

The Swapper

by Rose Scollard



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premiered with Theatre Network Sept 11 - 29, 1985
launching the theatre's season with two other plays
under the title *Uneasy Pieces*.

Cast and creative team:

Miriam	Judith Haynes
Thelma	Christine MacInnis
Gladys	Valerie Pearson
Director	Stephen Heatley
Sets and lighting	Daniel Van Heyst
Costumes	Heather Redfern

Characters

Miriam - a hairdresser

Thelma - her friend and customer

Gladys - an elderly customer

[Miriam's apartment on the ground floor of a high rise. She is running a small beauty salon out of her home.]

Three women are in the room, MIRIAM the hairdresser and two customers. GLADYS, an elderly woman with a gullible expression, is under the dryer. THELMA, thirtyish with a shy but somewhat sulky manner, is in curlers. MIRIAM is fastening a strip of cotton batting around the edge of the curlers where they meet Thelma's face and neck. There is the sound of children squabbling beyond.]

MIRIAM:

I'm telling you, Thelma, divorce is not something to be taken lightly. It needs to be planned. *[Children crescendo to the point where they cannot be ignored. MIRIAM crosses to hallway and shouts.]* Cool it, you guys, or I'm coming in there! *[Sound is smothered but it persists]* I mean it! *[Now there is complete silence and she returns to Thelma.]* Like I was saying, divorce should be planned as carefully as any other aspect of your life. It's crazy how many people just wait till the explosion and then spend all their time and energy picking up the pieces. Do you want that to happen to you? *[THELMA, who winces every time the cotton is poked under a curler tries to shake her head.]* Don't move! *[Finishing with the cotton she fills a small bottle with fluid from a larger bottle.]* Take me. Like a fool, I stuck around, trying to keep it all together. Then Denny up and leaves me with three mouths to feed and no skills to get the wherewithal. I tell you, I'd sure do it different the second time around. *[She is about to apply the liquid to Thelma's scalp when she glances over at Gladys.]* Oh my God! Mrs. DeVilkin. Her brains must be scrambled eggs by now. Come on Gladys, let's see how you turned out. *[Hauling the old lady from under the dryer, she positions her in front of the mirror and begins rapidly divesting her head of curlers, pulling it this way and that. GLADYS smiles expectantly into the mirror.]* What I mean, Thelma, is you've got to train yourself to be single.

THELMA:

You're forgetting about Ferney, Miriam. Ferney's not going to stand around cheering me on while I make plans to leave.

MIRIAM:

Does he have to know? It should be easy enough to get some skills on the quiet.

THELMA:

Give it a rest Miriam, This lecture of yours: "Divorce, preparation for" it just doesn't apply to me.

[The curlers out, MIRIAM now attacks Gladys's head with a comb. Though her head is pulled about roughly the old lady's smile only broadens.]

MIRIAM:

Violence is the best part of the treatment, eh Gladys? A few typing lessons, book keeping. There are dozens of courses you can take.

THELMA:

It's just not that easy. Ferney's opposed to me going out at night

MIRIAM:

I'm talking about self improvement, not a night on the town.

THELMA:

That's what I mean, though. Ferney gets upset if I try to upgrade myself. I think he feels threatened.

MIRIAM:

Typing's not biochemistry, for God's sake. It's like knitting or washing floors. How could he object?

THELMA:

He just would.

MIRIAM:

So what's he going to do? Break your fingers?

THELMA:

[Offended] Ferney never touches me.

MIRIAM:

He doesn't have to. You do the job for him. *[She fluffs up Gladys's hair. Looks at it cheerfully.]* You've got to assert yourself, Thelma. Face the problem head on.

THELMA:

I can't. It's just not in me.

MIRIAM:

I'm not saying you have to deal with it all at once. Just one thing at a time. The typing lessons, now. You could take them in the daytime. He'd never know. I'll even give you the money for it. Or come down here and learn hairdressing. Earn yourself a little money. We're only six floors apart. You could slip down here in the afternoon and he wouldn't be any the wiser.

THELMA:

I know how it was before; the time I took that night course? He wouldn't say a word. Not a damn word. Just go on slurping his beer and looking at the box. I'd get to the elevator, to the car sometimes. I'd even have the key in the ignition. Then something would happen. My stomach would close in on itself like a fist and I'd end up spending the evening in my room.

MIRIAM:

You know, it's not entirely Ferney's fault.

THELMA:

What do you mean?

