



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.



*Kim Gyngell as William and Melinda Butel as Isabel in the 2008 MTC production. (Photo: Jeff Busby)*

# ninety

Joanna Murray-Smith



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Cover shows Kim Gyngell as William and Melinda Butel as Isabel in the 2008 MTC production. (Photo: Jeff Busby)

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*For Raymond and the Pantheon.  
And for Charlie.*

*Ninety* was first produced by Melbourne Theatre Company at the Fairfax Theatre, Melbourne, on 22 August 2008 with the following cast:

ISABEL

Melinda Butel

WILLIAM

Kim Gyngell

Director, Simon Phillips

Set Designer, Andrew Bellchambers

Lighting Designer, Nick Schlieper

## CHARACTERS

ISABEL, around forty

WILLIAM, five or six years older

## SETTING

Isabel's work studio. It has as little or as much dressing as required, but the overall impression is of a room curated by an elegant eye. In the room is an easel with a very beautiful painting of a couple, done in the style of a Van Eyck and vaguely reminiscent of 'Mr and Mrs Arnolfini'. Hanging around the top of the easel is a watch.

## THANKS

*Ninety* came into itself through the significant talents of Simon Phillips, Kym Gynge, Melinda Butel and Rachel Griffiths. Thanks to all the staff of the Melbourne Theatre Company.

As always, I am indebted to Raymond Gill.

And particular thanks to Dr Joe Crameri, who wouldn't remember us.



*As the play begins, ISABEL is working at the easel with a tiny brush, small dabs interspersed with long periods of contemplation. The door opens and WILLIAM enters. The start of the play needs to show a playfulness built from history.*

WILLIAM: Your time starts now.

ISABEL: Latecomer.

WILLIAM: Scheduler.

ISABEL: I thought you might not [actually show]—

WILLIAM: Really?

ISABEL: Well.

WILLIAM: I said [I would]—

ISABEL: Yes, but—

WILLIAM: I said [I would]—

ISABEL: I know. [*Beat.*] But you said that last time.

WILLIAM: Ah. Last time.

ISABEL: And you didn't show.

WILLIAM: I was shooting.

ISABEL: No you weren't. I rang your agent. Max said there was a writers' strike in LA. *Nothing* was shooting. He said you were in Kenya. Some Abercrombie and Something luxury safari.

WILLIAM: That's what I mean. *Shooting.*

ISABEL: *Lions?* [*Beat.*] Even *I* know they're *protected*. Even *I* know all that went out with Hemingway.

WILLIAM: If you're very rich or famous they'll still let you sink an old gazelle or two while the World Wildlife Fund are taking tea.

ISABEL: *Cynic.*

WILLIAM: *Sentimentalist.*

ISABEL: It was good, actually. Last time.

WILLIAM: Good.

ISABEL: There is, as they say, something 'healing' in ceremony...

WILLIAM: Well.

ISABEL: It was lovely, actually. The park. The trees—

WILLIAM: 'In their burst of colour'—

ISABEL: In their burst of colour.

WILLIAM: I think we should let them go.

ISABEL: We should let them go?

WILLIAM: The dead. [*Beat.*] I don't believe in standing in a park and hearing *The Prophet* or *The Tibetan Book of the fucking Dead* and then going off to drink tea. Something about death sends tea consumption into a frenzy. I apologise.

ISABEL: It was lovely.

WILLIAM: Good. What did you do?

ISABEL: We went to the park. Marjorie read from... *The Tibetan Book of the fucking Dead*. Then we all came back to the house and... drank tea.

WILLIAM: Lovely.

ISABEL: I missed you.

WILLIAM: All right, so I didn't come. I'm busy. I have 'things on'. You may interpret this as self-importance and you may be right, but whatever, that's the way it is. I have *a life*. For what it's worth. I'm a citizen of the world of international travel *and I love it*. I apologise for my 'failure rate'. Anyway, enough about me. How are you?

