

Change of Heart

A one-act play by Caetlyn McLean

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Contact:

contact@caetlynmclean.com

HISTORY

Change of Heart began as an audio project for a university assignment way back in 2006. Named *Sounds of Darkness*, it was told from the viewpoint of a young blind woman trapped in a coma. She used audio clues heard by the activity around her and various flashbacks to work out how she ended up in the coma in the first place.

Caetlyn received a Distinction for her efforts. She then went on to work on the second phase for the production as part of a more advanced assignment – adapting it into a small film known as *Inner Core*.

Using the audio from *Sounds of Darkness*, *Inner Core* was set mainly on a theatre stage. The flashback scenes were filmed in a house some weeks previously and were projected onto a scrim which was co-incidentally used for another unrelated project at the time. Rather than seeing the scrim as a setback, it added a new form of separation between the main character, Ellie, who was on the stage and her sister, Beth, sitting alone in the audience watching Ellie's performance.

Inner Core was met with critical acclaim which prompted the next stage of the production to be written as a feature film – *Inner Paradox*. More scenes were added to the existing script and the film also included Beth's thought processes and resulting consequences of her actions towards Ellie. Sadly, due to lack of finances, the film never came to fruition.

Instead, in 2017, Caetlyn changed the character of Ellie to Alex and re-wrote the film as the stage production you see before you.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Overall Objective:

Mobility and simplicity are the keys for the overall performance of this play which means it is designed to be performed at any venue with minimal issues.

Therefore, props and scenery are restricted to one or two items per scene. This also includes minimal costume changes for each actor, allowing them to concentrate on remembering their lines rather than hurrying to change costumes for every scene.

Cast numbers:

As mentioned above, the key objective is simplicity. Therefore, the cast number for this production has deliberately been minimised for space on stage as well as efficiency of the overall performance.

Stage setting:

The majority of the play is set in an intensive care unit with the first to two scene set in an office and kitchen.

In order for the scenes within the Intensive Care Unit to work with the script, there are certain medical props and furniture items that are essential for the scene and will need to be sourced for maximum accuracy.

Sound:

Much of the play's scenery are introduced using soundscapes designed by the production's sound designer. Alex's thought process while she is in a coma will need to be recorded prior to the stage production itself.

Costumes:

Once again, simplicity is the key. The play is set in the modern day with normal street clothes and medical attire.

Medical props:

As mentioned above, several medical props and furniture will need to be obtained for this production. They are as follows:

- Medical bed with side rails and movable headrest
- Ventilator machine
- Two monitors
- IV stand with bag of fluid
- Ventilator tubing (needs to be attached to Alex)
- Tympani thermometer
- Resuscitation trolley

CAST

Females

Beth

Alex

Samantha

Claudia

Males

Doctor

Murray

Lawyer/Gareth

SCENE 1

The stage is divided into two sections. On side is an office with a chair behind a desk and two opposite. There is an in-out tray on the desk flowing with folders and papers. A small radio is resting on the office desk, softly playing music in the background.

On the other side of the stage is a kitchen area with a table and two chairs. There are two bowls of spaghetti set out as well as two glasses of orange juice.

ALEX and BETH are sitting on chairs in the office, waiting. ALEX has her eyes closed in meditation while BETH is staring up at the ceiling nervously.

BETH begins tapping on the chair's armrest. BETH's continuous rhythmic tapping irritates ALEX and she opens her eyes to looks at her hand.

ALEX

Will you stop that? It's driving me nuts!

BETH stops tapping and looks at her with a small grin.

BETH (*teases*)

Cover your ears then.

ALEX (*not amused*)

Oh, very funny.

BETH just shakes her head, wondering what the fuss is all about.

LAWYER enters. He picks up an envelope from the desk before turning his attention to ALEX and BETH who stand in greeting. LAWYER shakes their hands. He is slightly hung over.

LAWYER

Sorry, I'm a late. I was held up in court. (*takes a seat*) Now, it appears your father wrote a will before he passed on.

