



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.

Honour Joanna Murray-Smith



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Front cover shows William Zappa as Gus and Janet Andrewartha as Honor in the 2004 Melbourne Theatre Company production. Back cover shows William Zappa as Gus and Amanda Douge as Claudia in the 2004 Melbourne Theatre Company production. Photos: Jeff Busby.

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Middle-Class Morality

Katharine Brisbane

HONOR: You're the journalist, my love—the one who finds truth more compelling than kindness.

GEORGE: [*playful*] Journalists are far superior, morally, to writers.

HONOR: Oh, really?

GEORGE: We wear our appetites out there. You ask your casual little questions and then—years later, a book appears—unattributed, devastating.

HONOR: Perhaps we're both guilty of liking words more than people.

There you have it. The moral imperative of words. Their uses and abuses. Honour is a rare play for an Australian writer. Its synthesis of words, meaning, rhythm and context is masterful, as is its orchestration and timing. It deserves close reading.

Honor is a writer, George is a journalist; and they have been married for 32 years. Into their life comes Claudia, a self-seeking young reporter who wants to be an original. 'Middle-class girls are all the same', she confides. 'That's why we have to spend our whole lives singling ourselves out.' With classical austerity, the play is constituted of duologues that might more accurately be called interrogations. Evidence of the crime (if there is one) is gathered, one witness at a time, until nothing remains undisclosed and the verdict is inevitable. Or is it? The play is also surprising.

George's moral stance is made apparent at the outset. The brilliantly hesitant yet egocentric opening speech fixes him like a butterfly in the light of an uncertain but sexually attractive young woman who is interviewing him as a 'Mover and Shaker'. He flatters her from his position of immense superiority ('I'm like some ancient explorer'), inclines to be her mentor, offers to share some precious secrets. She gushes and expresses carefully-placed admiration and gratitude. Nothing is uncalculated. Look at the word 'secret'. By the end of the scene it

is her career that is capturing the conversation; a different sub-text is gently requiring attention.

Scene Two sets the moral parameters. George and Honor's 63-year-old friend has left his wife for a woman in her thirties. There is conspiratorial humour in their rectitude but behind the condemnation each senses a need to justify their own comfortable position. Honor is sharply defensive of the injured wife 'who spent her life catering to his grandiose ego' and predicts the outcome of such an undignified liaison. George is reluctantly admiring. 'He looked so fit!' George's self-satisfaction has been threatened.

In Scene Three Claudia, awaiting George's arrival, begins to interview Honor and, for the first time, her honourable belief in fidelity is challenged by someone as deliberate and articulate as herself. We learn she has sacrificed a much-praised reputation as a poet to provide a home life for her husband and daughter. Claudia interprets this as betraying her duty to herself. Honor's language is dignified, she speaks of principle. Claudia presses for examples and turns them against her. Honor is shaken. 'She's a clever young thing,' she says as the next scene opens.

Is she less a person than she once was? Has their middle-class comfort suppressed his vitality? By now Claudia's little arrows have begun to prick. Honor covers her irritation in surmise about the younger woman's home life. George covers his in cynicism. He is now in the state of mind to be seduced. And seduced he is, as Claudia's well-placed arguments burrow their way into his hidden desires. In a few short scenes the intervention of a new emotion has turned him from urbane celebrity to inarticulate child, unable to comprehend or to rationalise his confusion. Scene Six is a brilliant high-speed roller-coaster of repetitions and half-articulated phrases as Honor interrogates and George stammers. 'Did you say you are leaving me?' she keeps repeating, as if only empirical evidence will keep her own shock at bay.

It is in this scene that the extent of George's male self-centredness, which Honor has accepted in the name of married love, becomes apparent. Through the interrogation she discovers not only that he no longer wants their life together but that overnight he has discarded any investment in it. What he wants, we learn, is an adventure. He wants to disown his history. The tone changes as it dawns on Honor that

Claudia is the catalyst and the scene ends in an unseemly wrangle in which Honor has the upper hand. This is the high point to which the accelerating speed of the action has been heading. It is Joanna Murray-Smith at her finest.

