



JOANNA MURRAY-SMITH's plays have been produced in many languages, all over the world, including on the West End, Broadway and at the Royal National Theatre. Her plays include *Pennsylvania Avenue*, *Fury*, *Songs for Nobodies*, *Day One—A Hotel—Evening*, *The Gift*, *Rockabye*, *The Female of the Species*, *Ninety*, *Bombshells*, *Rapture*, *Nightfall*, *Redemption*, *Flame*, *Love Child*, *Atlanta*, *Honour* and *Angry Young Penguins*. She has also adapted *Hedda Gabler*, as well as Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*, for Sir Trevor Nunn (London). Her three novels (published by Penguin/Viking) are *Truce*, *Judgement Rock* and *Sunnyside*. Her opera libretti include *Love in the Age of Therapy* and *The Divorce*. Joanna has also written many screenplays.



*Sue Ingleton as Margot Mason in the 2006 Melbourne Theatre Company production. (Photo: Jeff Busby)*

***The  
Female  
of the  
Species  
Joanna Murray-Smith***



Currency Press, Sydney

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Front cover shows Bojana Novakovic as Molly and Sue Ingleton as Margot in the 2006 Melbourne Theatre Company production. Back cover shows Bojana Novakovic as Molly in the 2006 Melbourne Theatre Company production.  
(Photos: Jeff Busby)

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# Introduction

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Joanna Murray-Smith

I was sitting having dinner in the kitchen of the London film and stage director, Roger Michell, and we started talking about ideas that refuse to let go of you. You carry them around without even realising it. They lurk there in the shadows behind real projects, neither acted upon nor willing to evaporate. I told Roger about my idea of writing a play that used as a springboard the real life event in which Germaine Greer was bound and gagged by a young female intruder in her country house in England.

When I returned to my hotel that night I realised that the idea would never let me go unless I sat down and wrote it. Either it would work and I'd have a play or it wouldn't and the failure would exorcise it.

Back in Australia, I shared the idea with Simon Phillips, the Artistic Director of the Melbourne Theatre Company and a great friend. He commissioned the play at once and I wrote the first scene between Margot Mason and Molly. I felt the energy of a play was somewhere in there, but somehow it didn't spark. Usually when I start writing a play, I feel as if I'm barely drawing breath. It feels fast and dangerous. But this time, I was going through the motions—there was something academic about the way I was writing. I told Simon that it wasn't working and he said, 'Don't be afraid to be funny'.

Now, some of my friends have said to me, 'Be afraid of Simon telling you not to be afraid to be funny', by which they mean that Simon's exhilarated sense of humour might lead me to become a different sort of writer than the writer of my plays *Honour* and *Rapture* and *Nightfall*, which are all, in their way, dark. But the moment Simon suggested I be funny, something clicked. It felt instinctively right to use humour to liberate the theatrical invention from the real life event and it immediately overcame my (legitimate) fear that a straight play about feminism would only ever be seen at arcane, academic women's

studies conferences in places like Aarhus or Wales as the light relief between papers on domestic violence.

What I knew with certainty was that I did not want Germaine Greer or her disturbed acolyte to appear in the play. I didn't want my imagination to be curtailed by any kind of reality or by scruples to be truthful. I wanted to create my own feminist who, while sharing certain generic traits of many of the 1970s feminists—charismatic, good-looking, fierce, provocative, egocentric—could ultimately come into herself in the anarchic realm of dramatic fun. I wanted to create a lovable monster: most of the time you're with her you want to kill her, but the thought of not having her around makes the world seem inherently less interesting.

Asking many of the questions inside comedy was doubly satisfying because while the comedy took the edge off the academic dryness of the theme, the more confronting feminist issues I'm interested in gave the comedy a sometimes threatening edge. It seemed to be a perfect combination: feminism and farce.

Underscoring the scenario of the famous feminist held hostage was my real interest in what happens to the followers of a society's great ideologues when those ideologues change their minds. The social commentators come out with grand and often compelling statements about how we should think or behave, but they are intelligent and human, and often move on from their original, opinionated dictums, sometimes ardently contradicting themselves, or revealing that they themselves were victims of a ideological zeitgeist, or that they were sort of right but went too far. What happens to the followers who change their lives on the strength of the original ideology? How do they follow in the wake of their hero's change of heart?

One of the fascinating things about the second-wave feminism was that it did move beyond the ivory towers and into suburban houses. It did make a real difference to the way people lead their lives. And for my generation, who went to university in the 1980s, it had more of an impact on how we thought we should think and act, for better or worse, than any other political movement.

