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MUNK SCHOOL BRIEFINGS

Comparative Program on Health and Society
Lupina Foundation Working Paper Series,
2009–2010

Edited by Lisa Forman and Laurie Corna

Abide with Me: A Story of Two Pandemics

Kate Rossiter and Rebecca Godderis

Abide with Me: A Story of Two Pandemics

A Research-based play

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The Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto seeks to be an internationally recognised leader in interdisciplinary academic research on global issues and to integrate research with teaching and public education. We place special emphasis on the fostering of innovative interdisciplinary knowledge through the exchange of ideas and research among academics as well as the public, private, and voluntary sectors.

We are delighted to present this collection of research papers from the Comparative Program on Health and Society based on work that our fellows undertook during 2009–2010. Founded in the year 2000, the Comparative Program on Health and Society (CPHS) is a vital and growing research institute based at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto. Generously funded by The Lupina Foundation, the CPHS supports innovative, interdisciplinary, comparative research on health, broadly defined through our extensive range of fellowships, which for 2009–2010 included CPHS Junior Doctoral Fellowships, CPHS Senior Doctoral Fellowships, Lupina/OGS Doctoral Fellowships, Post-Doctoral Top-Up Fellowships, and Research Associate Positions. Our program builds on the scholarly strengths of the University of Toronto in the social sciences, humanities, and public health.

As the CPHS moves into its second decade, we have adopted a renewed vision of the social determinants of health which recognizes the complexity and interrelatedness of domestic, transnational, regional, and global factors that may impact on health conditions and access to health-related services within any country, including Canada. We recognize similarly that emerging and entrenched health inequalities may require policy-makers, communities, and researchers to grapple with challenging ethical, human rights, and social justice questions. We have accordingly expanded the thematic focus of the Comparative Program to accommodate research which specifically focuses on these definitional and operational challenges. The research papers you will read in this year's collection reflect these themes, and demonstrate the variety, complexity, and importance of comparative health research.

COMPARATIVE PROGRAM ON HEALTH AND SOCIETY

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The CPHS Working Papers Series

The Comparative Program on Health and Society maintains a collection of academic papers which we call our Lupina Foundation Working Papers Series. These works can range from research papers to thought pieces; and from statistical analyses to historical case studies. Our series represents a snap-shot of the work being done by our Lupina Fellows, past and present. Taken together, our Working Papers Series encapsulates the wide-ranging approaches to the study of the social determinants of health. We hope that you will find the individual papers in our series thought-provoking and helpful.

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Abide with Me: A Story of Two Pandemics

A Research-based play by Kate Rossiter and Rebecca Godderis

Abstract

Given its perceived ability to engage diverse audiences and capture and interpret qualitative data in a nuanced manner, research-based theatre has become increasingly popular within the field of health care over the last decade. This paper describes a research-based theatre project focused on ethical issues that may arise during pandemic influenza planning and response. To do so, we detail the project's history and methodology and then present the script that has emerged from this process. Set between two time periods, this script incorporates contemporary qualitative data as well as historical material gathered from archives in Brantford, Ontario. Thus, this project draws from multiple methodological traditions in order to create an engaging piece of research-based theatre.

Kate Rossiter is a CPHS fellow and an Assistant Professor at Wilfrid Laurier's Brantford campus, where she teaches in the Health Studies program. Her areas of interest and expertise include research-based theatre, the use of art in research and education, critical bioethics and the social determinants of health. Kate received her PhD from the University of Toronto in the fall of 2009.

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INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT CONTEXT

Research-based theatre has become increasingly popular within the field of health care over the last decade (Rossiter et al. 2008). This paper details a project that engages with research-based theatre as a methodological approach, and as such, the bulk of this paper is comprised of a research-based theatrical script entitled "Abide With Me: A Story of Two Pandemics." To contextualize this project, we provide a description of the study's design and development, beginning with an overview of the project's origins. We then detail the methodology employed, including data collection, analysis, and translation. Finally, we present the full script that has emerged from this project.

This theatre project is part of the Canadian Program of Research on Ethics in a Pandemic (CanPREP) – a large-scale, interdisciplinary and participatory study designed to explore the ethical issues that may emerge during the process of pandemic planning and response. In light of H1N1, SARS, and other emerging global pandemic threats, the need for widespread pandemic program planning and implementation has become increasingly urgent. While scientific evidence may be used to inform *some* of these plans, experiences emerging from public health crises such as SARS and, more recently, H1N1, have illuminated the social and ethical dilemmas inherent within pandemic planning (Singer et al. 2003; Thompson et al. 2006). Examples of such dilemmas include but are not limited to the organization and ethical distribution of limited resources such as vaccines and ventilated beds, whether or not health care providers should be compelled to go to work during a pandemic, and what kinds of supports should be made available to those adversely affected by the pandemic, either through illness or restrictive social measures such as quarantine.

To explore these ethical dilemmas, CanPREP has focused on three key ethical issues regarding pandemic planning and response: (i) obligations for health care providers and institutions (also referred to as "duty to care" issues); (ii) priority setting for scarce resources; and (iii) risk communication and knowledge transfer. The goal of CanPREP has been to engage stakeholders and community members across Canada in the process of ethical deliberation regarding pandemic-related issues, and the content of these deliberative forums provided the qualitative data necessary for the project. The use of theatre within this project provides

an innovative way of engaging the public in the process of ethical deliberation and of capturing some of the qualitative data gathered throughout the process. Drawing its roots from primary data, the finished play provides a platform not just to inform audience members, but to open a space for informed dialogue and deliberation about ethical issues addressed within the performance. Author 1 (KR) has been involved with this project since its inception as playwright and ethnographer.

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEMATIC OVERVIEW

Data Collection

The data collection for the play took place in two phases. First, many of the play's central themes emerged from the ethnographic data gathered by the CanPREP project for general use across the program. Second, the process of archival exploration and in-depth interviews with local key individuals informed much of the play's historical basis.

Beginning in the early months of 2009, members of the CanPREP team began to gather ethnographic data from stakeholder and citizen groups across Canada. Specifically, a forum for pandemic-related stakeholders was held in Toronto, Canada in January of 2009. Three groups of stakeholders were identified and participants were recruited by invitation. The three stakeholder groups were comprised of 1) health care providers; 2) health care policy makers; and 3) representative members of identified vulnerable populations, including First Nations and Aboriginal peoples, people with disabilities, and the elderly. Likewise, three citizen town halls were held in three cities across Canada: the first in Vancouver, British Columbia, the second in Winnipeg, Manitoba and the third in St. John, New Brunswick. Citizen participants were recruited for these town halls through local newspaper ads, the use of social networking sites such as Facebook and through the use of convergence sampling. Participants for these forums were not remunerated for their participation, save for the reimbursement of travel costs and the provision of food throughout the day.

Each forum lasted a full day. In the forums, participants were divided into smaller discussion groups and were presented with narrative pandemic-related scenarios revolving around the kinds of ethical dilemmas outlined earlier in this paper. Once the scenarios were presented, participants were asked to engage in a process of discussion and deliberation regarding the ethical issues with which they had been confronted.

Throughout each forum, KR acted as a participant observer, taking detailed ethnographic notes of the proceedings. Early concurrent analysis of these observations yielded multiple emergent themes, which have formed the backbone of the play's critical content. These themes included struggles regarding whether or not health care providers should be compelled to work during a pandemic, debate about what forms of reciprocal support should be offered to health care providers who work during a pandemic, tension around what forms of international aid is warranted during a pandemic, and deliberation regarding how health authorities might best communicate about the pandemic while balancing the need to limit public panic, distress, and confusion. Further, beyond substantive thematic findings, KR's observations revealed an interesting *narrative* finding. Throughout these forums, participants repeatedly appealed to history, both social and personal, as a means of communicating and making sense of the process of ethical deliberation, and feelings about pandemic planning and response. For example, one participant referred to her own childhood memory of a scarlet fever epidemic, while another recounted the dynamics of community support that emerged in the face of rampant illness and scarce resources during the Second World War.

