

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### “Over a Garden Wall:” Home and Horizons in the Plays of Elizabeth Baker by Maya Cantu

Vaulting from office typist to “one of the most widely discussed playwrights in England” (*The Christian Science Monitor*), Elizabeth Baker (1876-1962) startled her contemporaries with the realist landmark *Chains* (1909). In this and twelve produced plays that followed, Baker gave unprecedented voice to suburban London’s clerks, office workers, and shopgirls: groups that *The Atheneum*, in 1910, described as “one of the largest—and in the theater at any rate—least discussed classes of the community.” In works marked by their originality and “uncompromising truth of treatment” (*The Era*), Baker explored the constraints of class, gender and social convention upon individual agency. At the same time, the playwright followed her own passionate drives of ambition and wanderlust in a life that carried her “over a garden wall” (as she titled one 1915 play) and as far away as destinations that she evoked in *Chains*.

Born Gertrude Elizabeth Baker in Paddington, London on the most likely date of August 20th, 1876, the playwright grew up in a religious, Puritan family that worked in the garment trade. When Baker was an infant, her father, draper John Alexander Baker, died, leaving her widowed mother Elizabeth to find work as a shop assistant in Bishop’s Stortford, Hertfordshire. After remarrying master draper George Robert Collett, Elizabeth assumed a new role running her second husband’s shop. The family, including Baker’s four stepsisters, moved from Islington to Hammersmith before settling on Esmond Road in the West London “garden suburb” of Bedford Park. These three homes likely inspired details of the “two-penny-halfpenny backyards,” pea patches, and parlor hymns that shape the world of *Chains*. The Colletts worked hard and shunned dancing, music and the theater, while the teen-aged Baker wrote stories and verses in her spare hours working as an assistant in the family business.

As the “New Woman” charged into the twentieth century, Baker launched into the urban work force. Commuting from Bedford Park, Baker found employment as a London shorthand clerk and typist. Baker also started to break away from her family’s objection to the stage, developing an interest in realist drama. From 1904 to 1907, Harley Granville-Barker and J.E. Vedrenne presented three innovative seasons at the Court Theatre, including eleven plays by George Bernard Shaw. As *The London Weekly* paraphrased Baker in an interview: “She started going to the theater during Granville-Barker’s tenancy at the Court, and was so much inspired by the productions there that she attempted to write a play herself.” Baker recalled that after sending her “first attempt,” a one-act play, to the company of actress-manager Lena Ashwell, playwright Edward Knoblock encouraged her to

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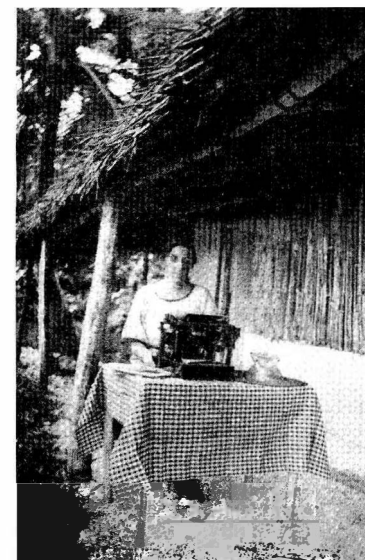
expand it into a full-length drama: “This I did, and *Chains* was the result.”<sup>1</sup>

Produced by the independent stage society, the Play Actors, *Chains* caused a sensation, as boosted by the Play Actors’ marketing of Baker as an untutored “girl novice.” In fact, Baker, who had already worked both as a City typist and in the newspaper offices of *The Spectator*, was thirty-two. First presented for a single performance at the Court Theatre on April 18, 1909, *Chains* paralleled the stories of clerk Charley Wilson, contemplating emigration to Australia, with his rebellious sister-in-law Maggie, resolving to escape a loveless engagement. Critics received the play rapturously. *The New Age*’s Cecil Chesterton compared the unknown stenographer favorably to Shaw, while hailing her as a “new playwright of unmistakable dramatic genius.” The critic called *Chains* “at once the most brilliant and the deepest problem play by a modern British writer that I have seen since *Major Barbara*.”

