



multiplay
drama

Wellington 24

Rachel Harper



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WELLINGTON 24



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Characters

RUTH
EILEEN
BONNIE
HILDIE
EDDIE
GRACIE
EVELYN
BETT
JEAN
AGATHA
EMMIE
MAGS
PHYLLIS
PLUCKIE
MINNIE
CANADIAN OFFICER, *voice-over*
FACTORY GIRLS (FG)
JOURNALIST 1
JOURNALIST 2
JOURNALIST 2
JOURNALIST 4
SECRETARY
POLICE OFFICER

Note on Text

A dash (–) indicates the quick succession of text.

A full stop (.) indicates the end of a thought. If no full stop is present text should flow without pause.

References

1940s British Aircraft Industry Workers – Workers Weekend – 1943 – CharlieDeanArchives
youtu.be/zlVLZ230iFs

ACT ONE

Scene One: Fuselage

A busy factory floor full of WOMEN at work in brown overalls, curlers and headscarves. Everyone has a job to do. The voice of a CANADIAN OFFICER speaks. [His lines are direct transcript from the original short film (see References). You have the option of lifting the original audio from that short film should the director wish. The stage can remain as busy or quiet as wanted, with workers all doing their part.]

OFFICER. This is a bomber factory in Britain. The workers have arranged with their management and their joint production committee to build a bomber in the record time of thirty hours and they asked us to make a film record of it.

While some people cultivate victory gardens in their leisure hours, the people of this factory build bombers in their spare time. We went along with our cameras to try and keep pace with this record-breaking attempt. It was quite a job.

So one Saturday morning not so long ago, we had our cameras in position when the workers arrived at the factory.

Enter RUTH and EILEEN carrying two sections of fuselage. They're interrupted by one of the many JOURNALISTS buzzing about the busy factory floor. RUTH loves to chat and, with her pristine make-up and rollers, she isn't shy of a camera. EILEEN is quite the opposite and very serious about her work.

JOURNALIST 1. Would you like to tell us a bit about yourself?

RUTH. ME?

RUTH drops the framework, taken aback by their interest. An annoyed EILEEN carts it off.

Not much to tell really! I'm a hard grafter, keen to help – worked in a make-up factory before all o' this. So if you've ever worn pressed powder, there's a good chance I'm the one what pressed it!

JOURNO 1. My goodness! And now you're –

RUTH. I'm a jigger. Well that's not the word for it. I'm a – I lay the framework, on the bombers... So if you've ever flown a bomber, there's a good chance I'm the one been putting it together!

...Funny that!

JOURNO 1. And your name? For the paper?

RUTH. Ruth Digby. *Miss Ruth Digby.*

JOURNO 1. Thank you, Miss Digby.

RUTH. I'll find you later, sunshine.

She gets back to work, proud of herself. The CANADIAN OFFICER speaks again.

OFFICER. Everybody had the feeling of 'well here we go', so we all took a deep breath and got set for thirty hours of non-stop real hard work.

BONNIE, *the foremost matriarch of the operation, walks across the factory floor.*

JOURNO 2. May we get a quick line? For the *Evening Leader*?

BONNIE. Course! How's this? Get out of my way, we've a record to break. Bonnie Simmons. S-I-M-M-O-N-S. You can quote me if you like.

OFFICER. The clock strikes nine and the record-breaking attempt begins. Two sections of the fuselage are carried in.

EILEEN *crosses the factory floor carrying a riveter.*

The dark girl with the riveter there is Eileen Daphne who used to work in a rayon factory. One of her brothers was killed in the naval action a little while back.

The fuselage parts are assembled in big frames they call jigs. These volunteer workers are giving the bonus they're earning today to the Red Cross Aid to Russia Fund and they are out to break that thirty-hour record they have set themselves.

The WOMEN commence work. A few straggling JOURNALISTS desperate for their pull quote. Flashes of old cameras.

JOURNO 3. Miss – madame! Anything to say to the boys at war?

FACTORY GIRL. Yeah, tell 'em they'd better not crash this one – we're working bloody hard on it!

Another GIRL slaps her hard across the arm.

