

The Song that Sings the Bird

I am the song that sings the bird.
I am the leaf that grows the land.
I am the tide that moves the moon.
I am the stream that halts the sand.
I am the cloud that drives the storm.
I am the earth that lights the sun.
I am the fire that strikes the stone.
I am the clay that shapes the hand.
I am the word that speaks the man.

Charles Causley

The Song that Sings the Bird – a play for Christmas

Cast in order of Appearance:

Bernie - the caretaker of the Church, sixty, single

Nic - the vicar of the Church, forty

Maggie - the artist in residence, thirty

Harry - cello player, mid-twenties, posh

- Debs - mother separated from her children, thirties
- Stan - ex-army, late forties but acts older, loud but weary
- Andy - does not speak, early twenties
- Ted - single, sharp, thirty
- Friedrich - German, sixties
- Annie - a bit of a wild outsider, sad, strong, hard to tell, could be forty, could be fifty-five
- Alice - young pregnant woman, rough, seventeen
- Elizabeth - Polish, intelligent, impulsive, early twenties
- Penny - weathered, wary, wilful, fifties
- Joe - quiet, attentive, thirty
- Marina - refined, aristocratic perhaps, hesitant, sixty

The woman playing Annie would need to be a confident singer.

There is also a group of mimers, plus a narrator, who perform a mime in the middle of the play.

The lyrics of the songs sung by Annie are poems written by W B Yeats, “Crazy Jane on God” and “Crazy Jane talks with the Bishop”

The Song that Sings the Bird

The space of the play is a partially submerged, subterranean, church crypt. It does have windows but the floor is below ground level. The play should be played as nearly as possible in the round. There need be only one entrance and this could well be the access for the audience. There is no interval. Ideally there would be another door, with a lock which one member of the cast needs to be able to get at and which mustn't be obstructed by the audience. This other door would hopefully be one allowing one to exit from the space but it could be a large cupboard or, even, a large box or trunk. But it needs a functioning lock. Otherwise the space has several small tables (3 or 4), not all the same, and a motley collection of chairs at the tables and perhaps one or two not too bulky sofas. An intimate space with quite subdued and general lighting from above with perhaps a couple of standing domestic lamps. It is a church space which is part of the temporary facilities for a Christmas shelter for street homeless and other vulnerable people.

Bernie enters. He is the caretaker of the building. He has a list and a pencil and he inspects the room as he refers to his lists and makes notes or ticks on his list. He goes to the door (exit, or cupboard, or trunk) mentioned in the preamble and takes out his big bunch of keys and tries to find the one which fits the lock. He has no luck and eventually gives up. He then comes to the

middle of the space and looks up and round at what are, for him, important features of the crypt, 4 high stained glass windows, one in each wall or at the four points of the compass if the space is not rectangular. Even if the actual space in which the play takes place has a low ceiling, Bernie must through his actions suggest a much higher roof which would allow the floor to be below ground level. So, those entering need to give the impression of coming down into the space from a level above. Bernie starts to practise part of his guide's introduction to the windows, a speech he is somewhat hesitant with. He has a second notebook which has the commentary written out for him to refer to. He does not start at the beginning, but tries various bits.

Bernie "The details of Metz's life, especially his early life, are often vague"Metz's life is very difficult to say. It's the z at the end. Metz's life – it's an awkward mouthful. "Metz became involved with stained glass only in the last period of his life, but is now regarded as the foremost artist in this field in the last century. Stained art is the glass.....stained glass is the art.....is the art ofplaying light.....light. Light plays a creative role in stained glass. Natural light changes from moment to moment"I mean you can't just turn it on and off can you....."its brightness changes from moment to moment, shining more or less strongly through the glass "....except it's dark now and you can't see nothing, not even the pictures in the windows, but we'll pretend, shall we....."more or less strongly through the glass so that form and colour depend ultimately on its power". Its power? The light.....the rays of light. "It was a visit to Chartres in 1952 which opened his eyes to the special property of colour in this medium. He made detailed studies of the medieval windows and from then on colour flooded into his work as it does into the darkness of this medieval crypt. As one writer has described it – "The experience of the Beyond, met with by the artist in the Bible and his own heart is articulated to perfection in the transparency and translucency of his colours"."

(During the last part of his speech, unknown to him, Nic (the vicar) and Maggie (the artist) have entered, Nic talking as they enter, but becoming silent in response to the impact of Bernie).

Nic (as they enter) (heard from afar) absolutely...wonderful...yes...yes...
.....Our experience is that rough sleeping is definitely on the increase....the young....migrants.....women.....definitely women.....a disturbing rise.....this shelter is small-scale but significant I believe. "Light up one corner of the world, just one corner, " as the Buddha said. It's enough, it's everything. Shelter for my neighbour....."Bernie! Here you are! Final checks that everything is ready for our guests! The doors are open. The Christmas refuge is ready to welcome.....well, we'll see..... This is Bernie our caretaker, and this is Maggie, she's here as artist in residence through these Christmas days, to document the whole experience, and to help those who come to find some meaning in these difficult circumstances. If that doesn't sound too eh...patronising or whatever.

Maggie A friendly facilitator.....I would like to be invisible, warm but invisible. I can provide the tools, a few suggestions, but be invisible. This is their project.

Nic And their space. Down here especially – a special space of human exchange where people can find their own way of being, their way of thinking, their way of breaking free of the old, find their way to.....who knows.....? This is the social

space, small kitchen out there, sleeping, meals, showers up in the church hall, tele up there, internet, but down here a social space, quiet, conversation, a place of total equality – “a condition of complete simplicity” as Eliot says.

Maggie If we get that far, I won't be needed. My approach is more like a collage, an assemblage, but in time. Things overlap. Two bands passed in the street – one was the Salvation Army marching by in their uniforms, the other was a steel band on the back of a lorry. They met, the sound mingled, they passed on. Perhaps they swapped – uniforms – music – who knows? You don't need a story, you don't need a plot. That's my simplicity.

Bernie One simple fact, Vicar, which I would like to be made clear to these vagrants – I know, it's not their fault, it could happen to anyone, Christmas is the festival of the excluded, I know – but down here, in my crypt, it's no drink, no drugs, no smoking, and a minimum of dirty boots and drips of coffee across the floor. This crypt is home to an artistic masterpiece – guided tours Wednesdays and Saturdays and all public holidays, bar Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year. And I will not have strong language down here. There are bones down here, buried, laid to rest. Ancient bones, some modern no doubt too. Bad language is disrespectful to the dead, disturbs the bones.

Nic We will make it very clear what is going to be tolerated, and what is not. But if people feel ownership of the space, then they will take care of it.

Bernie I'm here right through the night, a twelve hour, fully voluntary, shift, freely undertaken but I am off at six, seven at the latest and I do not want my good work to come to nothing over the following 24 hours until my return on the morning of the 26th.

Nic Everything is covered, Bernie, you've seen the list. These people have become disconnected. They've been squeezed out. This is the stable we offer them.

Bernie A stable it may be, but there is going to be respect. People can be worse than beasts. They can hang about.....or disappear.

Maggie I feel so excited. It's all so unpredictable. I mean, like, Christmas is so fixed, so dead, the same dreadful songs. Those people, if they ever existed, yes, let them exist, those shepherds, the travellers crowded into Bethlehem, they wouldn't recognised what we call Christmas, would they! I'm waiting for the detail, the telling detail, some little unexpected thing that will fling us all back two thousand years, will fling us into the present, the here and now. That's what art is for me. I'm here to notice the details. Being aware!

Bernie The essence of good planning – details, lists, foreseeable contingencies. I must do a final check on the first aid kits, so I shall have to venture up above.....look after the details and the war will be won.

(he goes)

Nic You are right. The clichés of the rough sleeper no longer apply, if they ever did. We speak about the hidden homeless, people living, partly at least, in squats,

hostels, sleeping on friends' floors – miserable lives, isolated, slipping into serious mental and physical health problems. Hidden, forgotten, sinking. Our society has become so unstable, people present with such complex issues, the dividing line between normality, survival, and your life falling apart is a knife edge, a knife edge. A knife edge without a safety net.

Maggie God, who is going to come in through that door! I suddenly felt a great hole inside me. I think of a dirty drunk man with a can in his hand, a scruffy dog, a rough voice. That's scary. But it's more scary thinking that I don't know who might come. It could be me. The ground goes from under my feet. It's the emptiness here.....it's beautiful, but scary.

Nic This is a crypt, after all. We have a children's party down here at Halloween. Mutterings from the conservative element.....a hidden place, but peaceful, healing. This is where they belong. This place is safe. And the light comes in, a miracle, from the high windows!

In come Harry and Debs.

Harry The caretaker sent us down. We're here for Christmas. We arrived at the same time. We're not together. I suppose no-one is "together" here.

Nic Welcome. A bit chilly down here but plenty of atmosphere. A place to relax, chill.....

Harry The janitor let me put my cello in the little office or whatever out there.

Nic That's the counselling room, not in use over Christmas. Cello you say?

Harry I'm a cellist, professional, well semi-, got a recital after Christmas, could be a breakthrough. Breakdown then breakthrough. That's the way it goes, isn't it. I'll need to practise – assiduously. No home, but I've kept my best friend and, yes, I do have to buy an extra seat for it on the plane. If, that is, I had anywhere to fly to. But who knows – the breakthrough?

Debs Do we sleep here? It's quiet, no traffic, I like the spiral stairs, old aren't they, very old, worn. I could feel they were worn. Do you keep the light on at night? You could fall on those stairs. Uneven. Worn. Stone. Hard.

Nic We keep the light on. We will tonight. May I ask your name? I'm Nic, I'm the vicar here. Nic the Vic the guys call me in the youth club. And this is Maggie. She'swell I'd better let her say.....she's a special kind of helper.

Maggie I make films and things. I'm here to be what you want me to be.

Debs I don't want no filming. I do not want my face on a film. I came here to be out of sight. Please, please, no filming, no faces. Not mine.

Maggie Of course not. I'm sorry. No intrusion. I hope it will be a bit of give and take. I'm taking from you, I know, but I will give you back something and as a tangible

sign I promise you a print – I’m a professional photographer – of you, your portrait, for you to keep. It will be beautiful. It will be you, yours, to take away – a photo, framed if you like.

