

The Welkin

Audition pieces for Wokingham Theatre, June 2026.

Piece 1: Elizabeth

The jury are halfway through deliberations, Elizabeth has just been asked why they should give Sally the benefit of the doubt.

Why? In truth?

Because she has been sentenced to hang on the word of a cuckolded husband. Because her mother Janet says she was not unaccounted for on the night in question but at Janet's house, weeping and frightened with a bloody nose, a fact I learnt from the prison laundry maid, cos it was not admitted to the court. Because every card dealt to her today and for many years before has been an unkind one, because she has been sentenced by men pretending to be certain of things of which they are entirely ignorant, and now we sit here imitating them, trying to make an ungovernable thing governable, I do not ask you to like her. I ask you to hope for her, so that she might know she is worth hoping for. And if you cannot do that for her sake, think instead of the women who will be in this room when that comet comes round again, and how brittle they will think our spirits, how ashamed they will be, that we were given our own dominion and we made it look exactly like the one down there.

Piece 2: Charlotte, Hannah & Mary

Introductions to the characters, delivered as asides to the audience. We would suggest that anyone reading for any of the jury women chose one or more of these speeches to audition for any of the jury women parts.

CHARLOTTE: Mrs Charlotte Cary, widow of Colonel Samuel Cary. I am a visitor to this parish from Colchester. Two daughters, both grown. My hopes for a walk were dashed by a turned ankle so I thought to entertain myself at the trial. I have a dinner engagement at five. I have been promised boiled bacon. I have a special fondness for boiled bacon.

HANNAH: I am Hannah Rusted. My husband's wages have gone down as the price of bread rises. We have three children and for the most part we rub along well enough but since Christmas I have been dreaming dreams wherein my husband is press-ganged into the Navy and when I wake up I am so happy.

MARY: Mary Middleton. Wife to Amos Middleton. I do not know what else to tell you except we have five children and there is a tankard in our house that is haunted. It flies across the room sometimes unbidden but I am the only one to have seen it and my husband says he will not throw out a good tankard on my account.

Piece 3: Sally & Fred

One of the first scenes of the play, introduction to Sally and her husband Fred. This is the night of the comet, and the death of Alice Wax.

Sally is searching for something, Fred enters.

FRED: Home then.

SALLY: Thought you'd be sleeping.

FRED: Four months.

SALLY: I had ten shillings and a nice piece of lace in that tin, where's that gone?

FRED: Four months and not one word.

SALLY: Only four was it? Felt like more. Where's my money Fred?

FRED: I spent that.

SALLY: That's not yours, I put that by.

FRED: You put that by from bilking me on butter, where you been?

SALLY: That's got like a midden in here, don't you know where the broom lives?

FRED: Sally.

SALLY: Thought I'd been away years. Thought I'd walk in here to find it all different and you with a long grey beard but everything's just the same but dirtier.

FRED: Wife, / where have you

SALLY: Disappointing.

FRED: where the fuck have you been?

SALLY: I wanted to see the comet when it came.

FRED: Comet?

SALLY: It has been predicted by Mr Halley, / don't you read the newspaper?

FRED: [don't] talk to me of comets wife, November you left this house on the back of another man's / horse

SALLY: Right, no

FRED: no, do not deny it, you were seen, so do not give me fucking sludder about comets Sally, though I don't doubt you were gazing at stars, flat on your back in a / ditch

SALLY: May I

FRED: I am speaking

SALLY: Oh.

FRED: at church I had to make out you'd gone to mind a sick cousin in Stowmarket. A lie, I told, in the house of God.

SALLY: Going to church is like housework, people judge you by how well you do it, it makes your back ache, and after you have done it, it needs doing all over again a week later.

FRED: That's a dry bob. But you cannot wash a soul as easily as you wash a floor.

SALLY: You are right Fred. Washing a floor is much harder, particularly when you have a dog as we do.

Piece 4: Elizabeth & Coombs

One of the first scenes of the play, introduction to Elizabeth and Coombes. They have a romantic relationship.

