HANNIE RAYSON is a graduate of Melbourne University and the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) and has an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from La Trobe University. A co-founder of Theatreworks, she has served as writer-in-residence at the Mill Theatre, Playbox Theatre, La Trobe University, Monash University and VCA. Her theatre credits include *Please Return to Sender* (1980) and *Mary* (1981), each premiering at Theatreworks; and *Leave It Till Monday* (1984), which was first produced by the Mill Theatre. *Room to Move* (1985) won the Australian Writers' Guild AWGIE Award for Best Original Stage Play.

Her next play, *Hotel Sorrento* (1990), a Playbox / Theatreworks co-production, won an AWGIE Award as well as a NSW Premier's Literary Award and Green Room Award for Best Play of 1990. *Falling From Grace* (1994), winner of a NSW Premier's Literary Award and the *Age* Performing Arts Award, also premiered at Playbox, as did *Competitive Tenderness* (1996).

Life After George (2000) opened at MTC and went on to win the Victorian Premier's Literary Award, the Green Room Award for Best New Australian Play, and Best New Australian Work at the 2001 Helpmann Awards. It became the first play to be nominated for the Miles Franklin Award.

Her plays have been performed extensively around Australia and a number have been produced overseas.

Hannie's television scripts include *Sloth* (ABC, *Seven Deadly Sins*) and co-writing two episodes of *SeaChange* (ABC/Artists Services). A feature film of *Hotel Sorrento*, produced in 1995, was nominated for ten Australian Film Institute Awards. In 1999 she received the Magazine Publishers' Society of Australia's Columnist of the Year Award for her regular contributions to *HQ* magazine.

Inheritance

HANNIE RAYSON

Currency Press, Sydney

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Foreword

Peter Sommerfeld

Sitting in the dark of the Sydney Opera House, experiencing *Inheritance* for the first time, was an intensely personal journey. It was set in the district where I was raised in the 1940s and 1950s. Names of little Mallee towns came at me from the stage, couched in dialogue with true vernacular and performed with perfect cadence. Chinkapook, Wycheproof, Swan Hill, Nyah West. Hannie took me home.

These were all places I'd go to regularly with Pop, my grandfather, fifty years ago in his old truck, to fossick in their council rubbish tips collecting bottles, old batteries, copper wire, which he'd later sell. He was the town's bottle-oh. My grandmother archly insisted on the term second-hand or marine dealer but he was happy with the other handle. These were the people who raised me after my mother died and my dad joined up in 1941.

I stopped going out with Pop once I hit eleven or twelve, when I was far too cool to be seen doing that sort of thing any more. But secretly I still ached to be there with him, out on those clear winter mornings on the road to Lalbert, rollie stuck to his bottom lip, ash falling down his shirt front as he sang 'I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen'. Turning to me mid-chorus, 'Might stop for a coupla quickies at the Royal in Quambatook, all right? I'll bring you out a lemon squash, okay? An' Ol' Missus… whassername? Ol' Missus Fiddlearse at the store? She'll prob'bly 'ave some empties to pick up. An' keep Sport in the cabin when I pull up so he don' bite no bugger. Orright?'

Like thousands of other post-war, smart-arse, working-class kids I was offered another road. Secondary schooling, higher education, independence and eventually all those middle-class trappings we'd all coveted in 1940s American movies. All this and the influence of an emerging youth culture created the gulf that alienated many of us from

our working-class roots. In my case (and I've considered this frequently because of my sexuality) I wonder what would have happened if I'd stayed. What was the likelihood of becoming yet another statistic of the rural suicides so devastatingly underlined in *Inheritance*? Tragedies far too frequent still in the case of rural gay youth, yet, strangely, seldom acknowledged as a significant factor in statistics.

