

Cell Talk

(A duologue between
Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe)

By Dana Bagshaw

© Dana Bagshaw 2002
ISBN 0 907174 21 3

First published in 2002 by Radius

Publishing Editor Nickie Cox
Design Barry Dunnage

All rights whatsoever in this play are strictly reserved. Permission for this play to be copied for purposes of a public reading or performance has been given but with the stipulation that the copies be destroyed after us.

A licence to perform or give a reading, either in its entirety or in the form of excerpts, is required by professionals or amateurs for production in church or elsewhere, whether for charity or gain, regardless of whether admission is charged or not.

A scale of fees is linked to such a licence and is subject to contract and subject to variation at the sole discretion of Radius. Application for a licence should be made to Radius in advance of rehearsals

Radius

The Religious Drama Society of Great Britain

Email: sales@radiusdrama.org.uk web: www.radiusdrama.org.uk



Cell Talk

Little is known about these Medieval women other than the two books they left behind: Julian's Revelation of Divine Love and the Book of Margery Kempe. Julian was born in 1343, survived two plagues, and after receiving divine 'showings' in 1373 became an anchoress in a cell attached to the smallest church in Norwich. In that same year Margery was born who, when 20 years old, married a burgess in nearby Bishop's Lynn. She thought she had a special calling, and came to visit Julian in Norwich in 1410 to validate this.

The play explores what led to that first meeting when Margery was 37 and Julian 67, as well as subsequent meetings that might have occurred over the next ten years. The setting for the play is Julian's cell attached to a small church.

Prologue

Margery alone

Scene 1

Margery's first visit to Julian - 1410

Scene 2

Margery visits Julian en route to Jerusalem -1413

Scene 3

Margery visits Julian on returning from Jerusalem - 1415

Scene 4

Margery's last visit to Julian in the garden outside Julian's cell – 1420

The running time is about an hour.

Scene 1

Margery approaches Julian's cell. There is a bench outside her window in a small garden

M Dame Julian! (*Peers in window*) Dame Julian?

J (*Comes to window*) I am here. I am she.

M I am Margery Kempe of Bishop's Lynn.

J Margery, I have heard of you. I am glad to meet you.

M I must talk with you, as our Lord commanded.

J Then who am I to deny you?

M I recently gave birth to my last child . . .

J . . . Your last? And how do you know this?

M Why because Our Lord told me so. I have long begged him to let me stop having children: 'Lord, how can I possibly look after another child and continue my devotions to you?' 'Don't worry, Daughter,' he replied, 'I shall arrange for someone to look after it. There is no sin in being with your husband bodily. For I want you to bear me fruit of the spirit one more time.'

J It is God's will, surely, for women such as you who have good husbands and are strong and able to replace the many we lost to the Black Death.

M But then, after this child, he said I had done my duty.

J How many children do you have?

M I have borne fourteen, though four have died.

J After fourteen I would agree with the Lord: You have done your duty.

M He sent me here to Norwich to speak to the Vicar of St. Stephen's.

J Richard. A good man.

M (*Laughing*) Full of good humour as well. He bade me begin at once to share my secrets with him and almost as soon as I had begun it happened again; right there in front of him.

J What happened?

M A heavenly melody so terrible I collapsed on the ground beside him.

J Does this happen often?

M Often. People say I have some strange affliction like the falling sickness.

J And do you think you do?

M No, because I always remember exactly what has happened and how close I felt to our Lord. But because people slander me so, I am eaten by doubt. That is why I have come to you, Dame Julia to find out if I am being deceived, for Father Richard told me you are an expert in such things.

J An expert! I think not. I have been sitting in this cell meditating on my own showings for over thirty-five years now. I certainly cannot expect to understand yours in one telling.

M Be that as it may: here I am.

J So you are. When did you first start having these visits from God?

M When I was a young wife, but I ignored them and did what I pleased and all the while I had one sin on my conscience so horrible I could not confess it. When I married John I thought I would be safe, but with our first child I had a labour that left me so weak I thought I would die. I was very frightened so I sent for the priest to confess this sin I had never revealed. But when I tried to tell him, before I could even explain what happened he became outraged and began shouting at me; such that I would say no more no matter how much he tried to pry me open. And after that, caught between the fear of telling and the fear of damnation, I went mad.

J Mad?

M Quite mad. I saw the devil, I shouted wicked, cruel things. And worst of all I hated myself, I wanted to hurt myself, cut myself. In desperation I bit my hand so deeply that I could taste my own blood. You can still see the scar. (*She holds out her hand to Julian*)

J (*Taking her hand*) You poor, tortured soul.

M They had to tie me down to my bed; and as I lay there alone our most merciful Lord, ever to be trusted, ever to be praised, appeared to me.

J In what way did he appear?

M Most pleasing and beautiful; in human form, sitting right on the edge of my bed gazing at me with such a lovely face that I felt instant warmth and peace and strength.

J (*Excited*) Our Lord appeared very much the same to me: most at home and yet most courteous. That you saw him sitting is important I think for, as I see it, sitting symbolises dwelling.

M Ah, but he did not stay sitting long for as soon as he finished saying those words He rose up into the light and was gone.

J And you have had more showings?

M Not for a long time after that. But one night, as I lay in my prayers, I heard a melody so pure and sweet that I thought I must be in heaven: and ever since, whenever I hear joyous laughter or music or even a simple song of a robin I am overcome with tears.

J (*Delighted*) And this is how you were blessed with the gift of tears.

M Am I blessed? Or am I cursed? The folk in Lynn who know me do not understand how I have changed so. 'What do you know about heaven?' they say, 'You haven't been there anymore than we have.'

J You need not concern yourself with what folk say about you.

M After hearing that melody I began to long for celibacy and hated my sins so much I confessed them sometimes two and three times a day.

J Two or three times a day?

M Especially that one sin I had kept concealed for so many years.

J Were you not forgiven?

M My confessors have told me many times I am forgiven . . .

J And yet you cannot forgive yourself.

M I committed a mortal sin.

J And who has not?

M But this sin was most horrible.

J As I see it, sin has no substance in and of itself (*pause*) It is only known by the pain it causes.

M Over and over I feel the pain of this sin so I keep going to my confessors, the priests and vicars. (*stops*) But then perhaps it would help to tell another woman instead.

J That is what I am here for.

M Well then, here it is. Before I was married, I was with child. I was only fourteen and . . . I killed it . . . my very own baby.

J (*Crosses herself.*) Surely, there is more to it . . . How did it happen?

M There was this man, visiting my father. I was drawn to him at first, he was so handsome. He aroused feelings in me I had never had before . . . I was young.