ALEX and BETH sit down again.

LAWYER rummages through the overflowing in tray, desperately trying to find something. He glances briefly at ALEX and BETH, and gives an embarrassed smile before going back to his search.

LAWYER

Just bear with me. It's here somewhere.

Papers and folders fall off the table as ALEX and BETH exchange bemused glances.

After some time, LAWYER pulls out an envelope.

LAWYER

Ah, here it is!

He opens an envelope and takes out a letter. He gives another smile before nervously clearing his throat.

LAWYER

It says here ... "I, Matthew Joseph Hasting, hereby leave my collection of 13th Century coins to my eldest daughter, Bethany Joanne Hasting. To my youngest daughter, Alexandra Charlotte Hasting, I leave the house and the amount currently residing in my combined bank accounts to the sum of \$750,000."

BETH just stares at him in disbelief for a moment.

BETH

Whoa! Wait a sec. I just get a bunch of useless coins and Alex gets the house and all the money?

ALEX

Look, don't worry about it. We'll share it amongst ourselves.

Unsatisfied, BETH just gets up and crosses the stage to the kitchen, leaving LAWYER somewhat shell-shocked by her reaction. She sits at the table, waiting.

ALEX is slightly embarrassed.

ALEX (to LAWYER)

Sorry about that.

Lights change as LAWYER exits.

ALEX joins BETH at the table and starts eating. ALEX takes a sip from her glass and frowns.

ALEX

There's something about this juice ...

BETH

What about it?

ALEX

It tastes ... I dunno ... different. Did you buy a different brand or something?

BETH takes a sip of hers and shrugs.

BETH

Tastes alright to me. Maybe it's just your tastebuds.

ALEX (*sighs*)

Yeah, maybe ...

ALEX takes another sips, still frowning, but shrugs and accepts the taste.

They don't say anything for moment and ALEX looks up at BETH to see her toying with her food.

ALEX

What's wrong?

BETH

Uh? Oh, nothing. The will reading just rattled me, that's all. (*pause*) What was Dad thinking? What the hell am I going to do with a bunch of 13th century coins?

ALEX

They're probably worth a mint though.

BETH

Yeah, but who in their right mind would pay for it? It's beyond ridiculous! I might as well just donate them to a museum.

ALEX's phone suddenly beeps.

ALEX (*sheepishly*)

Sorry.

She takes it out and reads the message. Her mouth drops open.

ALEX

I can't believe he would even do that!

BETH

Can't believe who did what?

ALEX

He's just called it off!

BETH

Murray? Did he say why?

ALEX

Only that he was "thinking about it"! I bet there's someone else and he's too gutless to tell me.

She puts the phone on the table and starts toying with her food as well but not really eating it.

BETH (*sympathetically*)
You okay?

ALEX blinks and looks up at her.

ALEX
Yeah, sorry. That text just threw me. I just can't believe he actually called it off!

BETH
I don't blame you. Most people do it face-to-face.

ALEX
Thanks for being so understanding.

BETH
Not a problem. I probably would've reacted the same way. (*pause*) Look, I know you're probably not up to it anymore but try and finish the spaghetti. I'd hate for the smell to permeate the room.

ALEX (*smiles*)
You can talk! (*pause*) I'm okay. I'm just pissed off with him, that's all.

They continue their meal.

BETH nervously watches as ALEX takes a mouthful and unconsciously taps on the table. ALEX looks at her.

ALEX
'You nervous about something?

BETH
No. What makes you say that?

ALEX
You always do that when you're nervous.

BETH
Sorry. 'Bad habit.

BETH licks her lips nervously as ALEX takes a sip of the juice and looks at her watch discreetly. ALEX doesn't notice and continues eating.

ALEX
You should do some meditation or something.

Taking one last sip, ALEX finishes her meal and drink and gets up to clear the table. She starts to feel queasy. BETH notices.

BETH
What's the matter?

ALEX
I ... I dunno know. My stomach feels weird.

BETH
Oh very funny. Butterflies in the stomach ... Ha ha ha ...