Yet virtually forced to abandon my roots, I know I lost something extremely precious, or at least buried something of intrinsic value. And for me this was the power of *Inheritance*. Predominantly it evoked an enormous sense of loss. The loss of my mob; the loss of the ancient river gums that are slowly dying; native fish choked by carp; native animals and birds prey to feral species; paddocks ruined by salination. But most of all, the loss of the open-hearted, 'fair go' attitude engendered by my grandparents and others like them, who'd experienced the real horrors of the Depression. It's to my grave disillusionment that some of their descendents now mouth the poison of Hanson, Howard and Ruddock.

It's through Hannie's diligent, up-front research that she is able to engage us so effectively. She does it again in *Inheritance*—artfully and with great humour. She again takes us through extremely tricky territory, particularly for middle Australia, but the audience stays with her, because she is able to demonstrate the real complexities of these characters, exposing their light and dark and thereby avoiding the far too common patronising stereotype. They truly live for us. We know them. For these reasons we recognise, celebrate and applaud the truth and the great heart in her work.

For those who missed the wonderful original production of *Inheritance* mounted by Melbourne Theatre Company, read on.

Sydney
June 2003

Contents

Speaking Truth to Power: Hannie Rayson's 'Inheritance'

Hilary Glow

Like Elvis Presley, Pauline Hanson might have left the building, but it's hard to tell for certain. There are periodic sightings around the country and with each appearance she seems increasingly phantasmagorical. But speculations about her corporeality really don't matter, what does matter is counting the cost of the political legacy that has been left behind. There can be no doubt that the emotional and philosophical priorities of One Nation have continued to shape the contemporary political scene. Guy Rundle points out that on the question of political philosophy, Hanson and John Howard share a fundamental view about the importance of racial and cultural homogeneity and, he argues, these 'accorded with the view of an essentially Australian character on which Howard's values [are] grounded'.[1] These essentialist values about Australia and Australian-ness are part of the grab bag of conservative 'common sense' ideas which win votes and help to shape the ideological terrain we inhabit.

Hannie Rayson's *Inheritance* bursts into this cosy conservative world view with so much verve and punch, and with such dramatic flair, that it serves to remind us why theatre (admittedly all too rarely) is a powerful vehicle for the dissenting view. Edward Said has said that the role of the public intellectual is to 'speak truth to power'[2] and this above all else is Rayson's objective. Like all of her plays, *Inheritance* shows Rayson's fascination with understanding those ideas which belong to the category of the apparently self-explanatory ('that's just the way the

[1] Guy Rundle, 'The Opportunist: John Howard and the Triumph of Reaction', *Quarterly Essay*, QE 3 2001, p. 26.

[2] Edward Said, 'The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals' in *The Public Intellectual* (ed.) Helen Small, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 2002, p.25.

world is'), and asks us to re-think them. And in the process of doing so audiences may find themselves questioning the 'merciless logic' of political power.[3] In *Life After George* (2001), Rayson trained her gaze on the corporatisation of the universities and the concomitant clash between the goals of a liberal education, on the one hand, and economic rationalism's relentless pursuit of the bottom line, on the other. In this new play, Rayson looks at the land, the country we inhabit, and asks: to whom does it belong? Here, there is a whole polyphony of dissonant voices: the two eighty-year-old women, Dibs and Girlie, who have an inherited loyalty to their land, a loyalty which is generations old; the white farmer, Lyle, who struggles to earn a decent living out of his patch of dirt while feeling all the while a crushing disappointment and resentment; Nugget, the adopted Aboriginal son whose sense of belonging (both spiritual and material) is utterly extinguished by an exclusionary white world; Julia and Felix, the city folk who bring to the country their well-intentioned but risibly inappropriate urban values with them in their overnight bags, and are treated like visitors from another planet (planet Melbourne).