Nic This is your place. For these few days. To rest, to re-create yourselves.

In come Stan, Andy and Ted.

Stan (to Nic) You the big cheese, are you? We have found the Christmas billet, bit dark and miserable and no doubt damp under foot but I’ve known a lot worse and I’m grateful for a place to lay me head.

Nic The sleeping quarters.....the beds.....are upstairs, and the showers; down here’s the quiet space to chat, have a joke.

Stan We have to pray, do we, to get our supper, or bow our heads and keep mum? Is that the score, your reverence?

Nic You are all welcome to join our Christmas worship in the main body of the church but that is your free decision. No compulsory prayers here, have no fear. Nothing obligatory.

Stan This is Andy, my mate. He doesn’t speak. I won’t say he can’t but he doesn’t. And don’t be taking him for a fool. He is no fool and anyone who treats him like a fool will have me to deal with. He’s got a book about astronomy in his pocket – “The Stars at a Glance” – maps for each month. The stars have very strange names, names you can’t pronounce. But Andy knows them all. That book is well-thumbed, well-thumbed I tell you.

Ted And I’m Ted. I quite possibly might be a fool. I will leave that for you to judge, as time passes, as time tells.

Nic Are you together, you three?

Ted The Three Musketeers! Athos, Porthos and Aramis. And where is the fourth? No. I am a loner. And most of the musketeers were Scots, by the way, Jacobite exiles or, like me, a mere soldier of fortune. Ted, at your service.

In comes Bernie with Friedrich and Annie

Bernie The place is filling up. Two more I found loitering at the door.

Friedrich Is one to make introductions? My name is Friedrich Schreber. I am a student of philosophy who has found my way to the soft heart of capitalism? (noticing that Maggie is taking notes on her laptop). And like any respectable madman my words are being recorded immediately. Are you one of the good angels or one of the bad?

Maggie I’m here to record, with your permission, what happens. I’m the artist in residence, temporary residence, of course. Six days.

Friedrich Wonderful! Amazing! Tell me, my dear, are you here to make sure we cannot tell our enemies from our friends or to help us forget we have enemies at all, that our fears are just bad dreams.

Nic Just to say - this is the season of goodwill, of peace on earth. We are all thrown together and this requires a certain restraint, go easy, eh!

Friedrich We are all in this together! That's it, isn't it, old chap. Then no-one's to blame, isn't it!

Nic Yes, we are. We are all in it together, here. I want this to be a place with no pressure, no distinctions, no competition. An escape, just for a few days.

Ted Isn't that asking just a tiny bit too much. Instant Utopia. How about a mattress and a cheese sandwich and a big mug of hot chocolate – can't you be satisfied with that.

Nic No. I won't have you dismiss this by calling it utopian. It's simply a place that is open to those who have nowhere. From openness comes peace. Cheese sandwich – yes – but with it – fulfilment, peace. As real as the cheese. No programme! No agenda! Leave your prejudices at the door! A mother, a new-born baby, a stable. Nothing could be simpler – peace in poverty. Peace on earth to men of goodwill. We just want to be friends, to be friendly.

Ted You know what mother rhymes with? Smother. Mothers smother. That's what I hear the angels singing.

Bernie Sort of rhymes with bother, don't it – mother. And if you're Yorkshire, it rhymes with t'other.

Stan If there's tea on the go, I'll have a mug and a smoke. Have to go outside, no doubt. (to Bernie) Show us where to go, will you, mate.

Bernie We have set up a covered smoking area in the vicarage garden. Not your heated beer garden but a gazebo kindly lent by one of the parishioners. All fag ends in the sand buckets provided.

Stan My, oh my, an invitation to the vicarage garden party – one lump or two. Things must be looking up... the lap of luxury....cucumber sandwiches, not chunks of stale cheese. I'm Stan, by the way. Plain Stan. No names no packdrill as my old man used to say.

(Bernie, Stan, Andy and Ted start to leave and don't stay for the whole conversation)

Nic By the way, we would ask you not to use mobile phones down here.

Friedrich Ah, this is the zone of contemplation, of true reality?

Ted And Jesus didn't need one, did he, so why should we?

Bernie There's none down here because I can't stand the noise. They get on my nerves, irritating those ring tones, so I've banned them from the premises.

Nic Bernie's little joke! I could tell you that reception is poor down here, but we decided to keep this area mobile-free because of our wish for equality.

Friedrich Isn't it wonderful how simple those with power make ethics out to be!

Nic Upstairs is a room for communication. Some people have phones, some do not. Some people have friends, some do not. Some of us have a family who care about us, some have none or have lost contact, or worse. So, down here, we do without. No drink, no drugs, no phones. Just other people! Come I'll show you. Perhaps we can iron out some of your misunderstandings.

Friedrich To the machine we must adapt. We are all mere reflections of technology. I will follow in your footsteps, O master.

(Friedrich and Nic go)

Harry I'm used to the mad house. No, that's not fair. I used to be the conductor for an orchestra of young deaf people. It was so beautiful, their determination, their enthusiasm. I thought, well, if I can get this lot to make music I'll be ready for the Berlin Philharmonic – the effort, the attention they gave to me, depending on me to lead them.

Maggie Is that a joke? An image? Is there really such an orchestra? How amazing!

Harry Many. It's a movement. World-wide. And why not? To make music, to be there all playing together – and not hearing what you are producing. Trusting, beautiful. But crazy. I get the same feeling here.

Maggie Can I see your cello? Will you tell me about this recital (they start to leave) and of course no-one will know that you spent Christmas in a refuge. I love the cello, it's so human, isn't it, the human voice..... (they have gone) you embrace it body and soul. No-one will know about you....so they play without being able to hear, and all looking to you to hold it together...that would make an amazing film..

Stage Direction

 Until the end of Sc 1, very quietly, a recording of someone practising the opening Prelude from Bach's Cello Suite No 1 in G Major, could be played. This is Harry practising – stopping, making mistakes etc – just the Prelude, and just quietly, far away. It doesn't need to be complete, or ever get to the end.

Annie I nearly said, "Come far?". It's hard to know what to say, what to ask. Are you cold? You look chilly, chilled.

Debs I'm fine. I haven't come far. I haven't come from anywhere. From the street. They told me I could come here, shelter here, be safe.

Annie Shelter from the storm. I'm not used to streets, how hard they are, how grey and broken.

Debs Did you live in the country, well, before you ended.....came here.

Annie You live somewhere and then....you live nowhere. I chose to leave. I had to leave. Take your pick. I was a bit of a gypsy and then it was time to go, to get out and I chose the city....and this.

Debs They told me I should go, leave home, it was no good always going back for more....punishment.....a glutton for punishment....that's what they said. Look after yourself.

Annie I've lived many years in the West of Ireland – Connemara – you won't know it, and we used to have tramps, big men with rough beards who slept under hedges. They were noble, heroic, nothing left to lose. I never felt scared – but now us, women are meant to be at home, to cope.....

Debs They said I shouldn't go on. I should get out, seek refuge. I don't know about coping.

Annie The first days in the city were exciting, the buzz, the possibilities, everyone getting on with their lives, free, going about their business. Possibilities. Then I lost it. It all drained away and left me flat.

Debs It's a place to live, isn't it, a place to keep on living, the city, all the streets, this way and that, you get to know your way around.

(in come, quietly, Alice and Elizabeth. Alice wears a coat which somewhat conceals her advanced pregnancy. Elizabeth is reluctant to speak throughout, acts as Alice's protector in an unobtrusive way)

Elizabeth We come in, OK? Soup ready soon, or something, they say, upstairs, yes?

Annie It's just us, for now. Come and join the gang. There's a kettle out there. I'll go and make us a tea. Do you want a cup?

Elizabeth Thank you, that would be very kind. Elizabeth (holding out her hand) Elizabeth. From Poland. My English is not very well.

Annie How about you, love? Come and have a seat, you look exhausted. Are you two friends....We've just met. Guests at the party. I don't even know your name. You didn't tell me.

Debs I'm Debs. Always have been. And you? Irish?

Annie No, grew up not far from here, then I was a wanderer. And I'm Annie, plain Annie. Call me Ann and I won't answer, or worse.

Debs Annie, right, I've got it.

Elizabeth This is Alice. We are old friends, two month at least. We stick together, got lift in veg lorry. Not much room. Alice get very big.

Debs How long have you got to go, love. Can't be long. What a shame, you here, you should be with your mum, have you got a mum? Can we get you home?

Alice No, you bloody can't. Got thrown out, me mum's boyfriend ain't having it, kicked me out. Lizzy here, she looks after me, she's me sister now, ain't you Lizzy.

Elizabeth I think it is begin. I think it has begun, the labour. She has pain, backache.

Annie Are you having contractions? I had my first in the back of a caravan, it all happened so quickly. I was lucky.

Elizabeth She has show – that what you say – show.

Alice I got cramps. I got backache. I want to pee and I've got a pain up my backside. Got the picture?

(the 3 women are gathered round Alice in quite a tight group and don't notice Penny coming in)

Debs We'd better get you some help, love, the hospital's down the High St and past the Fire Station. A and E. I know it well.

Alice I'm not going. You won't get me there. They were shit to me. They told me I was doing damage to my baby. A waste of time. They wanted to lock me up. It'll be alright. We'll be alright.

Elizabeth It all changed today. At Hospital say – be on look out for – how you say? The show. That's what you call it. The cramps. The baby comes.

Alice What am I going to do? She's a girl, they told me that, the scan. I had a scan. I ain't got a name for her 'cos I don't know how she's going to be born. I don't know how I'm going to do it.

Penny You can do it. You know how. We'll help.

Alice I don't know nothing. I don't know what's happening. I don't want them poking around. I reckon they'll tie me up or drug me or something. What are you going to do? Call the ambulance? Call the police? If you do, I'm off and don't you try to stop me.

Penny I won't, we won't. If you're going to give birth, you need help and you need to calm down. I used to be a midwife. I know what I'm doing. Please, let me help you.

Alice I ain't got much choice, have I? I want her to be ...well...safe and sound. I don't know what is going to happen. Will she be alright? I want her to be alright. I'll look after her, I will, I can do that. She's mine and I'll look after her.

