

# AFTER DINNER

Andrew Bovell



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# Contents

<i>Author's Note</i>	v
AFTER DINNER	
Act One	1
Act Two	45

## Author's Note

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### Andrew Bovell

I wrote this play ten years ago. I never thought it would last this long. I imagined it would be one of those plays that comes on at La Mama, lasts for three weeks and is never heard of again. In fact that initial season lasted for fifteen weeks, after transferring from La Mama to Theatre Works in St Kilda and then to the Universal in Fitzroy. By the time it was winding up in Melbourne three interstate companies were applying for the rights, including the Griffin Theatre Company in Sydney. Since then there's been over twenty professional productions of the play, including one in London and one in Dublin. And now, in 1997, the Melbourne Theatre Company and Black Swan in Perth are both undertaking productions.

*After Dinner* has just kept on keeping on, defying those early expectations of its author. It holds a special place among the plays and screenplays I have written because every time I've been broke and about to give the business of writing away a royalties cheque has arrived, as if to tell me not to give up. The cheques are rarely substantial but they have proved to be priceless in terms of boosting a writer's morale.

With the MTC's upcoming production and a new Currency Press publication of the text I've had the opportunity to consider the play once again and to think about its history.

I usually find it difficult to identify the genesis of a play. That's not the case with *After Dinner*. It was a moment glimpsed at the Tankerville Arms in Fitzroy in 1984. Three women were sitting at a table in the empty bistro arguing about how to divide the bill. One woman in particular was insistent that it should be done fairly. She seemed so concerned that she would have to pay more than her share. It was an excruciating moment, mundane and quintessentially Australian.

It wasn't the comedy of the situation that immediately struck me. It was its pathos. It said something to me about loneliness and the absence of love, about being stuck in a place and not knowing how to move forward, about coming up against your own limitations, about being furious with life and what it has failed to provide. It was probably a lot to read into such a simple moment. The woman concerned was probably just being careful with her money. But that's a playwright for you.

I got home that night and wrote. Dympie, Monika and Paula were born onto the page with surprising ease. This material formed the basis of a short play called *Dinner and Then Entertainment*. This was a Beckett like piece about three women stuck in a restaurant, consumed by fantasies of the exotic while being trapped in the banal. I was studying at the Victorian College of the Arts at the time. It was the end of our first semester and I workshopped the play with fellow students, Suzanne Kersten, Eugenia Fragos, Angela Seaward and Suzanne Shaw.

We presented it to the rest of the Drama School and received an amazing response. The piece had struck a chord. It was the first time I experienced the rush of adrenalin a writer gets when a magical connection occurs between a performance and its audience. If I had any doubts about what I wanted to be, it was that moment that dispelled them.

In 1986 I revived the piece for our graduation day performance. In this incarnation it became a comic sketch about three very ordinary women trying their hardest to have a good time when everything that could go wrong did. Eugenia played Paula again and was joined this time by Kim Trengove as Dympie and Mary Lou (Cabbage) Thorpe as Monika. It received an enthusiastic response from a demanding audience of industry heavyweights. It was a great feeling watching a theatre full of agents and artistic directors laugh their heads off. I can remember being surprised that something I had written could make people laugh like that. I had always regarded myself as a fairly serious young writer and my work more akin to the tragic side of life. I guess the lesson was that the line between tragedy and comedy is very thin and *After Dinner* managed to walk it.

I finally got around to writing the full length version of the play towards the end of 1987. It wasn't until this stage that Gordon and

Stephen were created. I wrote it quickly in a mad rush, allowing the natural structure of an evening out to emerge and guide the play. Some critics have said that it's unevenly structured and raw in its conception. Others have said that its structure and the rhythm of movement of action between the tables is perfectly judged. I don't know any more. What I do know is that it was one of those writing experiences where the characters just took off and led the action.

I wrote it specifically for Kim Durban to direct and for five friends who were all unemployed actors at the time. Eugenia re-invented Paula for the third time, Kim Trengove played Dympie again and they were joined by Leigh Morgan playing Monika. Tom Gutteridge took on Gordon and Peter Murphy played Stephen.

I owe a great deal to Kim and this fantastic group of actors. It was a new play and the style was initially unclear. It's not an easy piece to get right. If the comedy is played too hard then it can seem judgmental of the characters. But if the pain and loneliness of the characters is played too close to the surface at the expense of the humour then the audience is prevented from fully empathising with the characters. Without the humour it's difficult to identify with them.

The fact that the play has had such an extended life is in part due to the initial production managing the balance between humour and pathos so well. They showed others that it could work and gave me the confidence to believe that I could write.

Like me they never expected to be stuck with these characters for so long. For a while the actors felt like the characters had taken over. Tom confesses that it took several years for him to rid himself of Gordon and he still finds himself occasionally lapsing into Gordon's terrible insecurities. Likewise Kim finds herself curling her lip with disapproval just like Dympie and I still find Eugenia occasionally dancing in a world all of her own just like Paula.