Inheritance is a story of two families battling it out in the unforgiving terrain of Victoria's Mallee region. The elderly twin sisters, Dibs Hamilton and Girlie Delaney, represent two kinds of rural family story. Dibs inherited the family farm and has prospered; her children, Julia and William, are well educated city folk, and her adopted Aboriginal son, Nugget, is a successful farmer managing the family farm. Girlie, on the other hand, has had a tougher ride. Her son Lyle and his wife Maureen are embittered by their experience of life on the farm as one of endless struggle and never getting an even break. This group of characters gather together to thrash out (one way or another) the question of who will inherit the family farm, Allandale. The farm has both a literal and metaphorical connotation. Here the 'farm' is a synecdoche for the 'nation'; in other words the part stands for the whole. Along the way Rayson re-writes our grand cultural assumptions about the country and the people who live there. This play takes our often unexamined bush nostalgia, and the endless celebration of the earthy Australian values that are supposedly engendered there, and asks us to look again to find

[3] Ibid p.32.

a more complex and disturbing truth. The Hanson/Howard essentialist view of the matey, self-reliant, fair-go Australian is here revealed as a cobbled together rationalization of an altogether more malevolent intolerance of the outsider. This is Rayson's terrain, her métier; all of her plays are explorations of the point at which dominant ideas meet lived experience, and in the explosion of contradictions that this produces, lies the drama.

Inheritance was born out of Rayson's simultaneous curiosity about the social and political world, and her rejection of the black and white dichotomies and taken-for-granted ideas that characterize much contemporary public debate—the sort of thinking, for example, that has allowed the notion of 'political correctness' to enter public discourse both as a derogatory term and a self-evident truth. This play has its genesis in a critical enquiry about the use and currency of 'political correctness' as a strategy for creating consent and tacit approval; it questions the appeal and political successes of One Nation, and the way Hanson's rise to power had managed to produce (and was itself produced by) a great divide in the population. There were the rural 'rednecks' and the urban elites, and the two worlds missed each other by a country mile.

> The sort of rhetoric that both sides were using was at an impasse, a terrible despairing impasse—that was how I experienced it. It just became futile and defeating to keep saying 'what's wrong with these people?' Like most people in my particular circle of family and friends, I was furious and frustrated by Pauline Hanson and her escalating power base and so there was really no alternative for me but to go and find out where that support was coming from, rather than simply saying—those people must be a sandwich short of a picnic.

In order to move beyond this 'despairing impasse', Rayson has peopled *Inheritance* with characters who do not simply reproduce or represent the dichotomous positions of city-vs-country. Rather, the audience looks with fresh eyes at a familiar world made up of characters and scenarios which are readily identifiable, but complex at the same time; we recognize who these people are, we connect to their hopes and aspirations and we feel terribly implicated by both their actions and omissions.

Rayson wants a theatre in which audiences are challenged to look again at what they believe, to think again, to walk into the theatre with one set of ideas and walk out with another. In this regard Rayson might be viewed as an idealist but this is, arguably, the kind of politically-charged, critical optimism that the Australian theatre needs in order to ensure its viability and relevance. Rayson is occasionally accused of writing 'issue' plays; and *Inheritance* was seen by some as a catalogue of contemporary concerns.[4] But the play is more skilful than this, and it avoids the sort of propagandist outcomes that are usually associated with the 'issue' play; a genre Rayson has typified as 'corridor theatre':

> You get to the theatre and you know with a sinking heart that for two hours you'll be walking down a corridor which you can see, at the outset, has a sign that says 'No more freeways for Melbourne', or 'Ban Uranium'… I try to be as surprising and unpredictable as possible because that's the stuff of the drama. So you are not just seeing some sort of values clarification exercise, or illumination of a moral fable, or an inventory of 'issues'. Hopefully, you are so embroiled in the story and captivated by the characters, it is only the next morning over breakfast that certain 'issues' take shape in your mind and open themselves for further consideration.

In creating a complex, dynamic and provocative dramatic experience, one of Rayson's key dramaturgical strategies is the use of contradiction. Dibs is a Christian woman who believes in doing the right thing. In adopting Nugget as her son, for example, Dibs is certain that she is fulfilling her moral responsibilities. And yet, as the play unfolds, it becomes apparent that Dibs is capable of terrible moral perfidy rationalised by her unexamined racism. By creating characters who are not simply black or white but full of contradictions, Rayson not only creates a reality 'effect' in her drama (this is, after all, what people are like), but explores the full spectrum and all the subtle shades of moral ambiguity.