Penny First we've got to get her here. You're going to get her here.

Annie Here we go, like back in the caravan. I was quick, half an hour of pushing and out she came.

Debs You got to know what you're doing – there's always the chance of complications. You've got to watch out for complications!

Penny She's young, she's not had the best preparation probably but she can do it. What your name? We need to get things clear.

Alice Alice

Penny Right, Alice, the hospital scares you. We won't go into that. You are the one giving birth. You are the one in charge. We will help. I know what to do. Trust me but first trust yourself. Right now, thousands of women are preparing to give birth in slums and shanty towns, in caves and villages far from any hospital. We'll find a way to help you. I'm Penny. I'll help you.

Debs We can't do that. We've got to take care of the baby. She needs professional help.

Alice I'm not going back. Elizabeth took me there today. We were hanging around for hours. Then they sent us down to Social Services. I've had enough of them. I said I was staying at my aunt's. She'd keep an eye on me. Made it up, the address, said she was a nurse. They were satisfied with that. Let us go. Lizzy, they liked her, she can talk proper, long words, funny accent but they listened to her. She's worried I'm going to lose it, lash out. She's seen it happen. I'd had enough of questions – name, age, date of birth, name, age, date of birth.

(In come Joe and Marina, who both give the impression that they might be volunteers (without meaning to))

Annie Did you two hear any of that? Give us a minute before you go and tell.

Joe I don't know anything. Is there some kind of trouble? I just arrived. We just came in, you know. We're new here.

Annie This young woman may well be in the early, or perhaps not so early stages of labour – but we're not panicking. It's tricky. She's young, upset.

Penny And the hospital was too much for her. She's been let down, abandoned by the system and now she rejects it all. She's on her own. We're all she's got.

Alice They told me to go away. Stuff them!

Marina Hysteria is hardly the most appropriate way to prepare for birth. I wonder if we might bring a little calm to bear on this situation.

Penny We have to act. We must do something. She's at her wit's end and scared what they'll do to her. She needs time. We need time. She's done nothing wrong!

Marina Weakness is not innocence. This is her test. She has been given life, and now she must earn it by giving it herself – and that thought is not mine. It is one I have remembered and treasure. She is no victim.

Penny We must protect her.

Marina “The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason:”

I'm sorry, I'm hiding behind quotations.
We will do what is necessary.

Penny Another quote coming?

Marina My grandmother used to say – “it is better to begin in the evening than not at all”.
So, we're on the way.

Joe Shall I go and fetch someone in charge, someone in authority. There's going to be a baby is there? We nearly had one in the restaurant. I called the operator. 999.
Shall I contact the emergency services.

Penny This is not an emergency. This is a woman giving birth to her daughter.

Annie And what is your position here, you two? You're here to help, to keep an eye on us, be there for us, I should say.

Joe Me? I'll help anyway I can. I'm used to hard work but I had nowhere to go and I swallowed my pride and ducked in here. I'm no Christian but I can accept a bit of Christian charity. I met the vicar upstairs. I couldn't speak. My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth. The words just wouldn't come. He sent me down here. I've never begged for anything in my life.

Annie Oh, I thought.....you look....and you, what's your position?

Marina Reduced circumstances might have been the phrase at one time. Very reduced. One runs out of spare rooms. One comes to the end of....obligations, favours, goodwill.

Penny So you are both one of us. Will you help us with this, help us to find a way to help her, help Alice.

Marina Forty years ago I was a nurse in Africa. Kenya. You don't forget it...birth.

Penny I knew it! I could tell! You can help! It's just happened. Right now. We didn't plan it. She arrived. She's frightened. I am....I have....experience but I need something else...moral support?.....your help?

Marina That was forty years ago. I saw women die in child birth. I saw babies die. Too many. Too many weak, sick bodies.

Penny But that was not natural. That was poverty, and oppression. That was man-made. It didn't need to be like that.

Marina No it didn't. But you won't help by making such a song and dance. If you want Alice not be afraid, then be calm. This is not some political protest. I remember the faces of those women as they prepared to give birth. Dignified, reverent, holy. Yes, I will be so presumptuous as to use that word – holy. Holiness on the mud floor of a corrugated-iron shack. They did not complain. They had given themselves up to something, something natural yet also – I won't say spiritual, everything's spiritual nowadays – but also, yes, sacred. Like a prayer.

(Joe has left, somewhat embarrassed and Elizabeth and Alice have also, in response to a contraction, gone out of the space, but can be heard)

Penny I thought you meant something more raw, more instinctual. Praying sounds terribly polite, please and thank you.

Marina Have you never known what it is for a lonely soul to cry out in desperation? Does emotion for you have to be expressed in grunts and moans.

Penny No, but birth is self-assertion. It's not deference.

Marina It's letting go, trusting – natural and supernatural. You've put me in pearls and a twinset and not allowed me a beating heart.

Penny And you're just dismissing me as a vulgar agitator....no....no.....you're right. Stereotypes. I'm sorry.

Annie I had two friends, both stoned. I needed to pray. But we got through. The Angels kept an eye on us. She needs you both. You are both strong women.

Debs The baby needs you both.

Penny Penny

(they shake hands rather formally)

Marina Marina

Annie You'll be hugging before the night is over. Maybe? But that poor frightened girl will be hanging on to you both. She was a bit stunned by you two. You certainly shut her up. I think she already trusts you – your honesty. Now she could do with someone helping her get real with what's happening.

Penny I'm not going behind her back. I'm not going to betray her. It's her choice.

Annie I know, I know – you can see how unpredictable she could be, how wild. She needs some comfort – I don't know – and wisdom, someone wise – Marina, can't you help her.

Marina I think it's gone too far to ask her to be rational, to weigh up the options. She's here. There's a chance she will calm down enough to be carried through but we need to do what we can to be ready.

Debs The hospital's not far, you know. We can easy get a taxi, easy. Please. Please.

Marina I don't think she would get in it.

Penny And I'm not putting handcuffs on her, not even with a soft fur lining, Santa's tinsel handcuffs.

Annie Why don't you two go and see how she is, Alice, and go and see what you can find. You'll have a bit of negotiating to do. I can see you being a very effective double act – diplomacy and force.

(Marina and Penny are carried out of the room on Annie's strength)

Debs I don't like it. I'm scared. You can't just have a baby wherever you want, can you? I mean, it's not allowed.

Annie Needs must. There's nothing like it – the urge to bear down. There's no turning back. I remember it. Do or die and I was going to do.

Debs They won't let us, let her. They'll take her away, I know they will.

(In comes Bernie with Andy, Stan and Ted. For the rest of this Scene Ted must silently copy the words and gestures of all of the other characters, as if by magic, simultaneously, as they speak. He does not move about the stage but 'performs' in one place, to himself. The others do not notice him but he should be as visible to the audience as possible. It is obvious through his delivery when Bernie is repeating a memorised description of the windows

Bernie (in full flow) “If it were daylight you would see that the prevailing colour of the four windows is blue, thereby bringing the expanse of the sky deep into this building, half-buried as it is in the heart of the city. This is to be seen as a poignant reminder of the short gap between heaven and earth”. Mind the gap as we say stepping from the train to the platform. Mind the gap.

“The east window depicts a shepherd with his sheep, a universal pastoral image of divine care, whilst in the west the figure of a woman with wings is seen alone in a desolate landscape. For elucidation turn to Chapter 12 of the Book of Revelations”. Or is it Revelation? One or more than one? “Known also as ` the Apocalypse’ “ – the end is nigh..... “ The smaller north and south windows both

show simplified male and female figures with between them a ball of white light, indicating the love that lives between them, though some authorities discern the suggestion of an angelic or higher being in the gesture of this illumination which both unites and separates male and female, the primary human dichotomy. Note that the function of the lead is unusual. It does not perform a cloisonné effect, defining the forms, but sweeping across the whole composition, enhances the expressive gestures, the organic joie de vivre of the whole creation”.

(Joe has come in during Bernie’s speech)

Joe Excuse me, are you Bernie, I couldn’t find you.

Bernie All will be revealed tomorrow, though these winter days the sun don’t get up that high, but the blue is beautiful. Could be the sky, could be the sea.....

Joe I told the vicar, about the baby coming. He told me to find you, seeing as everyone’s down here and he says you’re in charge down here. He’s coming but he said you’d know what to do.

Bernie What to do?

Joe About the baby.

Bernie The baby? I haven’t seen no baby. We never thought of a baby. I mean, it’s not likely, is it, a homeless baby. I mean a baby needs a home, somewhere warm. A baby can’t just turn up. I haven’t seen no baby. We’ve got no changing facilities. No bottles. No nappies. We’ll run out of milk.

Joe The baby’s not here yet. It’s coming. It’s on the way.

Bernie On the way – well, stop it, send it somewhere more suitable, more practical. This set-up is not designed for a baby.

Joe It is here – with Alice. She’s the mother. She is the one who is going to have a baby, here, now, tonight, maybe.

Bernie Maybe? Is she or isn’t she? It’s one thing or the other. It must be.

Stan I helped deliver a baby once. You wouldn’t believe it would you? In the army. Iraq. There she was; in a ditch. We were on patrol, foot patrol. She was lying in a ditch, shit-scared. We called in the medics, but there was no time. She let me help. I just tried to keep her comfortable, tried to keep her clean. I kept thinking of buckets of hot water. I don’t know what for. I just wanted lots of buckets of hot water, but there weren’t any, of course. And towels.....

(In come Nic, Friedrich, Penny, Marina, Elizabeth, Alice – all of them somewhat agitated and talking over each other).

Nic It's impossible. We cannot turn a church hall into a birthing unit. We do not have the facilities. It would be totally irresponsible totally irresponsible. Think what the media would make of it.

Penny We take full responsibility. I am confident we can see this through. She's scared stiff. She trusts us. If there's a hint of danger we'll call an ambulance.

Elizabeth I've seen her completely lose it, totally. They'll have to knock her out. Put her to sleep. Please, please, let her stay here.

Alice Let me stay here, please. Penny'll look after me and Marina. I ain't going to no hospital. No, no, no.