Similarly, I owe my thanks to Currency Press. Currency initially published the play as part of their Current Theatre Series, in conjunction with Ian Watson's production at Griffin in 1989. We can't underestimate the importance of published works. It allows plays to be accessible and means that they are documented and distributed way beyond the reach of word of mouth or good reviews. I can only hope that this new edition sees the play through another ten years.

*After Dinner* was first performed at La Mama, Melbourne, 20 April 1988 with the following cast:

GORDON	Tom Gutteridge
DYMPIE	Kim Trengove
PAULA	Eugenia Fragos
MONIKA	Leigh Morgan
STEPHEN	Peter Murphy

Director, Kim Durban  
Designer, Amanda Johnson  
Stage Manager, Jane Allen  
Music, Tom Gillick and The Heartbreaks

## **CHARACTERS**

GORDON, a bank worker, mid-thirties.

DYMPIE, an office worker, mid-thirties.

PAULA, an office worker, mid-thirties.

MONIKA, an office worker, mid-thirties.

STEPHEN, a bank worker, mid-thirties.

## **SETTING**

The action takes place on a Friday evening at a suburban pub/bistro.



## ACT ONE

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*A suburban pub-bistro. The reserved area for meals, around seven p.m. on a Friday evening. The focus of the room is on two separate tables, each set for three. On each there is a burning candle, plastic covered menus, a small vase with three wilted flowers and an ashtray. Elsewhere is the bar, the dance floor, the dance platform and the toilets. GORDON sits alone at one of the tables. He has been there for some time. He checks his watch then goes to have a drink. His glass is empty, so he tries to catch the waiter's attention.*

GORDON: Waiter.

*The unseen waiter ignores him. GORDON self-consciously lowers his arm and picks up his menu to hide his embarrassment.*

*DYMPIE enters and surveys the scene as GORDON looks up from his menu and notices her. DYMPIE chooses her table. She walks to it, removes the ashtray and places it down elsewhere. She places a handbag on a seat then sits. Once seated, she blows out the candle and arranges herself for maximum comfort. Satisfied, she now surveys the scene again and notices GORDON watching her. They both look quickly away, back to their menus.*

*PAULA enters. She wears a bright, colourful dress with a hood attached which she wears over her head. This is in marked contrast to DYMPIE's more plain attire.*

DYMPIE: *[speaking across the room while trying not to attract attention to herself]* Paula ...

*GORDON looks at PAULA.*

DYMPIE: *[motioning for her to approach]* Paula ...

PAULA: *[speaking across the room]* Why don't we sit a little closer tonight.

DYMPIE: No, I've got one here.

PAULA: Yes, but I thought we could sit a little closer.

DYMPIE: No, this is fine.

PAULA: But last week I couldn't see.

DYMPIE: Paula.

PAULA: Last week we couldn't see.

DYMPIE: Paula ... come here.

*PAULA approaches the table.*

DYMPIE: If you want to say something to me then come here and say it. Don't stand on the other side of the room and shout at me. Look, you've attracted the attention of the entire bistro.

*PAULA looks at GORDON who quickly looks back at his menu. She then sits down checking her view of the dance floor.*

PAULA: There's still plenty of tables closer.

DYMPIE: They don't serve meals at those tables Paula. You know that.

PAULA: Perhaps if we asked somebody. Perhaps if we told them we can't see from here.

*PAULA swaps seats and checks the view.*

DYMPIE: You can go and sit there if you want. Go on. Monika and I will stay here. Who wants to sit that close to the bar anyway? I certainly don't.

*PAULA swaps back to the other chair.*

DYMPIE: Stop that. Stop that changing of chairs. Decide where you're going to sit and stay there.

*PAULA thinks about it then goes back to the other chair much to DYMPIE's increasing frustration. PAULA takes a box of matches from her bag.*

PAULA: [*relighting candle*] One night I'd just like to sit closer to the band. Closer to the other people.

DYMPIE: And be suffocated by cigarette smoke and have alcohol poured all over you by drunken men. Lovely. That would be lovely, wouldn't it Paula? You'd like that wouldn't you? No thank you, not me. And besides I don't like standing all night. I can't see the point of it when there are all these tables back here. You might be able to Paula but it's beyond me ... Are you going to sit there all night with that hood over your head? Is that the fashion now, is it? To walk around with a hood over your head.

PAULA *removes the hood. DYMPIE notices her make-up.*

DYMPIE: What have you done to your face?

PAULA: Nothing.

DYMPIE: You have. You've done something to your face.

PAULA: I've put a bit of colour on, that's all.

DYMPIE: A bit! ... It's lovely. Bit loud, but no, it's lovely. What, get it out of some magazine did you?

PAULA: No, just experimented.

DYMPIE: Experimented.

PAULA: I like a change.

DYMPIE: Oh I know that, Paula. You don't have to tell me. [*Pronouncing it 'sham-el-on'*] A regular chameleon you are.

PAULA: You should take to wearing a bit, Dymp. Just a touch around the eyes.

DYMPIE: I am wearing just a touch around the eyes.

PAULA: You should think about wearing just a touch more.

DYMPIE: No, I don't think so.

PAULA: You should think about it.

DYMPIE: No.

PAULA: You'd be surprised.

