



Kerikeri (N.Z.) Players cast of "Present Laughter" by Noel Coward (Jan. 1956)
 Standing: Dick Townsend, Pat Murray, May Brodie, Graham Hyde, Joan Hyde
 On the sofa: Bruce McAlpine, Shirlee Hopkinson, Marge Simpson, Eric Hopkinson,
 Margaret Armstrong, Natalie Lilburn.

THE LADIES VANISH.

Author: Joan Hyde (nee Hudleston)

Cast.

Mr. Clavichord, Conductor.
 Ladies Choir - (Five sopranos, four altos)
 Pianist.

(As the curtain rises there is a loud babble of feminine conversation with occasional bursts of laughter. This comes from the CHOIR assembled in two rows downstage L. The five sopranos are in the front row and the four altos behind them, standing on stools, or something to raise them above the sopranos and make them clearly visible to the audience. In the stage directions the choir members will be distinguished by numbers, the altos being numbered ONE to FOUR from L to R, and the sopranos FIVE to NINE, L. to R. They are dressed in long black skirts, and very gaily coloured blouses of various hues. NINE must be in bright green. They all hold sheet music.

There is a conductor's music stand R.C. and a small table on wall R. with a jug of water and tumbler upon it. The position of the piano is left to the discretion of the Producer. There are two exits, downstage L. and R. The conversation of the choir continues as PIANIST enters L. She is a stout person of commanding appearance and carries her music in

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a case. She goes straight to piano, opens case, sets up music, sits down and plays a few chords. She ignores the choir and they ignore her. The gossip and laughter continue unabated as the Conductor, Mr. CLAVICHORD enters R., carrying baton and music. He is a rather untidy man, with a floppy bow tie and wears horn-rimmed spectacles.)

Clavi

Good evening, ladies: (The ladies take no notice whatever, if anything redouble their noise. Clavi goes to music stand and sets up music, looking intently at the choir).

Clavi

A-hem! (pause) GOOD evening LADIES! (The noise subsides gradually)

Choir

(more or less in unison) Good evening, Mr. Clavichord. (They giggle)

Clavi

(glaring at them) May I ask the meaning of this fantastic riot of colour? As you very well know, this is our final rehearsal and I particularly requested you all to wear the silver lamé Russian tunics I myself designed especially for the Nightingales. So may I ask why you have come here to night dressed up like the flags of the United Nations? Or do you represent a surrealist's dream of a garden - in LATE summer?
(Forced laugh from NINE).

Two

If you please, I couldn't wear me lamé because three of the buttons come off at the last minute and I didn't have time to sew them on again.

Six

I was out this afternoon at a Plunket meeting and the kiddies got hold of the tunic for their dressing up game, and I'm afraid they have torn it quite a bit. Still, I daresay I'll be able to fix it for the concert.

Five

My husband doesn't like me in the lamé. He says it makes me look like a night-club doll.

Eight

The trouble with my tunic is that it fitted me perfect when it was made for me two months ago, but since then I've put on a bit of weight, and now it's much too small in the bust. It must be all this singing, because it isn't as if I was a heavy eater. Quite the reverse.

Clavi

What exactly do you mean by "all this singing"? If my memory serves me aright you have attended precisely two choir practices out of twelve

Eight

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Well, that wasn't my fault! I'm a busy housewife, the same as most of us here. And anyway, I always sing a lot about the house, for practice like, but if it's going to develop me bust like this I'll just have to give it up, that's all!

Clavi

(barking) Very well, madam If your bust means more to you than your Art, all I can say is that the Nightingales would be better off without you.

Eight

Indeed! Well, I've never been one that can't take a hint, and I'd just as soon be sitting in comfort by the telly as standing up here in the cold being insulted by a half-baked Toscanini! (She flounces off with her nose in the air).

Clavi

(shrugs his shoulders and the other choir members giggle). (rapping stand). Silence, please! And close the ranks, Sopranos!

(NINE moves up next to SEVEN).

Clavi

We will begin with "The Cuckoo Clock". (PIANIST comes to life and plays introduction to song. CHOIR joins in, but after a few bars CLAVI raps stand loudly).

Clavi

That won't do! That won't do at all! Alto number three is singing out of tune!

