

## **Street of Sorrows**

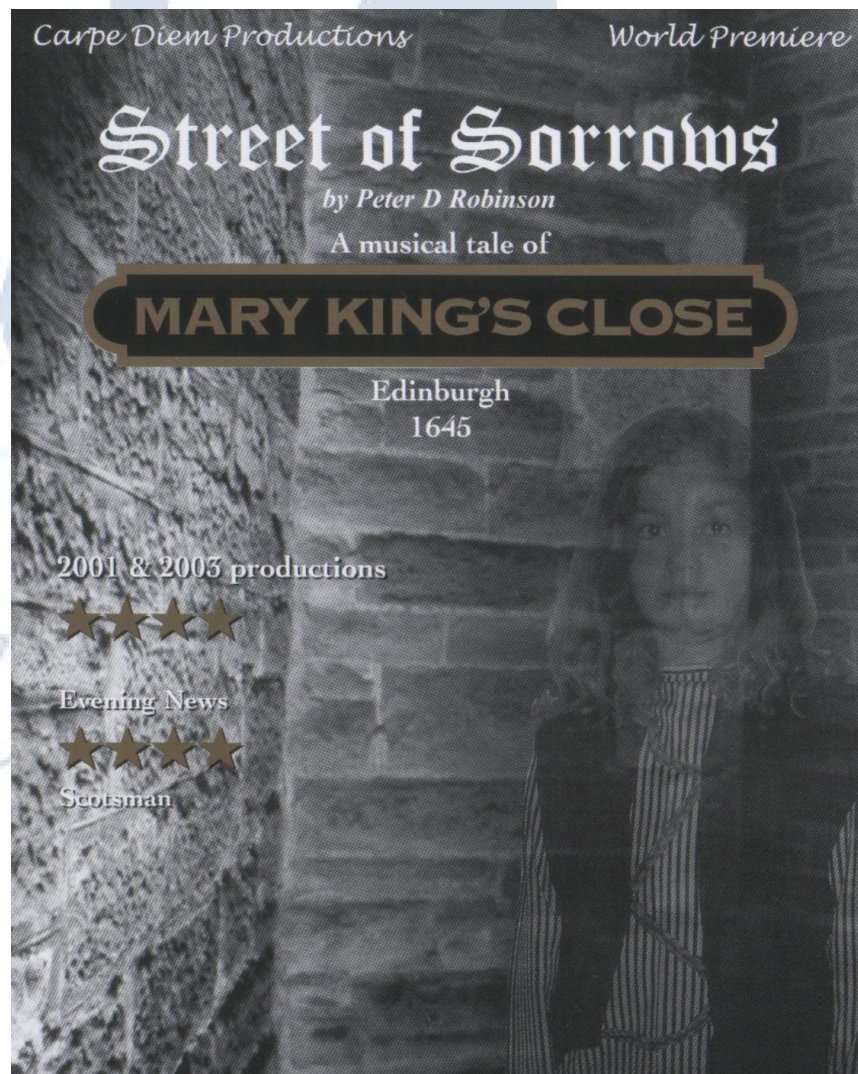
The musical “Street of Sorrows” takes us back to 1645 and plague-ridden Edinburgh. It tells the tale of the residents of Mary King's Close as the city succumbs to the sickness.

First the city is quarantined - no one in or out, and then the street is closed. Although they are fed by the council, the residents will either live or die on their own.

Two thirds of Scotland's population was wiped out by the disease which swept Europe, so there was little chance of survival for the people of Mary King's close.

Characters in the musical are based on real people who lived in the Close.

Street of Sorrows has to be unusual, even by musical standards, because every single character dies!



## Street of Sorrows - synopsis

Mary King's Close – present day: Annie McKinnon, a ghostly child, draws us into the story – *When My Heart is Still*

Mary King's Close, 1645

The residents of Mary King's Close are unsettled by the news that the plague has returned. Like waves of death, the pestilence has swept across Europe for three hundred years. Who will live and who will die? The luges (huts for the sick and dying) have been re-opened; Parliament has gone to Stirling; the Court of Session has also quit Edinburgh. People despair: *What Kind of Life is This?*

Mary King's younger son, William, is frustrated and unhappy; he wishes for a life beyond that which he has. His brother, Alexander, is about to take a trip to France to buy fabric for his mother, a seamstress of some renown within the city. Mary King's servant, Forbes Ramsay, tries to persuade William that the *Mountains* he wants to climb will still be there tomorrow when he is old enough to travel to them.

Alexander King takes leave of his fiancée, Margret Coupper (one of his mother's sewing girls). She regrets he has to go, but would rather let him go now – acknowledging the risk that he may not return, than hold him now only to lose him later: *Go Your Way*.

Over the next few days people become progressively unsettled as more and more rumours circulate. The sickness seems to be spreading in the City. William Murray has begun to seek solace in drink. Forbes tries to talk to him, but William lashes out, striking his friend: *Suddenly Strangers*. Confused, Forbes overhears Alisone Paterson (William's employer) berate him and slap him repeatedly.