DYMPIE: Not me, Paula. You won't see me with my face painted like some silly little tart trying to look half her age. Sorry, but no, not me.

GORDON *notices the waiter again.*

GORDON: [*raising his hand*] Waiter.

*DYMPIE and PAULA look anxiously to see if the waiter attends him. GORDON is ignored again. He self-consciously lowers his arm and returns to looking at his menu. DYMPIE and PAULA turn back to their own affairs.*

DYMPIE: Did you get those stockings I asked for?

PAULA: Yes, only I wasn't sure what size.

DYMPIE: I told you what size.

PAULA: Did you?

DYMPIE: I told you.

PAULA: What size?

DYMPIE: Average.

PAULA: [*taking the stockings from her bag*] Well I got you small.

DYMPIE: Not now, Paula. Don't give them to me now.

PAULA: What do you want me to do with them then?

DYMPIE: Put them away. Give them to me later.

PAULA *puts the stockings back into her bag.*

DYMPIE: Why did you get me small when I told you average.

PAULA: I thought you could wear a smaller size.

DYMPIE: No, I wear average.

PAULA: Yes, but I thought you could wear something smaller.

DYMPIE: No.

PAULA: You need something tighter, Dympie.

DYMPIE: What?

PAULA: I've been meaning to say something to you for ages, but your stockings bunch around your ankles.

DYMPIE: They don't.

PAULA: Everyone notices as you walk around the office.

DYMPIE: Who notices?

PAULA: Everyone.

DYMPIE: [*pulling her stockings up under the table*] Paula, my stockings do not bunch around my ankles.

PAULA: And you should try another colour as well, like black.

DYMPIE: Black! But I only wear bone.

PAULA: They're old fashioned, Dymp. Men don't find them attractive.

DYMPIE: What would you know about what men find attractive?

PAULA: You should try something sheer.

DYMPIE: All that doesn't concern me.

PAULA: Black and sheer, that's what men find attractive.

DYMPIE: The sort of man that judges you on your stockings is not the sort of man I want to spend the rest of my life with, Paula.

PAULA: Anyway, I got you black.

DYMPIE: But I only wear bone. Average and bone.

PAULA: Oh well, they fit me, I'll wear them.

DYMPIE: You will not. You got those stockings for me. Now give them to me ... give them to me.

*PAULA hands over the stockings. DYMPIE snatches them and shoves them into her handbag. GORDON rises from his table and wanders over to a print hanging on the wall. He studies it as though he is in a gallery. DYMPIE and PAULA look at him then DYMPIE resumes the conversation while PAULA lingers on GORDON.*

DYMPIE: It must be past seven.

PAULA: What?

DYMPIE: Where is she? I told her seven o'clock.

PAULA: Maybe she's not coming.

DYMPIE: Of course she's coming.

PAULA: Maybe she's not up to it.

DYMPIE: She promised she would. I made her promise.

PAULA: Maybe she's decided she doesn't want company after all.

DYMPIE: Would you stop it. You're a prophet of doom, that's all you are Paula.

PAULA: She's still not over it.

DYMPIE: I told her it would be good for her. Get out of the house. Have some fun. I told her that.

PAULA: Terrible thing.

DYMPIE: Yes.

PAULA: It wasn't expected.

DYMPIE: You don't have to tell me. You forget. My desk is right next to hers. She tells me a lot more than she tells you. Your desk is way over on the other side of the office.

PAULA: I found her having a little cry in the toilets.

DYMPIE: So did I. Several times.

PAULA: Poor thing.

DYMPIE: Yes, well, she'll get over it.

PAULA: I hope so.

DYMPIE: It would be best if nothing was said tonight.

PAULA: About what?

DYMPIE: The husband Paula. The husband.

PAULA: What if she wants to talk about it?

DYMPIE: Best just to avoid it.

PAULA: I'm not sure about that Dymp.

DYMPIE: I am.

PAULA: She might have feelings she needs to express.

DYMPIE: No, I think it would be better just to avoid the whole subject.  
Just carry on as though nothing's happened.

*MONIKA enters, but remains standing on the other side of the room looking a little anxious. She has obviously made an effort and dressed for the occasion. PAULA sees her.*

PAULA: There she is.

*GORDON is caught between DYMPIE and PAULA's table and MONIKA. He awkwardly gets out of the way.*

DYMPIE: What's the matter with her Paula?

PAULA: She's alright.

DYMPIE: Tell her to come over.

PAULA: [*across the room*] Monika ... youwhooo, over here.

DYMPIE: What's she doing?

PAULA: I don't know.

DYMPIE: Has she seen us?

PAULA: Yes, look she's waving.

DYMPIE: But she should come over Paula. [*waving back*] Why is she waving at us like that?

PAULA: It's alright Dymp, she's coming.

*MONIKA approaches the table. PAULA stands to greet her.*

MONIKA: [*arriving at the table*] Here I am.

PAULA: Here she is.

MONIKA: I was just looking.

DYMPIE: Yes.

PAULA: What at?

DYMPIE: Paula! ... Hello Monika.

MONIKA: Hello Dymp.

DYMPIE: Sit down.

PAULA: Yes, sit down, sit down.