PLAY'S INTENTIONS

The play is a kind of dramatised panorama of stalking in all its forms. PROWL deals with a 'socially inadequate' man who gets his kicks from looking into people's windows. The Wolf, the 'baddie' in so many fairy tales, is a peeping tom.

SCUTTLE deals with a vulnerable teenager, Miss Muffet, and her bullying mother, whose lack of care leaves her daughter open to abuse from the passing 'spider.' There is a passing suggestion that Miss Muffet is anorexic because of her mother's over-confident and inappropriate sexuality, constantly held over the daughter to make her feel more inadequate. Which is the real predator - the mother or the spider?

SNEAK deals with two busy-body snoops, Goldie and Primrose, who have invited their new neighbour, Ursula, to tea. The original story is loosely re-interpreted. Ursula - which means 'Little Bear' in Latin - is still the victim; Goldie and her seemingly innocent sister, the usurpers, who have invaded Ursula's personal space. Holding keys to the house, they have snooped in Ursula's absence and gradually, and frighteningly, reveal their total knowledge of her private habits. Like in the original story - where Goldilocks is a pretty and sweet little girl - the two sisters seem sweet and pleasant, good neighbours. The gradual realisation of their very real infringement of Ursula's privacy, tells us how the original fairy story could be viewed.

WHAT'S THE TIME MR WOLF? shows how vulnerable the single person - Mrs Wall, new to the neighbourhood - is, to bullying and gang intimidation. Not content with that, the scene goes on to show a more subtle form of abuse of Mrs Wall's vulnerability, when the Pied Piper offers to get rid of 'the pests.' The Pied Piper becomes the kind of plausible and very dodgy door-to-door salesman who preys on the elderly and lonely.

SPY centres on a teenage boy who is being stalked by an obsessive schoolgirl. The Rumpelstiltskin link is the girl's obsession with finding out her victim's name, by which means she can become closer to him. The thoughts of victim and stalker are juxtaposed to show the distance between his and her perception of events: he is frightened, she convinced he is interested, even loves her.

The ending ties all the ideas together with the Wolf figure again, using the three little pigs story as a starting point. Just when we accept the stalker as 'evil', the play turns our perception on its head again by showing the mob turning on the wolf/pervert. Stalker becomes victim in one last twist.

This is a clever play which examines our perceptions of stalking and forces us to question them and, hopefully, to reassess them. The use of fairy stories, childrens' games and nursery rhymes gives a deceptively simple structure, resulting in forcing us to re-assess these stories too.

The physical theatre approach in which it is written ensures that the cast are all involved throughout.

CHARACTERS

WOLF. A man of indeterminate age who needs to come over from the beginning as a 'type.' Dodgy macintosh, brown trousers, knitted tanktop - that sort of person. He clutches his briefcase almost prissily on his lap, feet and knees close together. His head is turning all the time, as he leans towards the window - careful mime of rubbing the bus window and craning as the bus moves on.

His voice should be fussy, perhaps a little high. Constant rubbing of his hands or wiping them on a handkerchief or his trouser leg, would suggest sweaty palms.

He should be both pathetic and creepy - frightening because of this rather than anything overt. When he returns at the end of the play, he changes rapidly from a threatening larger-than-life character - aggressive - a potential rapist or murderer - to the pathetic little figure of the opening once more. Creepy, but as much a victim as anyone else in the end. No one has sought to understand him - he is condemned out-of-hand.

MISS MUFFET is a teenage girl, probably suffering from anorexia. She is timid and self-effacing. Her movements are slight and uncertain, head ducked down, trying to keep a low profile. Voice is soft and lacking in 'bite.' We need to understand that she will fall prey to the spider. She is bullied - and somewhat disgusted - by her mother. Possibly she is trying to disguise or efface her own sexuality - ironically making herself more attractive to the spider.

MRS MUFFET is her loud and domineering mother. She exudes sexuality - the kind who would sit with her legs open, her whole posture an invitation. Her appetites are large and she should be played with large gestures, loud voice. She is impatient and

bad-tempered with her wimpy daughter.

