

Nellie:

The Musical

Book by Robby Steltz

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Murray

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Nellie: The Musical

- 2 -

SYNOPSIS

In the late 1800s rumors were circulating about alleged horror taking place on Blackwell's Island, home of the New York City Lunatic Asylum. Women were apparently the victims of abuse and torture, and one woman, a newspaper reporter, decided to risk her own life to investigate. Nellie Bly committed herself to the asylum, documenting her findings and ultimately revealing the horrors to the entire world. This musical is adapted from Robby Steltz's award-winning one-act play "Nellie" as well as Nellie's own book "Ten Days in a Madhouse." Featuring music by Stephen Murray, "Nellie: The Musical" tells the incredible story of how this "girl" reporter forever changed the way the world looks at treatment and housing of people suffering from mental illness. Eleven original songs including "Undercover," in which Nellie Bly makes her decision to take on a dangerous assignment; the haunting, a cappella "Dreaming," sung by the ghostly women; and the villainous Miss Grupe's demand that the asylum patients "Comply." Ultimately, in "Struck by Words," Nellie comes to the realization that her words can bring about positive change.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(1 to 4 m, 12 w)

NELLIE BLY: Journalist for *The New York World*.

MATRON: Head of the Temporary Home for Women, no. 84.

MRS. CAINE: One of the women at the Temporary Home.

ANNE NEVILLE: The second oldest at Blackwell's.

MRS. FOX: The outspoken elder of Blackwell's.

TILLIE MAYARD: The youngest woman at Blackwell's.

LOUISE SCHANZ: Foreign patient who speaks little English.

CATHERINE: The mischievous sister of Bridget.

BRIDGET: The adventurous sister of Catherine.

EDEN: A young, pregnant woman at Blackwell's.

MISS GRUPE: The head of Blackwell's.

NURSE: The assistant to Miss Grupe.

MAN: Plays all the male roles within the script.

Casting Notes:

Expanding the cast: Male actors can be added to play the roles of Dr. Kinier, Dr. Ingram, etc., as desired. If one actor is to portray all of the male roles, it becomes crucial that the costumes can change quickly.

Doubling options: The role of the Matron can double for the Nurse. Catherine can double as Mrs. Caine. Bridget can double as Eden.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

Set

Imagine the set to contain no walls. Instead, props and small furnishings, lighting, sound effects, and the movement of the actors create each scene quickly. Everything must be “choreographed” to revolve around the other action.

Costumes and Props

The MAN wears a white button-up shirt with black dress pants. Various costume pieces and props can be added for the different characters. These include: lantern, handcuffs, newspaper, photos, briefcase, bloodstained doctor’s robes, stethoscope, captain’s hat, large book, glasses, a tie, a notebook, and a gavel.

NELLIE wears a brown frock in the pocket she carries a notebook and a few coins. Nellie’s childhood nickname was “Pink” or “Pinkey” and there is a reference in the script in which she wears pink at the end.

MISS GRUPE dresses in a black gown.

NURSE dresses in white with a matching bonnet.

The WOMEN patients all dress in gray or white smocks.

ADDITIONAL PROPS: candles, desk, changing screen, bench, set of keys, bucket of water, a bloody rag; wash tub, rag, a push cart with various sized glass bottles on its top, chair, a scarf, ropes, measuring device, small bottle and needle, bucket and spoon, bowls, bloody bandage, a pedestal, a baby, coffee cup, sandwich.

Nellie: The Musical

- 5 -

MUSICAL NUMBERS

ACT I

1. Prologue: The Woman and The Leech - Nellie
2. Ten Days in a Madhouse - Ensemble
3. Undercover - Nellie
4. Dreaming - Women
5. I'm Not Insane - Women and Man
6. Comply - Miss Grupe
7. Home Sweet Home*
8. Trapped - Catherine
9. Struck by Words - Nellie and Women

ACT II

10. Entr'acte
11. Comply (Reprise) Nurse, Miss Grupe, and Man
12. Questions – Miss Grupe and Man
13. Others - Man
14. Take Us to Eden - Mrs. Fox, Tillie, Louise, Anne, & Nurse
15. No One Sleeps – Miss Grupe, Nurse, and Women
16. Home Sweet Home*
17. Epilogue: The Woman and the Leech - Nellie
18. Finale: Ten Days in a Madhouse – Entire cast
19. Curtain Call

* There are two moments within the script in which *Home Sweet Home* by Henry Bishop plays. A short version should be used for the beginning, while a longer version should be used for the end.

SFX AND MUSIC

Lightning / thunder	Waves crashing
A woman's scream	Sound of heels
Heavy rain	Crackling from lantern
Bell chime	Gavel
Door slam	A drumroll
Rain	

ACT I

(AT RISE: Stars twinkle within a darkening sky. MUSIC begins. NELLIE is onstage. She speaks through the melody.)