JOURNO 1. What of doing a man's work? What will your husbands think?

FG. Dunno, never had one. Why? You offering?

A few of the GIRLS laugh. A JOURNALIST chases a FACTORY GIRL.

JOURNO 4. Think you can really do this then? Break the record?

FG. Why couldn't we?

JOURNO 4. Lot of heaving lifting, darling. Wouldn't like to think of you putting your back out.

FG. Carry on like that and I'll put yours out for you.

BONNIE. Everything okay here?

JOURNO 4. Just admiring your work!

The JOURNALIST walks away.

FG. I don't like all this, Bonnie, feels like a bloody parade!

BONNIE. Smile for the cameras, girls!

FG. Will when I've something to smile about!

Another JOURNALIST pesters a FACTORY GIRL.

JOURNO 2. So, madame!

FG. Miss.

JOURNO. We're all dying to know – how are you going to do it?

How on earth do you make a bomber fly in just one night and day?

FG. Dunno – we haven't bloody done it yet!

FG. All this talking doesn't help!

A few of the GIRLS laugh, mocking the JOURNALIST. The sounds of the factory floor seem to begin a rhythm.

You hear that?

FG. What did he say?

FG. How on *earth* do you make a bomber fly!

FG. *In just one day and one night!*

FG. How do we make a bomber fly?

FG. In just one night and day?

They laugh, imitating the JOURNALIST. All of the WOMEN are starting to talk over each other – there can be improvised shouts and jokes over the following dialogue. It should all feel natural.

The atmosphere on the factory floor changes, from busy to joyous. The excitement is bubbling. A working song begins. Yips and cheers from the GIRLS morph into a song which should feel as if it has formed organically, as though this is a song they often sing.

'How Do You Make a Bomber Fly'

WOMEN.

Tell me how do you make a bomber fly,
In just one day
And just one night
Tell me how do you make a bomber fly
In just one night and day

Fix the jig into the rig
A strong jig, a sturdy jig
That's how you make a bomber fly
In just one night and day

Fix the pit to the jig
And the jig to the rig
A strong jig, a sturdy jig
That's how you make a bomber fly
In just one night and day

Fix the box to the pit
And the pit to the jig
And the jig to the rig
A strong jig, a sturdy jig
That's how you make a bomber fly
In just one night and day

Fix the wires to the box
And the box to the pit
And the pit to the jig
And the jig to the rig

A strong jig, a sturdy jig
 And that's how you make a bomber fly
 In just one night and day

Fix the blades to the wires
 And the wires to the box
 And the box to the pit
 And the pit to the jig
 And the jig to the rig
 A strong jig, a sturdy jig
 And that's how you make a bomber fly
 In just one night and day

Fix the wings to the blades
 And the blades to the wires
 And the wires to the box
 And the box to the pit
 And the pit to the jig
 And the jig to the rig
 A strong jig, a sturdy jig
 And that's how you make a bomber fly
 In just one night and day

Fix the shell to the wings
 And the wings to the blades
 And the blades to the wires
 And the wires to the box
 And the box to the pit
 And the pit to the jig
 And the jig to the rig
 A strong jig, a sturdy jig
 And that's how you make a bomber fly
 In just one night and day

Put the skin on the shell
 Fix the shell to the wings
 And the wings to the blades
 And the blades to the wires
 And the wires to the box
 And the box to the pit
 And the pit to the jig
 And the jig to the rig
 A strong jig, a sturdy jig
 And that's how you make the bomber fly
 In just one night and day

Put the paint on the skin
 And the skin on the shell
 Fix the shell to the wings
 And the wings to the blades
 And the blades to the wires

And the wires to the box
 And the box to the pit
 And the pit to the jig
 And the jig to the rig
 A strong jig, a sturdy jig
 And that's how you make a bomber fly
 In just one night and day!

The song finishes with yips and laughs from the WOMEN.

BONNIE. Right, I want my factory floor clear – if you ain't working get lost. If you are working get going. If you're filming or what have you – just stay out the bleedin' way.

RUTH and EILEEN are crossing the factory floor with another large piece of fuselage.

RUTH. Both his legs. Just like that! Gone from the knee. Poor lad might just as well have been at war.

