

3. EXTENDED WRITTEN (FICTION PLAY)

Farrell, Fiona. *Chook Chook*. In *Playlunch Five Short New Zealand Plays*. Ed. Prentice, Christine and Lisa Warrington. Otago: University of Otago Press. 1996. Copyright. Extracts from *Chook Chook*.



Chook Chook

The interior of a battery farm chicken shed.

A scaffolding framework divided into small apartments for each hen, one empty.

GEORGIA is SR, sitting on an old paint-spattered deck chair. She is knitting.

VALMAI is next to her on another chair. She has her handbag beside her. CHRISSE SL. She has sunglasses and sun block.

The cage for BRON is next. It is empty except for another decrepit chair. All the furniture and the scaffolding and the floor should be liberally covered in paint spatters.

The hens are dressed identically in white nylon check-out operator-type overalls with a full length zip down the front. Their hair is gelled to form combs. Underneath their uniforms they wear Las Vegas glamour-girl gear including a big bunch of feathers which can pop up when the overall is removed, but at the start this is concealed. They are Leghorn-cross hens – but not pantomime style: somewhere between women and birds.

GEORGIA and VALMAI are older, CHRISSE the youngest.

The sound is deafening: a blend of sound recorded in a battery shed with the most banal of commercial pop – one of those cheery songs or arrangements for light orchestra. Perhaps 'When you're smiling', which is VALMAI's song.

The apartments inhabited by the hens are just big enough for them to move a few feet in any direction.

Sound up.

Lights up.

Sound fades.

VALMAI Ooooh. (*She stretches*) Another per ... per ... perfect day. Of course, it's always perfect here really. You can say what you like about the facilities but you really can't fault the weather. I mean to say, I've known nothing but perfect sunshine, day after day, hour after hour just about as long as I can remember. And what I always say is, if the sun's shining, well, that's the main thing isn't it? I mean, I suppose, in an ideal world I'd like a bigger place, maybe a bit of a garden, but honestly there's just so much going on around here, so much to take an interest in, well, it takes your mind off the disadvantages doesn't it? I mean, it mightn't suit everybody, I know that, but – well, life could be a whole lot worse. And perfect sunshine every day, all day. You could do a lot worse.

She stretches out on her chair. Takes a ukulele from her bag.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

About This Play

This is the story about some hens in a shed. It has a moral – and it's something to do with confinement and the cages – political, emotional, traditional – within which life energy can be trapped or exploited to the advantage of some indifferent 'system'.

There are various ways to respond to the knowledge of confinement: deliberate indifference, depression, sublimation in distracting activity, frustration, rage, collusion or rebellion.

What matters most is to retain the naive but crucial vision of an ideal existence.

About Writing Plays

You've asked how I would like to be 'represented as a playwright'. To be honest, I don't think I'm a playwright at all. I'm a writer who occasionally makes plays, as a furniture maker might make a chair: to order, for specific clients. But I love live theatre. I love the way you have to ride a play, staying flexible and endlessly adapting to the unexpected. There's nothing to beat it for jumpy, nervous exhilaration.

FIONA FARRELL

PLAYS BY FIONA FARRELL

(Place and date given are of first production only.)

In Confidence (*Dialogues With Amy Book*), Massey University, 1982

Bonds, Depot, Wellington 1986

Passengers, YWCA centenary, Globe Theatre, Palmerston North 1989

Thatcher, Vitell and Small (with Charles Hoskins), Palmerston North Music in Education Conference 1989

The Perils of Pauline Smith, National Radio 1990. Mobil Award winner for best radio drama 1990

Airwaves, Palmerston North Girls High School 1990; published in *Song of the Shirt* by McIndoe 1993

Chook Chook, Allen Hall, Dunedin 1994

ALSO

Cutting Out – poetry (AUP 1987)

The Rock Garden – short stories (AUP 1989)

The Skinny Louise Book – novel (Penguin 1992)

Six Clever Girls Who Became Famous Women – novel (Penguin 1996)

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GEORGIA Oh yes dear. Dreadful bores the lot of them. Strutting about, conceited as can be, and no decent conversation.

CHRISSE Stuff conversation. What did they look like? I've got this image of something green and gold, something tall and proud.

GEORGIA That's them all right.

CHRISSE And the image makes me shiver.

GEORGIA Oh I wouldn't bother shivering if I were you. Not with frustration at any rate. They're bores, and *noisy!* From first thing in the morning till last thing at night, they just go on and on: how many hens they've had, how many they could cover in an hour under optimum conditions, that kind of thing. They're dreadfully competitive. Always making silly bets: you know. Who can stand on one leg the longest, who can make the biggest racket. Absolute bores.

VALMAI Georgia much prefers it here, don't you Georgia?