*She is about to respond when a small BlackBerry-type device/ phone starts beeping. He immediately pulls it out of his pocket, flips it open and reads the message, while she waits.*

Huh! [*He starts laughing.*] Cheeky bastard! [*He starts tapping a message back.*] Stick that where it belongs! [*He looks up at ISABEL.*] Sorry! How are you?

ISABEL: Well, I'm—

*The same device rings again. He flips it open.*

WILLIAM: [*to the phone*] I'm busy! No. No, tell him if that stays, I walk. I walk! Don't talk to me about clauses. Don't fucking talk to me about clauses, speak English. I know. I know. I *know*. [*He snaps the device shut.*] Never leave me alone. It's horrific. My PA's brilliant, she's brilliant, but I'm her life. [*Ironically*] Sometimes I have to say, 'Back off, babe', you know what I'm saying?

ISABEL: Not really.

WILLIAM: The business.

ISABEL: Congratulations on being a Globe.

WILLIAM: You really don't get out much, do you? You don't *become* a Globe!

ISABEL: Oh.

WILLIAM: You *win* one. A Golden One. You make me sound like an *artichoke*.

ISABEL: Well, anyway, that was... something.

WILLIAM: A nice role. Great writing. Just happened to... tap into the zeitgeist.

ISABEL: You're very good, actually.

WILLIAM: Thank you, Isabel. Generous.

ISABEL: How is it, being famous?

WILLIAM: Oh, it's nice.

ISABEL: Good tables?

WILLIAM: *Great* tables. Reservations totally obsolescent.

ISABEL: The world of obsolescent reservations. Gosh.

WILLIAM: I've also got to the point where I can fly first and not eat every single thing that's offered to me. The *really* famous never, ever, *ever* eat. It's too *mortal*. They only drink bottled water.

ISABEL: I've read about it!

WILLIAM: All those truffle-tinged hors d'oeuvres and hot baked cookies four thousand miles above the Sahara are only for people for whom flying first is a special occurrence. The lovely hosties holding trays of superbly zapped morsels dip and sway, their tight little arses sashaying towards me in seat 1A. I say, 'No Thank You. Just some water, if you please, collected from that small bubbling spring in that newly discovered rainforest off the Amazon by very, very nice pygmies. And if you're all out of that, please don't worry your pretty little head about a damn thing. I'll just recline here, ever so slightly parched, and contemplate my fame.'

ISABEL: I suppose lots of women come your way now.

WILLIAM: Millions.

ISABEL: Do you bed all of them?

WILLIAM: Of course not! I'm not a *slut*! [*Beat.*] Just the blondes.

ISABEL: They mainly *would* be blondes, wouldn't they?

WILLIAM: Actually, I prefer brunettes, but I'm caught in a cliché.

ISABEL: When I think of all those nights you spent going to radical handicapped theatre troupes doing productions of seminal plays by obscure Finnish geniuses. In mime.

WILLIAM: Let me remind you: Income is the choreographer of ideology.

[*He turns to the painting on the easel.*] This your latest, then?

ISABEL: Yes.

WILLIAM: Who are they?

ISABEL: Rock and Doris? We don't really know who they are. Probably a merchant and his wife.

WILLIAM: Rock and Doris, popular names in Antwerp in the sixteenth century, then?

ISABEL: They've been living with me for ten months, I had to call them something. It was found on a property in the Western District and dusted off by the beneficiaries. They want it restored, then they'll give it to Sothebys for auctioning next year.

WILLIAM: It looks like—

ISABEL: I know. But apparently not. There was some speculation it might have been an early study, but it's not Van Eyck. It's rather beautiful, don't you think? The supplication in his eyes—to what? God? Love?

WILLIAM: He might just be hungry. 'We've been sitting in front of this wanker for hours and has anyone offered us so much as a *pomme frite*?' [*Beat.*] Is it wonderful?

ISABEL: Is it wonderful to you?

WILLIAM: What do I know about wonderful?

ISABEL: I've stood in front of it for nearly a year, and still, it reveals something new almost every time I look at it.

WILLIAM: Nearly a year. Obsessive?