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[4] Helen Thomson, 'Inheriting the politics of fear and envy', *Age*, 7 March 2003, p.4.

> When I say my work is character-driven it means that the plays are always peopled with characters who contain huge contradictions, as do we all, and I am always interested in their having surprising kinds of qualities. People who are ruthless bastards in the board room are very charming at dinner parties, and people who work for the UN or help sink wells in Borneo can be extremely nasty to their own mothers in Bentleigh… the characters themselves have to contain multitudes. I am very taken with that Walt Whitman poem: 'Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / I am large, I contain multitudes'. I think that's also in itself a kind of politicizing idea—that people are capable of multiple thinking, and they can often sit with contradictory world views.

The dramaturgical emphasis on contradiction emerges most clearly in *Inheritance* as it plays out an intensely personal drama against the socio-political context. One defines and articulates the other. The personal, familial drama of the Hamiltons and the Delaneys, for example, has a sweeping and tragic resonance precisely because we understand these people's story within the framework of colonialism, globalisation and endemic racism. All of this is finely reflected in the story of Nugget's adoption by the Hamiltons whose treatment of their Aboriginal son is marked by a deadly mixture of ignorance, repression, silence and guilt—all thinly papered-over by good intentions. Nugget's story of dispossession speaks volumes about Australia's white history and the difficulty we have in acknowledging not only our racist past but its continuing legacy.

> There is a scene at the end of the play where Nugget rakes over his past and his relationship with his father, Farley, who had been his champion… and treated him like a son, but Nugget comes to realize that wasn't enough. One of the major themes in this play is about the white silencing of our history, and how that has completely and utterly disempowered Aboriginal people. I wanted to show that, and to underline it and ram it home. We see that the rug is pulled from underneath Nugget and he is left without anything, and yet the father is still saying to him that some things are best left unsaid, and it's impossible to shift the deadening, oppressive hand of keeping things secret.

> We are not speaking the truth about what has happened because of white guilt from having colluded in the oppression in the past.

This reflexive reading of the personal with the political is definitional of Rayson's work. Louis Nowra has recently argued that while contemporary English playwrights continue to be fascinated by class and the way it determines experience, American playwrights are obsessed with the self and the pursuit of happiness.[5] While Nowra also has some misgivings about contemporary Australian theatre, however, it is clear that Rayson's oeuvre represents a thorough-going commitment to the idea that theatre should express politics as lived experience, and vice versa:

> [My plays] are entirely about bridging the public and the private, about trying to deal with private moments in the stories of people's lives set against the historical, social and political backdrop. Politics exists and is manifested in how we live. My task as a dramatist is to make the recognizable and the particular and the known shed light on the bigger canvas. People think about politics as being quite separate from the way they live their lives, and my entire raison d'être is to bring the two things together.

Inheritance achieves many things: it is an absorbing family saga full of both affection and critique. And like many of Rayson's plays, here the tragic and the comic are intermingled, one in dialogue with the other: the wildly inappropriate dick jokes at a family funeral; Maureen and Girlie's racist diatribe taking the piss out of every sacred cow; Felix's well-intentioned 'Sorry' t-shirt, signalling his Brunswick Street cred, while here in Rushton it epitomises everything laughable about urban attitudes. The play revels in the ironic. Just as Dibs and Girlie settle the question of inheritance, Lyle violently self-destructs. Maureen's political rhetoric about helping the man on the land, turns out to be a matter of political expedience when at the play's close she happily turfs them all off the farm to finance her personal ambitions. Dramatic irony is a rich

[5] Louis Nowra, 'Just act normal', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 2003, p.4.

vein running through this play, making audiences laugh in recognition, and then lose themselves in the profound emotional and moral turmoil at the heart of the work.