And so the question in the play seemed to me to be: what happens if the great feminist is asked to apologise for causing personal havoc in the life of one of her fans? What if she is actually taken to task for

the errors of judgement in her public thinking? Can a young woman today be naïve or even legitimately cynical about the bequests of the strident feminists? Could she be absolutely persuaded that her life has been ruined because of them? I've long been interested in the personal impact of strident ideologies, the limitation of ideology when it comes up against unwieldy humanity—it's a theme that won't let go of me, only how much more entertaining it might be if I could make the anger fuel the comedy.

Investing feminism with comedy is a mark of respect. Feminism is a big girl now—it's strong enough to laugh at itself. But, fundamentally, I'm a writer. It's my job to throw ideas out there and see how they land—not unlike Margot Mason herself, although I hope slightly more sensitively. The fun of a play is acting on the impulse to lob ideas like grenades and to not know how or where they'll land until the audience tells you.

I remain enormously indebted to Simon, for cheering me up, hearing me out and steering me, as always, away from danger; and to Raymond Gill and Matt Cameron for smart, loving and critical responses. I owe much to director Patrick Nolan and the spirited cast of the first production, who taught me so much in the rehearsal room—not only about the play, but about comedy itself. And finally, I'm again indebted to the first courageous Melbourne audiences, who showed such an exuberant willingness to laugh and think at the same time, who took what I'd written and gave me so much back.

*Melbourne,  
January 2008*



*The Female of the Species* was first produced by the Melbourne Theatre Company at the Victorian Arts Centre Playhouse, Melbourne, on 26 August 2006, with the following cast:

THEO	Michael Carman
TESS	Roz Hammond
BRYAN	Peter Houghton
MARGOT	Sue Ingleton
FRANK	Bert Labonte
MOLLY	Bojana Novakovic

Director, Patrick Nolan  
Designer, Dale Ferguson  
Lighting Designer, Matt Scott  
Composer, David Chesworth

## CHARACTERS

MARGOT MASON, 60-ish, handsome, impressive, a monster

MOLLY RIVERS, early 20s, bright

TESS THORNTON, 30s, lost

BRYAN THORNTON, 30s but boyish, handsome, genial, thick

THEO HANOVER, 60s, dapper, gay, handsome, refined

FRANK, 20-something, a very handsome, masculine black man

## SETTING

A charming house in the country. A elegant study, filled with a lifetime's collection of books, including a shelf dedicated to Margot Mason's own works. Adding to the sense of cultivated taste and a life well-lived, are beautiful rugs and paintings, European and Indigenous art works acquired during world travels, antiques, modern pieces—all working beautifully but without design. The room features a large desk, a daybed and French doors opening to a bucolic setting. On either side of the stage are the suggestions of open, painting-lined hallways, one leading to the kitchen, another upstairs. In the study, amongst the *objets d'arts*, is one bust or small statue.

MARGOT MASON, *an attractive late middle-aged woman, elegantly and casually dressed, wanders around the study speaking on her cordless phone. On her desk are her laptop and a copy of her famous book The Cerebral Vagina. MARGOT is imperious, theatrical and a show-off, but there are signs here of a certain faltering.*

MARGOT: Oh, *fuck off!* No, *you fuck off!* You are the reason people say the publishing industry has gone to pot. You and your *Feng Shui for Beginners!* I mean, for Christ's sake, Theo, whatever happened to learned memoirs by men of letters? What ever *happened* to men of letters...? Oh, I see. They're all writing *Feng Shui for Beginners...* And what was that I heard from a little birdie: *Eddie Murphy, Man or Myth?* This from a publishing house that once made its name on the *Dialectical Definitive in Gender Relations*. How do you sleep at night...? No, no I'm working hard. [*Lolling, enervated, on the daybed*] I'm working *very* hard... Stop worrying! I *am* working hard, it's just taking a little longer than I thought... Haven't you got some little hack scribbling chick-lit from some Irish garret? Shopping. Sex. Men are hopeless. 'Juggling'. Honestly, if I hear that word one more time. Fucking *juggling*. Find someone else to fix the company's woes... I *am* working, I told you. [*Ingeniously and casually divesting herself of her bra as she talks without taking anything else off*] You'll get it when you get it... Well, that's *your* problem... No, *that's your problem...* Well, it's just not 'flowing'... [*The bra comes free and she flings it aside.*] I'm not sure why not... It's hard to put into words... Yes, even for me. [*Beat. Slightly trepidatious*] There's this little concept that keeps popping up, Theo: *stagnation*. There's just a tiny, tiny flicker of concern that finally I'm... Well—I'm bored by the sound of my own voice. Ridiculous, I know... Of course, it's absurd. Who's more interesting than *me*? Who's *ever* been more interesting than me...? *Exactly*. I'll be in the city on Thursday... Well, is that any of your business...? All right, a teeny-weeny oil I'm interested in. Didn't sell at Sotheby's... very pretty... very *very* pretty and the possibility of picking it up for a song... Fine. I'll stop by the office and we can go on from there. And this time don't take me anywhere cheap and ethnic. Hello?

