

A String Section

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As chamber outfits traditionally do, the four female performers of *A String Section* wear little black dresses: not too showy, not too skimpy; simple, classy, clinging just so to their curves. Each sits in a wooden kitchen chair and looks out at the audience, with an expression that's demure but tinged with curiosity. Gradually, each woman leans down and, without letting her torso lose contact with the chair, begins methodically to hack at its legs with a saw.

Metal claws into wood, with scraping sounds that are surprisingly whispering and soft, and through this slow destruction emerges a startling disquisition on female experience, and the impossible balancing acts we're expected – by society, by other women, and by our selves – to maintain; on the animal that lurks within women and the ways in which men see us as meat. Ladylike composure is quickly abandoned: the women contort their bodies as they curl around the chairs, stretching to reach behind them, beneath them; their legs splay apart, voluptuous thighs on full display. There is so much of sex in these contortions – the “exciting” sex you're encouraged to attempt by women's magazines to keep men interested; the stupidly athletic sex of Hollywood movies; the ugly emotionless sex of porn. As their physical exertions increase, and intransigent wood refuses to snap, the women begin grunting and sweating with effort; now they have the single-minded focus of women desperate to climax – and, further along in the natural chain, struggling to give birth. Gradually chair legs give way beneath brute force, and so the absurd attempt to maintain balance begins: they flail and overstretch themselves, as women who attempt to fulfil multiple roles in life always flail and overstretch themselves; now and then one of them will fall to the floor with a crash, the same crash women hear ricochet between their ears when their own delicate planning falls apart.

There are moments of rest, when the women return to sitting and gazing out, and each time their expression is a little less demure and a little more combative, challenging the audience to question how much they acquiesce in the representations of women being slowly dismantled. As the legs get shorter and the women become more and more furiously absorbed in their task, you catch something of the hysteria of the character in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, climbing the walls in pent-up frustration. But she is powerless and what these women demonstrate is control, over their choices and their circumstances. No wonder they take time to contemplate their splintering chairs with quiet satisfaction at a job well done. At the end, they sit silently again, staring at the audience with eyebrows slightly raised and expressions that are provocatively inscrutable.