A new element now enters the picture: Sophie. Sophie is their daughter at Cambridge, brought up in security to understand right from wrong. Like Honor her identity is threatened by George's defection and she takes her mother's part. Honor's language begins to reveal her uncertainty. At last she has an ally—but her determination is waning. Sophie then confronts her father. He helplessly asks her to be 'adult'—but she is not adult. She is angry that her famous father is not the rock on which she had leant all her life; her mother has been swindled. 'She was in service!' she cries. And in a splendid speech to end the scene we find that, like the others in this emotional quadrangle, it is her own self-esteem for which she has been fighting.

The affair runs its course of passion, of missing history, of social embarrassment—decorum as Honor calls it—as the new couple appear in public, and Honor's place is denied. In less than a week the lives of all the players have been overturned.

Claudia, unexpectedly, directs her steely mind to resolving the situation. After a scene in which we see how Claudia's intellectual ambition and George's self-indulgence are already at cross-purposes, come two scenes in which Claudia takes the high ground. In the first she presents herself as the young Honor who might have taken another path; and in the second she deflects Sophie's anger by threatening her with a picture of her parents as sexual beings, and confronting her with the need to grow up.

The pace of the play, by this time, has slowed a little. The exchanges are a little more considered. Time begins to stretch to greater and greater distance between scenes. George and Honor meet. Her dialogue is bitter but more literary, more definitive, as it was at the start of the play. She not only expresses her bitterness but her reviving writer's instinct watches and describes the symptoms. George is doing his best to be businesslike. At home with Claudia he tries to revive his work routine. Honor, after a breathing space, takes up the offensive, asserting the right to manage their business affairs. 'History kills passion', George has said in the excitement of starting his life again. Now Claudia begins to recognise

the virtues of that history. She begins to feel sympathy and admiration for Honor, to recognise adultery as ‘unlawful wanting’ and her determination to ‘not give up anything for anyone’ as self-destructive.

But Honor has already moved on.

Threat to the family fortress has become Joanna Murray-Smith’s theme; and Honor is her finest play. It began life at the Playbox Theatre Centre, Melbourne, in 1995 and has had the unprecedented benefit of being refined by splendid casts and applauded by theatre audiences in three countries before reaching this edition. Theatre is a collaborative art in which audiences play a significant, unacknowledged part. Too little is understood of the process that brings forth a great play or the fires through which it needs to go. Honor’s extended life makes it a benchmark in our contemporary theatre and one we need to celebrate. Today all the elements first unveiled to Melbourne audiences in Julia Blake’s beautiful performance have combined to bringing the text recognition as both a compelling and compassionate study of a familiar marital crisis an immaculately orchestrated study of what articulate, educated Australians value in their private lives, in a way no other Australian author has yet mastered.

KATHARINE BRISBANE, AM, was a theatre journalist for 21 years, was publisher of Currency Press until her retirement in 2001, and is author of Not Wrong Just Different—Observations on the Rise of the Contemporary Australian Theatre (2005).

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Honour was first performed by Playbox Theatre Centre of Monash University, at the CUB Malthouse, on 14 November 1995 with the following cast:

HONOR

Julia Blake

GUS

John Gregg

CLAUDIA

Natasha Herbert

SOPHIE

Belinda McClory

Director, Ariette Taylor

Designer, Trina Parker

Lighting Designer, Philip Lethlean

Original Music, Peter Crosbie

CHARACTERS

HONOR, a beautiful, elegant woman, around sixty

GUS, Honor's husband. An attractive, youthful man, around sixty

SOPHIE, their twenty-four-year-old daughter

CLAUDIA, a striking young woman around thirty

SCENE ONE

The stage is in darkness. Only GEORGE's voice can be heard.

GEORGE: First and foremost, a communicator. [*Beat.*] Unafraid to tackle the real issues. [*Beat.*] No. No. Always ready to plumb the depths of social and political change, he has—he has—convincingly merged an intellectual prowess with literary—no with a literary, no—with a distinctive literary style. No. No. [*Beat.*] An adventurer into the heartland of a nation's cultural—An adventurer into the cultural heartland of a nation's—It's all a little too pith helmet. Wait a minute. [*Beat.*] Award-winning—is that awful? It's probably unprofessional *not* to mention the awards. Bestowed with the odd literary gong—pretentiously casual—Why not just say it? Recipient of *awards* too numerous to—No—No— [*Beat.*] All right. Okay. [*Confidently*] George Spencer has been the authoritative—the single most res[pected]—George Spencer has been the incisive voice of—The intellectual establishment has long acknowledged—For twenty—no—for—Love him or hate him—George Spencer, the fearlessly articulate—*Fuck!* [*Beat.*] Look, this is awful—so, so—I *loathe* people who talk about themselves in the third person!