Marina Please, no more arguments. Remember the baby is hearing all this, feeling all this, what happens now will affect her for the rest of her life, the rest of her life. Nothing matters more than that we are calm and help Alice to be calm.

Friedrich Seven Billion! Seven billion! And here comes another one. Nature's capital is non-renewable but all you do is blame the victims. The poor do not matter. They don't consume, do they, they just die. But maybe they won't want to die any longer. The poor will want what you've all got. Seven billion wanting to be richer. And we're squabbling over one more mouth.

Nic (finally, to Friedrich) Mouth! Mouth! For God's sake shut yours. Shut your stupid mouth! (all go silent). Thank you. This poor child is about to give birth, or so it seems, and...and....it's my responsibility to decide.

Friedrich The naked voice of power.... the iron fist, two every second....two and a half every second.....a fact you can't deny.....a tide that will destroy this rotten world, seven billion.....eight....nine.

Stan Shut up. You heard, didn't you. You haven't got a clue. Numbers, just numbers.

Nic This is an impossible situation. A complete stranger starts giving birth and you're asking me to let you two, also complete strangers, to help her through this with a perfectly good hospital not half a mile away.

Annie If you go on like that you'll push her over the edge. It's difficult.

Penny But it's not an emergency. She's not in any obvious danger. There's lots we don't know, but we are acting responsibly, given the circumstances.

Nic Responsibly! I don't know why I'm arguing with you. It's ridiculous. And probably illegal!

Stan No it ain't ridiculous. I've seen it. In a ditch. I've seen it. In the flesh.

Marina You haven't rung for the ambulance because you sense something....Alice's need....her fear....and something more....not just the pressure of the moment...why don't you go and ring.

Nic I don't know....really....there's something asking me, to be brave? To keep things simple? I'm lost, to be honest.

Alice It's me you're talking about. I know this is crazy, me having a baby, here, tonight. It's a mess, my life, that's what you think. That's what I thought. If you take me to that hospital, the mess'll get worse. Here, there's a chance, here, I've got a chance.

Stan Better than a ditch, better than a stinking ditch.

Annie I think we want to let her stay.

Penny The vicarage is next door. We'll be fine. We take responsibility. This is what Alice wants. Not hostile strangers. We're not really offering you a choice. You can't throw her out. That's not going to look too good on the Christmas Day news, is it?

Marina No threats, this isn't about threats. We need to be in this together, all of us. Will you let us into your house, Nic. That would be the best thing.

Nic God knows what my wife will say. She's away visiting her parents. She's used to committee meetings, mother and toddler group, the senior citizens forum. A maternity ward will be a bit of a shock.

Marina We'll go over now. Come on; is that alright with you, Alice. Things are progressing but it will be a while yet. You stay here. We'll go and get things ready.

(Marina, Nic, Penny leave)

Joe I think a few of us could go and make ourselves useful upstairs. Come on, guys, we're a bit in the way here, I guess.

(Joe, Friedrich and Ted leave)

(In come Harry and Maggie)

SCENE II

Harry (talking to Maggie). If you could make a film of me practising, we could show it in the foyer, kind of a bit vague and misty, projected on the rough wall, if there is a rough wall, perhaps silent, can you give it a sort of silent-movie feel, a bit juddery, can you do that? And then in they come and see me come onto the stage and it will be hyper-real, I mean, me, the cello, the motion, the sound. Hyper-real. After the shuddering film.....what's up?

Annie We're having a baby. Alice, a young woman, who arrived here not long ago, is having a baby. It's started. We're going to care for her. It all happened while you were practising. How's it going, the rehearsal.

Harry Fine, wouldn't you say, Maggie? It's coming. I'm getting there....I'm getting there....I went to the station, to get on the train, to go home to Mummy, Christmas crowd, parcels, shouts, kisses, whistles.....I couldn't get on.....I'd forgotten how you do it.....be normal....ordinary.....

Maggie A baby. Christmas Eve and a baby on the way. Now that is an event worth documenting. Amazing, amazing. This is Bethlehem! Bethlehem all over again!

Annie No! This is Alice. Please remember. Alice, in the flesh. Alice giving birth.

Maggie I could film it all for you, a record, you could keep it, you'd always have it and – if you don't mind – I could use it in my work – this birth happening next to the turkey and the haircuts and eye-tests and counselling. Just there – no comment – no explanation.

Annie That's your creativity, is it, your idea of being creative. Maybe she just wants to be left in peace to get on with her creativity, her big day.

Maggie How about letting Alice decide. People like to see themselves, to remember what happened. Come on Harry, let's go and work on your rehearsing a bit more.

(Maggie and Harry leave)

Alice What you on about. I can't take it all in. It's doing my head in.

Annie The baby – your little girl – is on the way.

Debs Wouldn't you be better, dear, in the hospital? They can take care of you properly.

Alice No. I'm better off here. Penny is really kind and gentle.

Annie There was a song I used to sing – 'Crazy Jane'
 (she sings) My body makes no moan
 But sings on
 All things remain in God

It's been going round and round, strange song, 'Crazy Jane' –
 (she sings) All things remain in God

Alice When I was a kid I had to find food from bins, and skips, what I didn't steal. That's how it was. I never got looked after. It ain't going to be like that with my baby. My Gran was religious. Round her house I used to dress up as the Virgin Mary, with old curtains and shawls. She had a picture of Mary on a donkey, with her baby, going through a desert, looking kind of stoney-faced, pale. That's what I used to play, getting lost in the desert. At my gran's. Then she died.

Debs She got there . Herod slaughtered the innocents. Herod's soldiers killed the little children. She had to flee. They broke the doors down, the soldiers, but Mary had gone, warned in a dream.

Stan Go on dear, tell us the story. Andy's listening. He loves stories, and pictures that tell stories. We go in the galleries. He likes the religious ones, not fruit, not flowers. He goes for drama – the dramatic moment!

Debs That's all I know. That's what I was told. It was slaughter. The wise men told him. He sent his soldiers house to house, breaking down the doors. That's what happened.

Stan No doubt, no doubt, yeah, Andy don't want no fairy stories, he wants a good story, but he wants the truth. The truth ain't easy, I mean, the truth is hard to stomach, but he wants to know the truth. He's all ears.

Bernie Does he understand, does he take things in?

Stan Does he take sugar?! Yes he does. Yes he does take sugar. Yes he does take things in. He can speak for himself, except he can't. He's got a mind like a razor-blade, sharp. Write down any multiplication or division sum you like – long division – and he'll have it done and dusted in a jiffy.

Bernie And how would you know if he's got it correct, the correct calculation, the right answer!

Stan That's not the point. There's more to it. He's deep. He's got feelings. That's what the stories are for him – his feelings.

Bernie My dog's got feelings. He's very sensitive. One cross word and his whole body's droopy and sad but soon as I pick the lead up his tail is wagging like mad.

Stan No dogs here, I hope. Andy's scared stiff. I had to find a new home, a new owner, for mine. Andy couldn't get used to him. You ain't bringing him here, are you?

Bernie Course not. No dogs allowed in here.

Stan Good. Glad to hear it. That would be it for Andy. Live and let live, that's my philosophy.

Bernie There was a fellow on the radio today – said the spirit of Christmas was about collaboration. That's a funny word. Why not co-operation. What's the difference? Collaboration. Not the same thing is it as co-operation, is it? Or isn't it? Collaboration sounds a bit shifty, a bit suspicious, don't it?

Debs It's help. It's all about help. We need help. She needs help. Alice does. I need help. I've got help here but I've needed help. I feared for my life, the kids. He was brutal. I've been lying on the floor, and blood and whatever, and I've felt help nearby. Someone you couldn't see. Someone was with me.

- Elizabeth Is Angel, watching, very silent, bright, but no seen, no visible. Angel in the night is what child knows. Pray to angel.
- Alice I ain't never seen no angel. I just seen bare walls, windows, get under the covers. Angel must have turned his back on me. Turned his back. My teeth chattering and I can't stop it. Shivering, shivering. Bare windows scary.
- Bernie My dog hates fireworks. He knows it's coming, Guy Fawkes. He hides away under the bed. He shivers something terrible. He knows it's coming.
- Annie That song, 'Crazy Jane' was about time not mattering, time not being real – the past dead and gone – no, everything still exists, my life, yours, this old church, "All things remain in God" "All things remain in God".
- Debs It ain't going away is it. I worked in a florist, you'd bring in the fresh flowers from the market and the old would have to go, some of them, and the shop would smell all pure and beautiful again – fresh, the early morning, the shop still shut, dark even.
- Elizabeth I student of stars – Big Bang, cosmos – cosmology, you say. There is not one cosmos, probably, surely. Many, multi, multi-universe. That is name. That is theory, good theory, idea. Side by side, many different worlds, universe. This is one, maybe other universe touch this one, come close, speak to us or something. We feel it close. Is possible. Is theory. I study, university, not science fiction, not crap.
- Debs When the flowers are fresh you can feel how life blossoms, life wants to keep going, to flourish, yes, to flourish. I could feel love – around me – in the air – with the flowers. That's what kept me going. There was someone speaking to me, like you said, close, with the flowers, the fresh flowers, and the day still dark. You just have to keep going, I mean, life goes on, doesn't it, life has to go on. Something keeps it going, keeps us going, speaks to me.....
- Bernie I used to take my niece and nephew fishing out at the chalk pits near Shelford – now you may not think this can cast any light on the problem but for me it does – I've sat there and thought of those pits empty and now they're full, full of water, deep, too deep to reach the bottom, but once they were empty.
- Stan I know that place, been fishing there myself, in the old days.
- Bernie They lost interest. They liked it when they were little. It was interesting then but they got fed up with it. Anyway, it's gone upmarket now, an aqua park, motorboats and chalets. It was wild when we used to go, but they lost interest, the niece and nephew.
- Stan (to Elizabeth) If you're so clever and educated, what you doing here, why don't you go home – Polish, is it, your family could help if you're a bit short of cash.
- Annie She's here for Alice. That's more important.

Alice She ain't going. I know that. We came in the lorry together. That's what got me going I expect. How long is this going to go on?

Annie Penny and Marina will be back soon. It takes time, the contractions can come and go. They're getting things ready for you.

Stan Having a good go at that vicar, more like.