ALEX suddenly can't breathe as she holds onto the table for support, blinking violently.

ALEX (*in agony*)
Oh, god! What's happening to me?

BETH
How should I know? Stop fooling around!

Dizzy, ALEX starts losing her balance.

ALEX (*panting*)
I'm serious, Beth. I can't see ... (*She starts to choke.*) Help ... me ...
Please!!

BETH makes no attempt to move.

BETH (*snorts*)
And you're talking about me being nervous.

ALEX looks at her in horror.

ALEX (*slurred*)
Beth, what ... are you ... doing? ... I'm not -!

ALEX takes a few more unsteady steps before collapsing onto the floor, unmoving.

Terror sets in as we hear her inner thoughts.

ALEX (VO)
What's happening to me? I can't move. Beth? You still there? Why aren't you helping me? I ... can't ... breathe ... (*desperate*) Help!

Spotlight on ALEX.

ALEX's heart is slowing down and her body starts twitching.

ALEX (VO)
Can't ... think ... need-

Without warning, she goes into a seizure but BETH still doesn't move. Instead, she continues to sit there watching the seizure becomes more violent.

ALEX's heart stops and she loses consciousness. She starts to weakly gasp for breath (agonal breathing) - with each breath growing further apart until she stops breathing completely.

Lights up and turn red as BETH calmly sits there for a moment, looking down at her.

BETH (VO, *sneers*)

Now, you've done it. Alex is going to die and it'll be on your head! All because you didn't have the guts to tell it to her face. You had to go and poison her, didn't you?

BETH

Shut up! You have no idea what you're talking about!

BETH (VO)

Are you kidding? I'm you, remember! You better hurry up and do something fast. You've wasted enough time arguing with me already! (*She wriggles uncomfortably in her seat.*) Well? What are you waiting for? Go on! She's not breathing anymore and her heart's probably stopped by now!

BETH sits there for a moment, then suffers an attack of conscience and taps on the table once more. Lights go back to normal.

BETH

Alex? You okay? (*She rushes over to ALEX.*) Alex? Can you hear me?

She tries to rouse her and starts panicking when ALEX doesn't respond.

BETH (*in desperation*)

No, no, no! Come on, Alex. Wake up. You can do it. I know you can ... What have I done?

BETH bends down to access ALEX's breathing and starts to do chest compressions as the lights go down.

SCENE 2

The stage is divided into three sections. To the right is an empty space with two chairs representing a waiting room. The middle stage is the nurses' station with a desk, two phones and a computer. To the left is ALEX's medical bed in the intensive care ward. It is currently being blocked from view by a curtain.

BETH is sitting on one of the two chairs in the waiting room. She is tapping her feet nervously.

DOCTOR enters the stage left to meet BETH who stands up to greet him.

DOCTOR

It's not looking good. She's not breathing on her own so we've had to put her on a ventilator. We're running a series of tests on her to try and ascertain what's wrong so it'll be a waiting game. At this stage, we can't seem to rouse her which means she'll be in a coma for a while.

BETH (*anxious*)

Can I see her?

DOCTOR

Not just yet, I'm afraid. She's still very unstable. (*pause*) In the meantime, was there anyone you would like us to contact for you? Your parents perhaps?

BETH

No, it's okay. Mum's due back from holidays in a week. I can't let her see Alex like this. She'll be gutted!

DOCTOR

You look exhausted. It must have been a very emotional day for you. Why don't you go home and get some rest? The hospital will contact you when she has stabilised.

BETH

Yes, thank you. I might do that.

BETH leaves.

The curtain around ALEX's bed is pulled back to reveal her lying unconscious in it, attached to a heart monitor and ventilator. An intravenous line runs from her left arm into a bag of clear fluid which is attached to an electronic pump. The head of the bed has been elevated to a 45 degree angle. At the foot of the bed is a large metal reading stand with various medical charts clipped to it. She is wearing a standard hospital gown.

CLAUDIA is standing by her bedside, monitoring her. DOCTOR heads to the bed.