Elizabeth is churning butter, they are mid-conversation.

COOMBES: They have caught and tried the murderers of little Alice Wax.

Elizabeth looks up, surprised.

ELIZABETH: I did not realise they had found the, that they had found a body.

COOMBES: Two nights ago the curate noticed a preponderance of crows above the old Pearl house. They found her in pieces in two sacks stuffed up the fireplace.

ELIZABETH: Expect that is the closest a Wax child ever got to sweeping a chimney.

COOMBES: Lizzy! A girl has been killed. And the Waxes are a good family.

ELIZABETH: Certainly. They've a house full of decencies to put between themselves and the rest of the world but now the world has got in nonetheless.

COOMBES: What is the matter with you, they are in grief?

ELIZABETH: I'm sorry, I am tired.

COOMBES: It is only midday.

ELIZABETH: And yet I am tired Billy what is your question?

COOMBES: Lizzy / don't

ELIZABETH: I am sorry for Lady Wax, but seems to me people round here are too ready to mourn little girls and too slow to mourn grown men.

Elizabeth resumes churning butter.

COOMBES: Look, you know I am sympathetic to your grievances, but John Wax is a gentleman

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ELIZABETH: John Wax has enclosed my sister's husband's pasture and given him instead a scrubby spit of land a quarter of the size, I would not dry my linens on it. And David Swain is hanged under the Black Act for killing two deer that were destroying his clover after many requests to John Wax that he should control his beasts.

COOMBES: He was appraised of the law.

ELIZABETH: He is hanged Billy! Hanged for old venison! There are evils happening in this country at present that are worse than the death of a child.

COOMBES: What of poor Lady Wax then? Her life will be an open wound.

ELIZABETH: Good. That's a woman who never had nothing taken from her in her whole life, perhaps the experience will sweeten her, like frost on a parsnip.

COOMBES: I never heard you speak so cruel before.

ELIZABETH: Well you never met me in the middle of my housework before.

Piece 5: Elizabeth, Charlotte, Judith, Mary, Kitty, Emma, Sarah Smith, Sarah Hollis (non-speaking) Hannah, Ann, Peg, Helen, Sally, Coombs (non-speaking)

The jury is early in their deliberations. They are going to examine Sally, who has her hands tied in front of her. Coombs is in the room, not speaking but listening and interested in everything.

ELIZABETH: Shall we begin?

CHARLOTTE: Let us have the older ladies first.

JUDITH: Cats before kittens.

MARY: I am twenty-five, is that old or young?

KITTY: You wait your turn with us, love.

The older matrons (Sarah Smith, Sarah Hollis, Charlotte, Elizabeth, Emma, Helen and Judith) stand around Sally and examine her belly.

ELIZABETH: There is a swelling, to my eye.

EMMA: Not to mine.

CHARLOTTE: Nor to mine. Mrs Brewer?

JUDITH: Yeah, I'd say there's a pod on her, what d'you reckon Sarah?

SARAH SMITH: There's a pod, don't mean she's quickened. Someone have to feel it.

She looks around. No one comes forward. Sarah Hollis sighs. Puts her hand on Sally's belly. Waits. Shakes her head.

SARAH SMITH: Nuffen. Mrs Hollis?

She looks at Sarah Hollis, who shrugs.

SARAH SMITH: You girls, come and see.,

The younger matrons come over, Hannah, Peg, Kitty, Mary and Ann.

HANNAH: I ent wholly sure.

ANN: I think I see something. She is a little round here.

PEG: No, that is only how she carries her fat, she is gotch-gutted, my sister is the same.

KITTY: I dunno.

MARY: Me neither.

ANN: Tell us your symptoms.

HANNAH: Are you dizzy?

SARAH SMITH: Do you have a misery in your stomach? Does it cast off what you put it in?

EMMA: Do you feel too tired to blink?

KITTY: Does everything taste of onions?

CHARLOTTE: Are you troubled by your sour belchings?

PEG: Are you thirsty? Sweating?

MARY: Do you piss more than you drink?

JUDITH: What about your dairy, is it tender?