Alice I want her to be happy. I want her to be proud, proud of herself. I want to be proud of her. I'm going to keep hold of her. If I was in the hospital, they would take her away, I know they would. Not a fit person, not a fit person to be a mother. A waste of space. I'm keeping her. She's mine. I'm going to look after her and she'll be a star. I was good at running, not just shoplifting, proper races, on the track, cross-country. That's what I did best, cross-country. The kit didn't matter. I was the champion. Don't laugh, no joke, the champion. That's all over, all done, for me, but not for her. She's going to be a star, a champion. You wait.

(Nic and Penny enter during Alice's speech)

Penny Everything is ready, Alice. You can come and get settled in.

Stan Don't look so worried vicar, it might never happen.

Nic I don't know how we got into this but it's.....beyond me.

Debs Mine were taken, my two, and it wasn't my fault. I couldn't fight it, I couldn't provide for them. They were taken. I let them go. I had to. They weren't safe, with him. I was torn, torn apart. She's scared they'll take the baby away. She'll be helpless.

Nic Things are not like that now. The mother's rights are protected. This is a terrible risk.

Penny Please, no more of that. You, your church, your house, has given her a place of refuge. That's what you wanted. She is making her nest here. It is out of your hands unless.....

Nic Yes.....I lost my nerve.....I'm sorry.

Penny Come on Alice, we want to show you what we have prepared for you and your baby – in Nic's house.

(Penny, Nic, Alice leave)

Stan I don't like deceit. I don't like people pretending to be what they're not. That's got me in a lot of trouble in my life. Like pretending I was brave when I was in the army, pretending I could face the enemy with a steady hand. I couldn't, and now I've got something to say, especially to you, Debs is it? Debs.

Debs Yes, that's me.

Stan Something, someone, a man, has scared you. I'm not asking for details but it's obvious, obvious to me anyway 'cos I've done it, hit a woman, hit my wife, with the drink, not that that is any excuse. It's all in the past, I've lost my children, lost touch, they don't want to know, and why should they, it's gone, but you need to know if we're here together in this room and that young girl is having a baby. You could well be picking up the fear, from me, the fear, cos I hit her, more than once, it's something I've done. And she took it, she took it far too long, far too long.

Debs One thing I looked after was my sewing machine. It was a wedding present from my mum. She'd taught me everything – dressmaking, tailoring, embroidery, lacework. I looked after it, and whatever happened the girls got new dresses at Christmas. They chose the pattern, the material, the buttons, the ribbons – each year a new size, no hand-me-downs. We finished them and then wrapped them in tissue paper and waited for Christmas Day – he'd be sleeping it off, most likely and then they would unwrap them like they'd never seen them before, never. I hope they're still there, the dresses, Milly always wanted red, or pink, yes, sometimes pink. The hitting didn't matter, not one bit, not when we unwrapped the dresses.

Bernie I would be glad if someone could, you know, explain a bit about this labour business. I mean it can't be easy. You can steer clear of the – eh – anatomical descriptions – I never had any children of my own. I visited my sister in hospital when she had hers.....I had a fiancée once so I am not ignorant, I know what goes on, she went off with an Italian, just like that, so I never had any cause to be involved in this "labour". Alice don't seem quite here, I mean, it's all a bit much for her.

Annie She can't stop it. Her uterus, her womb is squeezing hard to get that little girl ready to find her way out. She's not really in the active phase of labour but she's getting there. It will be tonight, all being well. She doesn't know what's coming. I think that's for the best, but she'll be alright. Something will carry her through.

Elizabeth I'd better go. I don't know if I can help but we are friends. We look after the other. We going to stick together.

Bernie I met a man the other week who could not find a dentist here, or else it was too expensive, and he flew to Warsaw for his treatment – whatever it was, crowns, bridges, God knows. Said he got it for a quarter the price and was back the next day. You don't belong here, you're young and pretty and clever. What's to keep you here. Why should you stick with her. It doesn't fit. You don't belong here.

Elizabeth It happen. She me meet. No more questions, go together, lost together, hitch lift together. Not your business! Not everything fit neat.

Annie Nobody belongs here but here we are.

Debs She's kind, you can see it, just a friend. That's what you need.

Stan I think we all belong here. If we want to. It's up to us. We belong with each other. We look after each other. For now. You can't say more than that. For now.

Elizabeth Why I come here – that is my business. I not have to be telling, isn't it? This is place without history, yes? You are you, I am me, we have a cup of tea, a cigarette. No questions. That is the deal, yes!

(she goes in tears)

Stan I'm off for a smoke. You coming Andy? One thing I've learnt, I've seen it in Iraq, I've seen it not a million miles from here – that it's always the ordinary people who cry, the politicians make the noise, the officers, the poor bloody squaddies shout and swear, but it's the ordinary people who cry and nobody's there to listen. But I did help her, that woman I thought she was wounded, a casualty, but no, she was giving birth in a ditch – in the middle of a flaming war.

(Stan and Andy go)

Annie (to Bernie). So you'll be gone in the morning. Are you going to see your sister, your niece, is it, and nephew?

Bernie I like the morning, the early morning, an early bird. Specially on Christmas Day, the empty streets, magic. I'll go home and have a shower and change, I've got the presents in a bag and I'll be off. I'll probably walk, there won't be a bus. I don't want to get there too early. I mean they need their family time. But then Uncle Bernie will ring the bell and the festivities can begin. I'll probably treat myself to a taxi home, if there's one to be had. At a cost, of course.

Annie There are two little girls in Canada, I think, joined at the head and somehow their brains are connected. They are only five now, I think, they can't put ideas into words very well yet but when one is looking at something, the other one knows what it is without seeing anything and when one is tasting something the other one knows inside, mind to mind. I don't know how deep it goes, or will go, as far as thoughts, or feelings. They share who they are.

Debs I wonder where are they now, what are they doing – Milly and Katie. What dresses will they wear? Will there be fresh tissue paper? Lovely, rustling, smooth. I like white best, plain white, shows off the dresses.

Before the scene starts to change Annie sings one verse of the song she sang a bit of earlier in the scene:

(Sings) Before their eyes a house
That from childhood stood
Uninhabited, ruinous,
Suddenly lit up
From door to top:
All things remain in God

At this point Debs, Annie and Bernie must find something quite stationary to absorb themselves in. In come a group who then perform a mime, with narration, of the story of Little Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty) – just the main story up to the awakening of the Princess and the Wedding. But here, at this point in this play the story is told up to the point at which the whole castle falls asleep when the Princess pricks her finger. Throughout Scene III of our play the players in the mime must remain still, fixed in their positions. The actors in the refuge play in Scene III act as if the mimers are not there. They move round them, they do not see them. At the end of Scene III of this play we get the shorter second part of the mime, after which the mimers withdraw. This part of the play could be done just by a separate storyteller but it would be a pity to miss out on the two groups of players sharing the space.

The mime is performed for the audience, not to Debs, Annie and Bernie, the only characters on the stage at this moment.

After the play-within-a play of Little Briar Rose the actors in that play remain stationary on the acting area, whilst the action continues as though they are not there, a slightly different group occupies the stage after this interval entertainment. It is now several hours later, the middle of the night, perhaps 2 am. Stan and Andy are playing dominoes or draughts, Annie is giving Debs a foot massage and Maggie is working on her laptop. Joe is sitting quietly and Nic is on his feet, somewhat agitated.

SCENE III

Nic It's funny, isn't it, how you know when someone you are talking to is not really listening, their mind is somewhere else, but they're still looking at you, nodding, apparently there but they're not but actually it's more complicated than that because the person as well as nodding their head, smiling a little, is also telling you, somehow, that they are not really there, they want you to realise that they can't really pay attention to you – at the same time they are putting on this act, this performance, of listening. I have to protect that inner space. "I'm not listening....it might look as if I am.... but I'm not.....get it!". And we accept it, we go along with it, we keep going with the story we've started on, the one they don't want to be bothered with.

Stan (Andy has just won the latest game)
You win – again! He lets me win some times, crafty at it too, wants me to think I've earned it, he's made a genuine mistake. The other night we were down by the river. It was cold, quiet. I could swear I saw lights, over the water, hovering, moving – shifting lights. I thought he was tricking me, somehow, he was making me see them. I don't know where I got that idea from. Pale lights over the water, flickering.

Annie You alright, Joe? You're very quiet. Do you not want to go for a sleep. It's after two. This time of night, time stops. That's how it seems to me. I can let go of things.....myself.....responsibilities. It's my time of day.....but you.....there's plenty beds upstairs.

Joe No, I'm fine, I'm wide awake... I'm used to this time of night with my work....when I was working....I was a waiter....late nights.....get cleared up....walk home...if you were careful....avoided certain spots...I like the city at night...the quiet bits....after the heat and the rush of the kitchen, the faces, the plates. I like the trees at night, and you see wildlife. I love the branches and the leaves and you hear birds, you know, the dawn chorus it starts long before dawn. Perhaps they sense dawn before we do.

Annie What happened to home, Joe. Why no home to go to tonight, Joe?

Joe One thing, then another. I got in a bit of trouble. Nothing to be ashamed of and I couldn't keep it all together. So now the streets at night aren't so pleasant. It's nice, walking home from work in the quiet of the night, cool after the kitchen.

Debs I wouldn't feel safe, me, but it's not any better on the buses, is it, there's always trouble on the buses at night.

Bernie (bursting in) She's getting there. It's all happening. They let me in to see her, lying on a big pile of cushions. They were telling her to think of waves, waves rolling across the ocean, being carried in waves. It's not long now to delivery. That's what Penny said – the second stage. She has completed the transitional phase and is fully.....I've forgotten the word....deleted....depleted.

Annie Dilated.....that's the word.

Bernie I heard them say....it was ten.....yes ten inches, I think, or, no, was it centimetres...I'm not sure of the differenceten inches it must be.

(He leaves again, in high excitement)

Annie Doesn't really suit an Alice does it, to be going through such intense pain. Alice in Wonderland, Alice through the Looking Glass – a dream world, a pretty world of pinafores and pumps, and time drifting by in mysterious ways.

Nic But she's got a spark. She's a protester, a dissenter. She won't be repressed, she won't accept. She speaks out, in her innocence challenging the adults. I learn a kind of courage from her – the fictional Alice.

