

# ELLIS

Libretto for October 2 workshop

*Start on dark. Video projects a few facts on Ellis Island.*

*“350 babies were born in the hospital, and many were named after the doctors and nurses that helped deliver them. Ten times that number is how many immigrants died on Ellis Island — 3,500, buried in paupers’ graves around New York City.”*

*“Between 1892 and 1954, more than twelve million immigrants passed through the U.S. immigration portal at Ellis Island. More than **40 percent** of Americans can somehow trace their family history back to Ellis Island”.*

## **PROLOGUE: ARRIVING AT THE GREAT HALL (T, S1, S2)**

MANNY      The heat! The noise! The smell! It’s hot as a pistol. I never was this hot. I just can’t stand it. It’s hot as a pistol! The heat! The noise!

MARIA      What are the waves, if not our longing for address? To be and to long... Places nestle into homes.

RAYSEL     Our days are the passing of a shadow; we are made for waiting. Just as the snow waits, fields of wild white. My secret stays with me.

MANNY      My fellow pilgrims. Stars carry our waiting into a story. Into our story.

## **ELECTRONIC INTERLUDE (File: Interlude 1)**

*“...I learned this song, a lullaby, and my own children had the same lullaby. And every once in a while when I am by myself now, to sort of gather the whole background together I sing that song...”*

*“...I went to the Wailing Wall, I went to get help...”*

*“...And I pray for all of you...”*

## **SCENE 1 – MANNY LEAVES HIS HOMETOWN** (T, S2)

d.

MANNY He wrote back! He wrote back! And He's got my ticket! I leave with the Caronia ship, in a month. Now I have one month to get a visa. But leave everything? You and my sisters? Will you be okay? Will you join us at some point?

AUNT I will be fine here. You don't uproot old trees. But there is no future here for you. Think what your mama and papa would say? And your brother Lou, waiting for you in New York? What would he say? He'd say, "Jump, Manny, jump that ship! Then he left to New York to work in the factory.

MANNY That crazy kid! He jumped everything. Trains, trams, horses!

AUNT All you do is jump that ship, and write me and tell me if you see the cowboys and if the streets are really paved in gold.

MANNY What do I take with me? Well, that's easy – all I have is this suit of clothes. A handkerchief and a pair of socks. My stamp collection and family souvenirs. Is that all?

AUNT You have your heart and memories to take. But also, I have two things that will help you once you get there. Here's a letter from your uncle- it will help you find a job at Edison, where your brother already works. And, your father asked me to give these twenty dollars when you marry. I am jumping the gun, but who knows? Might be the right thing to do.

MANNY What if they steal it?

AUNT Then hide it in your shoes, and never take them off.

MANNY Ok, now: how will I even fill my suitcase? Good thing I paid two dollars for it!

AUNT Manny, relax. You have a month! You have time, but get ready. Time does not creep in America. Life is not a poor player there.

## **SCENE 2 – MARIA AND THE PARTY** (S1, S2)

MOTHER Maria? Maria, where are you?

MARIA Coming!

MARIA Mother, were you looking for me?

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MOTHER Maria, there you are. How is the party? Are you having fun?

MARIA Yes, mother—thank you. All my friends from school, our neighbors, our family... everybody is here. This is one of the happiest days of my life.

MOTHER Maria, have a seat. Do you remember Joseph?

MARIA I think I do. He's the son of the Galetta, down the road? I think I've met him once, when we were kids. I almost remember him, but memories are blurred.

MOTHER Maria, it's time we speak. You are sixteen. You are beautiful, and a hard-working girl. But with the war and the uncertainty of your father's job, we can't support you for much longer. So, Joseph's parents asked your hand, and we are going to say yes. He is young and healthy--has a good job in New York. So, we decided it was best for you to marry him, and join him in America.

MARIA America? Marry? Mother, what is this? I don't want to marry. I don't like this. I want to study, I want to study, dance, stroll, and live my life. I want to discover...

MOTHER Maria! Do you have a boyfriend?

MARIA No.

MOTHER Then, you know it's not proper for a girl your age. You must have a man. You are lucky we can offer you this.

MARIA But mother...

MOTHER Enough! You'll marry next September. Daughter, marriage is not about meeting someone, and falling in love, that sort of thing. It's about future. They sent us this ring as a sign of his commitment. You can wear it if you'd like, but that's how it's going to be.

MARIA So that's how it begins? With a small, shiny ring? They did not ask for my hand. They chose for us. A small, shiny ring?

As if a small ring concealed a greater mystery and sealed something one cannot see.