SPIDER is the least human of the characters in this piece. He is a kind of composite of all scary, shadowy perverts. His movement is scuttly and mirrors the spider's closely. The use of the crutches is important, capitalising on the frightening shapes the actor can make with these extra limbs. His words are far madder than anyone else's in the play and should be played for their non-sensical illogical and frightening qualities - voice jumping between singing, chanting, wheedling, silkily suggesting - always insistent and wearing Miss Muffet down by persistence.

URSULA is a 'normal' young woman of around late twenties, early thirties. She has left her husband, Stuart, to live on her own. She has been 'seeing' another much younger man, Terry. Recently she has had an operation for piles. It is important that, though more and more of her personal habits are revealed - eating the centre out of custard creams, sleeping in the nude - the actress realises that Ursula is like any one of us. She is as normal as any of us.

Starting out rather stiff and polite, Ursula progresses through unease to terror during the scene. This must be carefully managed - the success of the scene depends on the gradual rise in her fear and understanding.

GOLDIE & PRIMROSE are almost interchangeable. Initially, they must come over as dear little older ladies, kind and perhaps a little 'batty'. Their gentle sniping of each other at the beginning does not seem threatening. Primrose's hardly repressed laughter when hinting at the 'piles' and Goldie's when mentioning the furnishings and colour schemes should not at first seem threatening. The playing of the characters is a gradual crescendo to real evil. Once it is clear that the two have done their house in the exact decor of Ursula's, the terror escalates rapidly. The scene where they force Ursula to strip and lie under the duvet should be truly terrifying. Rather reminiscent of Pinter's mental torture of Stan in 'The Birthday Party', Ursula is accused of things, all of which are scarcely important really, but which, used as weapons by the evil sisters, reduce Ursula to a gibbering wreck. The two 'dear old souls' literally steal Ursula's whole life and identity and cause their victim's disintegration.

Voices should contrast, so that at the beginning they are sugary and kind but at the end they are sharp and venomous. Movements, too, gather momentum, ending up fast and sharp; they should move surprisingly fast, in a parody of tottering old-lady walks, to cut off Ursula's retreat.

MRS WALL is sketchily drawn as a character. Her role is to show how vulnerable people are who move to a new area, open to any charlatans and aggressors there might be living there. Though married, she also symbolises the vulnerability of the woman left alone in the house all day. Her increasing fear is shown by rising voice and nervous hand movements, voice becoming higher and the patter of her ever longer sentences, as she seeks to come out with ideas that will cover up her vulnerability.

When the Pied Piper comes in she is almost hysterical - that is why she is so rash in her promises. Her relief when she thinks she knows his name, should also come out with an edge of hysteria.

PIED PIPER is a portrait of a dodgy salesman. Voice and mannerisms are unctuous, slimy, insincerely reassuring. He should put his arm round Mrs Wall's shoulders, touch her reassuringly, lead her downstage, etc. His last 'Yup.' should be triumphant - said slowly, with a slow spreading smile: he's got her!

RUMPLESTILTSKIN a nervous teen-age boy. He is the son of divorced parents, living with his mother, but increasingly nervous because of the stalking from which he is suffering. Mum works and he is beginning to feel he should have stayed with his father and Dad's new girlfriend. It is clear that this would not be what he is normally thinking - it is just the fear working on him.

His movements are tight and nervous, voice a little too fast at times, to show his

fear.

MILLER'S DAUGHTER is a portrait of the obsessive. She has convinced herself that Rumplestiltskin loves her really and that it's only a matter of time. She is completely out-of-touch with reality.

Her voice should be comfortable and rather sugary, talking about him with a sentimentalised affection that is sickening. Facial expression, smiling with a little secret smile when she talks about Rumplestiltskin, head on one side - spooky, rather empty face.

In addition to taking on at least one character, the actors will need to show their versatility by taking part in all the ensemble, largely movement-based, sections.

SETTING

Setting needs to be bland and adaptable - able to suggest a variety of locations and moods. I would suggest a completely open stage, perhaps just using black curtains. A white screen or gauze near the back, which, through back-lighting, would allow shadows and frightening effects, would be helpful. There would need to be room behind the gauze for characters to pass and mime at certain times. Note that this idea is not essential, though it could be enhancing to the show.

If gauze is used, a single raised block centre back behind it. If no gauze, just place the block centre back....