GEORGIA What? Oh yes. You know where you are here. Out there, in the experimental deep litter pen, it was chaos. I mean, they were wanting to see how we'd react in a different environment: deep straw, all in together, that kind of stuff. So there were television monitors all over the place, filming us scratching and carrying on. But honestly, it was hopeless. Everyone fighting for food, queuing for the water dispenser, roosters everywhere, bouncing on you when you weren't looking. I don't go for all that instinctual nonsense myself.

CHRISSE So you had a few weeks out there in the deep litter pen, and you wanted to come back? To this?

GEORGIA Well, it's what I know isn't it? I've been here since I was a pullet. And home is where the heart is.

CHRISSE But what about the urges? Didn't you feel them? Didn't you want to – oh, I don't know: let go, be spontaneous, get in touch with your inner chicken?

GEORGIA And do what?

CHRISSE Expand. Explore. Do wild dangerous things, discover the limits of existence. Fly for instance. Valmai here says she dreams of flying.

GEORGIA Oh, I tried it once or twice. Just a wee hop. It's not all that great you know. Hop step jump wobble wobble crash. It hurt actually. I was bruised for a week. On the white meat.

CHRISSE But at least you've done it. You've had a go.

GEORGIA I suppose so. We all had a go during the experiment. I mean they were watching weren't they? It was the whole point of the exercise, to see if we had lost the knack or not after being bred in confinement. So we did our best. But I wouldn't say many of us enjoyed it.

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and green and strutting. I don't know what it is: some kind of atavistic race memory I expect. Something instinctual. Like remembering how to fly ...

VALMAI An orange and a pink. That'll do the trick.

The rooster calls again.

CHRISSE Ooooh. (*She yawns*) Something golden and green and gorgeous.

VALMAI It's a rooster.

CHRISSE Is it? Well I want one. I want one now.

VALMAI No you don't. Nasty bossy things.

CHRISSE Golden and green with a brilliant red comb. It's becoming clearer. I can feel its beak at my neck, its spurs at my side. It covers me. OOOOhhh. Oh God. Gotta keep moving. Gotta keep at the star jumps. One and two and one and two and ...

VALMAI You'll get over it. It's your age. It's a phase.

CHRISSE (*Still exercising*) How do you know? How do you know it's a phase? How do you know about all this?

VALMAI We've all been through it dear. It's nothing new.

CHRISSE And how do you know that roosters are bossy?

VALMAI Georgia told me.

CHRISSE Georgia?

VALMAI She's known a few in her time.

CHRISSE Has she? Hey Georgia! Georgia! You awake?

Lights up on GEORGIA.

GEORGIA What?

CHRISSE Tell me about it. Tell me now.

GEORGIA Tell you what?

VALMAI Roosters. She's developing. She's got urges.

GEORGIA Well, they won't do you any good here, dear. This isn't one of those free-range easy-come, easy-go places. This place is run on proper lines. We're organised. You won't need any urges around here.

CHRISSE But the call. Ooooh, doesn't it do something to you? Doesn't it make you tremble all over? Doesn't it stir your feathers?

GEORGIA Not any more, dear. I got that all out of my system ages ago. When some of us got taken out for the deep litter experiment.

CHRISSE You met some roosters then?

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GEORGIA It had a rather artificial shipboard-romance air about it: all of us strangers, thrust together in the deep litter pen. There was a lot of carrying-on.

CHRISSY But what happened Georgia? Tell me.

GEORGIA Oh, the roosters roamed about the place, scoring, you know: a bit of a flap here, a bit of a peck there ...

CHRISSY Was that all? A bit of a flap?

GEORGIA Well, yes. It was nothing to write home about.

CHRISSY And afterwards?

GEORGIA After the coupling? Oh it's all a bit of a blur now ...

CHRISSY You were fertilised?

GEORGIA Well, yes. Crossbreeds like us aren't really into motherhood though. It's been bred out of us. One or two of the girls with more Leghorn ancestry got into it, built nests in corners, went a bit funny and reclusive. They weren't much fun for a while.

CHRISSY Did they have chicks? Did you have chicks?

GEORGIA Oh yes. The eggs hatched. Dreadful mess. Not like here: down the chute and away, nice and tidy.

CHRISSY What were they like?

GEORGIA Little yellow cheeping things. Got under one's feet. Always wandering off and getting lost in the straw.

CHRISSY Did you love them? Did they snuggle under your wings?

GEORGIA Yes, they snuggled as I recall.

CHRISSY What did that feel like?

GEORGIA Oh, good heavens, it was a long time ago ... quite pleasant I believe. It didn't last long. They'd completed their study. We were relocated.

CHRISSY And your chicks? Where did they go?

GEORGIA Oh, I don't know ... somewhere in the establishment. Somewhere where they could be properly raised. An incubator maybe. They'll be around here somewhere I imagine. I used to look out for them among the point-of-lays, but honestly in such a crowd it's hard to pick out individual faces.

