

Elle

(A play for one audience member and one eye at a peephole)*

Anita Beckman

The theatre is set up for a “conventional” play with a performance area and rows of empty seats.

The performance area has three sets (Sets 1, 2 and 3). All three sets are identical: a lady’s dressing table and mirror, a chair. The tables have makeup spread over them, gloves, a covered plate with knife and fork and condiments, a teapot and cup. At Set 2 an evening dress is thrown over the chair.

Around the set are several peephole booths, concealed by curtains.

The audience, consisting of only two people (referred to as AUDIENCE and VOYEUR) are instructed to wait outside the theatre. VOYEUR pays at the door and is led inside to a seat in a peephole booth. AUDIENCE is instructed to hold on to their money. AUDIENCE enters after VOYEUR. It is not apparent to AUDIENCE where VOYEUR is concealed.

* *Elle* played from 3 to 8 August, 2004 at *La Mama Theatre* in Carlton, Melbourne. It was directed by Christian Leavesley, designed by Angela Buckingham and performed by Anita Beckman. There were two performances every evening. In the early show three “layers” of audience were present: A single person to whom ELLE directed her speech (referred to as AUDIENCE in the script), a person who watched from a concealed peephole booth (referred to as VOYEUR) and a “conventional” group audience who observed the interaction between ELLE, AUDIENCE and VOYEUR. The late show was an intimate performance with only three people present: ELLE, AUDIENCE and VOYEUR.

AUDIENCE is instructed to a particular seat up the front.

At Set 1 a woman in an evening dress, wearing an eyepatch lies slumped over the dressing table, her back to the audience.

She wakes, suddenly.

ELLE: Oh!

ELLE holds up a finger. It is dripping blood. She watches it drip.

ELLE shoves the cut finger into her mouth and sucks on it. Giggles to herself.

ELLE: Bloodsucker.

ELLE smells herself all over deeply. She sprays herself with deodorant.

She applies lipstick, makeup. She holds up gloves, confused.

ELLE: [*Muttering.*] Why do I have three gloves here, all the same? Either I've lost one or the two of them have given birth!

She puts on a pair. She notices AUDIENCE in mirror. She watches a moment. She addresses AUDIENCE through the mirror.

ELLE: I'm being terribly rude, staring at you like this in the mirror. Would you like a cup of tea? I could do with a cup of tea, yes I certainly could. There's only one problem, we only have one cup left. [*Remembering.*] And it's cracked. I don't know how it happens. The last cup of tea I had dribbled all over my lap. So perhaps wait until interval and then we can use the cups that aren't part of the show. Interval! Ugh! The very idea of it makes me hungry.

She stands, revealing a stain on the seat of her dress. Looks at her watch. She turns.

ELLE: Hello, my name is Elle. That's E-L-L-E.

She presses a switch which starts up electric fan.

ELLE: That's better. You know, when the air isn't moving I feel sort of stuck like I'm in a plaster mould.

I used to know a woman with a huge gap in between her front teeth. I

couldn't stand that gap. Some people think it's quite sexy. But why? What do they think they can fit in between those two teeth? I just hear the wind whistling. [*Fan slows to a stop.*] I could never look at her as I talked to her. She was quite a lonely woman, despite having a sexy mouth. And that gap just made it worse. I mean, it looked like there was a tooth missing.

This is funny. Her name was Anna. But she called herself An na. An na. With a gap between the two n's. Whether she was proud of her mouth or making fun of herself or just... unaware... I don't know. And now, I'm going to tell you EVERYTHING! I've worked out that I can reveal all about myself in ten points! Like my ten fingers! Are you ready?

The following is recited in a loud and efficient manner.