Stan Alice in Wonderland. That is just nonsense, isn't it. How can nonsense give you courage. Nonsense wouldn't have helped me, not with a sweaty finger on the trigger.

Nic School report. Always the same. "This boy is a dreamer. Needs to wake his ideas up". No chance. They couldn't touch me.

Debs Dreams soon turns to nightmares. Then what do you do? Faces hidden under hoods.

Joe You wake up sweating. In the end.

Stan I wanted it to be over, then there would be no more waiting. Oblivion. Beautiful word, that – oblivion. I like the sound of it. No more worries, no more cares. Oblivion. My finger on the trigger waiting for oblivion.

Nic Alice, she's strange – in the books, harsh. I liked that edge to the mystery, sharp – tumbling down a rabbit hole, far below, far underground.

Stan Never wake up.

Nic I bet Andy would like it. It's got such a strange logic to it. He'd enjoy that. I bet he's good at puzzles.

Stan He's fit for better things than puzzles, you know. He's what I call a genius, a misunderstood genius. He should be in a university.

(Bernie comes in again)

Bernie You can hear her now, loud and clear, it's all go up there. Marina came out to see me, keep you all informed. It's every four minutes and they're lasting about a minute. That's the right way round, isn't it. And it was centimetres. I'm never sure how long a centimetre is. You can't use your thumb, like with inches.

Debs What about pain relief. What are they giving her. They must give her something.

Bernie It's all in the breathing. That's what she said. Marina said she's got the hang of it – riding on her breathing.

(he's off again)

Maggie Why would anyone want to go through all this just to bring one more unwanted infant into this worldI am never going to have a child. What a mess! What a fuss!

Nic Hey – steady on. This is life you're talking about.

Maggie OK. Fine. People make choices. I choose not to go down that road. I am happy with my creativity, my mind, my art. Thank God some of us are. The planet is getting just a little bit crowded or will the Lord provide, come what may.

Nic I think he leaves that to us. That's why I'm here, to explore what God wants of us.

Maggie And I'm here for the people, for their stories, for their suffering, to make that known. What are you here for with all this tired old performance? If I didn't have my work to concentrate on, this place would make me scream.

Nic Have you ever been to Chartres. There's a set of sculptures there, the north porch, the creation of the human being. There is love, breathing into the Stone, bringing the stone alive. Behind the awakening human being stands the Logos, the word,

imagining that man coming into being. I feel the warmth, the breath of those carved figures. I go each year. I come back with the conviction to go on. Alive, not tired.

Maggie I can make something, I can imagine something without that mess, that mouth to feed. I don't need it. Pressure, pressure, pressure. Happy families! All they talk about are their precious babies, and how tired they are. Puking and sleeping. What's so wonderfully special about that?

Debs Don't have one. No-one's asking you to – just forget it and get on with your camera, your computer, your words. It's not really a choice, you know, a child, it's a decision, it's what you decide – life.

(Bernie comes in again)

Bernie All is well, all is well but we have a bit of a pause. Things have gone a bit quiet. She has not yet crowned, I am reliably informed, but she is on her way, but don't hold your breath. Are you not coming, vicar. It is your house after all?

Nic No, Bernie, I'm better out of it. Here I can believe it's actually happening. If I was any closer, it wouldn't seem possible.

(Bernie goes)

(Then Nic suddenly follows)

Stan Some things you wipe out, from your memory. I was standing on the platform, King's Cross, it must have been, all my kit, going back to barracks after leave, I suppose, maybe not, and this girl, dark eyes, is telling me she's pregnant. I can't have been more than seventeen. I can see her face, dark eyelashes and she's telling me and I'm picking up my bag and she's holding on to me and I'm turning away towards the train and that's it. She's not angry, she's just looking at me, and telling me she's pregnant. I can't even remember her name but she was my girlfriend, not just a quickie. You know what they say, twenty percent of the fathers on birth certificates ain't the actual father. Twenty percent. That's a lot. Women have got their secrets too.

Joe It'll be hard for her, Alice, without a man. She's tough, you can see that, but it's lonely on your own, you get strange ideas if you're on your own.

Stan She'll have her hands full. Trouble is, she'll have a struggle, just to make ends meet. What chance has she got of making anything of her life – hopeless.

Annie Depends what you want, Stan, you can survive on very little.

Stan But she will want, she will feel it, what she hasn't got, what that baby hasn't got, if she's still got the baby. I know it. You get desperate. You borrow, you can't repay. You rob Peter to pay Paul and you get deeper and deeper in the shit.

Maggie She's not here yet....don't count your chickens as they say.

(Nic comes back)

Nic They're doing fine, brilliant, all going well. Thank God for midwives – in the medieval drama of the liturgy at Midnight mass the shepherds would go searching through the church for the Christ-child and the midwives would lead them to the crib. Thank God for those women – such faith. That was long ago. We forgot about the midwives for Mary. They search in the dark and find a new-born child – “helpless, naked, piping loud, into the dangerous world I leapt”.

Stan Too right – danger wherever you look.

Debs Babies don't know nothing. They're far away, their faces shine. It's amazing, their skin.

Annie They look down on us, don't they – distant but shining – a light inside, a light within.

Debs But it don't last. The crying starts....the crying never stops.

Nic Utterly dependent, but telling us...no need to be afraid. The old symbols of power and punishment and fear turned inside out. Not power – love.

Annie What about all the other stuff, Nic, the mystery, the grandeur, the majesty of creation? I always hated 'Come All Ye Faithful' – 'Lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb'. No virgin's womb here.

Nic What do you want? What does all that matter? I'm a bit beyond theology tonight.

Annie It's messy you know. That baby is twisting and wriggling her way, squeezing her way through Alice's birth canal. Out she'll come greasy and slippery with blood and mucus.

Nic You've got it in for me, haven't you! God in the flesh, here, messy, in –carn –ation, in the flesh, in the body, that is my Christianity, the poor, the marginalised, that's the sermon I preach. You know what it says in John's gospel: he pitched his tent among us. I have believed in that. Tonight I'm feeling it, hearing it, perhaps even seeing it. Why do you want to mock what I stand for, what I am? I'm trying, you know. I'm trying to live up to it. Why don't you trust me? I don't want to wait for the answer.

(He goes)

(Bernie comes)

Bernie We're nearly there – that's what they said. Head's in place, everything ready, just holding on for now, any minute now, that's what they say.

(He goes again)

In comes Harry, obviously having been asleep but now wide awake. He has heard what Bernie said.

Harry So, the baby's nearly here. How did that happen so fast. Why didn't you wake us. That German chap is snoring his head off and that other guy – Ted is it? – he's asleep, I think. Shall we wake them – “Wake, O Wake”. Everyone else is awake, then?

Annie Bernie's our messenger from above. He's getting very excited. She must be giving birth right now.

Maggie Before this, I wanted things unpredictable. I wanted my work to have no patterns, no easy twists. Now this – so total, so sure – like the sun rising. She's in the middle of this huge ordeal, but I feel strange, calm even, not fighting for life. Her? Me? I don't know.

Harry I did a Christmas Oratorio gig last week. There's this instrumental section, a sinfonia introducing the second cantata with the shepherds in the field at night – you hear the angels – flutes and violins and then the shepherds' pipes start to come in and the two start to weave together, light and dark, heaven and earth, the music weaving them together, skilful, holy, simple. ‘Arise O lovely morning light’

Maggie Why should the light always be there, always come, always win? I don't see it. I see little flashes, facets, fragments but that doesn't mean it's broken, life, if it's just flashes, moments, pictures, here, then here. I like that. I can make sense of that. But not the light always being there at the end, some kind of victory. That seems like death to me.

Harry And I did a B minor Mass last month. I was feeling a bit lost, sitting there, in the proper kit, and nobody knowing I was, well, homeless, needing to find a friend with an iron, a clean shirt, and we came to the ‘Et Incarnatus Est’ – in the Creed ‘and was made flesh by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man’ and the music is grief-stricken, the voices, so pained yet looking beyond. The pain makes you look beyond, through the pain to something that can only come about through the other side of the pain. I can hear it now, falling, falling.

Debs You get sad, when it's over, the labour, the birth. Some gets suicidal. It's natural. Your brain don't know what's going on. Your body ain't there any more, like it was, something's gone, lost.

Joe In the Spring, you know, you cannot count the birds in the dawn chorus. That's my music. That is music you know. The new day. They sing for the new day. It sounds like each one just begins when it wants to, when it's ready, and then another, and one gets mixed up with the rest but if you listen, they are all part of the same thing, the new day coming and I hear it when I'm walking home and each street has different gardens, different trees, different birds, but it's all the dawn chorus. It's all the birds greeting the new day dawning.

(Bernie comes in, full of his news, before Joe finishes and is held for a moment by Joe's emotion).

Bernie The baby is born. She is breathing. She is crying. I've heard it. Penny told me. She is fine. They are both fine. She was very slippery but they didn't drop her. She cried. I heard her.

(Now the second part of the tale of Little Briar Rose takes part, the performers of that play coming to life and the performers in the main play staying still)

SCENE IV

(Players leave, and there are only Joe and Bernie left on the stage. It is now about 6am. Joe is cleaning or sweeping and Bernie is thinking, perhaps looking up at his windows)

Bernie She needs a name, that little one. Seven pounds twelve ounces. Or was it kilos? No, definitely, babies are pounds and ounces. But I forget how many ounces in a pound, and pounds in a stone. I mean it's not obvious is it.

Joe Kilos are easier, all in tens. A gram's next to nothing. A wren, you know, weighs less than ten grams. Light as air. I heard one today, in the cemetery, loud and clear. But tiny, light as air.

Bernie I like biblical names, traditional and surprisingly multicultural! Jews, Muslims, Christians, people of the book. So the names are transferable. Sarah, Miriam, Ruth, good names, solid.

Joe She might want something more modern, something more unusual. People make up names now, don't they. They don't stick with what's conventional.

Bernie If she's talking to the baby then she needs to give her a name. It'll help with the bonding – the voice, the name.

Joe Giver her time, it's only a few hours, she'll be exhausted. Perhaps she is having a rest. Most of them are asleep. It's gone quiet.