DOCTOR

Claudia, how is she?

CLAUDIA

Still unresponsive, Doctor. Pulse weak and irregular. BP 85 over 60. Oxygen level at 94%. Pupils are bilateral fixed and dilated. Coma scale at 3. She's lucky the ambulance got to her when they did.

DOCTOR (to ALEX)

Alex, I'm just going to test your reflexes using the sole of your left foot. Ready?

DOCTOR goes to the end of the bed and scraps ALEX's foot. It jerks slightly.

CLAUDIA

Reflexes still intact but otherwise unresponsive.

DOCTOR (to CLAUDIA)

Okay, give her the standard 1mg IV of adrenaline. Lets see if we can stabilise her heart again.

Lights change as DOCTOR exits. CLAUDIA moves to the nurses station where GARETH is sitting at a desk.

GARETH

Well, we have the initial blood test results back. She had alcohol reading of .07 but that shouldn't be enough to cause any major issues.

CLAUDIA

I don't really understand it. Her sister said she didn't have any heart problems so she shouldn't be having tachycardia.

ALEX (VO, *groans*)

My head hurts.

GARETH

Maybe she accidentally ingested something she shouldn't have. If that's the case, this is either a case of attempted suicide or attempted murder.

ALEX (VO)

Don't feel ... good. Body ... numb ...

Her body starts twitching but neither GARETH or CLAUDIA notice.

CLAUDIA

Don't even go there. We're not here to judge anyone. Lets just wait until the toxicology report comes back.

ALEX (VO, *slurs*)
Can't think straight ...

ALEX's heart monitor starts sounding.

ALEX (VO)
Help ...

*CLAUDIA and GARETH look at ALEX then at each other.
CLAUDIA gets up and moves towards the bed.*

CLAUDIA
It's alright, Alex. Just try and calm down. We'll work this out.

She looks at the monitor.

CLAUDIA
Your blood pressure's a little high but I'm just going to test your pupil reaction. Just stay with me.

She takes out a torch and gently pries ALEX's eyes open and shines the torch into it.

CLAUDIA (*to GARETH, concerned*)
Gareth, we're going to need the doctor here again.

GARETH makes his way to the bed.

GARETH
What's wrong?

CLAUDIA (*urgent*)
Her pupils aren't reacting and her BP is slowly increasing.

GARETH (*thoughtfully*)
Her heart rate's dropping as well which means she might have increased ICP. You better give her some Mannitol. I'll call the doctor.

CLAUDIA nods and injects some fluid into ALEX's IV line and she relaxes while GARETH heads back to the nurses station and picks up the phone.

Lights change as BETH enters and makes her way to ALEX's bed. She looks at ALEX somberly.

CLAUDIA
She suffered some brain swelling but we've managed to bring it back down with some antibiotics and minor surgery.

BETH

Can she actually hear us?

CLAUDIA

No one knows for sure but we do know that the hearing is usually the last to go.

BETH

She just looks so vulnerable lying there. *(pause)* Do we know what caused the swelling?

ALEX (VO, *groggy*)

Beth?

CLAUDIA

We're not entirely sure. Whatever caused her to end up here is wrecking havoc with her body. Do you know what she ate or drank before she collapsed?

BETH

I made her some spaghetti and orange juice before going out to hang the washing. *(hasty)* But I made it the way I always have.

CLAUDIA

Hey, it's okay. I'm not trying to lay blame on anyone. I'm just trying to help you work out what happened.

ALEX (VO, *moans*)

My ... head ...

CLAUDIA

There is some good news. Her pulse is getting stronger so there's a high chance she can still hear you. The best thing you can do for her now is talk to her. I just need to do some paperwork. *(to ALEX)* Alex, I'll be back to do your obs.

She leaves the bedside, leaving BETH alone with ALEX, and heads to the nurses' station where GARETH is on the computer. She takes a sit next to GARETH and starts writing on a clipboard.

BETH looks at ALEX uncomfortably for a moment then takes a seat. She taps nervously on the bedside.