1. MY BIGGEST FEAR IS OF EARTHQUAKES. I DON'T EVEN LIKE CRACKS IN THE FOOTPATH.
2. MY FAVOURITE CREATURE IS THE SNAKE. THEY DON'T HAVE ARMS OR LEGS. WHEN I SEE A SNAKE I GET ALL TINGLY. MY SKIN GETS SO TINGLY IT FEELS SEPARATE TO MY BODY.
3. I HAVE A HUSBAND, EYE, WHOM I LOVE. THAT'S E-Y-E. (HIS PARENTS WERE HIPPIES). WE ARE SOULMATES. I BELIEVE OUR SPIRITS AND BODIES SLIDE TOGETHER PERFECTLY, AS THOUGH WE WERE CARVED FOR EACH OTHER. EVERY MOMENT EVERY PAUSE EVERY SINEW IS ACCOUNTED FOR. ONE IS CONCAVE WHERE THE OTHER IS CONVEX. THERE IS NO ROOM TO MOVE AT ALL.
4. I THINK I MIGHT BE PREGNANT. EYE, WHO WORKS AS A PLASTERER, IS VERY PLEASED. I LIKE THE IDEA OF BEING PREGNANT BUT I'M SCARED OF SPLITTING OPEN LIKE SOME KIND OF WEIRD FRUIT.
5. I USED TO WORK AS A PROSTITUTE.
6. I HAVE A TENDENCY TO SPEAK/SHOUT TOO LOUDLY (PARTICULARLY WHEN I'M REVEALING THINGS ABOUT MYSELF).
7. AT SCHOOL MY NICKNAME WAS SMELLY ELLY. THEN IT WAS SHORTENED TO JUST "SMELL." I USED TO PEE IN MY PANTS. IT JUST TRICKLED OUT ALL THE TIME. SECRETLY I LIKED IT. THAT WARMTH GATHERING IN MY UNDERPANTS AND SLITHERING DOWN MY LEG. THERE WAS ALWAYS A GREAT DISTANCE BETWEEN MYSELF AND MY CLASSMATES, WHAT WITH THIS [*indicating eyepatch*] AND *THAT*. BUT THAT SMELL... THAT SMELL,

WELL IT ALSO SOMEHOW FILLED THE GAP.

8. THE ONLY THING I CANNOT BEAR ABOUT MY HUSBAND IS HIS SNORING. IT ISN'T THE NOISE THAT BOTHERS ME, AFTER ALL IT'S ALMOST LIKE SLEEPING WITH A CAT. A LOUD CAT. IT'S THE WAY THE SOUND ESCAPES HIM WITHOUT HIM KNOWING. I CAN'T BEAR THAT. HE SAYS I MAKE A HISSING SOUND WHEN I'M ASLEEP. HE TELLS ME TO WAKE HIM UP IF IT BOTHERS ME SO MUCH BUT I WON'T. I JUST STARE AT THE CRACKS IN THE CEILING AND WAIT FOR MORNING.
9. NUMBER NINE.

ELLE appears disconcerted. Counts on fingers.

ELLE: I think now might be a good time to have intermission. Don't you?
 Yes, let's have that stupid intermission and after that I'll finish telling you all about myself. Number nine.
 Oh, we should probably sort out the money. Have you got some money for me?

Approaches AUDIENCE. AUDIENCE hands her the money. She folds it gingerly, lifts her dress and puts it in her garter .

ELLE: Thank you ever so much. I know it's a bit early in the show to have intermission but I think it's good to get it out of the way.
 Well, intermission. Help yourself to tea or coffee.

She indicates a table set with tea and coffee but no cups. ELLE crosses to Set 2, starts to put on high heels then changes mind and brings seat over next to AUDIENCE. Puts on shoes.