MIRIAM:

I've seen the same thing in my kids. Georgie and Shirl, they're little demons right? Never satisfied unless they're testing their limits. And mine. But Joey. He's entirely different. Never steps outside the boundaries, even when he knows there's not a chance in the world he'll get caught. And I take advantage, right? I know I shouldn't but sometimes I can't help myself. He's the one I unload on. He's the one gets all the work to do because I know he'll do it. I put it all onto poor old Joey. Maybe you and Ferney are a little like that.

THELMA:

I don't know what you're talking about.

MIRIAM:

Sure you do.

THELMA:

Ferney's a creep!

MIRIAM:

I couldn't agree more. But it doesn't take away from the fact that a large part of the problem is you. You won't take responsibility for yourself.

THELMA:

I'm non-assertive. A lot of people are like that.

MIRIAM:

But Thelma, you not only don't assert yourself, you retreat, shedding options as you go. Bit by bit, you hand over all your power to Ferney. He may not even want it, but when it's offered like that, it's only natural to take it.

THELMA:

He wants it, all right.

MIRIAM:

Well it's a criminal act against yourself to keep giving it to him.

THELMA:

I have to give it to him.

MIRIAM:

If he beat you, I could understand it. Some women you wouldn't believe the way they're knocked about.

THELMA:

You just don't understand.

MIRIAM:

Maybe not. I'm tempted to think it's laziness. At the very least avoidance of hassle. But let me tell you about hassle. You take a step back from it and you find it's moved with you, and you have to take another step back. *[Finishing Gladys's comb-out, she hold up a hand mirror at the back of her head.]* There now isn't that dazzling? Oh my God! *[Snatches up Gladys's hand]* Honestly, Gladys, you oughta take better care of your hands. *[Turns hand over and studies it]* Everyone should take care of their hands. That's how you tell the *real* rich from the *nouveau* rich, didn't you know that? The way their hands are kept. *[Fetches bowl of soapy water]* Now you just soak your pinkies in here while I work on Thelma. It'll be worth every penny. You'll see! *[She returns to Thelma and picking up the small squeeze bottle starts anointing the rollers on her head.]* Isn't she something? I don't know where she gets it from but she's rich as Rockefeller, and more than willing to part with it. Now then, let's get this done with.

THELMA:

I hate this part.

MIRIAM:

Come on now, there's nothing to it. Just a little perm solution.

THELMA:

It has a disgusting smell. Like death.

MIRIAM:

Death! Give me a break!

THELMA:

Someone told me that's what happens with a permanent. The solution makes the hair die a little so that it shrivels slightly. The longer you leave it on the more the hair dies and the frizzier it gets.

[Upon hearing this, GLADYS picks up the hand mirror and examines her own head of frizz.

MIRIAM grabs it away from her and shoves her hands back in the soaking solution.]

MIRIAM:

Bull! It's simply a chemical process that makes the hair curl.

THELMA:

It still smells like death.

MIRIAM:

*[Works away on the rollers, anointing each carefully,] Sit still! You'd think I was dousing you with sulphuric acid or something. To get back to what I was saying, you should take it slowly. Some people are for walking out, get a separation, get it over with fast. But when you have no resources, no security, what can you do? Better to take your time about it. Spread the process over three, four years and train yourself to do something, so you can get along without the guy financially. Then, if you plan it right, four years down the road you're a free agent. *[A wail from off stage cuts her off in mid-squeeze. She hurries out.]* Kids!*

GLADYS:

*She's full of it! *[Taking her fingers out of soak, she fishes in her purse and brings out a package of filter tips. The gullible old lady look is gone.]**

THELMA:

[Concerned with her dripping rollers] Hmm?

GLADYS:

[Snapping off the cork tip she lights up.] If you want a divorce, you want it now, not four years down the road.

THELMA:

I don't think Miriam likes you to smoke in here? With all the chemicals...

GLADYS:

I'll take my chances. I had three husbands you know. And I didn't put up with any of them a minute more than I had to.

THELMA:

What did you do, divorce them?

GLADYS:

Killed 'em

THELMA:

Sure you did.

GLADYS:

Faster, cheaper, and much more satisfying. *[Inhales deeply and arches a wicked brow at Thelma.]* You don't believe me. But it's true. Popped off every one of them. And no one can ever prove it, either.

[Resting her elbow on the counter, GLADYS makes a slight sweeping motion with her cigarette, ridiculously elegant, and exhales slowly at her reflection. She is wearing a very good woolen sleeveless dress, but looks slovenly. A bra strap has slipped down. Catching Thelma staring at it she hoists it back into place.]