EILEEN. At least he's alive.

RUTH. What a waste – bloody good dancer he was. Had he not been so lacking above the neck he could have made something of himself.

Nothing left now. Personality was hardly worth shouting about.

BONNIE goes to them to help lift the fuselage and carry it into place.

BONNIE. Who's that?

RUTH. Harry Thomas, did you hear?

BONNIE. *Dead?*

RUTH. Halfway there. They were doing checks yesterday in the hangar and he was busy with the snags, sat either side of the landing wheel – legs over the arch of it. No one knew he was there, see, and they pulled the damn thing up.

Couldn't hear poor Harry scream. Crushed both his bleedin' legs! Nothing but air between his knees and his shoes now!

EILEEN. Christ, Ruth, will you not be so cruel – gossiping away like that.

RUTH. So when the papers do it – it's news but when I do it, it's gossip.

EILEEN. Because you mash your own thinking into it and half the time it's bleedin' lies

RUTH. What do you think the papers are full of? You watch, if we do this in two days they'll be telling the world it was one.

BONNIE. Poor old Harry.

RUTH. Poor old Harry indeed. They were yanking bits of him out the machinery for hours.

BONNIE. Ruth.

RUTH. Amount o' blood that fell out of him, can't believe the poor sod's still standing!

Well...

You know what I mean.

RUTH chuckles. EILEEN flinches, clearly upset at the thought.

BONNIE. Try not to be so crass, will you, Ruth. The lad's lucky to be alive.

RUTH. Suppose he'll be telling everyone he lost them in the war.

EILEEN. He did lose them in the war!

RUTH. But not the proper – not really

EILEEN. Yes really. I think he's a hero

RUTH. You think he's a hero? Cuz he didn't hear them shouting? I think he's hard of hearing.

EILEEN. He was doing what he could. If he hadn't been working on those bombers they wouldn't have anything to fly

RUTH. So by that account I guess I'm a war hero too. No one lays a jig faster than me – I'm a record-breaker.

BONNIE. For a record-breaker, Ruth, you don't half take your bleeding time –

RUTH. I took the skin off my knuckles yesterday stitching the lining. Reckon that gets me a medal?

RUTH *cackles*. EILEEN *snaps*.

EILEEN. Will you stop being such a – you think this is funny, don't you? You think – you're a child, Ruth. You're being such a bleedin' kid.

RUTH. I'm older than you.

EILEEN. But you don't take nothing serious. As long as you're safe you just cover your bleeding ears and let the world go by. You're ridiculous

BONNIE. Eileen – go and fetch us some water will you. Think I've taken in a bag of dust this morning

EILEEN *exits*. BONNIE *turns hot on her heels to RUTH*.

You. Grab the other end of this and for once in your life learn to shut your gob.

Beat. They shift the framework.

RUTH. She's got a right head on her today

BONNIE. Her brother

RUTH. What

BONNIE. Dead.

RUTH. James?

BONNIE. Since last Monday. Hasn't long got the news.

RUTH. Could have told us

BONNIE. Why d'you think she's here? You heard 'em. Bonus is going to Russia. Reckon the only thing getting her through this weekend is the notion that one of these might kill the bastard who took him.

A young woman, HILDIE, enters, looking a little dazed and lost.

You okay there, sunshine?

HILDIE. I'm new

BONNIE. Name?

HILDIE. Hildie

BONNIE. Hildie, you're late.

RUTH. Late and new – she's a multitasker!

RUTH laughs at herself.

BONNIE. Go and see Mr Phelps. He'll have your overalls. Then get yourself back here.

HILDIE, still looking confused, goes to walk away. BONNIE clicks her fingers.

Not that way.

BONNIE looks around at the FACTORY GIRLS.

Elsie, show Hildie to Mr Phelps's office, will you?

FG. I'm not her nanny – she can learn on the job like the rest of us. I'm busy.

BONNIE's tone sharpens.

BONNIE. And I'm in charge.

Now.

The FACTORY GIRL puts down tools and scurries off with HILDIE.

EILEEN re-enters.

EILEEN. Who was that?