BETH

I don't really know what to say. It just feels so weird talking to you but not knowing if you can actually hear me.

There is a long pause. BETH is starting to feel extremely guilty. She takes a deep breath and looks away.

Coloured lights suddenly flash across the stage in quick succession but neither CLAUDIA, GARETH nor BETH react to it.

ALEX (VO)
Help ...

BETH (*guilty*)
It was a really, really stupid thing to do. You know I don't usually do things on a whim. I don't know what came over me. It just ... happened.

She looks to ALEX but there is no reaction from her sister.

ALEX (VO)
Feel ... numb ...

BETH
Don't die on me. Please? I feel really awful about this. You have to believe me.

ALEX's body starts twitch and her eyes slowly open, unfocused.

BETH (*hopeful*)
Alex?

ALEX (VO, *slurs*)
Burning ... rubber. What-

The heart monitor starts beeping faster as ALEX's whole body slowly stiffens.

BETH (*nervous*)
Can you hear me?

ALEX suddenly goes into a seizure as BETH looks on in horror as the ventilator alarm goes off.

BETH
Oh god. Nurse, help!

ALEX's body movements get more violent and CLAUDIA comes rushing up to the bed as GARETH looks on, alert.

CLAUDIA
It's okay, Alex, I'm just going to give you something to relax those muscles.

She takes a syringe and fills it with fluid. She tries to hold ALEX down but she is moving too much.

CLAUDIA (*calls out*)
Gareth! I need a hand here!

GARETH rushes up to her.

CLAUDIA
She's moving too much. I can't get a clear shot.

*ALEX's seizure continues as does the ventilator alarm.
CLAUDIA reaches over and presses a button on the ventilator,
silencing it.*

GARETH
Have you got it ready? I'll hold her down.

CLAUDIA
Yeah, right here.

They struggle against ALEX as her seizure continues. GARETH soon manages to hold her arm while CLAUDIA injects the fluid into ALEX's IV line.

The seizure eventually dies down.

ALEX (VO, *sleepy*)
Hurts ... Can't .. move ... Where's ...

ALEX slowly passes out again, her body still twitching slightly.

CLAUDIA presses the button on the ventilator again and the normal breathing sounds come back on.

GARETH
I'll go write it up.

CLAUDIA nods as GARETH heads back to the Nurses' Station.

CLAUDIA (*stroking ALEX's head*)
That's it. Just try and sleep it off for now.

BETH
What just happened?

CLAUDIA goes to the foot of the bed and takes the clipboard.

CLAUDIA
She suffered a severe seizure, possibly from the brain swelling. She's not out of the woods yet but we'll need to keep a close eye on her.

She looks the monitors next to the bed and starts to write on the clipboard.

BETH jumps as her phone beeps which causes ALEX's hand to twitch briefly. CLAUDIA instinctively, and gently, holds her hand down.

BETH

Sorry ... (She takes it out and reads the text message displayed. She stares at it in dismay.) Oh, crap ...

CLAUDIA looks at her, curiously.

BETH *(flustered)*

I've got to go. There's something I need to do. (She stands up and strokes ALEX's hair.) Hey, I gotta go to work but I'll be back later, okay?

She looks intently at her for a moment and, suddenly uncomfortable, exits.

GARETH and CLAUDIA watch her go before exchanging glances as the lights go down.

SCENE 3

BETH is on her way to see ALEX with a small white teddy bear wearing a velvet blue bow tie when she overhears GARETH and CLAUDIA talking to each other about her.

Curious, she stops at the entrance of the unit and listens. Neither of them see her there.

GARETH

I don't know how she can do it. If it were me, I'd have a nervous breakdown.

CLAUDIA

If you love your sister as much as Beth does, you probably wouldn't think twice about it.

GARETH

She's in here just about everyday. I reckon she deserves some sort of medal. Talk about dedication.

BETH begins to shift uncomfortably and to tries and calm herself down as the conversation between GARETH and CLAUDIA continues. She subconsciously fiddles with the bow tie on the teddy bear.