ELLE: My name isn't really Elle. My real name is actually Elle Elle. That's E-L-L-E-E-L-L-E. So I have to pronounce my name four times just to spell it. Funny isn't it. Goodness I'm hungry. My parents called me double Elle because they knew that they didn't want any more children. I have a secret. I've changed my name. I did it properly by deedpoll. I've added an extra Elle. That's ELLE ELLE ELLE, spelt E-L-L-E E-L-L-E E-L-L-E. It's frivolous I know. Saying the name twice sort of emphasizes it but three times, well, it does something else. But I like it. It has motion. ElleElleElle well you can just keep saying it again and again with no gap between the beginning and end of the name. I don't usually tell anyone. About the double. Or the three. I say, "Hello, my name is Elle."

I could be saying it backwards and no one would ever know. I wouldn't even know. And what is... Oh! Intermission! We're not supposed...

ELLE crosses to Set 2, and finding dress she slips it over the one she is already wearing. Oblivious to AUDIENCE she lifts lid on food (a slab of tongue). She spreads it with mustard and digs in with knife and fork. Consumes about half and then cuts herself.

ELLE: Oh!

ELLE holds up a finger. It is dripping blood. She watches it drip. ELLE shoves the cut finger into her mouth and sucks on it. Giggles to herself.

ELLE: Bloodsucker.

ELLE smells herself all over deeply. Sprays herself with deodorant. She applies lipstick, makeup. She holds up gloves, confused.

ELLE: *[Muttering.]* Why do I have three gloves here, all the same? Either I've lost one or the two of them have given birth!

She puts on a pair. She notices AUDIENCE in mirror. She watches a moment. She addresses AUDIENCE through the mirror.

ELLE: I'm being terribly rude, staring at you like this in the mirror. Would you like a cup of tea? I could do with a cup of tea, yes I certainly could. We have only one cup left, that's the only problem. *[Remembering.]* And it's cracked. I don't know how it happens. The last cup of tea I had dribbled all over my lap. So perhaps wait until interval and then we can use the cups that aren't part of the show. Interval! Ugh! The very idea of it makes me hungry.

*She stands. Looks at her watch.
She turns.*

ELLE: Hello, my name is Elle. That's E-L-L-E.

She presses switch which turns on electric fan.

ELLE: That's better. You know, when the air isn't moving I feel sort of stuck

like I'm in a plaster mould.

I used to know a woman with a huge gap in between her front teeth. I couldn't stand that gap. Some people think it's quite sexy. But why? What do they think they can fit in between those two teeth? I just hear the wind whistling. [*Fan slows to a stop.*] I could never look at her as I talked to her. She was quite a lonely woman, despite having a sexy mouth. And that gap just made it worse. I mean, it looked like there was a tooth missing.

This is funny. Her name was Anna. But she called herself An na.

An na. With a gap between the two n's. Whether she was proud of her mouth or making fun of herself or just... unaware... I don't know.

And now, I'm going to tell you EVERYTHING! I've worked out that I can reveal all about myself in ten points! Like my ten fingers! Are you ready?

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TWEEN MYSELF AND MY CLASSMATES, WHAT WITH THIS [*indicating eyepatch*] AND *THAT*. BUT THAT SMELL... THAT SMELL, WELL IT ALSO SOMEHOW FILLED THE GAP.

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ELLE appears disconcerted.

ELLE: I think now might be a good time to have intermission. Don't you?
Yes, let's have that stupid intermission and after that I'll finish telling you all about myself. Number nine.
Oh, we should probably sort out the money. Have you got some money for me?

Again ELLE approaches AUDIENCE. She scans face of AUDIENCE.

ELLE: Do I know you? You've come before, haven't you. [*Backing away.*]
Look don't worry about the money. I don't know where the time has gone, we don't have time for intermission. We're way behind time, now how did that happen. You shouldn't have to pay if we don't have time for intermission. I mean who's to say that you didn't come here for that time to yourself in between all the action. For some people it's the best part. And now we've run out of time. So I'm not going to charge you.

ELLE disappears behind set.

Silence. Eventually she reappears.

ELLE: I'm sorry. I appear to have forgotten my lines. I'm very sorry about this.

Exits again.

Enters again.