BONNIE. New girl

RUTH. Hildie.

EILEEN. Hildie?

RUTH. Horrid name

BONNIE. Ruth.

EILEEN. Sounds German.

RUTH. She looked German.

BONNIE. Stop it, Ruth.

RUTH. Why? We gotta be careful, haven't we. Never know who to trust these days.

BONNIE. You can trust me when I say if you don't start speeding up I'll jam them curlers right in yer gob.

RUTH picks up a piece of framework and heads out of earshot and over to the bomber to work. BONNIE wants to console EILEEN but doesn't know what to say.

You... you doing alright?

EILEEN. Me? Yeah, yep.

Beat.

BONNIE. Well you know – if you need a minute –

EILEEN. If we all took a minute every time we lost somebody, there wouldn't be an hour left in the day.

BONNIE. Yes. I suppose you're right –

EILEEN. But that's – it is kind of you. Thank you.

HILDIE re-enters dressed in the brown overalls.

BONNIE. Like Rita Hayworth herself.

HILDIE. I don't think it fits

BONNIE. Nothing has fit since 1938. Now come with me. I'll show you the ropes.

BONNIE takes HILDIE away with her. A young person, EDDIE (gender never specified), working further along the bomber, pipes up.

EDDIE. Alright, Daphers.

EILEEN. Hey Eddie! Come hold this for us, will you –

EDDIE clambers over to EILEEN and helps her with the frame. EDDIE is restless. Wearing a cap that rests low on their face.

EDDIE. You seen Pluckie? I thought she was working the day?

EILEEN. No she swapped with Ruth for the night so Ruth could go dancing at the barracks. I swear that girl's hoping for another ten years of this. You seen her? Curlers and all?

EILEEN looks at EDDIE's face and sees it is badly bruised. She pulls off EDDIE's cap.

What the bloody hell happened there?

EDDIE. What?

EILEEN. That great big shiner?

EDDIE. Nothing it's... I'm fine.

EDDIE snatches back the hat. EILEEN knows there is more to it but doesn't want to ask.

EILEEN. What did you want with Pluck?

EDDIE. Just needed to chat to her is all.

EILEEN. Well if you're lucky she'll be in early. You know what Pluck's like.

RUTH – who is out of earshot currently working on the frame of the bomber – shouts from the back.

EDDIE keeps their head down and returns to work.

RUTH. Oi, Eileen – do us a favour and pass me the drill, would you?

EILEEN picks up the drill and walks it over to RUTH. EILEEN pauses, inspecting RUTH's face.

EILEEN. You wearing lipstick!?

RUTH. Course! Cameras are here today – got to look good, don't we!

EILEEN. Do we?

RUTH. Never know who's watching!

FG. Thought you were all loved up with that officer – the one from London?

RUTH. I was – till I found out his wife was also in love with him.

FG. He was married?!

RUTH. With two kids! The cheeky git.

Tried to say he wasn't to blame. In his words – he'd never met a woman like me.

So I told him I'd never met a man like him. Most blokes I know couldn't handle two bags o' washing never mind two wives. The sod.

She sighs.

Oh well. Plenty more where that came from!

BONNIE *re-enters with* HILDIE.

EILEEN. You've got an obsession, Ruth.

RUTH. We're a country at war, Eileen. Any given day could be our last. Carpe diem!

FG. What's that mean?

RUTH. Latin for 'seize the day'.

FG. Which one of your blokes told you that?

RUTH. At least three of 'em.

RUTH *cackles once more.* BONNIE *turns to* HILDIE.

BONNIE. So you reckon you can handle this? Remember it ain't for everyone. Twelve hours on yer feet. Blistering your hands. Girl like you might be more suited to the Wrens. Something with little heels and a pretty hat.

HILDIE. I'm perfectly suited to hard work, thank you.

RUTH. You don't bloody talk like it – posh'un, aren't you!

BONNIE. Behave, Ruth.

Now, Hildie, the first thing you should know – you see that light there?

HILDIE *looks up toward the large signal light above them.*

When it's green we're working. We're working fast and we're working hard. When it's red – and you better hope it isn't red. We stop immediately, no drills, no tool, no sound. Some of the girls like to get down on the floor.