Lights up. CLAUDIA and GEORGE sit comfortably facing one another.

CLAUDIA: I asked you—

GEORGE: Yes—

CLAUDIA: I need your help. I need ideas—

GEORGE: Yes—

CLAUDIA: It's so hard to fit everything—to summarise a *life* in a couple of paragraphs!

GEORGE: It *is* an art.

CLAUDIA: I hope you don't mind—

GEORGE: Not at all—not at all—

CLAUDIA: It's very interesting—

GEORGE: Is it?

CLAUDIA: Oh, yes!

GEORGE: Because, you know, a lifetime of interviewing can make one an

intolerably long-winded interviewee—as if one finally allays one’s sense of outrage at how much *more* interesting *oneself* is.

CLAUDIA: Not at all.

GEORGE: As an interviewer, one waits interminably for the question that never comes: What About You, Then? So you see, now I’m on the *other* side—I have a vast impulse to bore.

CLAUDIA: Well, your impulse is failing you.

GEORGE: I’m like some ancient explorer reminiscing—tracing over rivulets of technique, remembering philosophical oceans—

CLAUDIA: But you’re so *inspiring*! Some of the others were really, well, lethargic.

GEORGE: They were?

CLAUDIA: Yes. *Yes*. They were just these old men. These irrelevant old men.

GEORGE: And I’m not?

CLAUDIA: Last time we talked, I came away... *dazzled*.

GEORGE: Really?

CLAUDIA: Absolutely!

GEORGE: I know what you’re doing, young lady—

CLAUDIA: No—really—

GEORGE: Melting my defences—

CLAUDIA: Honestly—

GEORGE: So I ‘open up’.

CLAUDIA: Well...

GEORGE: It’s not a criticism...

CLAUDIA: Isn’t it?

GEORGE: Not at all. I’m impressed. You have strategy.

CLAUDIA: I do?

GEORGE: And strategy is important. It’s always important.

CLAUDIA: And is it working?

GEORGE: [*laughing*] I think it might be...

Beat.

CLAUDIA: The truth is, I found that interview stuff very interesting. Especially since *I’m* interviewing *you*.

GEORGE: You know, a kind of vulgarity has insinuated itself into journalism via the television set. I always say an interview comes down to secrets...

CLAUDIA: Secrets?

GEORGE: One's life revolves around secrets. A good interview does not need to expose a secret. It simply reveals to us *why* a secret is fundamental to someone's life.

CLAUDIA: Fascinating!

GEORGE: Not really—

CLAUDIA: Yes—yes!

GEORGE: What about you then?

They laugh.

What *about* you, then?

CLAUDIA: I'm nothing. I'm no one.

GEORGE: How can you say that?

CLAUDIA: I've got no illusions.

GEORGE: If they chose you—

CLAUDIA: They saw in me a bright graduate with—with tenacity—and they knew I'd be flattered to do it so they needn't pay me much.

GEORGE: I'm sure you're too modest.

CLAUDIA: That's fine. That's really fine. Because it's true. I—*am* flattered. And it will look good on my resumé.

GEORGE: The dreaded resumé!

CLAUDIA: Middle-class girls are all the same. That's why we have to spend our whole lives singling ourselves out. The publishers are using me, but then—I'm using them.

GEORGE: Isn't that a little cynical?

CLAUDIA: Actually, an exploitative relationship is in many ways the most dependable relationship. I need them and they need me. No one's going to fuck anyone over.

Beat.

GEORGE: Do you have a title yet?

CLAUDIA: 'Movers and Shakers: Power and Influence in The Media.'
Pretty dry.

GEORGE: I like it!

They laugh.

Well, they wouldn't have wasted their time with someone who wasn't very talented.

Beat.

CLAUDIA: Thank you.

Beat.

GEORGE: You want to write?

CLAUDIA: Everyone wants to write!