1. PROLOGUE: THE WOMAN AND THE LEECH

NELLIE: 'Twas a beautiful night,
Born the woman,
Heart made of gemstones,
Soul flooded with stardust.
And a fountain pen for a sword.
'Twas a sad day, though,
Not when the man was born,
But when the man changed!
He saw the woman's uniqueness.
Jealousy shrouded him.
The man mopped clouds into her sky.
Struck her light with blisters and bolts.
The woman didn't want to be concealed,
The man crafted her in that image.
When the woman looked about her,
She saw that her brothers and sisters,
Suddenly, had ink-stained eyes.
This poison was injected into the world,
And when these two forces combined,
Madness was born.
Madness that tears the world apart,
Madness that causes humans to harm their own,
Categorizing them,
Endlessly setting them apart.
The woman swore she would strive,
To become the Mother of the World.
To protect and find truth within it,
Because it was only the woman that knew:
That without a telescopic lens,
The shimmer from a shooting star,
Can often be mistaken,
As the sneer from a sneaky sky leech. *(Exits.)*

Scene 1

2. TEN DAYS IN A MADHOUSE

(SFX: A woman screams! Lightning and thunder. The stars have disappeared. LIGHTS up on a tableau. MISS GRUPE stands with a set of keys dangling from her wrist. CATHERINE sways. BRIDGET moans, holding her stomach in pain. ANNE wipes her tears away. The MAN hides behind a newspaper. MRS. FOX raises a fist in protest. TILLIE holds a hand to her heart. LOUISE clasps her hands in prayer. The NURSE carries a bucket of water with one hand while a bloody rag is folded over the other. The patients are dressed in white smocks.)

WOMEN GROUP 1: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 2: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 3: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 1: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 2: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 3: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 1: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 2: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 3: WOMEN

WOMEN: WOMEN.

MAN: NELLIE BLY.

MISS GRUPE: TEN DAYS.

NURSE: IN A MADHOUSE

MAN: MADHOUSE?

ALL: MADHOUSE!

CATHERINE: SAD WOMEN.

BRIDGET: BAD WOMEN.

ANNE: SILENCED WOMEN.

MRS. FOX: VIOLENT WOMEN.

TILLIE: RIOT WOMEN.

LOUISE: QUIET WOMEN.

WOMEN: FORGOTTEN AND ABANDONED WOMEN.

MAN: A WOMAN SHOULD NEVER USE HER WORDS TO PROVOKE.

Nellie: The Musical

- 8 -

WOMEN: A MAN SHOULD NEVER USE HIS HANDS TO CHOKE.

MISS GRUPE: I DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR TROUBLES.

NURSE: I DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR PAIN.

WOMEN: YOU TRICKED US ALL WITH LIES AND GAMES!

MAN: THESE WOMEN BEFORE YOU HAVE A STORY TO TELL.

WOMEN: SOME GO TO HEAVEN.

MISS GRUPE: SOME GO TO HELL.

MAN: SOME HUMANS LIKE MAKING HORRORS FOR FUN.

NURSE: WHO WILL REMAIN?

MISS GRUPE: AND WHO WILL BE DONE?

WOMEN GROUP 1: WHO WILL REMAIN?

WOMEN GROUP 2: WHO WILL REMAIN?

WOMEN GROUP 3: WHO WILL REMAIN?

WOMEN: AND WHO WILL BE DONE?

WOMEN GROUP 1: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 2: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 3: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 1: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 2: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 3: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 1: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 2: WOMEN

WOMEN GROUP 3: WOMEN

WOMEN: WOMEN.

WOMEN GROUP 1: TEN DAYS

WOMEN GROUP 2: IN A

WOMEN GROUP 3: MADHOUSE

MAN: NELLIE BLY.

WOMEN GROUP 1: TEN DAYS

WOMEN GROUP 2: IN A

WOMEN GROUP 3: MADHOUSE!

ALL: TEN DAYS

IN A

MADHOUSE!

MADHOUSE!

MADHOUSE!

(LIGHTS out.)

Scene 2: John Cockerills's Office

(SPOTLIGHT on NELLIE who sits at a desk writing.)

NELLIE: “On the 22nd of September, 1887, I was asked by John Cockerill, editor of the *New York World*, if I could have myself committed to one of the asylums for the insane.”

(NELLIE closes the journal. LIGHTS up on a MAN, who places a series of photos and newspapers on the desk; he sits opposite of Nellie.)

