

# Ellis Island Ahead!

*by Nora Louise Syran*

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**DEDICATION**

*To my parents*

**STORY OF THE PLAY**

On the eve of the 1954 closing of Ellis Island, two teenagers, an Italian-American and an Irish-American, sneak inside to see it for themselves. They meet an older man, now a janitor after serving as an inspector on the island since the early 1900s. The teens are drawn into his stories from the past and his memories come alive with an ensemble of people from all nationalities and backgrounds. Some of the immigrants are already famous, some will become famous and many, many others are "famous" only within their own families. But they all share one thing: they are on the path of their "pursuit of happiness." A timely play with music that celebrates America as a country of immigrants. About 30-50 minutes depending on the scenes chosen.

**ORIGINAL PRODUCTION**

The show was produced in 2017 at ASEICA an international school in Valbonne, France under the direction of the playwright. Ensemble cast in order of first speaking role:

Hugo Clarkin -- Ferryman, Elegant Man, Groom, German, Steward, Hero  
Remy Lecler -- Janitor/Inspector  
Fanette Grivet-Seyve -- Teenager 1, Finnish Anna  
Alexander Brenner -- Teenager 2, Irishman, Captain, Boss  
Lucy Giroud -- Annie Moore, Chasse, Swedish Hedda  
Benjamin Venon -- Antony Moore, Boy, Irish Steward, (guitar)  
Alex Callaway -- Philip Moore, Khalil Gibran, Doctor, Charlie Chaplin  
Sibylle Cheynet -- Journalist (ukulele), Mamie O'Rourke  
Abigail Stead -- Newspaper Reader, Mother, Emmeline Pankhurst  
Anabelle Gouze -- Elegant Woman, Frank Woodhull, French Traveling Companion  
Peri Yerlikaya -- Lena Berlin, Aysegul (flute/tin whistle)  
Leonard Kivilev -- Moses, Boutros, Translator, Russian  
Mathilde Weirich -- Woman, Sarah Berlin, Nurse, Mary Ann  
Aline Daher -- French Woman, Kamileh Gibran, Syrian Woman

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**Regarding Diversity in Casting**

The primary goal is to cast a talented ensemble that respectfully represents the characters in this play. While achieving a diverse cast may pose challenges in an environment that may lack ethnic diversity and it may not always be possible to mirror the characters' backgrounds precisely, we encourage you to ensure above all that your audience be able to see themselves reflected in the stories told on stage.

**CAST OF CHARACTERS**

*Ensemble of 10 (5 m, 5 w), 40+ roles without doubling*

**ACTOR 1:** (M) Former inspector, now a janitor, in his 60s

**ACTOR 2:** (F) Barbara, Italian-American teenager

**ACTOR 3:** (M) Brian, Irish-American teenager

**ACTOR 4:** (F) Elegant Woman\*, Newspaper Reader, Lena Berlin, Mother, (Frank Woodhull+), (French Traveling Companion)

**ACTOR 5:** (F) Woman, Sarah Berlin, Kamileh Gibran, Nurse+, (Finnish Anna), (Emmeline Pankhurst), (Mary Ann)

**ACTOR 6:** (F) Annie Moore, Chasse Berlin, Turkish Woman, Mamie O'Rourke, (Swedish Hedda)

**ACTOR 7:** (F) Journalist+, French Woman, (Syrian Woman)

**ACTOR 8:** (M) Anthony Moore, Boy, Khalil Gibran, Groom\*, Dan-The Irishman, (Irish Steward)

**ACTOR 9:** (M) Philip Moore, Doctor, (Charlie Chaplin\*), (Melodramatic Hero), Russian

**ACTOR 10:** (M) Ferryman, Elegant Man\*, Moses Berlin, Boutros\*, Translator+, (Captain\*), (Boss\*), German Man,\*

Director assign: Guitar: Dan song, Ukulele: Mary Ann song, and Tin Flute: Dan song

+male or female

\*Non-speaking or singing/one line only

(Optional Characters)

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**Optional Scenes to Cut**

- 1) Frank Woodhall Scene: cut stage directions "The DOCTOR notes FRANK WOODHALL..." pg. 17 to the end of Scene 4. And then reference on pg. 15 after the lines "Single women were turned away."
- 2) Titanic Scene: cut NEWSPAPER READER pg. 22 "APRIL 10, 1912..." to pg. 26 just before (SFX: "Sound of telegraph machines...")
- 3) Emmeline Pankhurst Scene: cut Scene 7.