*Chains*’s resounding success reached producer Charles Frohman. The American impresario included *Chains* in his 1910 season of London repertory at the Duke of York’s Theatre, in an ambitious program that also included Shaw’s *Misalliance*, Granville-Barker’s *The Madras House*, and John Galsworthy’s *Justice*. Still bound to her office work, Baker could only attend “rehearsals during her lunch hour, the only leisure time she had” (*The Sun*).

A substantial critical hit for Frohman, *Chains* also attracted conflicting interpretations. Some reviewers attributed the play’s power to Baker’s sense of “photographic faithfulness” in “obviously writing of what she really knows” (*The Observer*). Yet others took notice of Baker’s artistry and skill, and the deceptive simplicity of her writing. A critic for *The Bystander*, writing under the pen name of “Jingle,” observed:

This is a great play. It professes to be no more than a commonplace story of very ordinary people, and yet at every turn it gives off an atmosphere of allegory and parable as freely as a rose flings its perfume to the breeze... Every line of it throbs with a real humanity, and the characters that develop it are living things.... Miss Baker paints her picture with a light hand, while



Elizabeth Baker at work in the South Seas.

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all the while she seems to be focusing our attention on the shadows that are not there.

Baker's next plays, the one-acts *Miss Tassey* (1910) and *Edith* (1912), focused upon working women's economic vulnerabilities and struggles for emancipation on their own terms. Baker, meanwhile, continued in her work as a typist. *The New Rochelle Pioneer* reported, "*Chains* made a great sensation and not a little money for its author, but Miss Baker continued and still continues in her position as a public stenographer." Additionally, the autodidactic Baker continued to hone her dramatic craft with copying work in Frohman's London office, where she transcribed "plays by the foremost English playwrights."<sup>2</sup>

Yet, Frohman may have done his protégée a disservice when he commissioned the American playwright Porter Emerson Browne to adapt *Chains* for Broadway audiences. Playing a "special matinee" at the Empire Theatre, Browne's *Chains* not only re-set the play in suburban New Jersey (with Australia re-imagined as South America), but also "succeeded in making the final scene of the play altogether the antithesis of what the author had intended" (*The Sun*). The production's program billed *Chains* as a "play by Porter Emerson Browne (all caps), founded on the

English play of the same title by Elizabeth Baker (in very small type)." Noting that Baker was "herself a working woman entirely familiar with the economic conditions discussed," *The New York Times* observed that "the attempted stealing of her thunder seems a particularly ungracious thing."



Elizabeth Baker's hut at Rarotonga.

London theatrical success proved frustratingly elusive for Baker into the WWI era, despite a critically acclaimed series of productions at England's innovative repertory theaters. These included 1913's *The Price of Thomas Scott* (Gaiety Theatre, Manchester); 1915's *Over a Garden Wall* (Birmingham Repertory Theatre); and 1917's *Partnership* (produced by J.T. Grein at London's Court Theatre). Long independent, the playwright entered into her own romantic partnership in 1915. At the age of thirty-nine, Baker married James Edmund Allaway, a widower who worked in the upholstery trade, and the father of two adult daughters.

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Echoing themes in *Chains*, Baker and Allaway set off for the Pacific island of Rarotonga in January of 1922. As she confided to *The London Weekly* in 1927: "It is so difficult to get a play produced in London that I ran away to the South Seas for eighteen months and lived in a hut there with my husband...in the Cook Islands." Baker realized she had followed a romantic illusion, and that over the garden wall grew "monotonous evergreen vegetation" rather than the "acres of scarlet and purple blooms" that ran riot in her imagination, as she wrote in *The Spectator* in 1926. Baker elaborated, "The sunsets were as wonderful as the most fulsome pen of Hibiscus romanticists ever described, but I should have enjoyed the ocean more if it had been not quite so empty."