MAN: The New York City Lunatic Asylum, opened on Blackwell's Island, 1839. There have been many deaths: cholera, typhoid, etcetera, but there have also been numerous reports of abuse and torture in asylums throughout the country. As for Blackwell's, the asylum continues to grow by the hundreds daily.

NELLIE: Surely, they'll be reaching full capacity soon if they already haven't, and to think they're all trapped inside a two-mile strip of land.

MAN: Exactly. Where the mentally ill are dangerous, poor people are thieves in disguise, and killers sleep right beside you as you dream. Least that's what the other papers say.

NELLIE: It's true, sir, many of the stories I've read about asylums are full of misleading stories making the poor, many of whom, are women, as mad as they come. Coincidentally, putting them in mad situations turns them mad. Which leads me to a question: why then, are you asking me to be the one to go?

MAN: Because you seem brave, and you write very well. I've read some of your previous work with the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*.

NELLIE: Does it not cross your mind that this “first assignment” of yours could easily be my last?

MAN: You are to go Blackwell's Island. Chronicle the experiences within the asylum walls, the inside workings. I do not ask you to go there for the purpose of making sensational revelations.

Nellie: The Musical

- 10 -

NELLIE: A revelation may cause a revolution.

MAN: Perhaps the word you're searching for is "resolution"?
(*Beat.*) You are to write a plain and unvarnished narrative of the treatment of the patients therein and the methods of management. Write up things as you find them, good or bad. Give praise or blame as you think best, and the truth, all the time.

NELLIE: How will I get myself committed?

MAN: You may adopt one of two courses: either feign insanity and get yourself committed on the decision of two competent physicians or go by way of the police courts.

(*NELLIE thinks for a moment before smiling to speak.*)

NELLIE: Perhaps it would be wiser not to inflict myself upon friends or get any good-natured doctors to assist me. I will act the part of a poor, unfortunate, crazy girl, and make it my duty not to shirk any of the disagreeable results that follow.

MAN: That smile of yours won't get you a passing grade when feigning insanity.

NELLIE: Then I shall smile no more. (*Goes to exit but stops.*)
Mr. Cockerill...

MAN: Yes, Nellie?

NELLIE: Exactly how do you plan to get me out?

MAN: I do not know.

(*For a short moment we see NELLIE becoming fearful before she stands tall and regains composure.*)

NELLIE: I will let you know once I'm ready.

MAN: (*Smiles.*) Thank you, Nellie.

(*LIGHTS fade. The MAN exits carrying his chair with him. NELLIE, in a SPOTLIGHT, reads a passage from her journal, speaking directly to the audience.*)

NELLIE: "Did I think I had the courage to go through such an ordeal as the mission would demand? Could I assume the characteristics of insanity to such a degree that I could pass the doctors, live for a week among the insane without the authorities there finding out that I was only a 'child among 'em takin' notes?' I had some faith in my ability as an actress and thought I could assume insanity long enough to accomplish any mission interested to me. Could I pass in the insane ward at Blackwell's Island? I said I could, and I would. And I did."

Scene 3: Nellie's Bedroom

(The scene shifts to night. The desk has become a vanity and a changing screen is added in the opposite corner of the room. As the following song occurs, we witness NELLIE become the "crazy" girl: messy hair, tattered brown smock, with smudges of dirt upon her face.)

3. UNDERCOVER

NELLIE:

THIS IS A JOB I SHOULD DO.
I WOULD REVEAL WHAT IS TRUE.

I CAN HELP THOSE WHO CAN'T HELP THEMSELVES.
OR AT LEAST I AM GOING TO TRY.

I WILL UNCOVER THE SHAME.
BUT NO ONE CAN KNOW MY TRUE NAME.

THE NELLIE THEY SEE WON'T REALLY BE ME.
MY SEARCH FOR TRUTH STARTS WITH A LIE.

THEY CAN'T KEEP THIS
UNDERCOVER.
I WON'T LET THEM HIDE.
THE ONLY WAY TO FIND THEM OUT IS IF I GO INSIDE.
DON'T KEEP WOMEN
UNDERCOVER.

Nellie: The Musical
- 12 -

NELLIE: *(Cont'd.)* LET THEM SEE THE LIGHT.
CAN I DO THIS?
CAN I DO WHAT'S RIGHT?

SHOULD I BE TAKING THIS CHANCE?
SHOULD I BE TAKING THIS STANCE?

WILL THEY BELIEVE I'M SOMEONE I'M NOT?
OR WILL I BE CAUGHT IN A LIE?

CAN I RISE UP TO THIS TASK?
IS THIS ALL TOO MUCH TO ASK?

YES, I AM THE ONE TO GET THIS JOB DONE.
I AM THE ONE NELLIE BLY!