Friedrich (Coming in, sleepy) So, she has undergone the curse of Eve – 'in pain you shall bring forth children'. From the start life is trauma – birth, the beginning of the end – "in pain you shall bring forth children". Genesis, Chapter three, verse sixteen.

Ted (has followed Friedrich into the room, also emerging from sleep) "yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" – to complete God's corrective punishment as he chucked them out of Paradise. Pity about that – it was so nice in Paradise, better than the Seychelles even. And Adam got his deserts – toil, thorns and thistles, sweat and death – you are dust....dust.....verse nineteen, Chapter threethe Book of Genesis.

Friedrich A scholar of the Bible – how so?

Ted A proper upbringing – a heavy dose of guilt, the slim hope of salvation, very slim.

Bernie Mother and baby are both doing fine. I have seen the little one, a neat little bundle, not yet saying much.

Joe Don't bother yourself, Bernie, they're not interested. No cares in Paradise, were there. What's wrong with that – I'll have a bit of that.

Ted (sings)
 "Me and my Teddy Bear,
 Have no worries, have no cares
 Me and my Teddy Bear
 Just play and play all day"

Joe Think you're funny, don't you. Think you're clever.

Ted It's just a joke, wit, keeping us on our toes. You never know. God is an arbitrary bastard. Accepted Abel and his offering, rejected Cain. You need to keep your wits about you.

Joe I don't think you care about anybody else, do you? Other people?

Ted Other people? A catchy French definition of hell!

Bernie Who was the older, Cain or Abel? "Am I my brother's keeper". Terrible if you can't confess. People hang on for years, murderers, maintaining their innocence, and then confess – death-bed confession. Was it Cain first who resented his brother coming along, or was it Cain out to beat his older brother. Rivalry, eh?

Ted Cain, then Abel, the tiller of the ground then the keeper of sheep. Got rid of the usurper.

Friedrich So man dared to become like God, to know good and evil, and when power is threatened it not only oppresses but convinces those oppressed that they deserve to be under the thumb.

Joe What's the point of all this crap? Where does it get you – all this talk? Makes me sick. You think you're so clever, so bloody clever. it's rubbish, rubbish.

(Marina has come in and has heard some of the previous interchange)

Marina There is another way to look at it, if you so choose. The shepherds, the stable, the animals. These were the outcasts, the excluded, the unclean. This is comfort to the poor. Comfort gives strength, is the beginning of liberation. A morsel of peace – find it, take it, receive it, that is Heaven's gift, Heaven's only gift.

Friedrich I don't think you have much idea of what the poor have to live with. I don't know what you are doing here but you do not belong with the poor. It is humbug, you pretending, humbug. What is needed is clarity, analysis. You do not belong!

Joe And you do! I don't think so!

Marina What does poverty mean to you? Or justice? Surely the quarrel is not enough, the conflict. The struggle is for peace – yours, mine, Alice, the young girl in Kabul fearing she will be forced into marriage, or sold or jailed if she is raped. I am acquainted with a poverty beyond your politics, your abstractions. Poverty is fear and it is women who live with fear, and it is women who will bring you peace, not your abstract posturing.

Bernie Joseph, he must have found it all very confusing. I feel sorry for Joseph.

Ted Joseph is irrelevant. Keep him out the way, holding the lamp, or else he just might make dear little Jesus a little bit too human. Let's keep it all nice and angelic, leave it all up to the Holy Ghost.

Bernie Is she alright? Where is she going to go. I know it's early days but – she's got nowhere. Joseph was reliable, wasn't he, he wasn't going to let her down. He was faithful. He stuck with her.

Joe He led the donkey. He always led the donkey.

Marina The mother must be the one who is pure and fierce – “He has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things. The rich he has sent empty away”.

Joe Beautiful words, very powerful. Is it a poem? Sounds like a poem.

Marina It's Mary, poor, expectant Mary, feeling the power of the child in her womb. It's a prayer, a word of power, of praise.

Joe She was just a girl, innocent. Does it say that in the bible! That she spoke so strong!

Marina The innocent can be fierce, strong with suffering, with longing for...the impossible? No.....no.....the significant things.....home, warmth, shelter.....and that your child shall live forever, that love will give eternal life....that is the longing, the innocent wish.....impossible.

Bernie Don't know about innocent – not much of that about nowadays – but who's going to look after her? She's done well but, basically, she's helpless, helpless.

Friedrich Of course helpless. A victim. What the Lord gives with one hand, he takes away with the other. The system defeats us. Corruption. Nothing but corruption.

Marina Her courage got her through it, her spirit...Alice is fine, Bernie, and the child...I need some fresh air to clear my head.

 (Marina goes)

Friedrich And I need a smoke to clear mine – coming, Ted?

(Friedrich and Ted leave)

Joe I saw a photo the other day, in the paper, a woman with her nose and ears cut off, by her husband's family. She tried to run away. Afghanistan. How can that happen? How could you do it. Nose. Ears.

Bernie I used to get pigs trotters down at the market. Still can. Very popular with certain ethnic groups. We had a pig in here the other day, a live one would you believe, escaped from the urban farm. Urban farm! He took some catching, hard to get hold of. They've got a cockerel – noisy bleeder. There's been complaints, waking the neighbours. You don't expect it, do you – a cock crowing in the middle of a city. Urban farm!

(Stan and Penny come in)

Penny (talking as they come in) I remember reading a transcript of an emergency services operator talking to a partner to a woman giving birth, talking him through a sudden birth, a quick delivery. It was beautiful. She was calm, keeping him focused, letting him know that she was in touch with what they were going through – a patient voice, and her a perfect stranger.

Stan She's not got much hair has she, but it don't matter, does it. It'll come. Andy was funny, wasn't he. Looking so...well as if he didn't know what it was going to do. He wanted to touch her but I thought no....we ain't very clean, and you can infect a little thing like that, got to watch out for germs. We ain't really decent and clean. Where is he? (Stan leaves)

Penny She'll be fine. We'll take care, keep her safe but Andy can hold her, if Alice doesn't mind. You could go back later. She's getting lots of visitors – the Christmas crew.

Bernie I think we need to be a bit careful. I mean to say she's not on show is she. She needs her peace. Let's hope she can stay. When the vicar's wife gets back, which won't be long – lunchtime I believe – what is she going to say!

Penny Not much she can say, is there. Nic's going to call the doctor, later. He can say the baby came before we had time to think.

Bernie I don't know how you did it. I mean to say, giving birth just like that.

Penny She came without a hitch. She was fit and healthy, the baby, and Alice was young and trusted us. Things could have gone wrong, been difficult, but I believe we have to trust life, to keep real, and that means trusting in birth. Being responsible, but beginning with trust, responsible trust. Marina was amazing. She didn't say much, I'm the loud-mouth, but she had such a calmness about her. She seemed to be in touch with the baby, all the way through. She seemed to know the baby, to will her on through the journey, through the birth. I had the confidence but she had the conviction.

Joe You were a great double-act.

Penny And Elizabeth. She could just be there, be a friend, someone she knew, familiar. I said I'd get them something to eat. They're both starving. I never thought I'd do that again. I was standing on the edge of a cliff. I've stood there often. This time I jumped, I dived, I didn't think. This time I made it.

Bernie Always took me a good long while getting into the water – Brighton....Margate. Stand shivering waiting for a wave to splash up my legs...then in you plunge. Bournemouth...now that was a beautiful beach.

Joe You? Nervous? Penny? How come? You're the one who was so sure of what you were doing...without you....

Penny It's got me in trouble, my big mouth. I lost it, confidence. Didn't think I'd ever....I found it again, here, my voice. I found my voice again. I wanted to forget the past, delete it. But tonight, being here, I was back, I was remembering, and I was glad, despite the mess, the pain, I didn't have to relive it any more. I was in it. I was here and I was there, where it all went wrong. And I was happy.

Bernie Lovely acoustic in here, isn't it. When I'm giving my speech about the windows I don't have to strain, I can almost whisper. Something special. I suppose it was meant to be a place where people whispered, with it being a crypt, the remains.

Penny I don't think it was the dead who helped me. I think it was the living.

 (Penny goes)

Joe It was you helped us, Alice, the baby. You had the guts to do it.

Bernie I thought it was all injections and tugging the poor little thing out! They put those big tongs on its head, don't they – or cut them out. Ceezeiarian you call it. Tug and cut. I thought that's what you had to do.

Joe Think of it, right now, somewhere, a baby being born. You heard her cry, her first cry.

 (In come Annie and Debs who have been resting)

Bernie Here they are again, just like sisters, you two.

Annie If this was a panto, we could be the ugly sisters.

Joe And Alice could be Cinderella

Bernie And I'll be Buttons, all spit and polish.

Annie Alice won't be going to any balls for a while, but she's doing fine, is she?

Joe Marina was down, and Penny, and all's well, no sweat.

Annie I woke up just now with another of those songs in my head. I haven't sung them for years – Crazy Jane songs. I thought I could only sing when I was on the road, rootless. On the road there you're alive with something to give. That's what I thought, that's how I've lived. I was wrong. One night and this cold place feels like home, and then the song, then the song.

(she sings) A woman can be proud and stiff
When on love intent
But love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement.
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent.

Bernie That is a bit rude, is it not? Do we need to be reminded?

Annie Yes, I think we do. Thank God women now don't get cut automatically, the surgeon ready with his scalpel, don't need to, anyway, to be cut to give birth like they used to as a matter of routine. We're very stretchy you know, given a chance, given time, very stretchy.

Bernie Thank you – what is it they say – t.m.i. too much for me!

Annie Sorry, Bernie, I'm only having a tease. You coped, with Alice, the groans and moans.

Bernie Yes, it was fine. She was giving it a good go.

Nick and Maggie come in engaged in conversation.

Maggie It does make sense to ask 'what if'. What if Alice hadn't got a lift with Elizabeth? What would have happened to her? Where would her baby have been born? What if Mary and Joseph had found a room in the inn? What if the shepherds hadn't heard the angels?

Nic Now you're making fun of me. Counter-factual arguments tell us nothing. They divert our attention from the particularity of history. This is what actually happened, this and only this. Let's see what this leads to – cause and effect – the meaning of history.