**SCENES and MUSIC**

**Scene 1:** 1954. Teens meet the Janitor/Inspector. A memory of New York harbor where the first immigrants enter the grand hall of Ellis Island in 1892. Then the busy New York city sidewalks. *MUSIC SNIPPETS through time from "Sidewalks of New York," "Maple Leaf Rag." ... music from the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s 1950s. This can be up to the director, but it must be in public domain.*

**Scene 2:** Back to 1954. Teens and Janitor.

**Scene 3:** Immigrants including Irving Berlin family and Khalil Gibran family. *MUSIC: "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and "Say It With Music" both by Irving Berlin. Also Statue of Liberty poem.*

**Scene 4:** Medical staffers check immigrants for health. A wedding. *MUSIC: Hum the Wedding March. Meeting Frank Woodhull.*

**Scene 5:** The peak of immigration from 1900-1914. Another wedding. *MUSIC: "Maple Leaf Rag" by Scott Joplin. "No Irish Need Apply" by Kathleen (Kitty) O'Neil and John F. Poole. Can be performed with guitar and tin whistle, or a Capella.*

**Scene 6:** The one ship that did not reach New York, the Titanic. *MUSIC: "Dream of Autumn" by Archibald Joyce. Also a hopeful melody on a lute and "The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise" by Lockhart/Seitz 1918.*

**Scene 7:** Suffragettes march.

**Scene 8:** Amid growing fears from war, Ellis Island begins to close its "Golden Door." Fear of Russians grows.

*MUSIC: "Kalinka" by Ivan Larionov.*

**Scene 9:** Immigrants are hopeful, especially to make it in show business.

*MUSIC: "Come Out of the Kitchen, Mary Ann" by W.M. James Kendis, Charles Bayha and "The Sidewalks of New York" by Charles B. Lawlor.*

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**SFX**

New York harbor - foghorn, waves, seagulls  
Snippets of songs from 1890s to 1950s  
Crowd noise, telegraph signals, radio news broadcast  
Increasing battle sounds of the First World War  
Titanic crashing into iceberg, gunshot, music on deck, and explosion, and cries of help as ship finally sinks

**SET DESIGN**

The interior of the grand hall on Ellis Island designated by tall door/ windows center stage and an American flag of 48 stars. Also, the open deck of an ocean-going ship with a gangplank which could become the screen and table.

**PROPS**

Broom	Skirt, stockings to toss
Baskets, luggage, sacks	Newspaper clipping
Ship manifest	Trunk, lifejackets inside
Antique-looking camera	Ship tickets
1890s newspaper	Tin box
Paper map	"Votes For Women" signs
Bench/screen/table	Big pot for stirring
Clipboards for Doctor, Nurse	Fur coat

**COSTUMES**

'50s clothes for Teens and Janitor  
Hat, badge or jacket to indicate Janitor is now Inspector  
Plain pants / long skirts, shawls for the majority of immigrants  
Uniforms for Doctor and Nurse  
Uniform (white jackets and caps) for Titanic Captain, Steward and Sailor  
Evening wear for some men and women on the Titanic  
Attractive ladies attire for Emmeline Pankhurst  
Charlie Chaplin outfit with cane and moustache

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**Scene 1**

*(AT RISE: Low LIGHT. SFX: Sound of New York harbor. Foghorn, waves, seagulls. ENSEMBLE gathers - a mixture of people, carrying baskets, luggage, and sacks. Voices like memories fade in from the past.)*

**ENSEMBLE:** I've heard the streets of America are paved with gold/ Land is cheap/ Are we there yet?/ Do you see New York?/ Look, there's a light/ Lights!/ Look/ Paved with gold?/ We're safe/ The United States of America/ Do you see her yet?/ Who?/ The Statue of Liberty...