HILDIE. Is it safer?

FG. No but it's nice to get off your feet!

BONNIE. All comes to nothing

FG. We hope

BONNIE. But we don't pick up tools till it's green again. You understand me?

HILDIE *nods.*

Good. Now make yourself useful.

EILEEN. Here, Hildie – come grab this

HILDIE *grabs the other end of a piece of framework, helping lift it with* EILEEN *so* RUTH *can drill it.*

RUTH. Aye – that lippy is lush! What do you use?

HILDIE. Max Factor

FG. She's not a knock-off girl like you, Ruth.

RUTH. Oi. I'm not a knock-off. I'm resourceful.

Here. Look.

RUTH jumps down from her task and lifts up the leg of her overall, showing the back of her calf, which is brown with a dark line running up its centre – imitation stockings.

Know what that is?

FG. A cheap stocking?

RUTH. A very cheap stocking. Oxo gravy and an eyebrow pencil.

RUTH laughs, thinking herself a genius.

That's a bare leg right here! And you'd never know it!

FG. You will when it rains.

HILDIE. Very resourceful indeed.

RUTH. The amount of stick I get for doing a bloke's job. Can you bleeding believe it? Here I am saving the whole bloody country and they all but spit at me. So I like to remind them I'm still a woman.

BONNIE. I think they're doing the same thing.

BONNIE *turns to* HILDIE.

That's one thing you should know doing this. It ain't like being some pretty little Wren or a nurse or whatever, even the WAAFS. Only thing lower than us is the land girls.

RUTH. Wouldn't pick a fight with one o' them. Seen the size of 'em? One word... broad.

EILEEN. What were you doing before? Typist? Teacher?

HILDIE. Oh... well I was working in communications.

RUTH. What – like speaking German?

HILDIE. For the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. I would translate the German radio transmissions of the reconnaissance flights.

EILEEN. The transcripts?

HILDIE. No no, I mean as and when it was said. In the moment. I would hear them speaking to each other and translate for the commanding officer.

RUTH. What did they say? The Germans?

HILDIE. Same thing I imagined our brothers and husbands were saying too. They passed jokes, reported to their commanders.

RUTH. Then what?

BONNIE. Quit interrogating the poor girl, Ruth.

HILDIE. No, no it's quite fine.

We were there to ensure the flights operated within the international immunity agreements.

RUTH. And if they didn't?

HILDIE. And if they didn't we would report it and the Spitfires would take it from there.

HILDIE is clearly affected by her experience. RUTH changes the conversation.

RUTH. So what are you doing slumming it with us then?

HILDIE. I was transferred.

RUTH. You? You were transferred to... here.

EILEEN. Must be devastating.

RUTH. But why all the way up here?

HILDIE. I wanted a change. A dramatic change.

BONNIE. We're at war, love. Dramatic change is the only kind.

RUTH. Fancy giving up some cushty little job wearing silks and skirts for something like this.

EILEEN. She was transferred.

And not everyone selects their occupation by outfit, Ruth.

RUTH. What was it like... there?

HILDIE. Working in operations... the war – it was all so incredibly close. Almost palpable – tangible. A frightening thing.

RUTH is lost in HILDIE's vocabulary.

RUTH. Well lucky for you there's nothing *tangible* round here. Or palpable. Mostly just drillable and screwable.

BONNIE. Less talk more work, Ruth.

RUTH. I'm a multitasker too you know!

RUTH takes HILDIE by the arm.

So *Hildie* – that's a nice name. Where are your parents from?

BONNIE. Ruth.

RUTH. What?! She said she speaks German.

EILEEN. So you speak a lot of languages?

HILDIE. Three.

RUTH. Only three?

HILDIE. I also speak French

EILEEN. And they moved you here? Seems a waste of a good brain.

RUTH. What are you trying to say, Eileen? Plenty of good brains in this factory.

BONNIE. Well if it means one more feller can join the fight I guess it's the right way to go.

More women we can get in, more men we can send out.

HILDIE. I... I hadn't thought of it that way.

Beat.

A Nick Hern Book

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