GEORGE: Well, yes—

CLAUDIA: The truth is, I *do* write. Fiction. And I intend to become a very good writer. But I find it so pathetic—so indulgent to express that wish—

GEORGE: Well—

CLAUDIA: It's what one *does*, in the end.

GEORGE: Well, yes. But when you're young it's all ahead—it's *all* wishing. *Wishing* has the same currency that *doing* does in middle age.

CLAUDIA: We *all* intend. Only some of us achieve. I've always—Oh no—this is *your* interview!

GEORGE: Go on...

CLAUDIA: I feel so comfortable talking to you. You really—you seem to—

GEORGE: I'm interested.

CLAUDIA: I've always been able to imagine things I want for myself and it's as if my imaginings are so perfect, so pedantic that reality just obliges them.

GEORGE: Like this—

CLAUDIA: Like this book.

GEORGE: And what else?

CLAUDIA: What else?

GEORGE: What else do you imagine having?

Beat.

CLAUDIA: Oh, that's secret...



SCENE TWO

GEORGE: And?

HONOR: I was with her in the kitchen—

GEORGE: I was with him in the garden—

HONOR: I was stunned—

GEORGE: I told him what a fool he was—

HONOR: She was drinking and she never drinks—

GEORGE: And?

HONOR: I thought perhaps—the children—But she said they were all right.

GEORGE: He didn't seem to care—

HONOR: She was beside herself—

GEORGE: He looked so fit!

HONOR: That's the thing—

GEORGE: I said: You do realise you're turning yourself into a pathetic middle-aged male cliché—

HONOR: And?

GEORGE: He said: I realise my actions are very threatening to my friends.

HONOR: Doesn't the girl care what she's doing?

GEORGE: Biological clock. A thunderous tick in the ear—This is her last chance to dance—

HONOR: She *does* dance. She takes him to clubs and he's so old people think he's a performance artist.

GEORGE: He says he loves her—

HONOR: How easily love is invoked to lend dignity to shallowness.

GEORGE: He says he loves her—

HONOR: He loves how she makes him *feel*.

GEORGE: At a certain age, young women don't necessarily like to be seduced, but they like to be seen to be seductive.

HONOR: At a certain age, men don't necessarily enjoy fucking, but they like to be seen to be fucking. And at heart, Jim's always been a selfish prick and Gwen spent her life catering to his grandiose ego.

GEORGE: What is it about facing death that makes a man turn to a tanning salon?

HONOR: Gwen said he bought himself and the girl His and Her Cartier watches.

GEORGE: He said he wants to sell everything and buy a yacht—

HONOR: He just came home and said that was it—

GEORGE: He'll wake up to himself—

HONOR: He'll wake up to a luscious thirty-five-year-old. History free. Cellulite free.

GEORGE: And when she starts talking babies?

HONOR: He'll see it as his chance to rewrite himself as a father. Because the first time around he was too busy making money.

GEORGE: He's sixty-three years old!

HONOR: This time around he'll be investigating the safest change tables!

GEORGE: I told him: 'You've got one of the most intelligent beguiling women of our generation as a wife and I've got the other'—

HONOR: Darling—

GEORGE: 'Why do you want to trade a Bentley for a Toyota?'

HONOR: And?

GEORGE: He said: 'A Bentley belongs to a life I don't have any feeling left for'.

HONOR: It's so tragic—

GEORGE: It's so ugly—



SCENE THREE

HONOR: I'm afraid it's typical—

CLAUDIA: It's quite all right!

HONOR: He's trying everyone's patience—

CLAUDIA: I'm not worried—

HONOR: But that's George. He's probably stuck in traffic.

CLAUDIA: Actually, I'm glad to have this opportunity to talk to you.

HONOR: To me?

CLAUDIA: What better introduction to a subject than through the woman he has lived with for—for—thirty—

HONOR: Thirty-two—

CLAUDIA: Years. My God! I can't imagine ever spending thirty-two years with anybody!

HONOR: We're very lucky.

CLAUDIA: Is it luck?

HONOR: Partly luck. Partly skill. Partly love.

CLAUDIA: Is it a natural state then, do you think?

HONOR: It's *my* natural state. Although anyone will tell you, it isn't easy—

CLAUDIA: No!