Following this period of ethnographic data collection, KR turned her attention solely toward the creation of the play, and as such made an important methodological decision regarding its development. Given the prevalence of the use of historical narrative within the forums, KR decided to use an historical case study as a comparative source of dramatic material. In particular, she was interested in exploring the potential social and ethical contours of the 1918 pandemic. This decision fortuitously occurred as KR was relocating to take a faculty position at Wilfrid Laurier's campus in Brantford, a small university town in Ontario, Canada. After expressing her interest in the historical angle of ethics and pandemics, a new colleague, Author 2 (RG), expressed enthusiasm in the project. RG is a medical sociologist and historian with a great deal of experience doing archival work and an emerging interest in Brantford's history.

In late fall 2009 RG and a student research assistant (AC) began intensive archival work to exhume and explore Brantford's experience with the 1918 influenza pandemic. While the choice to use Brantford as the site for historical case study was based largely on pragmatics and happenstance, we could not have made a better choice had opportunity afforded other options. A number of key features about Brantford made it an incredibly rich and productive site for historical case study. First, Brantford was one of two places in Canada hardest hit by the 1918 influenza pandemic. Second, Brantford boasts a number of important yet underutilized archives, including the local town archives, complete archives of two local newspapers, military and civic archives, documents collected from the Board of Trade, and medical archives from a nursing school that operated in the local hospital. The primary textual data collected and analyzed were newspaper articles, which often provided detailed reports on discussions at the Board of Health, Board of Trade and City Council meetings. This data was supplemented by a number of other documents including formal meeting minutes, letters sent to and from official representatives, city bylaws, local maps and directories, histories and yearbooks published by the nurses' alumni association, and secondary academic sources.

A large amount of historical material was gathered in the late fall and early winter of 2010. To augment the archival research, we also located four local community members who were alive during the flu and performed in-depth interviews with these participants in order to get a sense of the lived reality of this event, and to provide cultural context for the area at the time. With these resources, we were able to put together a fairly complete picture of Brantford's experience of the flu, and were able to identify some of the significant ethical struggles that likely emerged during this event.

Data Analysis and Translation: Script Development

Concurrent analyses of both the forums and the historical data occurred throughout the process of data collection in order to unearth major guiding themes that were present in both past and current experiences of pandemics. The bulk of the analysis, however, transpired on and through the creation of the script, using a hermeneutic approach to guide this work. A hermeneutic, or interpretive approach to inquiry may be best understood as an epistemological position, stance, or commitment an inquirer may take in relation to his or her work. This stance has a number of salient methodological features that inform the process of inquiry. First, it locates the inquirer at the heart of the inquiry and demands his or her ongoing reflexivity, or sustained attention to his or her own position within, and relationship to the research. Second, it values the primacy of language to inquiry, and therefore often involves sustained attention to text, and the interplay between texts from which interpretive meaning may be drawn. Finally, it understands the act of interpretation as fundamentally *creative*: truth, or understanding, is *generated* rather than found through a process that aims to uncover an objective truth which is fixed and awaiting discovery.

As the archival work progressed, we assembled a group of student volunteers to explore current and historical material, and workshop ideas for the play. This group met twice-weekly from January through the end of March 2010. The rehearsal process began with an introduction to basic improvisation and trust-building theatrical techniques. The original hope was that the students would be able to create scenes based on thematic findings. However, given the limited time this group had together, and the paucity of acting training held within the group, this idea was not fully realized. Instead, KR began to script the play independently, and brought this work back to the students to breathe life into newly-created scenes. The students provided valuable feedback, and contributed many important ideas that have influenced the play's development, several of which included their own insights about pandemic planning and response.

Once the script was completed, other reflexive validation measures of the script were undertaken. These included performing a staged reading with a local Brantford theatre group for insight regarding the play's theatrical viability, a reading with the larger project team, who critically engaged with the script from the perspective of knowledgeable project "insiders," and perhaps most importantly, staged a reading of the play for original participants in the Toronto stakeholder forum who were then given time to provide feedback about how the play captured themes that emerged from their own participation in the project. Feedback from each of these readings was incorporated into the script. At the time of writing this paper (June 2010), we are preparing to stage a short run of the play as a work-in-progress with a post-show to facilitate feedback

discussion. We anticipate that the play will also be launched in other cities as a professionally mounted show in the upcoming year.

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Abide with Me: A Story of Two Pandemics

CHARACTERS

Present

Helen Hargrove: A 96-year-old woman recently admitted to hospital after a fall. While frail and disoriented from her accident, she is a smart woman, who follows the news and world events with interest. Over the course of the play she recalls her memories of the Spanish Flu pandemic. As such, she remains on stage in her hospital bed for the entire play, even during the 1918 scenes.

Gerald Hargrove: Helen's son, and a senior doctor on the general medicine floor where Helen has been admitted.

Zack Hargrove: Gerald's son, a university student. Zack is a bright, sweet young man, although he can be tactless and sometimes bombastic.

Rosalyn Dragomir: A senior resident in the hospital where Helen has been admitted. She is a bright young woman with a strong sense of moral duty. Rosalyn's family is originally from Romania.

1918

Kate McNeil: Kate McNeil is the senior nurse in charge of the emergency flu hospital located in the Tabernacle.

Blanche Neff: Grandma Helen's favourite aunt, her mother's younger sister, Blanche is warm, compassionate, and social, yet can be flighty and given to dramatics, and although they are close, her sister might describe her as a "flibbertygibbit." She is a nurse and is engaged to a soldier who is away at war.

Elizabeth Neff Moore: Grandma Helen's mother. Elizabeth is extremely upright. She is the oldest in her family and bears the most responsibility for keeping the family in order. She is a good Christian woman, although her sister might describe her as "cross." Elizabeth has seen her share of troubles. Her husband, John, is a bedridden invalid, and Elizabeth is his caregiver.

Adour Kezerian: An Armenian immigrant who has been brought to Brantford to work at the Cockshutt factory. He has left a large extended family behind in Turkey, and now resides in the Brantford tenements.

Dr. Norman Bragg: A young, shy doctor, just finishing his specialist training as an Ear, Nose and Throat doctor. His father is a town Alderman and he has been thrust into the position of Medical Officer of Health because of the sudden resignation of the previous MOH, Dr. Pearson. He is stuck between town politics and the duty to provide adequate care for all.

Prologue

The stage opens in darkness, and gradually gets lighter. In the middle of the stage are the characters from 1918. They stand together as if lined up in an upright grave. Their hands are folded over their chests and their heads are bowed.

Grandma Helen enters stage right. She moves slowly, with a cane and approaches the group – they are a collection of her memories. As she enters, the other characters hum the hymn "Abide with me" softly. She approaches the group, and stands in front of them. She touches Elizabeth's cheek. Elizabeth looks up sternly, fixes Helen's collar, wipes a bit of grime off her cheek and returns to her original position. Helen moves to stand in front of Bragg. Similarly, Bragg looks at Helen, feels her lymph nodes, takes her pulse and returns to his original position. Finally, Helen moves in front of Blanche. Blanche opens her eyes and laughs. She grabs Helen's hand and they begin to dance. Blanche motions for Helen to stand on her feet so she can learn the dance steps. They struggle and laugh, and Helen falls back. Blanche returns to her original position and Helen looks longingly at her wanting the moment back. Helen remains looking at the group and the stage falls into darkness.

