

"A Warning Against Indifference"
Andrea Pocosgnich, teatrocritica.net



ELLA'S SECRET

(A Play)

by H.W. Freedman

"Freedman's production does not seek answers, in fact it cultivates doubts...it is able to penetrate the viewer's intimate conscience, that is, if the viewer does not wish to remain deaf and indifferent." Andrea Pocosgnich, teatrocritica.net

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“Where history and story-telling meet, dense narratives arise. Especially when the chapter of history is the Nazi era and when the narratives are the interconnected stories of two women, a German Helga, and a Jewess Ella. It is the perfect occasion for a close confrontation between two diverse points of view about the darkest moment in contemporary European conscience.” Manuela Sammarco, teatroteatro.it

“...the guilt of those who have always known...Those who weren't among the soldiers rounding up the Jews and didn't make the laws...stood by and watched when a Jew was beaten and dragged away and then entered his house and carried off his possessions...Can forgiveness be contemplated for the perpetrators....?” Andrea Pocosgnich, teatrocritica.net

“...the encounter/clash of two strong women...Their parallel lives, families, children and a man who...keeps them apart and also close together, ...” Elisa Suplina, Lungatevere.it

“... 'Ella's Secret' has a profound emotional component...a rivalry that is part of the female universe...intense and satisfying, with the finale of a thriller...” Mauro Corso

ELLA'S SECRET

Characters

ELLA Schlessinger - *mid-50's; born Cologne, Germany; living in England since age 16.*

HELGA Hartmann - *mid-50's; Austrian-born, living in Cologne Germany since age 13.*

Setting: *ELLA's Sitting room. London, April 1980.*

Scene 1 – Sunday 10 a.m

Scene 2 – 25 minutes later

Scene 3 – 2 hours later

Scene 4 – 10 minutes later

The play is best presented without an Intermission.

Synopsis

On a quiet Sunday morning in London in 1980, *ELLA* receives an unexpected visit from *HELGA*, a woman she has never met before. Both their lives have been effected by the same Nazi-SS officer. *HELGA* has a mission, and *ELLA* has a secret.

Production 2013 — Directed by the Author
Teatro Millelire, Rome, Italy (in Italian)

Productions 2012 — Directed by the Author
Spoleto La Mama Fringe Festival, Italy (in Italian)
Ridotto Teatro Dell'Angelo, Rome, Italy (in Italian)

Staged readings — Directed by the Author
Beth Shalom Holocaust Memorial Centre, Nottingham, England
Holocaust Museum Houston, Texas, USA
United Nations, NYC, USA

Workshop Production — Directed by the Author
Ethnic Cultural Theatre
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington, USA

SCENE 1

(London 1980. April. Sunday 10 a.m. Raining and chilly.)

(SETTING: Minimum furniture. ELLA's sitting room: Two arm-chairs, a coffee table, a writing desk and chair, a hat and coat rack, a table with a telephone and stereo or radio.)

(AS HOUSE LIGHTS DIM TO BLACK OUT: MUSIC BEGINS: "UNA FURTIVA LAGRIMA" FROM "ELISIR D'AMORE". THEN AS LIGHTS COME UP CROSS FADE OUT UNA FURTIVE LAGRIMA AND FADE IN THE MONKS CHORUS FROM 'THE FORCE OF DESTINY'.)

(MUSIC CONTINUES AS, LIGHTS COME UP on ELLA wearing her house-robe and slippers. She is sitting at her writing desk putting a ribbon on a present she has just wrapped. There is a KNOCK ON THE DOOR.)

ELLA: *(Calls out)* Wait just one minute!

(She gets up, turns off the Music, goes to the door.)

What is it?

HELGA: *(From Offstage)* Mrs Schlessinger?

ELLA: Yes?

HELGA: *(From Offstage)* May I please speak with you?

(ELLA hesitates, then she opens the door, and we see HELGA wearing a raincoat and rain hat; she is carrying an umbrella.)

I should have telephoned.

ELLA: Who are you?

HELGA: I actually did telephone.

ELLA: You never called me.

HELGA: I did call, but I was afraid you would refuse to see me, so I hung up.

ELLA: So it was you who called twice yesterday.

HELGA: Ya, ya, I'm sorry.

ELLA: If you were trying to frighten me you didn't succeed.

(ELLA begins to close the door, but she stops when HELGA speaks.)