The irony also works to challenge whatever residual nostalgic and utopian ideas we might have about the country and the people who live there. As audiences, depending where we come from, we may view this play as a reworking of the iconic and romanticised view of the bush, a view that has come down to us through nineteenth-century art and literature, and then more recently reiterated in the period films of the Australian cinema in the 1970s and 1980s. There is much in *Inheritance* to suggest that the Australian countryside is not, and has never been, a place of great moral virtue, but a very dark place indeed—a place of terrible tragedies and repressions. And, as the play reminds us, this violence, inflicted on the self and on others, is historically patterned, each generation seeming doomed to repeat it. On the other hand, we might see this play as a critique of a political system which comprehensively abandoned the rural sector, turning country towns into nowhere-ville, and forcing their inhabitants to go without the most basic of services. Where this play is finally most remarkable is in its acknowledgement of a complex truth: alienation and despair provide the ideal preconditions for xenophobia. What a perfect scenario, this play shows us, for Hanson's politics of fear and blame.

This play is a hugely significant work of the Australian theatre; as significant in its own way as *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, or *The One Day of the Year* or *Don's Party*. Just as these canonical works once spoke to the hearts and minds of their respective generations, so does Rayson's play talk to us about who we are and what we believe. And this is no mean feat in an era when theatre seems increasingly to suffer from a certain timidity of spirit; less likely to take politics by the horns, and much more keen to take us into the psycho-sexual dramas of the middle class (a subject matter better handled by television in any case). In his history of British playwrighting, David Edgar argues that if the theatre is to thrive it needs to 'recapture its sense of the seriousness of its own mission. Faced with the fashionable contempt of those cultural critics who find theatre too much like hard work, theatre should celebrate rather than downplay the moral rigour of its endeavour, and return to its primary purpose of examining who we are and why we do what we

do'.[6] Hannie Rayson's is an urgent, moral voice and it rings out in this play, reminding audiences that the theatre, at its best, is a place where dissent and contradiction lead to recognition and empathy—an antidote to the normalizing conservatism of our day.

Hilary Glow was the dramaturg on Inheritance *and has worked on Hannie Rayson's plays for more than a decade. She is currently based at the Australian Centre, University of Melbourne, where she is researching a PhD on contemporary Australian writing. The interview material with Rayson is taken from a forthcoming interview in* Meanjin.

[6] David Edgar (ed.) *State of Play*, Faber & Faber, London 1999, p.32.

Director's Note

Simon Phillips

Shortly after the triumphant premiere of her brilliant play *Life After George* at the MTC in 2000, we struck while the playwright was hot and asked Hannie what she wanted to write next for the company. She'd already decided: a huge family saga about the land. Such was the blindness of my faith in Hannie that I baulked not a jot at the idea of this essentially urban writer presenting to our essentially urban audience a view of the oft-romanticised or over-simplified Australian 'bush'.

One of the things I most admire in Hannie's approach to writing is her interest not only in enlightening us, but also in enlightening herself. Shying away from the personal experience or even personal opinion (although her heart shines through her work), she sets out to explore a topic about which *she* wants to know more. She has likened her approach to that of the investigative reporter, scraping away at every angle of a story, 'not in the name of balance or fairness, but in the quest for truth and complexity'. She has an instinct for the zeitgeist—but even there the word 'instinct' might offend her—her sense of the zeitgeist is borne of a passionate and intelligent focus on the world around her—no mere hunch but rather an informed reading of, and concern for, current affairs.

Thus, after probing the corporatisation of the tertiary education system in *Life After George*, she turned her attention to the farming community with two objectives: to collect first-hand what the central concerns of that community are in the twenty-first century, and to try to better understand the circumstances in which a figure like Pauline Hanson might have found a foothold in Australian politics.

Typically, she went on a rampage of research. Having accepted the commission she disappeared for two years, during which time she made regular visits to the Mallee, doing her investigative reporter thing and collecting stories, points of view, inhabiting the lives and minds of the

people about whom she wished to write. She fell in and out of love with her subject matter as the warmer and uglier sides of their natures opened up to her apparently guileless and sympathetic probing.