NOTE: From this point on, the stage should be divided into two areas. Stage right is a present-day hospital. Centre stage and stage left are occupied by the 1918 scenes – which include the Moore family parlour and the Tabernacle

emergency hospital. The hospital must include at least two hospital cots – the first occupied by Adour, the second filled by a nameless body, then by Blanche. Because the 1918 scenes are from Helen’s memory, Helen remains in her present-day hospital bed throughout the play – nurses from 1918 thus tend to her in this bed. Transitions between scenes may be made with lighting, although Helen should always be lit, if only dimly.

SCENE ONE: PRESENT

Lights up on a private hospital room. It is present day, or very close to present day – perhaps a few years in the future. An elderly woman, Helen, is asleep in the bed. She is attached to many monitors and machines. Routine hospital sounds can be heard. Two doctors, Gerald and Rosalyn, stand at her bedside. Gerald is looking at Helen’s chart.

Gerald: I don’t see the CT results here...

Rosalyn: They’re not up yet – I can call down to radiology again if you like. They’re a little backed up, but I can see what’s happening...

Gerald: Yeah, ok – that’d be great. Do you know what else Tim ordered when she was in the ER?

Rosalyn: EEG, full neuro work up – I know he called Doug Williams for a consult on that one – and I think maybe a psych consult because she was so disoriented when she arrived. You know Tim – he’s really thorough.

Gerald looks distressed

Rosalyn: Look, Gerry, I think she’s going to be fine. Her vitals are all normal – she seems in really great shape for her age – she flew through the mini mental status exam...she was just a little disoriented from the fall and the meds.

Gerald (*chuckling*): Yeah – she’s smart as a whip and opinionated as hell. Reads the paper cover to cover every day – is more up on current politics than I ever am – although we don’t always see eye to eye politically...last time we chatted about it she thought Barak Obama was “out to ruin a perfectly good health care system” and can’t understand what the fuss about two-tiered medicine is...

Rosalyn: My folks are the same way – and they’ve got that whole former Soviet Block thing going for them... you should hear them rage against those “communist NDP.” Anyway - I’m heading back down to the ER in a few minutes and I’ll check with Tim when I’m there. (*Gently*) I know how hard it is to have a family member in here – particularly right now. My dad had a heart attack and got stuck in pre-op during the blackout– it was total chaos. I was a mess.

Gerald: Yeah, it’s brutal...did you hear they’ve had three new cases in Vancouver? I feel like we’re already in the middle of it even though nothing’s happened here yet.

Helen begins to stir and opens her eyes. She looks confused and startled.

Rosalyn: Mrs. Hargrove?

Gerald: Hi mom – how are you feeling? Do you know where you are

Helen: One step...

Rosalyn: Um, yeah, we’re just taking this one step at a time...easy does it....

Helen: (*Gazing at Gerald*): Is that James there?

Gerald: No, mom, it’s me, Gerald.

Helen (*tersely*): Well where has James gone, then?

Gerald: Uh... Uncle James died about 15 years ago mom. You’re in the hospital – remember I saw you down in the ER? The paramedics brought you in – you had a fall.

Helen: Did I? Oh dear. What a shame. I don’t much care for hospitals, though.

Gerald: It’s ok, mom, you’re in my hospital – we pulled a few strings and got you a private bed. We’re running some tests to make sure you’re ok.

Helen (*still clearly confused*): Well, I suppose it's all for the best, then. Who's this?

Gerald: This is Dr. Dragomir – she's the senior resident on this floor. I've asked her to keep a special eye on you while you're here.

Helen: Dr. Who?

Gerald: Dr. Dragomir. Rosalyn Dragomir.

Helen: Well that's certainly a different name.

Gerald: You're in good hands, mom. Dr. Dragomir's one of our brightest.

Zack enters. He is carrying a knapsack and wearing a surgical mask.

Zack: Hey dad! Hey Nana! Man – you look like you've had a rough day!

Helen looks extremely confused.

Helen: What's going on? Who is this? Is he sick? Am I?

Gerald: Zack – how'd you get up here? And what are you wearing?

Zack: Uhh...the nurses around here all know me...and I'm wearing a flu mask because of the flu or whatever. And Jeez, dad, nice to see you too. Mom called to tell me about Nana – is she ok?

Gerald (*irritably*): Take the mask off – this is ridiculous.

Zack: No way – I'm in a hospital during a pandemic.

Gerald: We're not *in* a pandemic. We're *awaiting* a pandemic. We're on

high alert for a pandemic...it's not the same thing. And besides – the masks won't do anything...

Zack (*confrontationally*): Then what's with all the hype on the news? Pete Mansbridge said last night that everyone should have their own mask just in case. The Gap said they're planning on selling a mask designed by Bono for his "Right to Breathe" campaign....

Gerald lets out an exasperated snort

Rosalyn: C'mon Gerry – just let him wear the mask if it makes him feel better – no harm done.

Zack (*pulling the mask up*): Anyway – how's Nana?

Gerald: Well, she's fractured a hip and may need some surgery...but in the meantime we're running some tests to see if there's anything else going on.

Zack: Man, Nana – what a drag. But you got a pretty sweet room here...

Helen: I'd prefer to be in my own home.

Gerald: I think we better let Nana get some rest – she's had a long day.

Zack: Cool. (*Giving his grandmother a kiss on the forehead.*) Ok Nana – hang in there – go easy on the nurses! Dad - can I catch a ride home with you?

Gerald nods with resignation .

Rosalyn: See you two later – I'm going to head back down to the ER. I'll let you know if anything comes up, Gerry.

Gerald: Thanks, Rosalyn.

All three exit leaving Helen by herself. The lighting shifts as Helen remembers.

SCENE TWO: SUNDAY, OCTOBER 13, 1918

Grandma Helen stays put on stage in her hospital bed. In these scenes it is as if she is at once present and distant – both watching and re-living as the action unfolds. Elizabeth and Blanche may pantomime Helen's physical presence where necessary.

Lights up on the Moore family parlour. It is well-kept and comfortably middle class, although not fancy or ostentatious. Elizabeth enters briskly, but pauses to fix Helen's collar and wipe grime from her face.

Elizabeth: Straighten up. Your Aunt Blanche will be here soon for a little visit and to help get ready for supper.

Helen (*sitting up slightly*): Yes mother.

Blanche (*from offstage*): Yoohoo! Where is the world?

Helen (*shouting back*): We're in here Aunt Blanche – in the parlour!

Elizabeth (*sharply*): Helen! Throw your voice down the cellar please.

Elizabeth exits. Blanche enters. She clearly has a joie-de-vivre that her sister lacks.

Blanche: Well there you are! Wasted no time changing out of your church clothes, I see!

Helen: Look Aunt Blanche – I'm playing with the doll you gave me for my birthday!

(*Blanche sits on the couch*)

Blanche: Well so you are. I thought you'd like that one. With all the boys we have in our family it's a positive treat to have a little girl to buy gifts for...

Elizabeth returns with a tray bearing a teapot and cups. She pours tea and settles in near her sister.

Elizabeth: Lovely service this morning.

Blanche: It certainly was. Reverend Henderson does an admirable job of keeping spirits buoyed up during this time of woe. The Dixons got a letter about their Harold – did you hear?

Elizabeth: A terrible shame. And they lost little Elva to measles just two years ago. Marion's sick about it. Any news from Clarence?

Blanche (*looking slightly distressed*): Just a short letter on Monday. He's coping well –he's arrived in France – imagine! He said the ocean was a thing to behold – thought it would never end – and he's promised that we'll go back after the war and once we're married. Paris, Elizabeth – can you picture your sister in *Paris*! What would father have made of that!

(*Elizabeth is less inclined to romantic daydreaming and it shows*)

Elizabeth (*dryly*): Well, he is the one who chose a queer French name for you, after all.