THELMA:

You don't look as if you could finish off a fly, let alone three husbands. How did you do it?

GLADYS:

[With leering emphasis] Why? Are you interested?

THELMA:

[Shrinking back] I don't know what you mean.

GLADYS:

Sure you do. And what's more, you wish you could ...

[MIRIAM returns, picks up Gladys's hand and goes to work on it with a menacing looking tool.]

THELMA:

Hey! Wait a minute!

MIRIAM:

What?, Oh that stuff takes about twenty minutes to set.

THELMA:

But you only did half my head!

MIRIAM:

Oh right! Which side did I do? The left? No the right. *[Picking up the bottle she works rapidly, occasionally splashing it on Thelma's face. GLADYS reads a magazine but every so often she glances over the top of the page and catches Thelma's eye.]*

THELMA:

I know what she means all right!

MIRIAM:

Did you say something?

THELMA:

No. *[The eye contact goes on]*

MIRIAM:

There, that's done. Now just sit patiently for about twenty minutes. *[Another cry from beyond]*
I'm really going to fix their wagons this time! *[Hurries out]*

GLADYS:

[Leaning over in a conspiratorial manner] How much?

THELMA:

[Uneasily] What?

GLADYS:

How much is it worth to you? *[THELMA doesn't answer]* Ten years. Give me ten years and I'll do it for you.

THELMA:

[In spite of herself] Ten years! Miriam's way is only four. Five at the outside.

GLADYS:

No, no. I mean ten years of your life. Ten years and he dies right away. Today if you like.

THELMA:

[Laughing, her anxiety relieved by the humour of it] I'm sorry. It's just so preposterous. Ferney facing off with a seventy-year-old hit lady!

GLADYS:

It's a deal then.

THELMA:

Why not. The women in our family all live well into their eighties. I can afford ten years. *[Laughs and is then serious]* If only it were true. To be rid of Ferney with no fuss. Ten years would be a small price.

[MIRIAM returns.]

MIRIAM:

Well, Gladys. Let's get at those hands.

GLADYS:

[Gathering coat and purse] Another time. I gotta go.

MIRIAM:

How come?

GLADYS:

Got something to do. *[Vague, but excited.]* You know, an appointment. A date.

MIRIAM:

A date? With a fella?

GLADYS:

[Winking at Thelma] Yeah. With a fella.

MIRIAM:

[Helping Gladys on with her coat] Boy, Gladys. You really know how to reel 'em in, don'tcha?

THELMA:

To die at seventy instead of eighty. I could handle that.

GLADYS:

What do I owe you? Forty? *[Hands over money]* Yeah well, gotta rush. See ya.

MIRIAM:

Come in some time this week. I'll do those hands for you.

GLADYS:

Yeah. I wouldn't want anyone thinking I was *nouveau* rich. *[She is about to go but returns and leans over Thelma.]* Painless?

THELMA:

[Lost in her own thoughts] Hmm?

GLADYS:

Do you want it painless or do you want him to know he's going?

THELMA:

[Laughing, getting into the spirit of it] Let the jerk suffer. *[Shakes her head in disbelief as GLADYS exits]*

MIRIAM:

What was that all about?

THELMA:

Just a private joke.

MIRIAM:

She's a real kidder, that Gladys. Don't you love her? All those fossilized gestures of chic. Straight out of the thirties.

THELMA:

She's strange with it, though. I wouldn't want to be at her mercy.

MIRIAM:

Gladys? She's a pussy cat.

THELMA:

You've known her a long time?

MIRIAM:

She's been in once or twice. A harmless, silly old girl easily parted from her money.

THELMA:

When you were putting the solution on my hair, she kept catching my eye. Her eyes would come up over her magazine and bore right into me

MIRIAM:

A trick of light.

THELMA:

I kept getting these breathtaking flashes of what life would be like without Ferney.

MIRIAM:

Wishful thinking.

THELMA:

As if I could just snap my fingers and he'd disappear.

MIRIAM:

Face it, Thelma. There isn't any easy way out.

THELMA:

What time is it?

MIRIAM:

Relax, will you? Come on I have to rinse this stuff out.

THELMA

Really, though. If Ferney gets home and I'm not there...

MIRIAM:

You're in the building aren't you? You can phone up if you're late. You know what's difficult for you? To relax and enjoy. Most women just love to sit and have themselves worked over.

THELMA:

How can I relax when I know he might be up there, strutting around, waiting for his supper.