*(ENSEMBLE freezes as LIGHTS transition to the interior of a grand hall designated by a tall window center stage and an American flag. It is 1954, the eve of the closing of Ellis Island. MUSIC: Fades through time with snippets of music. A lone JANITOR sweeps the floor. He listens to his radio. He is in his sixties.)*

**JANITOR:** *(HE is disrupted by a noise behind him. He turns off his radio.)* Who is there?

*(HE pulls two teenagers, BRIAN and BARBARA, from their hiding place.)*

**JANITOR:** How did you...? Ellis is closed to the public!

**BARBARA:** Hey, take it easy...We're not doing any harm.

**JANITOR:** Italian-American, eh?

**BARBARA:** Yeah, you have a problem with that?

**BRIAN:** Ye said we're not here to cause trouble. Me ma will give me a baytin for sure.

**JANITOR:** Irish, eh?

**BRIAN:** *(Ready for a fight.)* And...?

**JANITOR:** Cork. A Catholic...

**BRIAN:** And...?

**JANITOR:** Recently arrived.

**BRIAN:** *(Confused but curious.)* Last year...not through here though. *(Looking with interest.)*

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**JANITOR:** (*Impressed.*) First or second-class Irish family then...

**BRIAN:** Hey, now...how...?

**JANITOR:** Only third-class passengers came through here. (*Pause.*) The first immigrant to come through these doors was from Cork. Annie Moore. (*Pause.*)

**BRIAN:** Who is Annie Moore?

(*LIGHTS shift to ENSEMBLE.*)

**BOY:** America, America! Come up and see the lights of America!

**JANITOR:** Annie Moore? Why she was the first immigrant to step foot off the ferry onto Ellis Island. 1892.

**WOMAN:** Look over there... the Statue of Liberty!!

**ENSEMBLE:** (*Overlapping.*) The Statue of Liberty!/ La statue de la liberté !/ der Freiheitsstatue!/ Dealbh na Saoirse/ Azatlyk heykeli...

(*A FERRYMAN works his way through the crowded boat.*)

**FERRYMAN:** Any English speakers here? You, where are you from?

**ANNIE:** Cork.

**FERRYMAN:** Excuse me? Country?

**ANNIE:** County Cork.

**FERRYMAN:** Not county, sweetheart, *country*. Ireland. You Irish had better get used to answering "Ireland" from now on. So, you speak English?

**ANNIE:** If I have to.

**FERRYMAN:** You'll do. Who are these with you?

**ANNIE:** My brothers.

**FERRYMAN:** What's your name?

**ANNIE:** Annie Moore.

**FERRYMAN:** (*Scans the manifest.*) It says here you're fifteen...today. Happy Birthday and Happy New Year! 1892. This is too perfect. The press are gonna love this.

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**FERRYMAN:** *(Cont'd.)* Hey, you look older than fifteen. Saved a bit on the fare coming over, eh? Oh.... *(Moves to addresses another PASSENGER.)*

**ANNIE:** The press are going to love what exactly?

**PHILLIP:** I want to go home! I don't want to spend another night on this boat. It's so dark down below. It was the darkest Christmas ever, Annie.

**ANTHONY:** Except when that nice lady in first class threw down the oranges!

**PHILLIP:** And the sweeties!

**FERRYMAN:** Ellis Island ahead!

**ANTHONY:** Ellis Island? But Ma said to get off at Castle Garden?!

**FERRYMAN:** Castle Garden! My no. You and the other 145 steerage passengers are going to be the first immigrants to enter the new building, on Ellis Island, opening today, New Year's Day.