Three

Out of tune? Me? I've never sung out of tune in me life. It wouldn't be possible for me, because I am one of those rare people who have Perfect Pitch. It wasn't me singing out of tune - it was her. (Pointing at TWO).

Two

Oh, it was, was it? I don't know what you mean by perfect pitch, but I think you're a perfect ----

Clavi

(rapping very loudly) Ladies!Ladies!Please!

Three

That's a nice way to go on at choir practice, I must say. Let me tell you, I've kept quiet all these weeks, putting up with that croak of yours. When you're not singing out of tune you're squawking away with the Sopranos, and I've had just about enough of it.

Two

You're nothing but a jealous cat! Ever since I won the solo at last year's Music Festival –

Clavi

(Striding over to choir and shaking baton in Three's face.) Perhaps you will allow me, your conductor, to know who is singing out of tune. You are the culprit, Madam - you, and not the lady next to you.

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Three

Ve-ry well. Since I am the false note in this heavenly choir, I'll remove my inharmonious presence (coming out in front). I never did think much of the outfit, anyway, and I doubt if the rest of you altos will be able to make yourselves heard at all without MY voice. Nighty-night nightingales! (She marches off R.)

(Much laughter from remainder of CHOIR).

Clavi

(returning to stand) We will now begin all over again, and please remember to enunciate your final consonants.

(They start singing again, but it sounds much worse than before, because they are all singing in the wrong key.) (Clavi appears puzzled, then becomes agitated, and finally raps his stand and they all stop).

Clavi

Good heavens! What is wrong with you all? It sounds like the wailing of the damned! Again from the beginning please.

(They recommence, still at variance with the Pianist. After a few bars FIVE suddenly slides to the ground in a dead faint. Six bends over her and fans her violently with her music sheet. Commotion among others.)

Clavi

(going over to PIANIST) This is your doing. (Pianist wheels round in amazement. Clavi crosses to table R, seizes jug, goes over to Five and sprinkles some water rather indiscriminately, then paces up and down behind footlights, still clasping the jug).

Six

I think we'd better get her out of here.

Two

(stepping down) Poor little thing! She doesn't look too good to me. (To Six) I suggest we take her home at once in your car. (TWO and SIX take FIVE by the shoulders and feet and carry her out R.)

Clavi

(downstage C. still clasping jug) My best soprano!

Pianist

(rising from stool and coming down C.) Look here, young man, what did you mean by speaking to me like that just now?

Clavi

(accusingly) You were playing the accompaniment in the wrong key. No wonder the poor girl fainted - I was on the point of fainting myself! (He goes to table and pours out a glass of water and gulps it down).

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Pianist

(following him) How dare you make such an outrageous suggestion? It was those precious sopranos of yours who were in the wrong key, not me! Why in my time I have accompanied celebrated prima donnas, and I was playing for the Harmonico Choir when you were still in nappies. (Titters from four remaining choristers.) What a choir that was! Dear Mr. Timpany was the Harmonico's Conductor in those days. Such a gentleman. So courteous and so quiet - he never had to raise his voice. And we didn't have to be dolled up in silver lamé tunics either, to attract our audiences. Such huge audiences they were, too. Why, I can remember a performance of the Messiah - in 1950 it was - no, it must have been 1952 -

Clavi

(shouting at her) When I want a history of the Harmonico Choir I'll go to the Public Library!

Pianist

You can go to the devil for all I care, and take your shrieking sopranos with you! I'M THROUGH with the lot of you!

(She sails off L.)

Clavi

(taking handkerchief from breast pocket and mopping his brow). Phew! Ah well, we're better off without her. Let me see - two sopranos, two altos, we can still have a shot at it. (going over to piano) I will give you the keynote (He strikes a note and sings) Doh! Doh!

(At this ONE gives a little shriek).

One

(clapping a hand to her mouth) Doh - doh - - DOUGH! My bread! I left two lovely loaves in the oven and they'll be burned to a cinder! Oh! I must get home at once! At once! (She rushes off L. in great agitation).

Clavi

(scratching his head) Two sopranos, one alto. We'll see what can be done. Ready, ladies? (He walks to stand, picks up baton and sings keynote) Doh! (They commence to sing, but every few bars there is a loud hiccough from FOUR. Finally Clavi raps stand and they stop singing).

Clavi

(pointing baton at FOUR) What is the matter with you?

Four

Hic!

