

## **WORMWOOD**

At the time of the Chernobyl disaster I was pregnant with our son Charles, and I still remember the feeling of helplessness as we tracked the fallout, heading for Scotland. It took me some ten years to get sufficient perspective on the event to write a play about it. Performed in Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre, during a fiercely hot spell of weather, the play created quite a stir – members of the audience kept fainting, partly due to the weather, but partly due to the sheer stress of the subject matter! The character of Stefan (Liam Brennan) in particular reduced most of the audience to tears, with great regularity. From audience reaction, it quickly became apparent that people had been misled about Chernobyl: it had been all too easy to blame it on soviet mismanagement. Actually, it was a safety experiment that went wrong, and in spite of the fact that I never intended this to be an anti-nuclear polemic everyone involved with the production reached the alarming conclusion that this kind of accident could, and probably would, happen somewhere else in the future. I suspect the audience thought so too. Artemis (a tour de force by actor Forbes Masson) is a mysterious character – we are never quite sure who he is, but his name itself means Wormwood. And so does “Chernobyl”.

### **EXTRACT FROM “WORMWOOD”.**

**Stefan walks to the centre of the stage. He is still dressed in his fireman's uniform but it looks more shabby and dishevelled and his face is grimy. He turns and talks to Artemis, gradually becoming more distressed and more lost in what he is describing. Again this is reportage, again, like Viktor, Stefan is transfixed by the light, lost in his own past. During the following, Viktor also comes forward, listening, fascinated and at last driven to comment..**

### **ARTEMIS:**

Tell us what happened on the morning of Saturday 26th April 1986.

**STEFAN:**

We arrived at the reactor at 1.35 am. We were on night shift in the town. There was a crew stationed at the power plant. They had heard the explosion and were already on the scene.

**ARTEMIS:**

But you were there very soon after.

**STEFAN:**

We were there very quickly. Our lieutenant took a search team into the building. I was one of them. We were told that the reactor core was burning. But we could see that for ourselves.

I mean there was this weird kind of luminous light, coming from the central hall. I've never seen anything like it in my life. It wasn't like an ordinary fire at all. We didn't need to be told. We could see it for ourselves. We knew that the only thing that could be burning like that - with that crazy light - was the reactor core itself.

Our commanding officer was on leave from the station. He could have stayed away but he came back immediately. He was a brave man.

**ARTEMIS:**

Not just a fool?

**STEFAN:**

No. No more than any of us. He stood by us. That has to count for something. There were only twenty eight of us at that point. It was all an unknown quantity.

**ARTEMIS:**

There had been fires at the plant before.

**STEFAN:**

Fires yes. But nothing like this. Never anything like this.

**ARTEMIS:**

So how did you tackle it? There was no point in pouring water onto the core was there?

**STEFAN:**

Water? It would just have vaporised.

You could have poured a whole bloody lake onto it and it wouldn't have been enough. But the structures above the core were blazing too and there were three other reactors on site. The blaze could have spread to them. So we knew we had to control those fires first. Forget the reactor for the moment. Except that you couldn't forget it. It was there. It filled your mind. Like some monster. Like a dragon. And you know what? It was so fucking beautiful! You couldn't keep your eyes off it!

**ARTEMIS:**

So how did you control the fire in the building?

**STEFAN:**

Some men tried to work from the ground. Only they were being showered with radioactive graphite all the time. Some of us went up on the roof of the turbine building. I was one of them. There were clouds of poisonous gas up there as well as radioactive dust. And the heat was shocking. **(He pauses, remembering)** We realised after a while that the roof was made of fucking bitumen.

**ARTEMIS:**

Another safety oversight.

**STEFAN: (Until now he has been almost matter of fact in his description, but now he is angry.)**

The roof...as we were walking...the fucking roof was melting under our feet.

**ARTEMIS:**

Did you have any real idea of the danger you were in?

**STEFAN:**

Of course we fucking knew. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Well, at first, for a moment or two after we got there, we thought it might just be a fire. Like any other fire. But we had a radiation meter with us. And that told us all we needed to know. I saw the operator's face. I saw what he was seeing. It had gone right off the end of the fucking scale. You've no idea what it was like. No idea.

**ARTEMIS:**

And you? Did you stay?

**STEFAN:**

I stayed.

**ARTEMIS:**

That was very heroic of you.

**STEFAN:**

Heroic? It was bloody stupid I know that.

**ARTEMIS:**

Somebody had to do it.

**STEFAN:**

Aye. Somebody had to do it. Some poor sod.