Such a small ring – half circle with another half – rippling –its weight one with your longing?

How would I love what I don't know?

To belong, an affection for someone unknown.

To be, to long  
to belong to each other  
new ripples, new circles.

So that's how it begins? With a small, shiny ring?  
Is this merciful, or just cruel and reckless?

**Electronic Interlude (former prologue)**

*"I just didn't know what to expect"*

*"I didn't have the desire to go"*

*"I wanted to have a home"*

*"It means you're free"*

*"I made up my mind I would never regret it"*

*"I was the only child in school who didn't speak English"*

*"It was heartbreaking to leave"*

*"I was born, on that day, on Ellis Island"*

**SCENE 3 – RAYSEL AT THE REFUGEE CAMP (B, S1)**

*In a WW2 Refugee Camp. A lonely camp woman sitting on a bench, staring at the trees.*

**ELEC.** *I took nothing because we had nothing.*

*We ran out of the house when it was burning*

**RAYSEL** *Who will be waiting for me across the waves?  
What if it's a dream; a phantom?*

*Last night, my mother was there again; pointing to the ocean.  
Like an envoy, a messenger: "Leave across the stretching waves."*

I see the procession of beloved faces in the wake.  
The sea is bound to shake. I am afraid. Leave everything behind, like birds with  
their old nests?  
And get across the Atlantic, where we promised we would meet again? If alive?

My family. Uprooted like an old oak.  
Its soul is harsh, robust, sturdy.  
I touch its bark - every event is a carving, a new, black scar, connected deep  
down to the roots. Now I need to carve my part.

I stare into a land I know nothing about.

Who, what is there, waiting for me?  
What if it's just a dream, a phantom?

GUARD                   What are you doing here? It's almost curfew time.  
  
Do you prefer to be alone? I was just checking if everybody is in for the night.

RAYSEL                I like to come here and look at the trees.

GUARD                   Do you have family here?

RAYSEL                No. Not anymore.

GUARD                   I'm sorry.

RAYSEL                They are alive in this oak.

GUARD                   What's your name?

RAYSEL                Raysel Leba

GUARD                   Raysel – sounds like rose in German.

RAYSEL                It is Rose in Yiddish.

GUARD                   My mother's favorite flower. I just saw a white, tiny flower, but not as beautiful  
as a rose.

GUARD                   So, what's next for you out of here?

RAYSEL                I want to go to America. Start again. That's where my parents and siblings were  
hoping to find each other after the war.

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Guard           Where are they now?

RAYSEL:        I don't know. Dead I assume.

GUARD           Can I walk you over to your barracks?

RAYSEL         Yes.

RAYSEL         The tree where I met you. I want to show you something. Do you see it?

GUARD           A nest? What kind of a bird would build a nest in this camp?

RAYSEL         I can hear its call. It's nearby.

GUARD         You're still watching the tree?

RAYSEL         Yes, I come here every day. The other week there were five eggs; now one remains, and there are trills and chirping.

GUARD         A new beginning for them. And maybe a hope for healing in this world.

GUARD           I brought you something.

GUARD           A rose for a rose.

GUARD         Will I be seeing you again tomorrow, under this tree? And the day after tomorrow, and every other day that we're allowed to spend in this place?

GUARD         Raysel, what's troubling you? What's on your mind?

RAYSEL         I need to talk to you. I can't stay here. This is a haunted country for me. Words in German strangle me at night, and memories haunt my dreams: the hissing, the noises, the dogs. My parents would never forgive me if I were to stay, and I have to get away to forget all of this. I can't stay here.

GUARD           Raysel...

RAYSEL         Forgive me, I can't stay. But I will pray for you, every night, that you're happy, wherever you are. The days with you have been a glimpse of a happy life, and I will always carry it with me.

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**ELECTRONIC INTERLUDE 2**

*“14 days ... 18 days... 9 days... 18 days... 14 days”*

*“One day they said there were mines, one day they said a German boat passed by...”*

*“We all did get sick”*

*“Like all good immigrants, we were packed in like sardines, but there was a family from Sicily that had an accordion and a mandolin”*

*“And the singing, made life tolerable for those 14 days”*

*“You could see it on the faces, they were all in awe”*

*“There was that magic statue, standing right there”*

*“And now we were gonna go to heaven”*

**SCENE 4 – MARIA AND MANNY, ON THE BOAT (T, S2)**

MARIA I like the stars. They are quiet, and still they're never far from me.

MARIA Is it true? the rudder broke?

MANNY So it seems.