Seven

Try holding your breath and swallowing three times. (Four takes a deep breath)

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Nine

(to Seven) No - you scream in her ear suddenly and give her a fright. That always works. (seven screams loudly in ear of FOUR, who rushes downstage. Ow! Ow ! Me ear-drums gone. I felt it snap. (She moans, hand over ear.)

Clavi

Nonsense, nonsense! Here - wait a minute. He goes to table R. and pours out a glass of water. Clavi brings glass of water over to Four.)

Clavi

The only certain cure for hiccoughs is to drink out of the wrong side of a glass of water. Like this. (He demonstrates, then hands glass to Four who makes a valiant effort to drink as directed, but only succeeds in pouring water down the front of her blouse).

Four

(dropping glass) Ow! It's all gone down inside me blouse. I've only just had - hic - flu and now I'm sure to get - hic - pneumonia! I've always had a deli - hic - deli - hic chest. I must go home and get into – hic - bed with me – hic - hottie. (Exit FOUR hastily L.)

Clavi

This is terrible, terrible! (Picking up baton) One of you two sopranos now have to sing the alto part. You. (He points baton at SEVEN)

Seven

(airily) But I don't know the alto part.

Clavi

You don't know the alto - you - don't - know - what the devil does that matter. You have the music in front of your nose. All you have to do is READ it.

Seven

But I can't sight-read, you know. Never could. What I always do is listen to the person next to me, and just sing what she sings.

Clavi

(brandishing baton at Seven) GO! GO! GET OUT! Before I forget myself and HIT you.

Seven

(calmly) Okay. Suits me. I couldn't care less! (She strolls off L. and Clavi covers his eyes with his hand.)

Nine

(sidling up to him) At last!

Clavi

(irritably) What do you mean - "at last"?

Nine

(clasping hands together and gazing up at him) At last we are alone....

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(Clavi takes a hasty step backward, and continues to retreat backwards towards R., closely followed by NINE)

Nine

Let us sing a duet - a love duet: The love duet from "Madam Butterfly"! (She flutters eyelashes violently).

Clavi

(coming to a standstill) Love duet! Ha ha! Butterfly! Ha ha ha! You look more like a green beetle than a butterfly!

Nine

Oh, how could you be so cruel? It has been the dream of my life to sing a love duet with you.

Clavi

(taking a step towards her and hissing the words) You must be out of your senses - oh, not for loving me, that's understandable - but to ask a man who has been through what I've been through tonight to sing a LOVE duet. Ha ha! A hymn of hate, madam, would be more appropriate to the occasion. (Nine now retreats in alarm towards L. closely followed by Clavi) Yes, a hymn of hate, do you hear? I hate you! I hate ALL women! And I curse the day I ever set foot in this hag-ridden town! (He raises baton menacingly. Nine gives a little scream and runs off L. Clavi snaps his baton in two, flings pieces on stage, snatches music from stand, tears it up and thrown bits of paper wildly into the air.) – as the Curtain comes down.

CURTAIN.

Footnote:

Joan Hyde (nee Hudleston) wrote several one-act plays for the local branch of the Country Women's Institute in Kerikeri, New Zealand. This is one that my sister Audrey Paterson (nee Hyde) managed to find and she recently sent a copy to me.

Kerikeri (located in the Bay of Islands - New Zealand) in the 1950's was a village primarily involved with producing citrus fruits. As the population was somewhat scattered organisations such as the Country Women's Institute were popular gathering places for competitions, learning new skills, and cultural activities such as musical performances and plays.

Even though Kerikeri probably had below 1000 residents in the 1950's, there were many interesting people living there. For example Joan pasted the following into her scrapbook:

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Alan MacDiarmid's marriage to Marian lasted for 36 years until her death in 1990. They had three daughters and a son.

When Alan was 16 his parents retired to Kerikeri, where they had a citrus orchard located within walking distance of the shopping centre. He stayed on in Wellington and from 17yrs old he supported himself. In 1944 he obtained a job as a lab assistant in the Chemistry department of Victoria University, Wellington.

Alan MacDiarmid (born April 14 1927; died February 7 2007 at 79) was awarded a Nobel prize in 2000 (shared with Alan Heeger and Hideki Shirakawa). This was for the discovery of metallic-like electrical conduction in polymeric materials more usually associated with highly insulating plastics.