ISABEL: Patient. [*Beat.*] What astonishes me, is how little we've changed in five hundred years, we husbands and wives. There she is. Look at her. She's wondering where she becomes him, and where she is alone. Their faces were cloudier before. Layers and layers of varnish have come off. Hundreds of years of UV light, pollutants. Their gaze has been getting more distinct—

WILLIAM: You've been—

ISABEL: Bringing them back.

*His BlackBerry goes off again.*

WILLIAM: Oh fuck. [*He flips it open and reads.*] Fuck me! What's the point of delegating? [*Typing*] Tell. Them. No. Photo. Shoot. I don't care who they are. [*Pause. Typing as he speaks*] Who are they? [*He waits for a response. Typing and speaking*] Say yes, then!

ISABEL: What is that?

WILLIAM: It's like a BlackBerry, only much more expensive.

ISABEL: A BlackBerry?

WILLIAM: It's brilliant. And this one—the keyboard is enormous.

Absolutely enormous. It's impossible to hit the wrong button.

ISABEL: But it's only two inches big.

WILLIAM: I have every fifteen minutes for the next month programmed into here. Can't live without it.

ISABEL: Can you turn it off?

WILLIAM: Technically it's turn-offable. But the concept makes me nervous.

*She looks at him. He thinks. He turns it off and puts it aside.*

ISABEL: [*surveying him*] Does someone take you shopping?

WILLIAM: Can you tell?

ISABEL: You look as if you've had *help*.

WILLIAM: I *have* had help, actually. And what I've learnt, in a nutshell, is that it's all about *layering*.

ISABEL: You got so lucky!

WILLIAM: That wasn't *Vanity Fair*'s opinion, as I recall. I think they mentioned something about 'an ability to express the melancholy of the modern condition with tragi-comic insouciance'. *The New Yorker*, incidentally, captioned my portrait 'The man who made the small screen big'.

ISABEL: As a matter of interest... how quickly do you adjust to fame? How long does it take for that first rush of glorious bewilderment... the How Did This Happen to Me? phase... How long does it take before you start to wonder why *even better* things haven't happened to you?

WILLIAM: Seconds.

ISABEL: Do you miss anything about obscurity?

WILLIAM: The legitimacy of complaint.

*Beat.*

ISABEL: I miss you.

WILLIAM: I know. [*Beat.*] Isabel.

ISABEL: Yes.

WILLIAM: Why did you bring me here?

ISABEL: You know why I brought you here.

WILLIAM: I'm being picked up at seven.

ISABEL: Yes.

WILLIAM: The point is, we need to get on with it.

ISABEL: Ninety. Not much in the scheme of things. A blink.

WILLIAM: I'm here. Aren't I?

ISABEL: You're here because you know I'm—[right]

WILLIAM: *No*. It's a *contract*. You said on the phone—

ISABEL: Yes. All right.

WILLIAM: And by the by, I'm *fourteen* hours behind—

ISABEL: Yes, yes—

WILLIAM: On the phone *at four a.m.* you said—

ISABEL: It's a contract.

WILLIAM: Ninety. And then—

ISABEL: Yes.

WILLIAM: That's it.

ISABEL: Ninety.

WILLIAM: That's it.

ISABEL: That's the contract.

WILLIAM: Just so we're clear. The car is coming for me at seven.

ISABEL: So you said.

WILLIAM: The plane's at ten. Her parents are arriving in Gay Paree as we speak. It's all happening *Dimanche*.

ISABEL: The big day.

WILLIAM: *La grande journée. Exactement*. Charming young Parisian florists are designing floral concepts as we speak. Fancily wrapped presents are assembling themselves on dining tables. Celebrants are performing vocal exercises in preparation. *It's happening*.

ISABEL: Where did you propose?

*Beat.*

WILLIAM: Here, actually.

ISABEL: Where?

WILLIAM: Do you care?

ISABEL: Yes.

WILLIAM: At Adolpho's.

ISABEL: [*unable to quite disguise her pain*] You proposed at Adolpho's?