MARIA How long have we been traveling for? How many days? How long?

MANNY I don't know. Twenty? Twenty-one? Twenty-two?

MANNY But I heard that tomorrow we'll see land.

MANNY Where did you get it?

MARIA My home. We have a lot of those. I heard food is different where we are going. But this taste, I don't want to lose it yet.

MANNY So if we land tomorrow we will finally see the Lady?

MARIA The Lady? You mean the statue?

MANNY That's all my brother ever talks about, you know, in his letters. "He and his lady," my aunt used to say.

MANNY What do you have there? Is that who is waiting for you in America?

MARIA He is. I hope he does. He's my future husband. I haven't seen him since we were kids, so I don't really know him.

MARIA Have you ever wondered what's waiting for you there? I feel I now have two lifetimes. I had my dreams at home, but that life now is gone and a new one is starting. I know there might be a good future where I am going, but I just don't know yet, and I traded so much for it.

MARIA Seems the music is still going. Did you dance?

MANNY Yes, it was fun for a bit.

MARIA I heard there was someone with an accordion, and some good singers.

MANNY Dance?

MARIA Oh I'm not very good...Alright.

That night, we danced. The night I learned about my future... it was my birthday, and we danced all night.

I didn't know it then, but my second life started there. That night, I was bidding farewell. Goodbye to my family, my friends, my town, my people.

MANNY It's late. It's time to sleep. Let's hope to land tomorrow and see your lady.

MARIA You've got to come out and see this! Take a look. The Lady over there!

MANNY Look at those lights! They're like burning! Are those skyscrapers?

MARIA It is as if she is welcoming us. We're finally here!

MARIA So that's how it begins? With a big, bright torch?



**SCENE 5 – RAYSEL LANDS ON ELLIS ISLAND AND MEETS HER FATHER** (T, S1, S2)

*Scene setting: Raysel lands on the island, and is carrying her bag along. While singing the next lines, she goes through the documents inspection and medical.*

ELEC. *I was an adopted child because my birth parents survived the war but were incapable of caring for me.*

*All is good.*

RAYSEL I rest my eyes on waves ahead  
I can see the Lady from here  
I see her gentle eyes  
Her hands  
  
I want to climb into the Lady's arms  
and sleep in these hands  
They look like a boat like a cradle  
I'll make my nest there; my dwelling place

RAYSEL One day these hands  
Will carry back a fresh twig  
An olive branch

ELEC. *My birth mother came through after the war  
Gave birth here  
She me her father here  
Decided to take care of him and to give me up*

RAYSEL A promise for both of us  
the waves are a lullaby for the hope that I bear in my womb  
  
They cradle us all  
my missing Father  
my gassed mother  
My sisters... all the ones I left behind

RAYSEL Father? Lebe Tate! Father!  
Oy Gutt tate

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Gottze dank. Tate!  
du lebst  
How did you get here? Speak to me! Father! Father, you are everything to me. I  
found you, and I will find something, and we'll  
all be together.

RAYSEL My father. My father, he is here.  
But now he is here in front of me.  
His ravenous homesick eyes  
and the flicker growing when he sees me.  
Stretches his hands toward me  
the weak hands of a daying man.  
The tortures, his amputated leg  
His weak body is a map of hell  
He velled through.

What am I supposed to do?  
Can I be the mother or both?  
Like the Lady in my dreams

RAYSEL In my womb she leapt.  
I can feel her clinging to me, pleading: stay stay stay.  
I sing lullabies in my mind and my heart.

They bring me papers to sign, to give her up for adoption.  
They ensure me she will be better off where they take her.  
I recite a psalm my grandmother taught me:  
My Lord is My Shepherd, I shall not fear. Thy rod, and thy... but the words are  
mangled, mixed with my tears. The waves swallow me. Oh God, God, why have  
you forsaken us?

RAYSEL We came from from the sea  
so I offered her to the Lady  
she will feed her and care for her  
My daughter and the ocean  
I see both leaving

Days pass  
I won't speak  
I remember the ocean,  
the calls of anxious gulls

**SCENE 6 – MANNY MEETS HIS BROTHER** (T, S1, S2)

*On Ellis Island, just outside the “kissing post”. In line, Manny in talking to another unclaimed immigrant, who doesn’t interact with him and actually seems slightly bothered:*

MANNY        What the hell is going on? He was supposed to be here yesterday!  
Now I am like an unwanted package.

What the hell is going on?

LOU            Manny, don’t frown, give me a hug.

MANNY        Where the hell have you been? Did you jump the wrong island?