I WILL GO IN
UNDERCOVER.
I WILL FIND WHAT'S TRUE.
I WILL HELP THESE PEOPLE.
IT'S WHAT I WAS BORN TO DO.
I WILL BE THERE
UNDERCOVER.
WATCHING IN PLAIN SIGHT.
I WILL DO THIS.
I WILL DO WHAT'S RIGHT.

*(LIGHTS out. SFX: Lightning/Thunder. Heavy rain. NOTE:
The stage is cleared in darkness.)*

Scene 4: Temporary Home for Females

(It is night. NELLIE appears, shivering. She makes the gesture of pulling a rope from above, causing SFX: a BELL to chime loudly. The MATRON appears almost instantly. She wears a simple dress that is dark in color.)

MATRON: It is late, what do you want?

NELLIE: Is the matron in?

MATRON: I am she, and I have no single rooms. We are crowded. If you occupy a room with another girl I could do that much for you.

NELLIE: I should be glad of that. How much do you charge?

MATRON: We charge thirty cents a night.

NELLIE: That is fine.

MATRON: Come in then. What is your name?

NELLIE: Nellie Brown.

MATRON: Follow me, Miss Brown.

(LIGHTS up on small room with two beds. MRS. CAINE, a kindly woman, is asleep in a small bed.)

MATRON: *(Cont'd.)* This is your room. *(Gesturing to another bed in the opposite corner is now deemed Nellie's.)* Thirty cents, please.

(NELLIE reaches into a small pocket before handing the MATRON a few coins.)

MATRON: *(Cont'd.)* Is something wrong with you Miss Brown?

NELLIE: No, why?

MATRON: Because I can see it in your face. It tells the story of a great trouble.

NELLIE: Yes, everything is so sad, and the women here must all be crazy. I'm so afraid of them.

MATRON: They may not look very nice, but they are good, honest working women. We do not keep crazy people here.

Nellie: The Musical

- 14 -

NELLIE: There are so many crazy people about, and no one can tell what they will do. Then there are so many murders committed, and the police never catch the murderers, and the world has become so scary. I'm sad and I'm scared. I'm so scared. *(Now sobbing hysterically.)*

MATRON: I'll come back to talk with you after a while.

(The MATRON runs off. NELLIE turns to go to bed but notices MRS. CAINE who is now awake.)

NELLIE: Forgive me for waking you.

MRS. CAINE: Don't fret. My name is Mrs. Caine.

NELLIE: Nellie Brown.

MRS. CAINE: Why are you here? Do you not have friends?

NELLIE: No.

MRS. CAINE: That's too bad. You can always be my friend.

NELLIE: That would be nice when everything else is so sad.

MRS. CAINE: Why are you sad, Miss Brown?

(NELLIE thinks, then suddenly becomes frantic.)

NELLIE: My trunks! I seem to have lost them.

MRS. CAINE: I haven't seen any trunks.

NELLIE: *(Screaming.)* Help! Help!

(The MATRON arrives.)

MATRON: What is it, Miss Brown?

NELLIE: My trunks! I've lost them.

MATRON: What trunks?

NELLIE: The trunks I arrived with.

MATRON: You had no trunks when you arrived.

NELLIE: I did! I know I did. I must find them.

(NELLIE tries to exit the room but the MATRON stops her.)

MATRON: You stay here. I will find someone to search for your trunks.

Nellie: The Musical

- 15 -

(The MATRON exits. MRS. CAINE goes to NELLIE.)

MRS. CAINE: Poor child. What's the matter?

(NELLIE is pacing the room.)

NELLIE: I already told you. It's my trunks!

MRS. CAINE: The Matron said—

NELLIE: *(Interrupting.)* —she saw them!

MRS. CAINE: Did she take them from you?

NELLIE: *(Begins to tear the room apart.)* No. No. The trunks are here. Unless someone stole them. So many bad people. Everyone is bad. You could be bad too. Did you steal my trunks?

MRS. CAINE: *(Shakes her head.)* I would never, but I shall pray for you.

(The MATRON returns with the MAN dressed as a police officer. He carries a lantern.)

MATRON: I want you to take her quietly.

NELLIE: *(To the MAN.)* Please, help me find my trunks.

MAN: That is why I am here. Follow me.

MRS. CAINE: *(To the MATRON.)* May I follow? To help search?

(The MATRON and the MAN exchange glances. The man nods.)

MATRON: I suppose. Just stay quiet.

(LIGHTS fade. The stage is cleared while the MAN leads NELLIE, the MATRON, and MRS. CAINE in a circle around the stage. SFX: The thunderstorm continues.)

MRS. CAINE: Why are we outside?

(The MAN suddenly shoves his lantern into the MATRON's hand so that he can place handcuffs around NELLIE's wrists.)

End of Freeview

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