In *Rarotonga*, Baker also wrote a play that brought her work in Australia. "Mrs. Allaway" visited the country on both legs of her move to the Cook Islands and befriended members of Sydney's growing repertory theatre scene, including the noted playwright and feminist, Marguerite Ludovia Dale. In 1923, Gregan McMahon's Sydney Repertory Theatre Society followed up its 1921 production of *Chains* (which *The Sydney Morning Herald* praised for its "truth of atmosphere") with Baker's new satire of English suburbia. However, *Bert's Girl* failed to provide Baker with a London comeback when the Birmingham Repertory Theatre produced it at the Royal Court Theatre in 1927.

Despite facing declining production prospects in the early 1930s, Baker continued to write challenging and original plays about women breaking bonds of class and gender. With *Penelope Forgives* (1930; to be produced as a Mint Further Reading on June 29), the playwright created a trenchant problem play about the economic perils confronting divorced women. Baker's final produced new play was the one-act comedy *One of the Spicers* (1932), about a young woman who expresses her desire to "go into the wide world."

Baker herself remained closer to home. Following the death of her husband in 1941, Baker relocated from Bedford Park to Bishop's Stortford, where she lived with a stepsister. Baker's later years brought a small measure of renewed recognition. Between 1959 and 1961, ITV Television Playhouse produced adaptations of *Chains*, *Miss Robinson*, *Over a Garden Wall*, and *The Price of Thomas Scott* (retitled *Paris Round the Corner*). *The Daily Mirror* identified Baker as "Mrs. Gertrude Allaway, an eighty-four-year old widow." The paper quoted her: "It's a wonderful experience at my age to see one's work coming to life again and reaching a vast new audience." Baker died on March 8, 1962, at the age of eighty-five.

Restlessly risk-taking in her movements from suburban London to Australia and the South Seas, and from a sheltered upbringing to a career in the theater, Baker reflected her adventurous life in a versatile body of work. *Chains* started a pattern to

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which Baker repeatedly returned, as she vividly dramatized the tensions between characters' desires to travel toward new horizons, and their obligations to keep rooted in familiar places and familial bonds. Baker's works explore what mobility variously means for working women: whether in terms of social class, professional advancement, or the unencumbered ability to travel. Praised by Rudolf von Weiss as an "authentic social critic of early twentieth-century England," Baker's plays project the timely and original voice of the independent woman who wrote them.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Week in London: Things to See and Hear: From Typist to Playwright," *The London Weekly*, April 9, 1927, p. 478.

<sup>2</sup> "Girl Typist Author of *Chains*, New Play at Criterion Theatre," *The New York Press*, December 15, 1912, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> von Weiss, Dr. Rudolf, "Versions of Emancipation: The Dramatic World of Elizabeth Baker," *Sprachkunst* Vol. 20, 1989, pg. 315.

**MAYA CANTU** Since 2013, Maya has worked on sixteen productions at the Mint. She is the author of the book, *American Cinderellas on the Broadway Musical Stage: Imagining the Working Girl from Irene to Gypsy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). For her essay "Beyond the Rue Pigalle: Recovering Ada 'Bricktop' Smith as 'Muse,' Mentor, and Maker of Transatlantic Musical Theater," published in *Reframing the Musical: Race, Culture and Identity*, Maya was selected as the 2020 recipient of the American Theatre and Drama Society's Vera Mowry Roberts Research and Publication Award. Maya teaches at Bennington College, and received her D.F.A. in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism at Yale School of Drama.

## FURTHER READINGS

### **PENELOPE FORGIVES**

by Elizabeth Baker • Directed by Britt Berke

June 29, 7:30 pm

Theatre Row: 410 West 42nd St.

Free for Members of the First-Priority Club, \$25 for non-members

Join us for a reading of Baker's play *Penelope Forgives*, introduced by Kristin Ceello from CUNY Queens College. This play premiered 21 years after Baker made her dramatic debut with *CHAINS*. In both plays Baker considers the ties that bind, but *PENELOPE...* is a "radical and explicit challenge to the institution of marriage as it stands." *PENELOPE FORGIVES* had a brief run and was Baker's only produced play that was never published. Mint obtained a copy of the typescript from the Lord Chamberlain's collection at the British Library and is delighted to share it with Mint's audience.