MIRIAM:

Look, you just can't hurry a perm. It takes the time it takes. You're only going to be a few minutes late. You can phone up and tell him.

THELMA:

No!

MIRIAM:

I give up. Just come over here and let me get on with it. *[Leads her to chair by sink and pushes her into it in a reclining position.]* Think pleasant thoughts. Think about what you're going to do with the forty dollars.

THELMA:

What forty dollars. Oh. You mean the forty dollars for the perm. That's yours.

MIRIAM:

Uh uh. This one's on the house.

THELMA:

You have three mouths to feed, remember? Really Miriam, I don't want it.

MIRIAM:

[Getting a fresh towel she wraps it around Thelma's neck.] Use it to take that first step. A few lessons. A new dress. Just remember, you've got time to make it happen. You have youth on your side.

THELMA:

Youth!

MIRIAM:

You have most of your thirties ahead of you.

THELMA

Yeah. And Ferney's using them up fast.

MIRIAM:

Forget about Ferney for once. *[There is flash and bump outside the balcony window.]* What was that!

THELMA:

[Sitting up] What?

MIRIAM:

Something fell into the yard. It was like a comet or a meteor or something. Didn't you see it?

THELMA:

No.

MIRIAM:

[Goes to window and looks out] Oh my God!...*[Blocks Thelma's view]* Don't look!

THELMA:

Why?... What is it?... It's Ferney isn't it! *[Pushes by to look]*

[Light goes down and there is a swirl of shadows and nightmare sounds. Lights come up on the same room. MIRIAM is talking on the phone. THELMA is sleeping on the couch.]

MIRIAM:

I tell you Kate, it was horrible! Unspeakable! . . . Yes, she's with me. She's taking it pretty bad. I was up with her most of the night. I finally got her off about five thirty. I mean, to see your husband smouldering there like barbecued meat. Try keeping that out of your dreams . . . Of course . . . I know! Much better off. When she comes to her senses, she's going to see that. Ferney was a creep. All the same, it was a rough way to go. He came flying off that balcony lit up like a torch . . . Yes, the police have been coming and going all night. And the fire department Cooking fat. He was heating a pan of fat on the stove. There was no sign of what he was planning to cook.

THELMA:

[Opens her eyes] He never cooked.

MIRIAM:

Listen, I have to go, Kate. She's awake. . . . Yeah, I will. Bye.

THELMA

Ferney never cooked. He never even made coffee.

MIRIAM:

But with you not being there. Perhaps he was hungry enough to fix himself something.

THELMA:

He wouldn't have cooked. *[Still lying flat, looking out into space she pushes back a curl from her forehead.]* He would have gone out or something.

MIRIAM:

How are you feeling?

THELMA

[Sits up slowly, gingerly. She is a mess, haggard disheveled, pale and drawn. She has a deep and hacking cough.] Well, the shock of his death seems to be subsiding a little.

MIRIAM:

That's encouraging.

THELMA:

But I feel none of the jubilation I expected.

MIRIAM:

Jubilance! For pity's sake, Thelma! It's been less than twenty-four hours. It was a horrible, horrible death!

THELMA:

If only I didn't feel so tired. *[Picks up hand mirror and pulls at hair. Some of it comes away in her hand.]* My hair is so brittle. *[Coughs]*

MIRIAM:

That's a bad cough.

THELMA:

[Clutching at chest.] If I breathe in too suddenly it catches me. *[Smooths away a little line at the corner of her mouth.]* I look so old.

MIRIAM:

It's the shock.

THELMA:

What time is it?

MIRIAM:

Early afternoon. Two. Two-thirty. I'm not sure.

THELMA

When I saw him there, all scorched and blackened, not like a real body at all, something went out of me.

MIRIAM:

Don't talk about it, now. You should try to rest.

THELMA:

Something small and clean. It went out of me.

[MIRIAM makes soothing noises and tries to stroke her shoulder but THELMA pulls away and looks in mirror anxiously.]

MIRIAM:

You must get hold of yourself.

THELMA

My shoulders, look how thick they are. They're closer to my neck. Do they seem that way to you?

MIRIAM:

I'll make some coffee. Better yet, why don't I go out and get something stronger. Some scotch. Or rye. What would you like? *[Thelma says nothing. Miriam puts on her coat.]* Rye then. I won't be long. If the kids give you any trouble just throw something at them. *[Exits]*

[THELMA sits peering at herself for a minute or two, pushing at her hair and coughing. She gets up and moves around as though stiff and in pain. There is a sudden squall of sound — Children squabbling and the previous nightmare sounds all intermingled — then silence as a skinny, tough-looking woman in her thirties, with blazing, frizzy red hair, makes a provocative entrance. There is something familiar about her.]