CHRISSY So you lost them.

GEORGIA We were relocated.

CHRISSY And you came back here.

GEORGIA Yes. And what a relief! It was getting cold out there, roosting in

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CHRISSY So you met some roosters, you tried a couple of flights, you scratched about a bit, then you came home.

GEORGIA Back to the old familiar apartment, among my friends and neighbours, where everything is properly organised. Out there there were rats. You had to roost when the sun went out, well up out of harm's way. In the dark. And that's another thing: darkness. I didn't like that. And the emptiness all around.

CHRISSY When I was trying my flight I caught a glimpse over the edge of the pen. You have no idea: there was nothing, just a great space stretching back and back to the far wall. I couldn't come down to earth fast enough I can tell you.

The rooster calls.

CHRISSY But that sound ... Can't you hear it? Can't you feel it? Either of you?

VALMAI I seem to recall a tingling, once a long time ago. A vague restlessness. But the orange pellets seemed to take care of it. The tingling disappears if you eat the orange pellets.

GEORGIA Lot of fuss over nothing if you ask me. Get organised, keep things tidy, keep busy. That's the secret.

CHRISSY I do keep busy. I do, I do. I jog. I do aerobics. I do step repackpuckpuck ...

She exercises briefly.

One, two, one, two, one, two ...

She groans up, breathless. Pause.

CHRISSY Georgia.

GEORGIA Yes dear?

CHRISSY Can you remember ... you know ... when you ...

GEORGIA What?

CHRISSY When you got ... covered ... by one of them ...?

VALMAI Chrissy! Sometimes you ask such personal questions. Privacy. Remember? We all have a right to privacy.

CHRISSY I know - but did you, Georgia?

GEORGIA Of course, dear. We all did. Well, it was part of the experiment. They timed us I think - to see how long it took us to recover our natural selves. It didn't take some of them very long either, let me tell you. They really played to the cameras. Showing off. I thought it was all a bit of a too doo.

CHRISSY (*Dramatic*) Too doo. Too doo. Doooodle doooooo ...

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CHRISSEY It's bolted shut. Don't you know anything?

BRON Bolted. Right. I'll fling myself against the bars till they buckle. (*She bashes at the bars*) Okay. I'll flatten myself and squeeze through.

VALMAI You'll get toughened fibre doing that.

GEORGIA I hope you're not going to make a nuisance of yourself.

VALMAI Calm down, dear. Take it easy.

GEORGIA Because this is a quiet neighbourhood. We like to keep things nice and if everyone considers everybody else we'll get along just fine.

BRON Fuck off.

GEORGIA Now look: I don't know where you've lived before this but in block 4320A we look after one another. Do you hear? We jog along quietly, we keep our heads down, and nobody takes any notice. We don't bother them, they don't bother us. Do you understand me?

BRON Put up and shut up?

GEORGIA If you want to express it in those words, yes. Now we're not saying everything is per ... per ... fact here. We'd be the first to admit there are drawbacks: not quite enough space, draughts from the door, an inner city outlook – but we've all seen worse, haven't we girls?

VALMAI Oh yes. I've seen a lot worse. Down among the 1000s over by the egg sorter. Now, that was rough. Talk about noise! You could hardly hear yourself think.

GEORGIA But we've managed to find, by good luck or good management, places up here – and we intend to hang on to them. Valmai here has missed the cull twice by keeping quiet and she is our oldest resident. She deserves some consideration. And I'm getting on too. We have achieved longevity by keeping ourselves to ourselves, we've worked hard to build a pleasant community and we do not now want things disrupted by loutish behaviour. So, dear, we, the residents' association, would ask you to Pull Your Head In.

BRON A pleasant community? You think this is pleasant?

VALMAI Well, yes. I've started out down on Bottom Row. Everybody in the cages above doing doodoos on my head. Up here, it's open and airy. And you can see the sun.

BRON The sun?

VALMAI Yes. The sun. Up there. It's nice isn't it? And it's like that day after day after day. You'll build up quite a tan.

BRON I'm a white Leghorn cross. I don't tan.

VALMAI Oh, you might. You never know what you can do till you try. Now,

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the dark, having to figure everything out for ourselves. Not my cup of tea at all I assure you. I like to be part of an efficient system where everyone knows their place and we can all make our own small contribution to the smooth running of the organisation.

Sudden eruption of sound: clanging as of prison bars. BRON arrives in a heap in her cage.

BRON Shit! Hey! You! Let me outta here! Let me out. I don't want to be here. Do you hear me? Is there anyone there? If you don't let me out this bloody minute I'll stuff my eggs down the chute! I'll peck the cage to bits. I'll hold my breath till I explode and you'll have guts and feathers everywhere. I'll retain my eggs. Let me out! Let me OUT!

VALMAI Oh dear.