You know I thought I was alright at first. Your mind can't really take it in. You think, I'll be fine. I can handle it. That wee optimistic bit of you that thinks it's indestructible. I stayed on for a long time. We were replaced at 4 am. The roof and building fires were almost under control by then. So there was no danger of it spreading to the other reactors.

**ARTEMIS:**

And what did they do with those other reactors, Stefan?

**STEFAN:**

The other building? I don't know. I was too busy to find out.

**VIKTOR:**

I know. I know what they would do. I know what they did.

**ARTEMIS:**

Of course you do Viktor.

**VIKTOR:**

They would have to keep reactors One and Two in operation. Different building. Same site.

**ARTEMIS:**

And how would they do that Viktor? How would they manage to staff the building, in the circumstances?

**VIKTOR:**

They would have to switch off the radiation meters and let the workers come in.

**STEFAN:**

The bastards.

**VIKTOR:**

It's what they would have to do.

**ARTEMIS:**

The workers weren't fools. Somebody would demand an explanation, surely. A reason why the meters were switched off.

**VIKTOR:**

The management would just tell them the meters weren't working. They would say that the explosion had affected them. That's what they would have to do.

**STEFAN:**

The fucking bastards.

**VIKTOR:**

You see they needed the power. They still need the power.

**ARTEMIS:**

In Kiev.

**STEFAN:(wearily)**

In Kiev. Yes. I suppose they did. I suppose they do.

**He and Viktor move back together, leaving centre stage free for Tanya who comes forward.**

**TANYA:**

The next morning we had to be in school. Saturday mornings are school mornings. We always left before Stefan was due home from the fire station. When he'd been on Friday nightshift I mean. He would get his own breakfast - just bread - and coffee if we had any - and then he'd sleep. If Natalia was staying with us he'd make her a cup of tea or coffee and take it in to her. I hadn't slept well and I woke up very early.

**TANYA:**

I went downstairs and outside with the rubbish. It was going to be a lovely day. Blossom on the trees. Spring flowers in the gardens. I thought I might pick some and leave them on the table for Stefan to see when he came in. The sun was up and it was quite warm. But there was a strange heavy feeling in the air. It's hard to explain. At first I thought there had been a frost in the night but it was too warm for frost. There was a little garden outside the block of flats and they had planted roses. The new glossy leaves had this fine white powder on them. Like ash. I touched it. Something else. No birds were singing. None at all .

And then as I was standing by the bins I felt my face beginning to tingle. As though it was raining. You know when you're out in winter and the rain is almost snow, but not quite, and it hurts your skin? It felt like that. There was no smell. But my eyes began to water. And the taste... I could taste metal on my tongue, and it brought all those dreams back to me. Dreams about trying to keep something out. Except that this was just an ordinary spring day.

I was afraid. Like an animal. I had this sudden terrible fear. I put my rubbish in the bin and then I went back inside and as I went, I found myself running. Faster and faster up the stairs. And when I slammed the door of the apartment behind me, my heart was pounding.

**She is now back beside the bench.**

I didn't know what to do. I calmed down enough to phone the fire station. I thought if there was anything wrong, Stefan would know. But Stefan wasn't there. I spoke to one of his colleagues. A woman who works in the office. I knew her. Not well, but we'd met a couple of times.

**TANYA:**

She said there had been an accident at the power station, but that she didn't think it was too serious. Only I should listen to the radio. That would give me more information. I turned the radio on and they were playing music. Soft soothing music. So I said to the woman, I said was it anything to do with what we had seen the night before. The fireworks and all that. And there was this long pause and then she said no. She didn't think so. But perhaps I ought not to go out that morning. Perhaps we shouldn't go to the school. Just in case. She wouldn't be sending her own children to school. And then she said, you have relatives in Kiev, don't you? Just that, nothing more. And the tone of her voice - I don't know - it worried me.

I thought about Viktor. He'd be able to tell me. So I phoned the plant. But I couldn't get through there. All the lines seemed to be engaged. And I didn't want to call my mother in Kiev. I didn't want to worry her. And then Natalia woke up and came through.

**Wormwood was first performed at The Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1997, directed by Philip Howard, with Liam Brennan, Stephen Clyde, Meg Fraser, Forbes Masson, Anne Marie Timoney and Anthony O'Donnell. It is published in Scotland Plays ed Philip Howard, by Nick Hern Books, ISBN 1 – 85459 – 383 – 8 . All enquiries re rights in the play should be addressed to Catherine Czerkawska**