HELGA: Please. Just give me one minute of your time.

ELLA: Why should I?

HELGA: I'm sorry for hanging up, but as soon as I heard your voice I knew I couldn't explain over the telephone.

ELLA: I don't like people who telephone and hang up. Now what is it?

HELGA: I'm sorry for coming without warning so early on a Sunday morning.

ELLA: Come to the point.

HELGA: It couldn't wait.

ELLA: What couldn't wait? Who are you for heaven's sake?

HELGA: If I tell you my name, please promise at least to hear me out.

ELLA: Why should I promise anything?

(ELLA again begins to close the door.)

HELGA: Hartmann.

(ELLA stops.)

ELLA: I beg your pardon?

HELGA: Hartmann.

(ELLA allows the door to open.)

ELLA: Who?

HELGA: My name is Helga Hartmann.

ELLA: *(Beat)* Hartmann.

HELGA: Yes.

ELLA: So?

HELGA: I am his wife.

ELLA: Whose wife?

HELGA: Eric.

ELLA: *(beat)* Eric.

HELGA: Yes.

ELLA: I'm afraid I'm busy.

HELGA: He needs your help.

ELLA: If it's about the letter, I sent it at least three years ago.

HELGA: Five years ago.

ELLA: Can it be five years already?

HELGA: Yes.

ELLA: Then you know I sent the letter.

HELGA: Yes, the first one.

ELLA: Oh, I see.

HELGA: May I speak with you?

ELLA: About the second letter?

HELGA: In a way, and about Eric.

ELLA: I was very clear in the second letter.

HELGA: But you didn't write what we asked.

ELLA: I couldn't.

HELGA: And you didn't come.

ELLA: No, I couldn't.

HELGA: Eric needs your help.

ELLA: I've done what I could.

HELGA: I'm not sure.

ELLA: Well, I am. I think I have heard enough.

(ELLA begins to close door.)

HELGA: Please, allow me to explain.

ELLA: There is nothing more to be done.

HELGA: There is.

ELLA: It's not a matter of opinion, it's a matter of fact!

HELGA: Please, Frau Schlessinger. I was referring to Eric.

ELLA: He is not my concern.

HELGA: Eric has changed.

ELLA: Haven't we all?

HELGA: Of course, but with Eric it is more - it is extreme.

I came from Cologne yesterday just to see you. I didn't know where else to go.

(ELLA opens the door wide and steps aside.)

ELLA: Come in. It's chilly in the doorway.

HELGA: I don't want to disturb you or your family.

ELLA: My husband is away. Come inside.

HELGA: Only for a moment.

(HELGA steps inside.)

ELLA: Let me have your umbrella and your coat.

HELGA: They are wet.

ELLA: Yes.

(HELGA hands her umbrella to ELLA.)

HELGA: Danke schön.

ELLA: English.

(ELLA takes umbrella, and places it in the umbrella stand.)

HELGA: Sorry.

(HELGA takes off her coat and hands it to ELLA.)

ELLA: Your hat.

(HELGA takes off her hat and hands it to ELLA.)

HELGA: Danke

(corrects herself)

Thank you. It's very wet this morning.

(ELLA hangs up HELGA's coat and hat as she speaks.)

ELLA: London is always wet.

HELGA: I'm sorry to disturb you on a Sunday, but I felt it was my best chance to find you at home.

ELLA: You were correct.

HELGA: Cologne is also wet and dreary these days. But you know Cologne.

ELLA: It was a long time ago.

HELGA: You are Cologne-born?

(ELLA motions to the sitting area.)

ELLA: Please sit down.

(HELGA remains standing.)

HELGA: I came for Eric's sake.

ELLA: Have a seat. I won't be a moment.

(ELLA goes to Exit, but when HELGA speaks she stops and turns to face her.)

HELGA: I'll wait.

ELLA: Actually, I'll be more than a moment - I'll put on clothing.

HELGA: Don't go to any bother on my account.

ELLA: No, of course not. But I do have to dress.

HELGA: Eric doesn't know I have come here to see you.

(ELLA looks at HELGA, then EXITS.)

(HELGA inspects the room. She notices the photo albums on the coffee table, sits, opens an album and begins to look at the photos.)

(AS LIGHTS DIM TO BLACK OUT — MUSIC FADES IN: OVERTURE to MACBETH by Verdi)

END of Scene 1