The result of this approach to her writing is twofold. She tells the truth, or rather she tells truths, varied and opposing, but one finds them expressed in her plays, heartfelt and passionate, straight from the mouths of her characters. Whether Hannie herself likes the characters or not, they say it how they see it, without her censure. Thus any given person in the audience can find themselves cheering a different character on. Secondly, and this is a marvellous bi-product I think for a work of theatre, her characters' hearts beat and so we love them. Shakespeare wrote for an ensemble of actors and I often think that his characters have the benefit of his knowing the texture and detail of the real person who was going to play them. In Hannie's case, her characters are drawn together from threads of real people she has met (often the stories of several different people find themselves appropriated for one character's history or storyline), so they inherit the heartbeat of their genesis and as an audience it's hard not to view them with compassion, even if they horrify us.

Interestingly, this method of writing, which we affectionately refer to as the magpie approach, not only informs the development of the characters, but is ultimately reflected in the play's structure as well. The threads of the story are gathered together and at some point the spine of the plot is laid down (with a populist's eye for a damn good story), but because Hannie's concerns are both socio-political and humanist there are many aspects to the story which seem to float, waiting to find their emotional place in the nest. Hannie will hang on to an anecdote that has been lovingly passed on to her by someone, admitting that any form of rigour would see it turfed to the cutting room floor, but instead shuffling it through the story from one place to another, convinced that its presence will ultimately lend the story that extra layer of humanity.

In our early discussions about the play, Hannie surprised me by making comparison to a production I'd done of *The Seagull*. On the face of it, the structure of *Inheritance* is filmic, in the same way that Shakespeare is filmic, with often short scenes and sharp cuts from location to location. Chekhov tends to inhabit a single location, at least for an act at a time,

letting his characters come and go. But her comment was a useful hint as to how she saw the play. Chekhov's plays bring together a community of people, thrust into each other's company by blood or circumstance, and the location seems to intensify their shortcomings and longings as their lives move inevitably forwards, usually towards seemingly inevitable disaster or despair. And that, essentially, is what Hannie has written here. In spite of the fact that the play never sticks literally in one location for more than a few pages, the overriding sense is of one location, a microcosmic family carrying the aspirations and desperations of an entire community, even a nation, inside its own personal story.

Melbourne
July 2003

To all the farmers, stockmen, shearers, stock-and-station agents, country publicans and exiles who told me their stories with such good humour and grace. Thank you.

Inheritance was first produced by Melbourne Theatre Company at the Playhouse, Victorian Arts Centre, on 5 March 2003, with the following cast:

DIBS HAMILTON	Monica Maughan
GIRLIE DELANEY	Lois Ramsey
FARLEY HAMILTON	Ronald Falk
WILLIAM HAMILTON	Rhys McConnochie
JULIA HAMILTON	Julie Nihill
FELIX HAMILTON-GRAY	Gareth Ellis
NUGGET HAMILTON	Wayne Blair
LYLE DELANEY	Steve Bisley
MAUREEN DELANEY	Geraldine Turner
ASHLEIGH DELANEY, YOUNG DIBS	Katherine Fyffe
BRIANNA DELANEY, YOUNG GIRLIE	Jody Kennedy
NORM MYRTLE, LUCKY JOE DELANEY	Nick Farnell

Director, Simon Phillips
Dramaturg, Hilary Glow
Set Designer, Shaun Gurton
Costume Designer, Tracy Grant
Lighting Designer, Nick Schlieper

CHARACTERS

THE HAMILTONS

DIBS HAMILTON, aged 80
FARLEY HAMILTON, aged 83, husband of Dibs
WILLIAM HAMILTON, aged 52, eldest son
JULIA HAMILTON, aged 44, daughter
FELIX HAMILTON-GRAY, aged 19, Julia's son
NUGGET HAMILTON, aged 38, adopted Aboriginal son

THE DELANEYS

GIRLIE DELANEY, aged 80, Dibs' twin sister
LYLE DELANEY, aged 48, son of Girlie, farmer
MAUREEN DELANEY, aged 55, Lyle's wife
ASHLEIGH DELANEY, aged 16, daughter of Lyle and Maureen
BRIANNA DELANEY, aged 15, her sister