*She jiggles the buttons on the phone. Dead.*

Hello...? Hel-llo? For God's sake.

*She hangs up and walks over to her desk, peering at her open laptop. She sits down and looks over what she's been writing. As she thinks of titles, she types them, regarding them on the screen.*

*The Dialectical Experiment of the Patriarchal Paradigm.* Who the fuck is going to buy that? [*Thinking*] It's got to be sexy. Mmm... Something dignified, yet *au courant*. Sex, Death and... no, *The Feminine* something, *The Feminine*... no... Got to get shopping in there somehow, or stilettos or lipstick... Perhaps something that enters the lexicon, some new coining: *Clitorism!* With an exclamation mark. *The Utopian Fallopiian?* No. No. My God, woman, *think!* If I could only get the title, the rest would follow! Something simple—

MOLLY: *The Female of the Species.*

*MOLLY has entered through the French doors, a young woman somewhat kookily dressed, carrying a shopping bag. MARGOT gives a tiny glance, but is intent on seeing the title on her screen, typing it in immediately. She is captivated by the task at hand.*

MARGOT: *The Female of the Species.* Not bad.

MOLLY: I'm good with words.

MARGOT: *The Female of the Species.* [*Thinking*] Surely it's been used?

MOLLY: Sometimes the simple is simply overlooked.

MARGOT: True!

MOLLY: You're working.

MARGOT: I *am* working.

MOLLY: I just came in from the garden.

MARGOT: I can see that.

MOLLY: The doors were open.

MARGOT: So it seems.

MOLLY: French, aren't they?

MARGOT: French? Yes. French doors. I like my doors French.

MOLLY: Why are they?

MARGOT: Why are they?

MOLLY: French.

MARGOT: Because they're stylish, thin and up themselves. *The Female of the Species.* Mmmm. [*Channelling a journalist*] 'Her remarkable

new bestseller, *The Female of the Species*, brilliantly extends the treatise of her earlier hit *Madame Ovary*.' 'Her searing Number One title that has finally eclipsed *The Da Vinci Code* in sales, *The Female of the Species*.' [Beat.] It's good.

MOLLY: It is good.

MARGOT: Clever.

MOLLY: I like it.

MARGOT: [*delighted with herself*] It's amazing how I do that. If I wait for the muse, it comes.

MOLLY: But I—

MARGOT: I come through in the end—I *always* come through!

MOLLY: But I—

MARGOT: You have to trust! It's always in there!

MOLLY: But I thought of it.

*Finally, MARGOT looks up at her.*

MARGOT: You did?

MOLLY: Yes.

*Beat.*

MARGOT: Oh. Well... Are you sure?

MOLLY: Yes. I came in and I said—

MARGOT: Yes, yes! All right! It's not *that* good! But why am I—This is my—

MOLLY: Yes, it's—

MARGOT: My house.

MOLLY: Yes.

MARGOT: My room.

MOLLY: Yes.

MARGOT: Those are my French—

MOLLY: Yes.

MARGOT: Doors.

MOLLY: Yes, they are.

MARGOT: I'm at work. I'm working and then—

MOLLY: Here I am.

*Beat.*

MARGOT: [*calm, but suddenly realising*] Who are you?

MOLLY: You don't—

MARGOT: *Should* I? I'm sorry but—

MOLLY: You really don't know?

MARGOT: Have we met? The thing is, I just don't remember anyone.

I'm one of those people of whom others say: *I've met her a hundred times and she pretends she doesn't know me.* [Full of self-justification, unaware of the awfulness] But I'm *not* pretending. I'm really *not* pretending. I really *don't* remember who they are.

MOLLY: I'm sure if you *try*—

MARGOT: *Honestly*—

MOLLY: You gave me a lift into town. February. From the campus.

Remember? The horse on the road, you swerved.

MARGOT: Oh yes, the horse.

MOLLY: You must remember the horse?

MARGOT: [*not remembering*] The horse, of course, yes.

MOLLY: That's it. You swerved.

MARGOT: Yes, I swerved.

MOLLY: I was in the car with you.

MARGOT: Now you mention it, I do remember there was someone in the car. A student.

MOLLY: That was me in the car.