ELLE: What is it with these *bloody* gloves. I'm quite hungry. I've been up

here a long time, it's hard to remember all the words. I do usually though. I'm usually very good. I remember every line, every comma. Nothing escapes me. I've just forgotten. I've forgotten what I'm supposed to say. It could happen to anyone.

She sits. Restless. Takes off shoes.

ELLE: You know, according to the script I'm supposed to forget. The problem is that I'm confused about what I'm supposed to forget and what I've really forgotten, if you know what I mean.

She stares out at AUDIENCE. After a minute:

ELLE: I'm sorry I don't remember.

Crosses to the plate of tongue at Set 1.

ELLE: Tongue. Mustard.

Elle spreads the tongue carefully with the mustard. She cuts it finely into even squares, spears a piece and chews it with dissipating enthusiasm. She seems puzzled and attempts to eat another piece but apparently cannot.

ELLE: [*Murmurs.*] Now I'm the opposite of hungry.

ELLE pushes plate away.

ELLE: So... [*Pauses.*]

I was about to ask you what your name was but I don't think that's a good idea. We'll get right off track.

You have nice eyes.

You probably think I say that to everyone. I don't. At least I don't think that I do.

I really don't want you to go.

I'd like you to keep watching me.

I don't have the slightest idea what I'm to do if you leave.

Although probably as soon as you left it would all come flooding back.

[*Silence.*]

Eye likes to watch. He's here somewhere. He used to watch me when I was working as a prostitute. I told him this is different, it's safe. But he

still likes to watch.

He's got an unusual body. It's like he can just slip into spaces and disappear, you wouldn't know he was there. He's here somewhere. And he knows the whole script, he's seen it so many times.

Don't you, Eye. He's out there, mouthing the words for me, trying to help me out, I bet. He's very shy, Eye.

ELLE's face contorts. She struggles with an oncoming sneeze. She sneezes.

ELLE: I think I remember the last line. Something about... yes. Snakes! Yes! [*She becomes confident in recalling.*] You know, the thing I like about snakes is the way they appear and disappear so silently.

That was definitely the last line. I'm sure of it. I remember because when I read the script I thought it was an odd line to end on.

Well that was the end!

Oh.

We're not supposed to be at the end yet.

Perhaps the other bits will come back to me. It'll just be a bit out of order.

You know, I think I was supposed to take my clothes off at some point. I can't remember why.

I remember the emotion of it but not what comes before, or after.

With a sudden drive ELLE starts to undress. She looks confused at the fact that there is another dress underneath.

She repeats the motion, removing the second dress and discovers a third dress. She removes this as well, revealing some particularly flashy, fluoro underwear.

Pause.

ELLE: NO! No I *wasn't*... supposed!... to do that! That wasn't it at all! It was...

Oh my god. What is wrong with me today. I wasn't supposed to take my clothes off!

I was *supposed* – Yes!

ELLE hurriedly re-dons two of the dresses.

She fetches a small puppet booth with a curtain made of the same material as her dress. She sets it up on AUDIENCE's knee. The two finger puppets, ELLE PUPPET and EYE PUPPET, appear. EYE PUPPET does not have arms or legs.

ELLE PUPPET: Why are you looking at me like that?

EYE PUPPET: Like what?

ELLE PUPPET: Like that.

EYE PUPPET: I don't know.

ELLE PUPPET: Well, if you don't know, don't do it. It freaks me out, it's so intense Eye.

EYE PUPPET: I haven't got arms. I like looking at you.

ELLE PUPPET: I know, Eye.

EYE PUPPET: Well, why are you looking at *me* like that?

ELLE PUPPET: I'm not. I'm just looking back at you.

EYE PUPPET: I don't want you to look *back* at me. Just look at me.

ELLE PUPPET: I'm hungry, Eye.

EYE PUPPET: You are always hungry Elle. I could look at your breasts all day.

ELLE PUPPET: I bet you couldn't. You'd have to check the footy scores.