Blanche (*ignoring the barb*): Clarence would never complain though – he doesn't want to arouse my nerves. I must finish knitting the socks I started so I can send along a parcel...Oh Elizabeth – I do worry so!

Elizabeth (*more sympathetically*): Well, the Brantford Women's Auxiliary is doing their best to assemble care packages – we've really made great headway...And you heard Reverend Henderson's sermon this morning... God works in mysterious ways and we must not lose sight of this...

Blanche (*waving her away, still agitated*): Yes, yes...it just all seems too much...and with that terrible flu circulating...they say that the flu is killing more soldiers than combat, if you can believe that. (*Nervously*) I just hope it doesn't make its way here to Brantford. They're saying that the soldiers are bringing it home to their families...Dr. Pearson said he'd heard of a family in the States where they celebrated their son's return on a Monday night and by Wednesday they all were dead...The whole lot of them!

Elizabeth: Blanche! That's enough! Mayor McBride has said emphatically many times that we have nothing to worry about here. Why even this week the Expositor reported that Brantford is as safe as anywhere. Let me find the article...it even quoted your man Dr. Pearson!

Blanche: That isn't what he says in confidence...I saw him just on Friday at Tincknell's Grocery – he says he's not so sure we won't have cases here.

Elizabeth (*condescendingly*): But you must remember, Blanche, that we are blessed to live in a town graced with good health – our citizens are clean and well-mannered...Brantfordites are known for their inclination

toward sport and overall good cheer...how does the Expositor put it...(locates the article)...right... Brantford “has a magnificent climate...” and here they write “It is doubtful if there is any other place in Canada which can show the long streets of neat, tidily kept and cozy workingmen’s homes with lawns and gardens in plenty.” So chin up – it’s right here in print, Blanche! At worst we’ll get a few cases – and even then we have wonderful doctors and nurses to tend to our ill. Brantford is in every way a modern city!

Blanche (*conceding slightly*): I suppose you must be right. I just thank my lucky stars that I’m finished with my nursing career – I’d hate to be in the thick of it.

Elizabeth: Well, you’re an engaged woman now. It wouldn’t be right.

Blanche: Elizabeth – did you hear that Clarissa Thompson has gone to work at the Steel Company of Canada! She’s gone to be a factory girl! Imagine! They say the girls are just as good as the men...Clarissa says she’s having the time of her life!

Elizabeth: As I said – in every way a modern city! Between you, me and the walls, though, I’m glad we’ve some means...A woman’s hands should be busy with babies and children, not bullets and bombs. It’s just not right. They’ll be lucky if those girls don’t all come down with nervous prostration – working with munitions!

Blanche: Oh Elizabeth – how old fashioned you are! They keep a nurse on hand to make sure the girls are healthy – the girls can have breaks whenever they like and the Matron takes their temperature regularly to make sure they’re fit and well. If I was younger and single I’d think of it myself – I’ve always fancied myself a modern girl. Why – I’ll bet that when Helen grows up women will be running the factory!

Elizabeth: Now wouldn’t that just be the cat’s meow!

Blanche: Helly-Mae – come sit next to your auntie...how would you like to work in a factory run by a woman?

Helen looks at her mother and aunt and smiles wistfully. Elizabeth grows quickly impatient.

Elizabeth: Well then, enough gabbing and lollygagging...let’s get started on dinner – those potatoes won’t peel themselves!

Elizabeth and Blanche get up and head to the kitchen. The light changes, and Helen is jolted out of memory and back into the present. She remains wistful, thinking of her childhood.

SCENE THREE: PRESENT

It is morning in the hospital. Helen is sitting up in her bed, and Zack is sitting beside her, slouching in the hospital chair.

Zack: It’s just not fair Nana...I mean, my prof – the one who teaches “Theorizing Banality” – is totally unfair about *everything*. Like he keeps talking about quality and how we all need to really work on our writing but like he doesn’t get that quality takes *time*. I’ve got this really awesome idea for a paper using Hegel and Nietzsche to like totally dismantle Disney’s *Mulan*, and it’s a few days late, ok, well maybe a week, and he’s taking 15% off – so I can’t even get in the A range.

Helen: Oh dear.

Zack: So anyway – how are you feeling, Nana?

Helen: I’m feeling all right – although a little muddled. It’s nice to have a visitor.

Zack: Is it nuts around here with that new flu scare?

Helen: I wouldn’t really know – I haven’t been up and about much – a lot of masked people around here, though – that’s for sure.

Gerald enters – he is wearing a gown and mask.

Zack: Hey dad. I thought you said the masks don’t do anything?

Gerald: Hospital policy.

Zack: (*sarcastically*) But I thought you said we're just "awaiting the pandemic..."

Gerald (*sounding tired*): I know – it's precautionary.

Helen: You're looking tired Gerald – is everything ok?

Gerald: Sure, yeah, it's fine. There's just a lot to handle right now. How are you feeling, mum?

Helen: Ok, I guess. I was just having a nice little visit with this young fellow.

Gerald: I can't stay long – but I came up because I wanted to chat with you about something (*he closes the hospital door*). It looks like you'll have to stay here for another few days. And we're not really sure what's going to happen with this new bug...so I got my hands on the vaccine – we're not really supposed to give it to older...I mean, you're not on the priority list right now, but since you're going to be staying here a little longer I'd like you to get vaccinated in case this thing really blows up.

Zack: The *new* vaccine? Are you kidding? I wouldn't touch that stuff, dad.

Gerald: Zack.

Zack: No, seriously dad – have you googled that shit? It's, like, toxic and totally not tested. It's just big pharma out to make a ton of money off our backs. They don't give a crap if it kills us all!

Helen: Oh my – what language!

Zack: Sorry Nana...

Gerald (*getting annoyed*): Zack – it's not that simple. This vaccine is a lot like other vaccines we've been using for years.

Zack (*sarcastically*): Oh great – like the kinds that cause autism?

Gerald (*visibly angry*): There's absolutely no sound evidence....

Zack: I mean – dad, do you even know the history of this stuff? Half this stuff doesn't even work – did you know that in England they vaccinated like 98% of the population for smallpox and then experienced the worst outbreak they'd *ever had*? And smallpox isn't just some flu – it's *brutal*...and they discovered that other vaccines were, like, contaminated with some virus that causes cancer and was given to millions of kids...cancer, dad....

Helen: The flu can be deadly too

Zack: Yeah, but mostly for kids and old people – no offence Nana....

Helen: Not always...

Gerald: Zack – have you had measles?

Zack: No.

Gerald: Mumps? Rubella? Polio?

Zack: No, but...

Gerald: Has anyone you know had these diseases? Did you lose any of your childhood friends because of them?

Zack: No...

Gerald: Right, then cut it out.

Zack: Just because some of them work doesn't mean all of them will. I can't believe you just buy whatever big pharma sells you...I mean, I know you doctors are generally in bed with big pharma, but seriously dad, I wouldn't be so trusting if I were you...I'm not putting that stuff anywhere near my body..

Gerald (*insulted and annoyed*): Zack! That's enough. I don't have time to tell you all the ways in which both your history and your epidemiological reasoning is completely wrong...Mum – I just came to give you the vaccine – would you prefer if I do it, or would you like me to get someone else to come in?

Helen: Thanks for your concern, Gerald, but I'm just fine without the vaccine.

Gerald: Mum – I'd really like you to get it...we have no idea what's going to shape up around here over the next week or so...

Helen: But you said yourself I'm not on the most-wanted list, or whatever it's called.

Gerald: The priority sequence...not for now, but that could change...