MARGOT: [*not recognising her at all*] Oh, yes, yes. Yes. [*Confused*] You were in the car when the horse swerved! How did you find me?

MOLLY: The internet.

MARGOT: [*loving her own performance*] The internet! *Where did you meet?* The internet. *Why did your wife leave you?* The internet. *Where have you been the last three years?* The fucking internet. Sixty years ago, it would have been 'the war'. Oh, the banality!

MOLLY: I googled you.

MARGOT: Here I am tucked away in the middle of nowhere. A hundred miles from a caffè latte! Jesus Christ, no one's safe! [*Deeply contemptuous*] Googled!

MOLLY: I took the train and then the bus and then I walked. And here I am!

MARGOT: And here I am with a deadline.

MOLLY: The great Margot Mason's house!

*Beat.*

MARGOT: [*confused*] Did we have an arrangement?

MOLLY: I tried. I wrote. But you said you were in the middle of the next book. And you were—

MARGOT: Racing against the clock. That's exactly right. My publisher's having a nervous breakdown, so I'm sprinting—

MOLLY: So I thought I'd just come.

MARGOT: I see...

MOLLY: I get an idea in my head and then—

MARGOT: Right.

MOLLY: I just follow through. Come what may. Is that wrong?

*Beat.*

MARGOT: Who are you?

MOLLY: Who am I? [*Beat.*] Molly. Molly Rivers.

MARGOT: Molly Rivers. I tell you what, I could make you a quick cup of tea—such a long way—and then call a cab. On me. My dime. To the station.

MOLLY: Go?

MARGOT: [*uncomfortable*] You could leave me some of your work and I could read it. And then get back to you.

MOLLY: After the book is done?

MARGOT: You see, it's taking rather longer than I thought. You can't hold a stopwatch to the intellect. Doesn't work... [*Detouring to her title-search*] *Stopwatch to the Intellect, The Intellectual Stopwatch*... A sophisticated concept together with something surprising: *Flaubert's Parrot. Howard's End. Margot Mason's...* [*unable to think*] *Menopause*.

MOLLY: Look, I know I'm disturbing you—

MARGOT: It's the book, you see. Ordinarily, I'd be very happy—but goddamn Theo is breathing down my neck. And to be honest... the book is killing me. *Killing me*. I have to be disciplined. So, I'm afraid I'm going to have to—

MOLLY: Oh—

MARGOT: Reschedule. I'm happy to pencil you in—

MOLLY: Pencil me—?

MARGOT: In a month or so. Once the book's done.

MOLLY: Could I wait until you take a break?

MARGOT: No. You couldn't.

MOLLY: But I've come such a long—

MARGOT: No.

MOLLY: Just an hour or so would be—

MARGOT: You're forcing me to be rude. Which is *very* hard for me. But I'm a writer, Molly Rivers. And the first thing you should know is that a good writer's first love is their muse.

MOLLY *slips on her coat, hat and scarf.*

MOLLY: Of course you're right. I'm such an idiot!

MARGOT: We—ell, I wouldn't—

MOLLY: An idiot! I'm so embarrassed! I got carried away because I'm so sick of wasting time with those moribund, tenured, overweight, dead white males running that decrepit institution.

MARGOT: [*delighted*] I'm flattered by exclusion.

MOLLY: I was over-excited. Like a silly schoolgirl! Fantasising to be here, *here*, in Margot Mason's house with Margot Mason—the Margot Mason!

MARGOT: My dear girl, settle down. I'm just a silly old... thinker. A silly old intellectual.

MOLLY: Don't be ridiculous! (I can't believe I'm telling Margot Mason she's ridiculous!) You're a legend.

MARGOT: Me? [*Giggling*] A legend? *Absolument* not! I'm just a well-preserved old warhorse!

MOLLY: You've been around forever!

MARGOT: Well, a *while*. Not forever. I'm beginning to feel like Cher.

MOLLY: I want you to promise to forgive me because I couldn't bear it if the woman who has shaped my life more than any other thought badly of me.

MARGOT *studies her intense, passionate demeanour.*

MARGOT: [*softened by flattery*] Oh well...

MOLLY: Thank you, this has really *helped* me, I want you to know that. Because it's always bothered me how rarely women of a different generation have a chance to *communicate*, you know?

MARGOT: [*interested*] I suppose that's true...

MOLLY: And now you have work to do and I'll be off. Goodbye and good luck!

MARGOT: Well, listen—hang on a moment. There's no real rush. The publishers have waited eighteen months, they can wait an hour or so more.

MOLLY: No, they can't!

MARGOT: Yes, they can!