BRON I'll jump up and down and rattle my cage. And the one next door. And the one beyond that. I'll shake this shed in pieces!

She jumps up and down vigorously. The others look on fascinated. Finally she collapses, exhausted. Pause.

GEORGIA (*Brightly*) Welcome to block 4320A.

BRON What?

GEORGIA Welcome. I represent the block committee for 4320A. And we'd like to welcome you to our neighbourhood. We hope your stay here will be a pleasant one.

BRON Get stuffed.

VALMAI That's not a very nice thing to say to a hen.

GEORGIA I was only trying to be civil.

BRON Well, don't bother. (*To the universe*) Let me out! I'll peck out all my feathers. Look: I'm pecking. I'm pecking. I'll be as bald as an egg in a minute. Do you hear me?

CHRISSEY Of course they can't hear you. The music's on.

BRON So I'll drown it out. I'll shout. LOOK. PECK PECK PECK. I'M PECKING MY FEATHERS OUT. LOOK OVER HERE.

VALMAI That won't do any good you know. You'll just feel all the draughts – and you get a lot here, near the doors. It's very airy. You have to wrap up warm.

GEORGIA Yes. The bracing air and elevated views are features of this location. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask and one of our residents will be happy to field your enquiry, based on several months of extensive regional experience.

BRON Yeah. I've got a question. Where's the bloody lock on this thing? How do you open the door?

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CHRISSE When?

BRON On the way here. We were in a shed pretty much like this one, then we were on a truck, then we went over a bump and several of us got shaken loose and we fell out from under the tarpaulin and they drove on. Left us on the side of the road for ages and ages.

CHRISSE Were there any roosters?

BRON Not that I saw. It was early morning, the sun just up, and mist over the ground. But I heard one. A good stirring cry.

CHRISSE Not just arrogant? Not just boastful?

BRON Oh, of course it was arrogant! That's the whole point. That's the thrill of it, it was a challenge.

CHRISSE Out of the mist! A call out of the mist.

BRON Then the bloody truck came back, picked us up and here we are. In this dead and alive dump. Which is exactly like the dead and alive dump I came from. Shit. Shit shit shit.

CHRISSE A good stirring cry. OOOoh. I told you so, Valmai.

VALMAI Don't be silly.

CHRISSE I told you there was more to it. And a *hugy* sun!

VALMAI Look, there's no point getting all worked up about it. It's not going to do you any good, you know. All this silly talk.

CHRISSE But it's the truth. It's the way the world is out there, past the doors. You've got to know what's true. You've got to know what's real.

GEORGIA Truth? Reality? You're too clever for your own good, you know that? You'll get in a muddle using words like that. Look at Bron here. That's what happens when you start thinking about truth, and reality, when you start kicking up a fuss. How long do you think she'll last here? She'll come to a bad end. And a quick one.

BRON There's got to be a way out. There's got to be ...

GEORGIA I gave her about a week before she's gone. In the Bag.

BRON Karate kicks. I shall shatter this cage with my bare feet. Mind over matter. Hai Hai!

GEORGIA Leave her alone. It's dangerous to get involved with ones like her. I've seen it before.

BRON My feet are feet of steel. I am Power. I am Destiny. I am Hen! Hai Hai!

CHRISSE (To VALMAI and GEORGIA) So what would you advise instead?

VALMAI Two greens and a white?

CHRISSE I'm not hungry.

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just settle back in your recliner chair. Put your feet up.

BRON Anyway it's not the sun.

VALMAI Of course it is. Up there? See? The big shiny thing.

BRON It's a light.

GEORGIA It's the sun.

BRON It's a light.

VALMAI The sun, shining every day, all day.

BRON It's a fluorescent tube.

VALMAI On the land of endless summer. This is the Gold Coast. It's Sun City.

BRON It's the land of the long white fluorescent tube. The sun's round.

CHRISSE How do you know?

BRON Seen it.

CHRISSE When?

BRON Just now. An hour or so ago. I've been outside. And now I've been there, I want to go back. I want out. Hey! Do you hear me! I want out! I want out!

CHRISSE What's outside like?

BRON Beautiful.

GEORGIA Don't listen to her. It's scary. It's hard work. You have to find all your own food.

BRON It's green. Do you know green?

VALMAI Of course we know green. We have green pellets. For leucosis.

BRON Not that green. Real green. Bright green. Shiny green. Trees and grass green.

VALMAI Georgia says there's rats.

BRON Maybe. But it's beautiful just the same.

VALMAI You're making all this up. You're trying to upset us.

BRON I'm not; hills and a river and trees and thick rich earth so you feel your toes itch, wanting to start scratching.

GEORGIA That's not what I saw in the litter pen.

BRON It's the truth. That's what's in the real outdoors. I've seen it.

GEORGIA How did you come to see it?

BRON I fell off the truck.

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