ANN: Have you lost all desire to eat meat?

HELEN: Are you very warm?

PEG: Or cold, I am ever so cold.

ANN: Do you feel sometimes merry and sometimes sad with no cause?

SARAH SMITH: Do you have a sore throat?

KITTY: It's March and it's rafty, we've all sore throats.

SARAH SMITH: Twenty-one children I've had, all of them started with a sore throat. One time that turned out I had smallpox instead. I nearly died but I was so relieved.

MARY: Do you have a great desire to eat strange things, such as, for example, a piece of your husband's buttocks?

SALLY: I've got the shits. And when I lay down to sleep at night a great crack rents the sky and angels come flooding out of it.

SARAH SMITH: I never heard that one.

MARY: My granny saw an angel.

HANNAH: She never.

MARY: She did. Last time the comet came. It flapped its wings so hard the thatch come off the roof and that night, she gave birth to a very hairy boy with two thumbs on one hand.

Piece 6: Charlotte, Ann, Judith, Elizabeth, Emma, Charlotte, Hannah, Kitty, Peg, Helen

The jury has just started, the women are still getting to know one another. Elizabeth has just opened a window and there is the sound of a baying, angry crowd outside.

CHARLOTTE: Have none of them employment to go to?

ANN: They are wild, are they not?

JUDITH: They had thought to see her swinging by now.

ELIZABETH: They are ahead of themselves.

EMMA: Oh no. She'll piss when she can't whistle. Sooner or later.

CHARLOTTE: She must look to the Welkin. There is no earthly help for her now.

Elizabeth studies Charlotte.

ELIZABETH: Beg pardon, I never caught your name.

Emma rushes forward, with a great show of manners.

EMMA: Allow me to, Mrs Charlotte Cary, Mrs Elizabeth Luke, Mrs Cary is fore-matron of our jury, visiting our province from Colchester / and

ELIZABETH: Our what?

EMMA: Our province.

ELIZABETH: Our what?

EMMA: Our province.

ELIZABETH: Ohhh.

EMMA: And Mrs Luke is the local midwife.

ELIZABETH: I also keep the town whites bag so if you dirty your linens while you're here, or you've bloodstains you can't shift, knock me up.

CHARLOTTE: I certainly shall.

ELIZABETH: Soak it in salt and cold water.

CHARLOTTE: Beg pardon?

ELIZABETH: That's how you shift a bloodstain. Salt and cold water. And there is our help.

Charlotte looks at the others and laughs, baffled and unnerved.

JUDITH (*quiet*): Pack it in, mawther.

Elizabeth looks at Judith. A tiny nod.

ELIZABETH: No, I was only saying, we might help the prisoner.

CHARLOTTE: Help her how? She cannot be helped. She is an animal.

ELIZABETH: Her claim may be true.

The matrons, apart from Elizabeth and Helen, laugh.

HANNAH: You have not seen her Lizzy, she is thin as reeds.

KITTY: Very plain.

ANN: Bovine.

KITTY: She stood in the dock, completely silent

JUDITH: did not say a thing

CHARLOTTE: but made impertinent expressions at the comments of the magistrate

PEG: and when Lord Wax took the stand she, well she was

KITTY: flirting. With a father in grief. Completely unbidden.

ELIZABETH: Perhaps not completely. She worked in the household, did she not?

KITTY: So?

ELIZABETH: So John Wax takes it as his personal duty to fuck all the servant girls, does he not?

The matrons smother gasps.

HELEN: Lizzy, are you, are you quite well?

ELIZABETH: Even if we support her claim, that will not mean a pardon. She will still be transported.

EMMA: Lizzy she is lying! And she will hang, and when that rabble are let loose there'll be little left for the surgeons.

ELIZABETH: Surgeons? What surgeons?

ANN: The Justice was not content to merely hang her, he sentenced she should be anatomised afterwards.

The matrons shudder, and stand in silence, listening to the crowd. Judith suddenly starts forward.

JUDITH: Enough.

She shuts the window. Fans herself.