Zack (*sarcastically*): Yeah, right...today it's kids under six and a half, people living north of Eglinton but south of Lawrence, people with dogs but not people with cats, and those who have at least one grandparent from Kentucky. Tomorrow it'll be people over the age of 91, and people who have a birthmark behind their right ear...I'm pretty sure they're just using a magic 8 ball to decide who's on and who's off, dad.

Gerald (*losing his temper*): Y'know Zack, for someone who doesn't know a *thing* about what he's talking about you sure talk an awful lot...

Zack: Just because I don't buy into everything they tell us doesn't mean I don't know what I'm talking about...I read the news everyday – both mainstream *and* alternative – and you can't tell me the priority lists haven't changed like every four hours...and then you guys just let all your friends get the vaccines whenever they want!

Gerald: What are you talking about?

Zack: Those hospital guys. The board members or whatever. They got it before anyone else and they don't even really work here...they just go to meetings in a totally different building...

Gerald: They aren't my friends – I don't even know them!

Helen (*interrupting*): I'd like Henry to have the vaccine (*motioning to Zack*).

Gerald and Zack (*in unison*): What??

Helen: I've lived a long, full life. If it's my time, it's my time. He's young and healthy – he has his whole life ahead of him. I'd like him to have my dose.

Zack: Please, Nana, this whole flu thing's a joke anyway.

Helen: You don't know that. (*At a loss for words*) You have no idea...you've never experienced...To go after 90-odd years is a gift. To go after 20 or 30 is a tragedy. (*Getting upset*) You have no idea...you've never lost *anyone*...

Gerald: Zack's not on the priority sequence for now either mum. He's not a health care worker or a member of a vulnerable population...If anyone asks I can at least make the case that you're vulnerable because you're in the hospital....

Helen: I don't want it. It should go to someone else. I'd like it to go to Henry.

Zack: I'm Zack.

Gerald: It doesn't work like that.

Zack: I don't even want it....

Gerald (*defeated - looking at his watch*): Damn – I have to run. Mum – I'll be back in a few hours. We'll talk about it more then...

Zack: Yeah, I gotta run to class. See ya, Nana.

Zack and Gerald exit.

SCENE FOUR: OCTOBER 20, 1918

Lights come up part way to reveal Elizabeth's parlour. It's late afternoon on a Sunday. Blanche enters – she is wearing a fall coat. Her face looks strained and worried.

Blanche: Elizabeth? I'm here!

Elizabeth enters, visibly worried

Elizabeth (*crossly*): Oh thank God. Where have you been? You're three quarters of an hour late!

Blanche (*indignantly*): I had a sick headache after lunch so I lay down.

Elizabeth (*still angry*): Fine time for a lie-down! I've been in a positive lather wondering where you were.

Blanche (*conciliatory*): Bethy – I'm fine. I'm here and I'm fine. I just had a little sick headache. I'm sorry. You know I lose track of time...Are you all right? You look peaked. Is everything well with John?

Elizabeth (*calming down*): John's the same as ever. I'm just out of sorts. The world's falling apart and we don't even have a Sunday service to turn to...

Blanche: I know, I must admit, I had no idea what to do with myself this morning – Imagine! 9:00 am on a Sunday and here am I still in my nightclothes...

Elizabeth (*witheringly*): Not all of us frittered away our morning. I made sure the children were up and dressed for church as usual and then conducted my own service of sorts. The change in routine isn't good for them. We must lift our chins and carry on despite adversity.

Blanche (*embarrassed*): Well, you're a fine example, Elizabeth. I was just...fighting off my sick headache. (*Eager to change the subject*) Where are the children?

Elizabeth: The boys were underfoot so I sent them to play by the river. Helen is upstairs playing on her own.

Blanche (*hollering*): Helly-Mae! Come give your Auntie Blanche a kiss!

Elizabeth: Blanche! Throw your voice down the cellar, please.

Elizabeth exits. Helen enters and runs to give Blanche a kiss

Helen: Hi Auntie Blanche – happy Sunday!

Blanche: Hallo my girl! A little bird told me you had church at home this morning!

Helen (*Grumpily*): Yes. Mother made us dress up and everything. Not even Reverend Henderson's children had to go to home church!

Blanche: Ah, Helly-Mae – she's just looking out for your spiritual health...I know she seems strict, but she has your best interests at heart...here...how about a Necco wafer...I'll let you choose the flavour...(*pulls some candy from her pocket*).

Helen: Auntie Blanche – can we practice the dance steps?

Blanche: Sure – let's wind up the Victrola and we'll practice our one step.

Blanche winds the family's Victrola and mime's dancing with Helen. They are tippy and giggly - and both enjoying themselves. Elizabeth enters, clearly agitated.

Elizabeth: Turn this racket off at once! Blanche – where is your sense of decorum? (*She slams the lid on the Victrola*)

Blanche (*bewildered and annoyed*): Elizabeth – what on earth is the matter? I was just teaching Helly-Mae the one-step!

Elizabeth: This is hardly the time for dancing, Blanche. Just look outside, will you?

Blanche (*looking outside and growing serious*): Oh. Oh my. Where is it coming from?

Elizabeth: Helen – go play upstairs.

Helen exits, hesitantly

Elizabeth (*in a hushed tone*): I saw Dr. Pearson heading toward the Turnbull's this morning. The hearses are like a parade...it feels as though there's another one passing by every hour...

Blanche: Oh – not the Turnbolls...It happens so fast. Dr. Pearson says he can't keep up and that by the time he arrives it's often too late. (*Lowering her voice*) He says they turn a peculiar shade of lilac just at the end... Are the boys wearing camphor outside?

Elizabeth: Yes, of course they are.

Blanche: I can't say we weren't warned. Dr. Pearson said it all along – there was no way we could avoid this, despite Mr. Minnes' grand protestations...*(a little bitterly)*. It's politics all over again – they knew full well that flu panic would slow down business...and the last thing anyone would want is to slow down business! Even when they're dying on the factory floors! And now Dr. Pearson's resigned – well, I'm sure we'll all live to regret his departure.

Elizabeth *(wishing to avoid the topic)*: Perhaps I should check on the Turnbills...

Blanche: Elizabeth – no! You have three children and an infirm husband to worry about. And you've seen how contagious it is!

Elizabeth *(judgementally and a bit angrily)*: Well what about you Blanche? Why don't you go? We've been neighbours with the Turnbills for years! Don't you think they could use some comfort in their grief? What if there are others in the family who are ill? You said yourself whole families can succumb inside of a day...

Blanche: Elizabeth...It wouldn't do any good now...

Elizabeth *(imploringly)*: But all your training...your experience...It's just over? That's it? Blanche – they're begging for nurses. Single or married. The emergency hospital is overflowing...I ran into Marion Forde... she says they're desperate...the other nurses are run off their feet...

Blanche: Elizabeth - you know what I endured in practice. Besides, I told you I'd help look after the children while the schools are closed...you've already so much on your plate – blood's thicker than water, right?

Elizabeth: Your community needs you, Blanche.

Blanche *(angrily)*: You of all people, Elizabeth! You saw me cry day after day during the cholera outbreak – every day new tragedy and despair – and all we could do was wipe foreheads and change sheets. And it was you who walked me to the hospital every day to cross the picket lines when the other nurses went on strike – not for the pay, but because I couldn't bear to leave the sick unattended, however unpopular that might have made me. No - my heart couldn't bear the hospital again – not when I have Clarence to worry about... I've made my choice and I won't return to nursing.

Elizabeth: It's different this time – don't you have a sense of duty?

Blanche: I've done my time, Beth. And this flu...this flu is different. It's not like the others. It kills inside a day – and not just the old or the young...it's taking those of us in the very prime of life –

Elizabeth *(quietly)*: You have no idea, do you?

Blanche: What?