CHARACTERS FROM THE PAST

NORM MYRTLE (1890-1934), father of Dibs and Girlie
YOUNG GIRLIE
YOUNG DIBS
WORMIE MCCALLUM (1915-1980), stockman
LUCKY JOE DELANEY (1920-1989), Girlie's husband
LOFTY BLAKE

PROLOGUE

Sunset in the Mallee. The sky is streaked with orange and red. Darkness is approaching. In the backyard of the Myrtle family farm, the water tank is in silhouette. There are rusty forty-four-gallon drums lying around. The yard is littered with old farm junk and various members of the Myrtle family, neighbours and friends. Birds are calling. Dogs bark.

It is December 1934.

As the audience take their seats, the actors gaze into the auditorium, quiet and impassive, as though watching strangers coming into town.

NORM MYRTLE *(the patriarch) plays the piano on the verandah.* WORMIE MCCALLUM *is accompanying him on the mouth organ.*

Suddenly night falls. A big spotlight, made from a roo spotter, falls on NORM. *He is holding a trophy made from a sheep's skull with a blue ribbon rosette.*

NORM: Ladies and gentlemen, a big, warm welcome to our first act of the evening. Competing for the 1934 Norm Myrtle Memorial Trophy, please put your hands together for our very own 'Darlings of the Mallee'—my two favourite girls—the Myrtle Twins.

The spotlight is directed at two towels hanging from a clothes line, making a circle of light.

Dibs and Girlie Myrtle.

NORM *strikes up the music. Two fourteen-year-old girls, dressed in blue, burst through 'the curtains' to sing 'Two Little Girls in Blue'. (Melody and text by Charles Graham, 1893.)*

DIBS & GIRLIE: [*together, singing*]

An old man gazed on a photograph
In a locket he'd worn for years;
His nephew then asked him the reason why
That picture had caused him tears.
'Come listen,' he said, 'I will tell you, lad,

A story that's strange, but true!
Your father and I, at the school one day,
Met two little girls in blue.

REFRAIN:

Two little girls in blue, lad,
Two little girls in blue.
They were sisters, we were brothers
And learned to love the two.
And one little girl in blue, lad,
Who won your father's heart,
Became your mother. I married the other,
Till destiny drew us apart.

But freedom and happiness filled our life,
A life that was fair and true—
For two better girls never lived than they,
Those two little girls in blue.'

The assembled crowd clap and whistle.

NORM: Ladies and gentlemen. The prima donnas of Allandale. Our very own queens of song, Dibs and Girlie Myrtle.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

Midday in the Mallee. A country road.

There is an almighty explosion. A Toyota Corolla shudders to a halt. Smoke pours from the engine.

The driver is a woman in her forties, JULIA. *The passenger is her son,* FELIX. *They are clearly inner-city folk.*

JULIA: Fuck. [*Pause*.] Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

They get out. As JULIA *slams the door, the car explodes again. This time the bonnet springs open and water gushes out.*

Fuck.

Silence. They stare at the car. FELIX *surveys the landscape. They are miles from anywhere. He goes to release the radiator cap and burns his hand.*

FELIX: Fuck!

JULIA: Felix!

He kicks the tyre. A black crow comments: Faarrk, faarrk!

He leans against the car.

FELIX: Where are we?

JULIA: On the Berriwillock Road.

FELIX: And how far is Rushton? Approximately.

JULIA: About forty ks.

FELIX: Too far to walk. Obviously.

JULIA *examines things under the bonnet.* FELIX *leans on the roof of the car and squints into the distance.*

JULIA: Black smoke means a fuel system defect.

FELIX: [*to the audience*] I hate cars.

JULIA: Blue smoke means internal engine problems.

FELIX: [*to the audience*] I don't even have a licence.

JULIA: And white smoke is the result of coolant getting into the cylinders.