*(FERRYMAN puts the gangplank into place. The PASSENGERS exit into the hall. SFX: Sounds of a crowd. Telegraph signals. News being reported.)*

**JOURNALIST:** January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1892. Rosy-cheeked Irish lass Annie Moore from County Cork set foot on Ellis Island ahead of the other passengers from the steamship Nevada on what was her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday.

*(JOURNALIST addresses the CHILDREN as she sets up a camera.)*

**JOURNALIST:** *(Cont'd.)* Why did you choose the Nevada?

**PHILLIP:** Because it sounds so... American! What is Nevada anyway?

**ANTHONY:** It's a state, you eijit.

*(As NEWSPAPER READER reads, JOURNALIST takes photos and exits.)*



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**NEWSPAPER READER:** *(Reading.)* As soon as the gangplank was run ashore, Annie tripped across it.

**ANNIE:** *(Incredulously.)* "Tripped" across the gangplank? After being cooped up for 12 days on that ship?

**NEWSPAPER READER:** Annie Moore was presented with a gold Liberty coin. She says she will never part with it but will always keep it as a pleasant memento of the occasion.

**ANNIE:** *(To the audience.)* Never part with it? A ten-dollar coin? Rubbish! It was a month's rent! *(Pause.)* We still had to pass through the big hall. As we were the first to come through, it took only minutes. We were young and healthy, and our parents were waiting for us after one last ferry ride...

*(THEY move back to the boat. MUSIC: "Sidewalks of New York.")*

**BOTH BOYS:** Not another boat!

**ANNIE:** One last ferry ride to Manhattan Island. *(To her BROTHERS.)* Anthony, Phillip, we're here! New York. Mother and Father should be here *somewhere* to meet us.

**ANTHONY:** New York City! Annie, look, children playing on the pavement.

**ANNIE:** Sidewalks. They call them sidewalks here, Anthony.

**PHILLIP:** Look how tall the buildings are!

**ANNIE:** Stay close, boys. Look at all the people.

*(An ELEGANT COUPLE and then the JOURNALIST pass by downstage as if on the streets of New York.)*

**ANNIE:** How elegant everyone is. I think I'm going to like New York.

*(The ENSEMBLE exits as MUSIC fades and LIGHTS return to 1954 scene.)*

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**Scene2**

**JANITOR:** What are an Italian and an Irish teenager -- is that the word? What are you doing out here so late? Hid yourselves on the ferry? That's what they tried to do.

**BRIAN:** Who?

**JANITOR:** Immigrants. We had to search below deck for stowaways.

**BARBARA:** (*Indignantly.*) I'm American, old man. Just because I speak Italian doesn't mean—

**BRIAN:** I'm American, too. Well, nearly. Waiting on the paperwork. Me ma says she can't live in a country she can't vote in.

**JANITOR:** A wise woman. A suffragette. (*Pause.*) Now she was quite a woman...

**BRIAN:** (*Angrily.*) Who, me ma? Listen, old man...

**JANITOR:** No, Emmeline Pankhurst. English suffragette. I saw her. Here. She was detained for "moral turpitude"...

**BARBARA:** Suffra...? Moral what?

**JANITOR:** Moral turpitude. Must have been 1912. No, it was after the Titanic. Cork was her last port of call, just like Annie Moore. But Pankhurst, that must have been...1913. Yes. October.

**BARBARA:** The Titanic?! How long have you been working here?

**JANITOR:** I've been working here all my life and now... forty-seven years. (*Looking around him at the hall.*) What will I do?

(*The TEENAGERS are not sure what to make of the JANITOR who looks as if he's about to break down into tears.*)

**BRIAN:** There, there...old man...

**BARBARA:** Papà (*Correcting herself.*) Pop got something called Social Security. A check. My mother said it would just about cover the repair on the old Frigidaire! But Pop says it's a step in the right direction and that America is the greatest country in the world.

## **End of Freeview**

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