Elizabeth: You have no idea what they say about you...

Blanche: What...who are you talking about?

Elizabeth *(distressed)*: The neighbours. Other members of the ladies auxiliary. Never mind.

Blanche: Elizabeth! Out with it – what's going on?

Elizabeth: They say horrible things about you. Horrible. It's mortifying. And of course I defend you because you're my sister...but I can't say that I don't understand...

Blanche *(quickly)*: What do they say?

Elizabeth: That you're selfish. And vain. And cowardly. *Blanche lets out a little cry.*

No-one has a shred of sympathy for nurses who don't want to work right now – it's right here in the papers. "A tar and feather campaign of indignant citizens would probably bring these snobs to their senses."

Blanche puts her head in her hands.

Blanche *(furious but also humiliated)*: I've put more than my share of time in! Years. And this from the women in this town too wealthy to lift a finger and too lazy to do a single day of honest work!

Elizabeth (*very rattled by the confrontation*): Blanche - they won't...it's not true what they say. You do so much for us here...The children love you – and of course it's your choice. Forget that I said anything – pay it no mind. Everyone's nerves are just...

no-one's in their right...I'm sure this will all be over soon. (*Long pause. Blanche is clearly very disturbed and Elizabeth tries to change the subject, guilty that she has caused her sister harm*). I believe I will send the pies I've made for supper to the Turnbells. Those of us lucky enough to have our health can at least do without dessert for one night – don't you agree?

Blanche (*shaken from her sister's admission*): Of course. Certainly.

Elizabeth: Wonderful. I'll prepare a hamper.

Blanche (*Gathering her coat*): I believe I'll be heading home now – I'm afraid my sick headache has just returned and I will need to lie down again.

Elizabeth: What a shame. We shall miss you at dinner. I'll send your regards to the Turnbells. (*The women make eye contact*) Blanche – why don't you lie down upstairs in Helen's room?

Blanche ignores her sister's invitation and leaves.

Elizabeth: Never mind, then. (*She is upset by her sister's departure, and expresses her distress by tidying the living room*). Helen! Helen – come help your mother prepare a charity hamper for the Turnbells! (*She receives no answer and sighs with annoyance*) HELEN MARY! *She hears girl's voices playing outside the window and is cross.* Helen Mary! I instructed you *not* to play outside today!

The girls' voices become louder and more clearly

Girls (chanting): *I had a little bird*

Her name was Enza

I opened up the window

And in-flu-enza!

Elizabeth is visibly unnerved – frightened even. She rushes to the window and shouts for Helen again.

Elizabeth: Helen Mary! Come in this instant!

Helen moves into the room slowly. She is very ill. Her breathing is laboured and raspy.

Helen (*softly*): I'm here, Mother. I'm right here.

Elizabeth looks at Helen and is horrified.

Elizabeth (*terrified*): James! Henry! Call Dr. Pearson!

Blackout.

SCENE FIVE: PRESENT

It is night in the hospital. All is quiet and still except for the whirring and humming of monitors and machines. Helen is in her hospital bed, asleep. Rosalyn enters. She is fully gowned and masked, although she removes the mask to check on Helen's chart and her monitors. Helen startles and wakes up. She is less confused than earlier, but still not entirely lucid.

Rosalyn: Hi Mrs. Hargrove. Don't worry – I'm just checking your chart...I told your son I'd keep an eye on you.

Helen: What time is it?

Rosalyn: It's 3:30.

Helen: Did I have my lunch yet? I can't remember...

Rosalyn: It's 3:30 am. I got stuck with the night shift. Everything's fine, though. Go back to sleep – I just came in to check that you're ok.

Helen: Oh. That's very kind of you. Remind me of your name, dear...

Rosalyn: It's Rosalyn Dragomir.

Helen: My – that's a different name. And they've stuck you with the night shift.

Rosalyn: Yeah – we have to take turns. We're really short staffed right now, so this is my third night in a week.

Helen: You must hardly know which way is up by the end of it.

Rosalyn: Yeah – it's pretty exhausting. Particularly right now – until they've got this new bug figured out we have to take full infection control precautions – which means gowning and masking up a lot more. It doesn't really sound like a big deal, but the masks are uncomfortable.

Helen: Oh my. I've always had great admiration for the work you nurses do.

Rosalyn (*embarrassed*): I'm actually a doctor.

Helen: Oh, I see – all these modern changes. Well at least I don't have a nurse who's a man!

Rosalyn *looks a little mortified*.

Rosalyn: I think you had a male nurse yesterday – Eric – the one who came and checked your vitals.

Helen (*chuckling*): In my day it was so much clearer...do you think these male nurses can really do a good job?

Rosalyn: We've got a number of male nurses around here – they're all excellent.

Helen: I'd just worry they didn't have the natural inclination for that kind of work. The men of my day would hardly have known what to do with themselves if you'd told them to make a bed or tend to the ill. I just think God's given us certain talents and we should use them. When there's a crisis like this it's a woman you want at your bedside.

Rosalyn (*snorting a little*): I'm not sure gender has much to do with it these days. We're having trouble getting anyone to come to work – man, woman or otherwise. A number of people are using all their sick days because they don't want to be here if that new bug hits. They're terrified of it.

Helen: But you're here...

Rosalyn (*shrugging*): I guess I just feel like this is what I signed up for. I mean, if I was a firefighter I wouldn't get to pick and choose which fires to put out based on how risky it was for me – and you don't become a firefighter if you're scared of fire, right? No-one said being a doctor was risk free.

Helen: Admirable. Do you have a family?

Rosalyn: No...not yet...well...I'm engaged. (*Looking a little guilty at her righteous stance*) I know, I know. This is probably really different for someone with kids. I can't imagine how awful you'd feel if you brought a serious bug home to your family...and I know there are some nurses who are single moms and if they got sick they'd have no-one to turn to for child care or support. I guess it's really complicated. (*talking to herself more than to Helen as she finishes checking the monitors*) I mean, the least they could do around here would be to give us all access to unlimited supplies of anti-virals, but the admin keeps telling us that our stockpiles are low and we can only have them under certain circumstances...Mrs Hargrove? (*Rosalyn realizes Helen's asleep and stands by her side to check her IV line. Blackout*)

SCENE SIX: 1918 – TABERNACLE

Lights up on the Tabernacle – a make-shift hospital quickly converted from an old wooden structure previously used as a religious gathering space and then to temporarily house soldiers. The Tabernacle is an emergency isolation hospital that is expected to handle the flu victims, instead of the Brantford General Hospital. Kate MacNeil is standing at Helen's bedside, taking her pulse (this can mimic the tableaux from the scene before). She is wearing a mask. There are occupied beds next to Helen's – and a sense of grief and quiet chaos.

Kate: Just lie still now – someone will be back to see you soon. If you need to see a nurse, just call out as best as you can.

Helen (*in a little voice*): Will my mother come soon?

Kate: I'm sorry, Helen. The people in this hospital are too sick right now to have visitors. You'll see your mum when you're feeling all better. Until then, you'll have to be a brave girl – try to think positive thoughts.

Helen nods, coughs violently and is still afraid.

Helen: When will I get better?

Kate: We don't really know. So it's important that you do your best to lie still and be as good a girl as you can. Now – there are many other sick patients here, so I can't stay with you any longer. Be a good girl and try to sleep.

Helen nods and coughs again. Kate checks on the patients in the neighbouring beds and then exits. As her coughing fit subsides, Helen looks around the hospital. The other beds are filled with people too sick to move or call out. Coughing and laboured breathing can be heard across the ward. In the bed next to Helen is a man – he is Armenian. Having never seen a “foreigner” before, Helen stares. The man awakes and looks back at Helen. Although he is very sick, he works to speak to Helen. His English is broken, but he struggles to make himself understood.