THELMA:

I'm afraid Miriam isn't talking customers today. She...

GLADYS:

I was hoping she'd finish my nails for me.

THELMA:

[Looking uncertainly as recognition dawns.] Gladys?

GLADYS:

My hair went back to its original colour, but the perm is still with me. Apparently the powers of darkness are no match for Miriam.

[GLADYS sits, crosses her legs, revealing a lot of skinny thigh. Fishing in her purse she pulls out her cigarettes and lights up. THELMA's cough is triggered by the smoke. She sits down heavily, aware of the pain in her chest.]

THELMA:

I don't understand. You have all Gladys's mannerisms. But your face. You look so young!

GLADYS:

That was the idea wasn't it?

THELMA:

You're still onto that are you? About getting ten years of my life. *[GLADYS nods. Thelma is suddenly cautious, Uncertain of this conversation.]* Well all right then, suppose we say you did get ten of my years.

GLADYS:

Oh I did. Make no mistake about it.

THELMA:

I still don't see how you can look so young. You don't look a day over thirty five.

GLADYS:

[Humorous and sinister] Ohhhh! You thought I was going to get your eighties didn't you.

THELMA:

Something like that.

GLADYS:

We don't just add on the years we bargain for. Who wants to take the risks just to get to be an octogenarian, wheezing and stooping and crumbling at the joints. It has to be a little more worth it than that. *[She waits for Thelma's reaction.]* You still don't get it, do you? How old are you?

THELMA:

Thirty-three.

GLADYS:

There you are. Thirty-three to forty-three, that's what I got *[Pauses]* Did you look in the mirror today?

THELMA:

Only when I had to. This last twenty-four hours has really taken it out of me. I feel like I've aged... *[Stops, suddenly apprehensive]*

GLADYS:

You got it! Your body is now forty-three years old.

THELMA

I don't believe you.

GLADYS:

Think about it. The slack skin. The sagging stomach. The weakness in the legs.

THELMA:

My chest is sore too.

GLADYS:

[Apologetically pats her hand.] I smoke too much.

THELMA:

I didn't think I'd be this run down in my forties.

GLADYS:

If you'd been living the last ten years yourself, you probably wouldn't.

THELMA:

[Suddenly clueing in] You mean what you do affects me? How I'm going to feel? *[Coughs again]*

GLADYS:

You should see a doctor about that. I smoke two packs a day. *[Puffs contentedly]* You gave up ten years. I wouldn't be surprised if you lose another five, ten maybe, by how I live them. I may as well tell you now, I like a good time.

THELMA

I've missed my thirties?

GLADYS:

'Fraid so.

THELMA:

But those were my best years. You didn't say I had to give up my *best* years. That wasn't part of the bargain.

GLADYS:

[Suddenly cool] If you wanted different years taken you should have specified. It's irreversible now.

THELMA

But I didn't really even agree to it. I was just going along with the joke.

GLADYS:

You don't mind him being dead, though. Admit it.

THELMA:

But I wouldn't have chosen it. Never!

GLADYS:

You must have chosen. At some level you chose, or I wouldn't have been able to do it.

[MIRIAM returns with a brown bag under her arm.]

MIRIAM:

Well now, we can just fix ourselves a little drink. *[Takes bottle out of bag and then spots Gladys.]*
Oh sorry, I didn't see you there. I'm Miriam.

GLADYS:

[Grins and puffs on her cigarette.] I'm a friend of Thelma's.

MIRIAM:

We were just going to have a drink. *[Gets out glasses and ginger ale and mixes drinks]*

THELMA:

I saw him at the exact moment the life went out of him.

MIRIAM:

Thelma! Take it easy.

THELMA:

He was burnt beyond recognition, but he caught my eye. Was that when I became . . .
unsalvageable?

GLADYS:

You know it wasn't.

THELMA:

Before then.

GLADYS:

Yes.

THELMA:

When I chose.

[MIRIAM gives THELMA her drink. She takes it but holds it absentmindedly, lost in her thoughts.]

GLADYS:

[Taking her drink, holds up glass to Thelma.] Drink up. It's time you started to live a little.

THELMA

[Bitterly] Live!

GLADYS:

You said it. No matter how bad you think the years to come will be, you can be sure that what comes after will be a hell of a lot worse.

[Lights redden and fade]

THE END