Maggie If I can imagine Christmas possibly having been different – Herod might have found Mary and Jesus before they escaped. The innkeeper might have betrayed them. That makes it alive for me. That brings it right into the present, here and now, the choices we make, the decisions we take. That's what this piece of work is going to be about – decisions.

Nic Did Alice make a decision to have a baby?

Maggie No, I suppose not. She probably didn't think about it.

Annie But she did. In the end, she did, she went through with it. The decision lives on. You catch up with it. It catches up with you

Debs She knew what she didn't want. She wasn't going to the hospital. She was a tiger about that. Never mind what the vicar thought. Never mind what was sensible.

Joe Penny and Marina, they were amazing. How can anyone have such guts.

Debs They're not scared, are they? By Life. They just got on with it, like swimming.

Joe So have you, Debs. As best you could. There's different ways of being brave.

Bernie My dog fell in the canal. I had to fish him out. He kept afloat – doggy paddle. Nowhere to climb out. I got down on my belly and grabbed his neck, and yanked him out. All dogs must do doggy paddle. They haven't got a choice, have they.

(In comes Elizabeth)

Elizabeth I've been holding her. Her head's such strange shape, squashed. She breathe very quiet, and sneeze, and make noise. I walk round with her, I hold her here against my shoulder, here against my neck. She smell lovely but she nearly bald on her head. Strange and lovely, her squashed head. Bones soft. She look at me. I sure she look in my eyes. But I keep her close, hold her close.

(Elizabeth almost dances with the imaginary baby)

Elizabeth She sleep in arms. Tiny. Who harm her? Who can be harm her?

(She leaves again in tears)

(Stan and Andy enter)

Stan Starting to get light. Christmas morning, who'd have believed it? And not a present in sight, but who cares. We've got our little treasure upstairs. He was outside the door – of the room – just standing there, quiet as anything, listening. Do little babies hear things. I expect they can – see things? Smell? Hear? What do you think?

Annie How about a game, a Christmas game. You know the story of Sleeping Beauty – the wise women bestow their gifts on the baby.

Bernie I thought they were fairies. Fairy Godmothers. Is that different to wise women? I mean to say: it's a fairy tale, isn't it!

Joe Fairies have wings. They live outside. They're not so serious as wise women – I don't know what I'm talking about....It doesn't matter, it's the same. It doesn't matter, it's the same.

Debs But one was left out. There was no place for her and she was angry at not being invited. She came in at the end but there was one left, the littlest, who hadn't been noticed, and she stopped the wicked one's wish, she stopped the little girl falling down dead.

Nic Friedrich can be our wise woman who doesn't get invited. And he'll wish on her the collected works of Schopenhauer and Fredrich Nietzsche. And I'll be the last fairy godmother, who undoes the damage. I'll have to think what my gift is.

Annie Let's play, let's say what we would give to Alice's baby, each of us.

Bernie If it was a real Christening, then we'd know her name by now.

Annie She's called Briar Rose in the story. We'll call her that for now, shall we, Little Briar Rose. I'll start. I wish for our little Briar Rose a voice to sing with, a love of singing, that's my wish – that she is a song, a song that sings.

Joe I want her to have a garden, not a big one, but big enough to have a tree in it and a bird table and a bird bath. That's my wish.

Maggie I want her to have a friend, just one, a friend who knows her so well that she doesn't need to say a word. They share everything without needing to speak. That's what I wish for her.

Debs I want her to have a little bedroom with a thick carpet and a little window and a big teddy-bear and a pretty bedspread and wallpaper with roses on it, for little Briar Rose.

Stan Well, I'm speaking for Andy and for me. Andy, write down here, son, what you want to give the baby. It's whatever you want, right? I don't think he gets it. I mean, he's not very used to pretending, you see. What's that? A circle? What is it? Money? No...right...a ring. He wants her to have a ring. Is it a wedding ring? No. It's just a ring, her ring? Right! Gold, is it, pure and simple..... And I give her common sense. You can't see it but you know it when it's there – common sense.

Bernie So, there's only me left, then Friedrich – but we won't bother trying to explain it all to him, then it's the vicar who comes in at the end. Well, I can't quite figure it out. I want to give her a bird, a special bird, with a beautiful song and brightly coloured feathers. It'll need a cage but I don't want it shut up in the cage, so this bird can go to and fro, as she wishes, but she always comes back and she's safe in the cage. I hope I've made myself clear. A bird with a cage – to be safe – but not in a cage.

Nic And I've got to undo the damage of all those big heavy books. All those big heavy ridiculous books. I'll give her a boat, a rowing boat, yes, a pea-green rowing boat. She can row out to sea with those books in a sack and throw it overboard and let it sink to the bottom of the deep blue sea. But the boat is hers to keep but she must paint it every Spring.

(General cheers and jollity)

(In comes Harry)

- Harry I just had such a strange dream. It wasn't a nightmare, it wasn't frightening but I was dead and lying on a platform with flowers all around me. It was in a ... well it was in a place like this, I suppose that's where it came from. I mean this is a sort of crypt and crypts are creepy, and I was looking down on my body almost buried in flowers and somebody was telling me, perhaps it was me, to wake up, wake up, and I did....I did wake up.
- Maggie Birth, it's a moment.....and death....the last breath....but it's more....being born and dying...more than a moment, it's there all the time, waiting till we're ready. That should be how it is. Being ready to die, ready to be born. Waiting for the moment, knowing it will come.
- Annie Think of that little new being who will see the world with fresh eyes, as if it's never been seen before. Not like my tired eyes.
- Stan They made it, both of them. They got through it. That's what matters, right now. They're alive.
- Debs You can't keep the sadness away can you?
- Joe No you can't....you can cry.....you can laugh.
- Bernie I can never remember jokes. People tell me jokes. I remember the punchline but I can't remember how you get there. Or else I forget to pause. The effect is all in the timing, the comic pause, making the audience wait.
- Stan Jokes are alright so long as you know when to stop, when someone's had enough of you winding them up.
- Maggie I look down on myself sometimes, like a camera in the corner of the room. I pretend I'm dead. A tiny camera looking down.
- Annie Thank God for that new life, her bright eyes looking out. Standing at the edge of a cliff, the sea silent far below, seabirds crying.
- Harry I did wake up. I did.
- Bernie Of course you did. That's what happens. You wake up. You get out of bed. You look for your slippers.
- Annie I'm going to teach you a song....we're going to go and sing to the baby....so it must be something gentle and welcoming. We're going to sing a song of welcome, true and simple.

(The song could vary, of course, but I think it should be simple, perhaps a round, and suited to a new-born baby. I am imagining a Christmas Alleluya but it could well be a carol, if not too heavy and wordy. Best if it's just alleluya).

Annie Now this is simply praise, that's what Alleluya means – praise you - but don't think compliments or approval or seeking approval.....This is for the baby, for Alice, it's gratitude, something large and gentle to welcome the child, the singing is somewhere she can rest, where she can feel as home, here, with us. "My soul doth magnify the Lord"..... I love those words. I don't know what they mean. Mary...the mother to be...she grows...her soul...her heart grows large...the vast unknown life of her child and she can feel it more just because she has nothing...when I come to a neglected place, an abandoned croft, just a wall, a hearth, a doorway, I can feel the warmth, the lost warmth. I feel protected, watched over, in a broken-down house. That's what Alice has given us. Naked, indestructible, whatever the knocks...this night will never die...Now, we sing this in three parts...three voices, circling round, circling round for ever above, around Alice and the child.

As they practise, Bernie leaves without being noticed, and Friedrich and Ted come in and, with some humour, get drawn into the singing. When Annie is happy with the practice, she gets them organised.

Annie Now, everyone, quietly up the stairs when we get over there. We are going to be a choir of angels, floating between earth and heaven, singing of glory and of peace (they all go – 10 of them).

Into the empty room come Elizabeth and Bernie

Bernie I thought you'd be outside. The day's here. No birds. Joe and his dawn chorus. A few city pigeons. Give pigeons a bad name - cities.

Elizabeth I was telling the day about the baby. I held her up to the sun. Not real. Pretend. She warm upstairs.

Bernie I'm thinking about the future. I wanted to talk to you. You're her friend, her only friend, I guess.

Elizabeth Me? We came in the lorry, hitched a lift, I want to help Alice and the baby, but I have nothing.

Bernie I wonder why you're sad. I know you're happy, holding the baby, little Briar Rose – I know that's not her real name but she needs a name and that'll do for now – but underneath you're sad. I know.

Elizabeth In my country we love the kings. They come to the child. They are rich. They are wise. We have a saying – a wise man hears one word and understands two. There is lot going on in my mind, here, in my heart. I cannot say. I not say more.

Bernie A wise man knows how to listen. A wise man knows how to listen – not my strong point but I'm learning. But right now I've got something to say.

Elizabeth Too full to speak. Now this baby. She what matters. She sleeping. Not a care in world. She our care, our concern. Is correct.....concern?

Bernie I have a plan. It might be ridiculous but I want to talk it over.

Elizabeth I go up now, see if Alice need me, get coffee, maybe, I bring you coffee, sandwich. No talk right now, plan wait. (she goes)

Bernie Time I was off. A long shift. The volunteers today won't have a clue about last night. What went on here. 'In the bleak mid winter', I like that one. Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas. There's more to it than that. Bleak mid winter Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. merry, happy, merry, happy. The crypt will be open again Saturday – if anyone comes. She'll still be here, won't she. She won't have gone. The vicar's wife – thank God she was out the way. She'd have put her foot down (He starts to become aware of the windows again).

(takes out his notes)

“...By etching away the glass with acid he varied the colours until he reached at times pure white. But the work does not end there. When the panes have been prepared and provisionally put together he paints the figures and shadows onto the surface in grisaille. By his use of the brush, he adds his own hand before the final firing. Some figures seem solid and human while the occasional white light streaming through helps to dematerialise the composition..a poignant reminder of the short gap between heaven and earth....”

Bernie goes to the door he tried at the beginning of the play. Now he finds the right key, turns it in the lock, expresses satisfaction but does not open the door but turns back to go through the door Elizabeth left by. Similarly if the other door is a cupboard or box or trunk he simply manages to undo it, then leaves, satisfied. In the distance we hear the Alleluya being sung.