Adour: Hello.

Helen gives him a shy wave

Adour: Are you feel sick? (*He motions to his chest*)

Helen nods

Adour (*sympathetically*): Is bad, is bad. Your name is please?

Helen tells him her name, still shy

Adour: Miss Helen – is nice to have meet you. (*He pauses*)

Helen is entirely overwhelmed, and begins to cry.

Adour: Oh no...no, no! Is ok! Is ok... No cry...

Helen works to gather her emotions.

Adour: My name – my name is Adour Kezerian – big name! You say me “Adour.” You say “Hello Adour!” (*He waves again at her and makes a silly face, trying to stop her tears*)

Helen smiles despite herself

Helen: Hello, Adour

They wave at one another from their cots, then both dissolve into a fit of coughing. Helen's subsides, but Adour keeps coughing. Kate MacNeil rushes to his bedside.

Kate: Mr. Kezerian! Mr. Kezerian – sit up! Lean forward Mr. Kezerian – it will help clear your airways. That's it...

The coughing begins to subside, but Adour gasps for breath. As he regains his breath, he glances over at Helen

Adour (*softly*): Is ok...is not bad.

Adour lies back on his pillows and Kate moves around to check on Helen. As she feels Helen's pulse and temperature, Blanche appears in the Tabernacle. She is wearing her coat, and carries her nursing uniform in her arms. Kate looks up and meet's Helen's gaze for a few seconds.

Blanche: Nurse MacNeil – I'm here to help.

Blackout

SCENE SEVEN: PRESENT

Helen is awake, and looking more energetic. She is watching the television. Rosalyn enters, still wearing mask and gown.

Rosalyn: Hi Mrs. Hargrove, it's just me again – I'm just popping in to see how your night went...

Helen: Oh hello dear.

Rosalyn (*picking up Helen's chart*): They've got you sitting up –

Helen: The hip gave me a little trouble last night – so they propped me up like this and gave me some medication. I brushed my teeth this morning, though, and if that doesn't make a body feel human again, I don't know what does.

Rosalyn: Glad to hear you're feeling a little better...yeah – it's here in your chart – they upped your pain meds. I'll ask the nurse to keep a special eye on it...

Helen: I see they've got you wearing the full regalia again.

Rosalyn (*sounding exhausted*): I'm afraid so. They're saying we should be seeing the first cases here any day.

Helen: I was just watching the news – they're saying it's come from China...

Rosalyn: Well, it's never totally clear with these things – although you're right – this one seems to have started in Southeast Asia...probably Vietnam, actually.

Helen: Is the government doing anything about it?

Rosalyn: You mean our government? I think they're doing the best they can given the circumstances...the usual – taking temperatures at airports, ramping up surveillance.

Helen: Have they shut our borders to them?

Rosalyn: Sorry?

Helen: Well certainly we shouldn't be letting any of them in – no sense in putting healthy Canadians in harm's way.

Rosalyn (*uncomfortable*): I don't think it's that easy...we can't just stop global travel from one part of the world...

Helen: But surely our government has a duty to protect its own citizens. We've worked very hard to make our country the place that it is, and I don't think we should let foreigners come in and threaten our way of life...and besides – they have so much to learn about modern hygiene over there...it's no wonder they keep getting sick.

Rosalyn (*trying to divert the conversation*): That's not totally true – I mean, the Spanish Flu started in Kansas, right?

Helen: But they have to learn to stop sharing their homes with their livestock, and they need to learn to clean up their own mess! I don't see why Canada should come galloping in to save them every time there's a new problem – we have our own issues to worry about.

Rosalyn (*offended, but trying not to be*): Look – I worked for an NGO in Cambodia for a few years before I started medical school – and people there often don't have a choice about their living conditions...these are really poor countries...and if Canada was serious about public health we'd be sending every extra penny overseas – I mean, we talk a good line about foreign aid, but we actually do very little to help other countries – and to be honest, I'm not sure the state of agriculture in North America is that much more hygienic – I mean, our factory farms are atrocious.

Helen: Well I don't know about that, but I just think we should look after our own first. I'm just sick of seeing Canada be exploited for its generosity –

Rosalyn remains quiet, offended and unsure of how to respond.

Helen: We have to care for our own first – there are only so many tax dollars to go around – and we already support so many newcomers.

Rosalyn (*angrily*): And some of us “newcomers” spend a lot of time supporting other Canadians. Listen, Mrs. Hargrove, I've gotta run to check on a few other patients...

Helen looks startled, perhaps guilty at having caused tension

Helen: You have a good afternoon – and I think you're doing a remarkable job here...

Blackout

SCENE EIGHT: 1918 – TABERNACLE

In the Tabernacle – later the same night. Kate and Blanche are still working. Blanche wears her nursing uniform now. Both women are exhausted. Blanche is tending to an unnamed patient who is vomiting into a basin. Helen and Adour are asleep.

Blanche: Nurse MacNeil – we'll need to change the sheets over here...his fever's up again – and do we have any more cinnamon milk?

Kate enters.

Kate: No, we're out of almost everything – even clean sheets. We'll have to just make do. *(Kate holds on to the side of a bed)*

Blanche: Nurse MacNeil – Kate – you're run off your feet. Is there anyone to spell you so you can go home to get some rest?

Kate snorts.

Kate: Not likely. We've lost so many of our own – and even with this extra space we don't have enough beds. *(looking around helplessly)* I've never seen anything like this. Besides – Doctor Bragg should be coming any time now to get an update.

Blanche: Norman Bragg?!

Kate: Yes – didn't you know he's been appointed in Dr. Pearson's place as the Medical Officer of Health?

Blanche: Well that's what you get for being an Alderman's son. *(Blanche begins to giggle)*

Kate: What can you possibly be laughing at?

Blanche: I've known Norman Bragg since he was a baby – my sister and I used to mind him when his parents went out visiting. *(She begins laughing harder)*

Kate *(laughing a little too)*: What?

Blanche: He was the shyest little boy – afraid of his own shadow. The kind of boy who always had a runny nose and untied shoelaces – and wet his pants, as I recall. His parents never knew what to make of him – he was so dreadfully awkward! When we came to mind him he used to hide under the bed – nothing could get him to come out...well, this went on for some time, until Elizabeth lost her patience and decided enough was enough – dragged him out by his feet! And did he kick up a fuss! No amount of cajoling could get him to calm down – you'd think we'd have beaten him from the racket he made! Mrs. Bragg had to come all the way back from her function – and I think that was the last time we were asked to watch little Normy Bragg...and to think that he's...*(she begins to laugh again)*...that little Normy Bragg *(laughing harder still)*...is in charge of...*all this!* *(The two women cackle at the absurdity)*

Kate: Well, next time I can't find him I guess I'll start by checking under the cots!

Blanche: And keep a clean pair of pants for him, while you're at it!

The women roar at the thought of Dr. Bragg hiding under the hospital beds, wetting his pants. They do not notice Dr. Bragg entering. He clears his throat, embarrassed. The women turn and see Dr. Bragg and immediately try to compose themselves.

Kate: Ah, um, Dr. Bragg. Good evening.

Blanche: Dr. Bragg – lovely to see you. You're looking well these days.

Dr. Bragg: Nurse MacNeil, Nurse Neff. I don't mean to break up your party – I just came to check on our tabernacle patients. Is all well here this evening?

Kate: As well as to be expected – too many patients, not enough nurses, no supplies...how are you faring in the new position?

Dr. Bragg: I'm coping – trial by fire, I'm afraid. Do you want to give me a patient-by-patient update?

Kate: Certainly (she stands by Helen's bed). This is Helen Moore – aged six. She arrived this morning – her mother, Elizabeth, tried to care for her at home, but brought her in when her fever spiked and could not be brought down.