Next morning news is issued from the council: *The City Closed*. No-one may enter or leave. Fear spreads. Janet McKinnon is distraught that her youngest child has not been Christened and, because of the closure of the kirks and the ban on public gathering, she is concerned that, should he fall victim to the plague, he will not be accepted into Heaven. Bessie, a wise woman, organises a Highland Christening for the babe, which the residents of the Close take as an excuse for an impromptu ceilidh: *The Fairy Folk, Salt on the Devil's Tail, A Silver Six-Pence*. At the height of the celebration,

Alisone Paterson falls ill. Bessie Huchisone knows that the pestilence has entered the Close.

That same evening the news is issued that, because of Alisone's death – and the huge numbers of the sick who are stretching the city council's resources to the limit – the Close is to be quarantined. The Paterson house is to be used as a sick house and as a mortuary: *Let it be Over Soon*.

Three weeks later and the Close's inhabitants, fewer each day, gather to pray: *Shelter Me*. More and more they are comforting the dying rather than caring for the sick. Mary King nurses her son William. *What Times are These?* she asks. Her daughter, Phemie, is concerned for her mother's health.

Mary Lokie is very sick. She is to be taken to the Paterson house, but her husband will not let William Murray and John Rosses take her from him: *The Girl with the Raven Hair*. She dies in his arms and he, broken hearted, carries her to the Paterson house himself.

Alexander King has flouted the law and entered the City and returned to the close to be with Margret. He has arrived just in time to help carry the bodies of his younger brother and sisters to the Paterson house. Margret and Alexander are reunited: *Suddenly Everything is Clear*. Although death seems certain, they wish to marry. Mary King arranges with Bessie Huchisone to have a Highland wedding, a hand-fasting. Forbes laments Alexander's return; he can no longer pretend that one day Margret may return his love: *Dreams*.

Margret and Alexander are wed in the old way: *The Hand-Fasting*. Despite the death that is all around, the residents try to make the occasion as light-hearted and joyful as they can, singing *The Lassie fae the Connongate*.

Soon it is the Sabbath and few are left alive in the Close. Those remaining see no reason, since the Close is quarantined, not to have a public gathering so they gather to sing and pray: *Shelter Me – reprise*. News is brought that Forbes has hanged himself. Mary King, guessing the reason, forbids that Margret be told, preferring to let her daughter-in-law enjoy the few days of happiness she has left: *When My Heart is Still*.

# Street of Sorrows

Cast in order of speaking

Annie McKinnon – a little girl	Brodi Orkney
William Murray – servant to Alisone Paterson	Duncan Robertson
Mary King – a wealthy widow	Jan Stuart
Alisone Paterson – a wealthy woman	Jackie Zinkiewics
Bessie Huchisone – a wise woman	Norma Carr
Dr Arnott	Nigel Orkney
Janet McKinnon – Annie’s mother	Kenna Orkney
James Lokie – a middle-aged man	Iain Hughes
Mary Lokie – his wife	Linda Robertson
William King – Mary King’s younger son	Billy Naismith
Forbes Ramsay – servant to Mary King	Peter Robinson
John Rosses – council employee	Phillip Carr
Margret Coupper – sewing girl to Mary King	Kirsty Anderson
Alexander King – Mary King’s eldest	Alastair Dinnie
Meg O’Donnel – friend to Bessie Huchisone	Norma Walker
Phemie King – Mary King’s daughter	Robyn Sinclair

## Other Residents of the Close

Martin Butler, Camilla Carr, Anne Easson, Sandra Filshill, Betty Ganson, Colin Gourlay, Eric Govan, James Hannah, Elspeth Hay, Carole Kerr, Jim Kerr, Diane Kinnear, Fiona Macpherson, Marueen McCue, Anne Mirtle, David Mitchinson, Ronnie Murdoch, Brogan Orkney, Audrey Westwaters, Alan Woolley, Hannah Woolley

## Musicians

Piano – Dorothy Moncrieff

Keyboard – Alan Gibson

Violin – Stewart Webster

## Production Note

Mary King's close exists: you can visit it on the Royal Mile, opposite St. Giles Cathedral. During an outbreak of plague in 1645, the close was quarantined. The city council, for the time, was very forward thinking: they built huts at various sites outwith the city environs where the sick and dying could be cared for in an attempt to halt the spread of the sickness; they provided food for the sick whether they could pay or not, and introduced various laws to try and stem the flow of death. Medical knowledge was far less advanced than today, and although Edinburgh was to become a world centre for medical training, that time was over a century in the future. All the city council was sure of was that if you were near someone who was sick the chances were that you too would become ill. If you became ill, you were many more times likely to die than to survive.

The people we meet in "Street of Sorrows" actually lived in the Close at around the time of the plague outbreak in 1645. Wee Annie, the spectral child believed to still wander the close, may have been called McKinnon or McKenzie – no one knows for certain, although research continues. Mary King herself died in 1644, the year before events in this story. Of the others, not much is known but their names. There are records, but in the seventeenth century much of what we have access to in today's society simply did not exist. Property use and ownership, contracts, wills and legal disputes would be recorded officially, but little else. So, James Lokie – though he definitely lived in the Close – may have been a tailor, a baker, or a tavern owner – we cannot be sure. Perhaps one day we will find out.

We have tried, allowing that "Street of Sorrows" is a fictional tale about the dreadful events of 1645, to maintain historical accuracy. We trust that Mary King and Wee Annie will forgive us where we transgress.