EYE PUPPET: I can listen and look at the same time. If I had arms I'd give you such a hug.

[ELLE PUPPET is silent.]

EYE PUPPET: Well?

ELLE PUPPET: I'm just pretending that your eyes are your arms.

Curtain closes. ELLE emerges.

ELLE: I didn't really remember that. I just made it up. You could probably tell. The arms and legs fell off the puppet, so I ran out of things to say.

ELLE, frustrated, begins to wander the periphery of the stage.

ELLE: EYE will you stop being such a bloody obstinate bastard. You can come out, I've mucked up the whole thing anyway. Just give me a clue. Whisper something to me. Come on you bastard, I don't care anymore. Can't you see it doesn't matter? The audience doesn't care. Now will you help me out, please.

[To AUDIENCE:] This isn't like him. He wouldn't let me embarrass myself like this. If he knew I wasn't saying the right words he would whisper them to me.

Come on Eye, COME ON !

She wanders the periphery of the stage getting angrier and rips open several peephole booth curtains with empty seats behind. The last one she rips open reveals VOYEUR to AUDIENCE and ELLE.

ELLE appears startled.

ELLE: Oh sorry, sorry. I'm looking for... my... Eye... my husband.

ELLE closes curtain on VOYEUR. She sulks.

She approaches AUDIENCE.

ELLE: You might as well go. I'm not going to get my act together. It's all just gaps and spaces. And I'm not getting any help from anyone, am I?

[ELLE removes money from garter and pushes it into AUDIENCE's hand.]

Here – it's only fair.

I guess you'll go now.

She points to door and waits for them to leave. As they leave ELLE blurts out the following:

ELLE: Elle is my name. Did I tell you that? That's E-L-L-E. Which is interesting because you have to say my name twice just to spell it. When the spelling of it is meant to break it up, you know. And of course backwards it's the same, so I like to think of it as infinite. Actually to myself I spell it with 3 Elles. With the elles all over the place. Sometimes I just want to call myself L, the letter L, spelt L. Or add on another two elles. Elle Elle Elle. You don't hear names like that. You may have Lou Lou. But never Lou Lou Lou. Or LouLouLoulou. Imagine that. Hello loulou-loulou. I'd like to say to someone, my name is Elle Elle Elle Elle.

Did I mention that I think I might be pregnant. Of course there's nothing to see yet. It's a bit scary. It's there but it's not there. Eye is so pleased. Eye, he's my husband, I mentioned him didn't I. The idea of being pregnant is lovely. I mean you're never alone are you. Part of me would like to stay pregnant forever. Getting bigger and bigger and further from everyone and closer at the same time. What frightens me is the idea of it leaving my body When I see the baby's face I won't know it at all. It's different when it's inside you, you don't have to know it. And of course I'm terrified of splitting in two, like some... kind... of weird fruit.

Her blathering exhausts itself.

ELLE: Listen, can I ask you a favour. Come here into the light

ELLE brings AUDIENCE to Set 3. As she speaks she comes closer, bending over AUDIENCE examining them intently.

ELLE: Could I come very close to you. I don't want to touch you I just want to look. It's so strange being so close to someone. It makes my skin tingle. I've been here such a long time. Don't worry, it's safe. I won't touch you. If you don't mind I'd like to smell you. Not just sniff, inhale. This way I won't forget you, whoever the hell you are. And your smell will stick to my clothes. Please just relax. You don't have to do anything.

She finishes thus examining and inhaling AUDIENCE.

ELLE: Thank you so much.

I'm so terribly tired all of a sudden. Even you watching me couldn't keep me awake. Goodbye and thank you.

ELLE returns Set 1. Gazes at herself in the mirror.

ELLE: You know, the thing I like about snakes is the way they appear and disappear so silently. I've always found this way of moving more beautiful than flying.

That was definitely the last line, I'm sure of it...

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