GARETH

You know what I admire about her the most? Is that the fact she is still able to go back to work after everything that's happened.

CLAUDIA

Well, she can't exactly put her life on hold. Someone needs to pay the bills.

GARETH

Maybe. Although, being a first aid instructor, I thought she'd at least take a few days off. Imagine trying to teach CPR straight after using it to save your own sister.

BETH suddenly makes a horrific realisation and looks at her watch.

BETH (*softly*)

Shit! Hank's gonna kill me!

She hurries down the corridor, taking the teddy bear back with her.

GARETH looks up, curiously, and comes out just in time to see her disappear. He shakes his head and returns to the nurses station where CLAUDIA is doing some paperwork on the computer, looking up briefly to check on ALEX.

She looks back, staring, at the computer screen.

CLAUDIA

Oh, boy ...

GARETH

What's the matter?

CLAUDIA

Alex's urine test results came back. *(pause)* She's pregnant.

GARETH

Does her sister know? What's her name?

CLAUDIA

Beth. I don't think so or she would've said something.

GARETH

I dunno. I'm not sure I trust her.

CLAUDIA

Gareth, don't tell me you using her as a guinea pig. Just leave her alone. Seriously, ever since you took that psyche course ...

GARETH

I am serious. There's something about her that doesn't quite add up. Every time she comes in, she acts all nervous.

CLAUDIA

Well, what do you expect? Her sister's lying in a coma.

GARETH

Okay, next time she comes in, watch her for a couple of minutes. It's like she's hiding something from us.

CLAUDIA

Was there anything in particular or are you just going by gut instincts here?

GARETH

Have you heard her tapping?

CLAUDIA

Come to think of it, it does have a rather unique rhythm. Almost like the ringtone of her mobile.

GARETH *(smiles)*

Well, there's some food for thought.

CLAUDIA *(thoughtfully)*

Yes ...

ALEX's monitor alarm goes off, causing CLAUDIA and GARETH to look up.

ALEX (VO, pants)
So thirsty!

CLAUDIA heads out of the station to ALEX's bed. ALEX is shivering.

CLAUDIA
It's okay, Alex. I got it.

She feels ALEX's forehead.

ALEX (VO)
Can't ... think.

CLAUDIA
You're feeling fairly warm. Let me just take your temperature for a moment. I'm just going to stick the thermometer in your ear again.

She places a thermometer into ALEX's ear until it beeps. ALEX's body starts to twitch.

CLAUDIA (concerned)
41 five. That's not good. I'm going to add more fluid to your IV to try and bring it down.

ALEX (VO)
Help ...

The alarm continues as CLAUDIA fiddles with the intravenous pump. ALEX relaxes slightly.

ALEX (VO)
Tired ... need ... sleep.

CLAUDIA
We might have to get the doctor in. I'll be back soon.

She returns to the station.

CLAUDIA (urgent)
Gareth, I think you better page the doctor. We have a problem.

GARETH
What's wrong?

CLAUDIA takes a seat.

CLAUDIA

Alex's tachycardic again and her temp's 41 five. Her BP is slowly dropping too. I've given her some extra fluid but it doesn't seem to be making too much difference.

GARETH (*concerned*)

That doesn't sound good at all. I wonder what's causing it. We can't seem to stabilize her.

CLAUDIA

I've often wondered that myself. Not matter what we do, she seems to take a few steps back and we're right back where we began. Maybe we need to send for another blood test.

GARETH

What was it she came in with again?

CLAUDIA (*thoughtfully*)

The ambos said she was in respiratory arrest when they got to her but her sister said she hadn't eaten anything out of the ordinary. She said that Alex had orange juice with her lunch the day she came in but the blood test showed traces of alcohol. Something just doesn't make sense.

GARETH

Well, I'll page the doctor while you organize that second test and we'll go from there.

CLAUDIA nods gets up to go to ALEX's bed while GARETH picks up the phone.

Lights down.