FELIX: [*to the audience*] My mother did a course in Car Maintenance For Women. So we should be back on the road in no time. I'm Felix. I live above the Cosmic Kebab in Sydney Road.

JULIA: I think it's the head gasket.

FELIX: That did occur to me, but I didn't want to be alarmist.

JULIA: Felix, can you pass me a spanner? From the boot.

FELIX: Spanner… spanner…

He hands her a screwdriver.

Spanner.

JULIA: That's a screwdriver.

FELIX: Right.

He dives back into the car and hands her a spanner. She holds up the two tools.

JULIA: Spanner. Screwdriver.

She returns to the business under the bonnet.

FELIX: [*to the audience*] This is my mother, Julia.

JULIA: [*to the audience*] Hi.

FELIX: [*to the audience*] She always takes on this passive-aggressive tone when she wants me to come up to Allandale with her.

JULIA: What are you talking about?

FELIX [*mimicking*] It's just that it's your nanna's eightieth birthday and everyone would be so sad if you weren't there.

JULIA: You didn't have to come.

FELIX: [*mimicking*] But we'd all be very disappointed if you didn't.

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SCENE TWO

The Hamiltons' farm.

DIBS *walks across the stage with a wheelbarrow of dirt. Her twin sister* GIRLIE *enters.*

DIBS: [*to the audience*] We were all very disappointed when Julia and Hamish separated. I'm Dibs. Julia's mother. She's coming up this weekend, for our birthday. Girlie's and mine. We're eighty tomorrow.

She tips the dirt out.

GIRLIE: [*to the audience*] Old as God's dog. [*To* DIBS] I hope you're not using blood and bone on those roses.

DIBS: No.

GIRLIE: [*to the audience*] She is, you know. She'll burn the roots. [*To* DIBS] You'll burn the roots.

DIBS: Righto.

DIBS *spades the dirt onto the roses.*

GIRLIE: [*to the audience*] See! Doesn't take a jot of notice. [*To* DIBS] D'you see where Kyneton Boy came home in the third at Cranbourne.

DIBS: D'you have any money on it?

GIRLIE: I gave that silly son o' mine, ten quid. D'you think he remembered to go to the TAB?

DIBS: He's got a lot on his plate, poor ol' Lyle.

GIRLIE: Poor ol' Lyle, my arse. Came in at seven-to-one.

DIBS: Jeepers.

GIRLIE: Always had the luck of a speckle-arsed rooster. [*She grabs her coat.*] Well, I'm off home.

DIBS: Righto.

GIRLIE *exits.*

[*To the audience*] It's a terrible thing when a marriage ends. Mind you, I don't think Julia tried hard enough. That's the thing with young women: too selfish by half. I thought he was lovely—Hamish. I miss him. He came up one Easter and helped me plant the lavender

hedge, over there. Sometimes in the spring when I come out for herbs and I see the lavender in full bloom, I say, 'Hello Hamish'.

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SCENE THREE

The Delaneys'.

A little run-down house on the outskirts of Rushton. GIRLIE *lives there with* LYLE *and his family. There are car bodies in the yard and a rusty, swinging seat with plastic cushions on the verandah.*

LYLE *comes looking for his mother. On the front path there is a large object with a blanket over it.*

LYLE: You there, Girlie? Mum? You there?

GIRLIE: [*offstage*] Only just.

GIRLIE *enters.*

What's this?

LYLE: Happy birthday.

GIRLIE: What is it, Lyle?

LYLE: Na-nah!

He unveils the object. It is a motorised lawn-mower that he has converted into a little drive-bike for his mother. Long pause. GIRLIE *stares at it.*

GIRLIE: Do I have to do m' own lawns now?

LYLE: Come on. Hop on.

GIRLIE: Don't be ridiculous.

LYLE: This is going to make all the difference to your life, Mum.

GIRLIE: Too right it is. I'm gonna be the town idiot.

LYLE: Look. Pull the cord. And away you go.

He demonstrates.

GIRLIE: You expect me to ride down the main street of Rushton on a dead man's lawn-mower. Anyway, it's clapped out.