LOU            I am sorry. They held me up at work. My boss would have fired me. I could not  
leave.

MANNY        I thought I’d be stuck here forever!

LOU            How was the journey? You stink like hell. Once we get home, I will find new  
clothes.

MANNY        I am starving. I met a woman who gave me an  
orange. That orange was a piece of paradise.

LOU            Why not trade some dollars for food?

MANNY        God forbid! Plus I told Auntie I would hide it in my shoe.

LOU            You have one day. The second day you need to start early. Don’t waste  
time sleeping. You have the chance to see for yourself how different it is from  
what we were told. Tomorrow we will meet at Edison factory and I’ll introduce  
you to the boss. We’ll take the subway.

MANNY        What’s the subway?

LOU            Just a train underground. Just make sure you buy a ticket. Exact change.

MANNY        Good morning, Lou! I’m ready! God Almighty, I can see where this is  
going! There's no end in sight.

LOU            There’s nowhere to go. We’re done. We’re done. We’re done

MANNY What?

LOU We lost the job.

MANNY What are you talking about?

LOU You heard me-- they fired us!

MANNY "Despite you are a good worker we don't hire Hebrews-- or 'Jews', as we call them here. This is not personal, but it's a company rule. We just don't hire Jews. Therefore we're going to fire you effective immediately. Also, your brother Manny, will not be able to work here"

MANNY But why? I don't understand. We're good guys, good workers.

LOU It's a company rule! We don't make these rules. They don't make these rules. No one does, apparently. But still, somehow, they're up there. Let's just go home and search again. We'll find something else. It happened before, and will happen again.

#### **ELECTRONIC INTERLUDE 4**

The electronic interlude will include voices from immigrants focusing on the new life in US, the suffering, the joys, and the adjustments of the new life.

"We came because we had to find a place to live and grow"

"We're true Americans"

"That history helps you for your future"

"I had a very good life"

"I love people, I really do"

"Like I'm telling you a story. It's not a book, it's the story of a life. That's what it is."

#### **SCENE 7 – WEDDING PROCESSION FOR MARIA (S2)**

CLERK Maria Castelnovo, please come to the front. Maria Castelnovo, please come to the front.

MARIA Me? Someone's here for me? Give me one minute.

MARIA            So that's how it begins? With a small, shiny ring?

We met at a dance. Did we?

The moon doesn't come to you, does it?  
You waltz and climb to the moon.

Our wedding?  
Will we have children, and petals, and roses, and accordion players?

Our honey-moon?  
Will it be a picnic in Central Park?  
Will we have smoked meat and white bread?

All that was given to me already in that dance:  
Illnesses and joys  
Blessings and wounds  
Children and no children

Not a feeling at first, a fact,  
an obedience.

A yes that was not mine, a curse, at first.

Will it root in me? petal by petal;

Will it unfold?

To belong to each other? What does it mean?  
He was not mine.  
We were given  
We were matched.

To be, to long –  
to belong  
to each other –  
New ripples, new circles.

As if a small ring concealed a great mystery  
and sealed something we cannot see.

Such a small ring.  
Half circle with another half.  
Rippling its weight one with your longing.

So that's how it begins.  
With a small shiny ring.  
Is this merciful or both cruel and reckless?

**SCENE 8 - EPILOGUE** (T, S1, S2)

*The three singers will come back on stage, somewhat "de-characterized" - they will alternate singing these lines, since they are of general sense.*

RAYSEL        We carry songs, ballads, rituals.  
                  We carry holy water to sanctify the waters ahead of us.  
                  We take the turf with us. We take the dirt.  
                  We smuggle mortality. We smuggle our dirt.  
                  We smuggle our stories.

TUTTI            They carry

MARIA           They carry crucifixes, pocket knife, tears and children, accordions, and fears. The distance from what they love. Vowels and consonants. Intersections.

TUTTI            they carried crucifixes  
                  they carry pocket knives  
                  they carried tears  
                  they carried children  
                  they carry accordions  
                  they carry fears  
                  they carry sheets  
                  they carry the distance from what they loved  
                  they carried vowels and consonants  
                  they carried spices and intersections  
                  they carry their grief into one hundred fold of grief  
                  they carry their hopes into one hundred fold of hope

MANNY        They carried their grief into one hundred fold of grief. My fellow pilgrim, I follow you.

MARIA           Their hopes. Hundred folds of hopes. In barrels we take our thousand years' stories.

RAYSEL        Will you arrive like a sparrow?  
                  Will you arrive our thousand years' stories?

FIN.

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