Dr. Bragg looks at Helen and then to Blanche – making the connection.

Dr. Bragg: Blanche – Nurse Neff – this is your...

Blanche nods

Kate: The fever has come down some since she's arrived and we're hopeful that she will stabilize. (*They move to Adour's bed*). This Adour Kezerian – aged 28. He was brought in by some fellow Cockshutt workers last night – he collapsed on the job.

Dr. Bragg (*alarmed*): Nurse MacNeil – he *can't* be in here. If word gets out that we have foreign men in the same ward as a little girl...let alone the very next bed...he has to go...

Kate: We have nowhere else to put him. The men's ward is overflowing with patients. And he's too sick to go back to the boarding house – we have no choice.

Dr. Bragg: We can't have this. If Minnes finds out he'll be furious – the Board of Health has been very clear about this. We need a separate ward for foreigners.

Kate (*scoffing*): And who would you get to staff such a ward? We're short of nurses as is – what nurse would volunteer their time to care for a ward of foreigners? You know how it is – they're already saying that it's foreign tenements that are causing this flu to spread so quickly...that they're dirty and crowded and depraved...

Dr. Bragg: Nonetheless – we can't have this...

Kate (*authoritatively*): Dr. Bragg – I'm sorry, we have no choice.

Bragg (*almost apologetically*): Nurse McNeil – he can't be here. You know the public sentiment right now... I can't answer to that. I'll leave it to you two to see that he's moved immediately. If you'll excuse me, I need to begin my rounds in the men's ward.

Bragg exits. Kate looks defeated.

Kate: I don't know why we bother. We're just giving them a bed to die in...nothing more.

Blanche: But Kate – maybe they're right...you've seen the tenements – they're in squalor. I don't know why they choose to live like that...and if they're putting regular Brantfordites in harm's way...

Kate: Blanche – they're in squalor because we *let* them be in squalor. We've brought these men here to work in our factories, but we don't pay them enough to keep body and soul together...the least we could do is nurse them in their time of need...

Blanche: Regardless – we have to move him.

Blanche moves to help Adour, but pauses to steady herself. Kate does not notice. They approach Adour's bed. Kate shakes him gently.

Kate: Mr. Kezerian – wake up Mr. Kezerian...we need to move you.

Adour does not respond

Kate (*more forcefully*): MR. KEZERIAN – I NEED YOU TO WAKE UP NOW...

Adour has died, but Kate continues to shake him.

Blanche (*softly*): Kate...Kate...he's gone. Leave him be.

Kate lets out a cry of anguished, exhausted frustration. It seems she has reached a certain breaking point. She rests on the side of the bed collecting herself for a few moments. Blanche stands near her. Helen looks on.

Kate: I'll summon the orderlies to collect the body.

Kate exits, and Blanche pulls the sheet over Adour's body slowly, with care and respect. As she does so, she sings the hymn "Abide With Me" quietly. When she has finished, she sits to rest at the side of Adour's bed, still humming. As she hums, she begins to cough, and in coughing looks terrified. Midway through her coughing fit she catches Helen's eye.

Helen: Aunt Blanche?

Blanche: Go back to sleep, Helen.

Helen: Are you all right?

Blanche: I said go back to sleep.

Helen continues to watch her aunt. Blanche stands, but is clearly very ill. She struggles to catch her breath. She tries to tidy the area around Adour's bed, but begins to cough violently again.

Blanche: Nurse MacNeil?...Kate...?

Blanche slowly makes her way to the second cot, which is now empty. She sits at the side of the bed. Labouring to breathe. Helen stares, transfixed. As this happens, Zack enters, and Helen is partially pulled back to present day.

Zack (*entering, with backpack and mask pulled down around his neck*): Hey Nana...how's it going?

Helen looks at Zack, distracted.

Helen: Huh?

Zack: Dad said I should stop by to say hi – they think Toronto's got its first case of the new flu, and dad says they'll be tightening visiting rules any second...

Helen (*looking back and forth between Blanche and Zack*): Oh.

Blanche slowly lies down in the cot, and moans slightly.

Zack: So anyway, Nana – how are things? You really picked a crazy time to be here, huh?

Helen (*distracted*): Yes...I guess I...

Zack: Oh sweet – they got your TV hooked up...(*Zack grabs the remote and starts flipping through channels. Helen is paying no attention*)

As Zack begins to talk, the scene with Blanche unfolds simultaneously. The 1918 scene is quiet and muted – almost in the background. Kate enters.

Kate: Blanche? Did you call? Oh Blanche (*alarmed*)...oh no...Let me see if I can find Bragg on the men's ward...Breathe slowly Blanche...easy...How long have you had the fever?

Blanche (*barely audible*): Since this morning.

Kate: Mercy! Why didn't you say something?

Blanche doesn't answer. Kate works to settle Blanche in the cot then quickly exits.

Zack: Wow – so it looks like it finally might be here...although I still don't trust a word the government has said about this...I think it's just a ploy to get us all good and scared so we won't ask too many questions about the rest of the crap they're up too...

Helen gazes at Zack.

Zack: But I mean, even if this IS the real deal – and I really don't think it is – they've got their priorities totally screwed up – I mean all this anti-viral stockpiling, and hand-washing, and vaccine production overdrive – I don't get it.

Helen: What do you mean?

Zack: I mean, it's not like we're not overpopulated right now anyway – maybe pandemics are nature's way of pruning – of separating the wheat from the chaff – don't you think, Nana?

Helen turns to 1918. Kate and Bragg enter and Bragg examines Blanche, who begins to cough violently again.

Bragg and Kate exchange grim glances. Bragg exits, Kate tends to Blanche.

Zack: Like really, we should just let it go – see what happens...all this intervention defies the way things are naturally...and let's face it – we're ALL gonna die sometime anyway, right?

Helen: Zack, you have no idea...no idea what that would look like.

Zack: No, but I mean Nana – that's exactly the point – we're so afraid of what it would look like that we do everything in our power to stop these things – and who knows what damage we're doing by trying to stop the natural world...like think of all the damage we've done with antibiotics...

Helen turns back to 1918. Elizabeth enters with Bragg. Not seeing Blanche, Elizabeth looks at Helen and rushes towards her, letting out a small cry. Bragg grabs Elizabeth's arm.

Bragg: Elizabeth – it's not Helen. *(He turns Elizabeth toward Blanche. Elizabeth is horrified and kneels next to Blanche's cot).*

Helen *(looking back at Zack)*: I...I don't...

Zack: It's like forest fires – sure they're awful, but they also allow a ton of new stuff to grow...

Helen: But so much is lost.

Zack: I know this sounds weird, but I think it would be kind of exciting.

Elizabeth lets out a wail next to Blanche's bed, and begins to keen softly. Kate kneels beside her. Helen cannot help but watch. Slowly, Bragg lifts the sheets over Blanche's body.

Zack: I mean, can you imagine if everything was just suddenly like totally upended? If we really did find ourselves in the middle of total chaos?

Helen smiles at him painfully, pats his face and looks back at 1918.

Helen *(heartbroken - to Elizabeth)*: You shouldn't have...you shouldn't have pushed her to work...

Elizabeth weeps bitterly. Helen looks back at Zack.

Helen: I don't know what to think any more. I feel muddled. *(She pauses)* I lost my aunt in the 1918 pandemic. My mother was never the same...we were never the same.

Zack *(chastened)*: Wow – sorry Nana, I had no idea.

Zack turns off the TV.

Zack: Do you remember it?

Helen: Like it was yesterday. These days it feels like I can't stop remembering...

Zack: I'm all ears.

Zack gives his genuine attention to his grandmother and the stage fades to black.