

Radiance

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*To Rosalba Clemente
and
Rachel Perkins*

Radiance was first produced at the Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, on 21 September 1993 with the following cast:

MAE

Rachael Maza

CRESSY

Lydia Miller

NONA

Rhoda Roberts

Director, Rosalba Clemente

Set Design, Brian Thomson

Costume Design, Sue Field

Lighting Design, Fiona Johnstone

Sound Design, Paul Charlier

Stage Manager, Loretta Busby

CHARACTERS

MAE

CRESSY

NONA

SETTING

The play is set in North Queensland.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

The large living room of a wooden house on stilts. It is late morning and harsh tropical light pours in through the slats in the many shutters. MAE is wearing a dowdy black frock and is lost in thought as she stares at a chair. MAE touches the chair with her foot as if making sure that there is no-one there. As she talks she strikes matches and throws them at the chair.

MAE: Are you still there? You are, aren't you? I'll have to burn down this place to get rid of you. Ghosts burn, did you know that? And you'll burn. It'll all burn down, even ghosts can't live in a place that doesn't exist anymore. I'll do it. I'll have the courage. Everything will burn. And then you'll be gone. The whole world will burn. I'll hold my hands out, like warming them before a fire. *[She looks at a piece of paper in her hand and then at the chair. To the chair]* He did the dirty on you. Did the dirty on us both. He'll see it burning, but he'll be too late. They'll see it burning from miles and miles around. Like cracker night. Everything up in flames.

NONA enters wearing what can only be described as 'a little black dress'. She is also made up as if heading off to a party. MAE, surprised by NONA's sudden appearance, hides the piece of paper from NONA.

[Shocked] You can't wear that.

NONA: Why not?

MAE: Not to your mother's funeral.

NONA: I'm not fully dressed yet. I've still got to put on my knickers.

MAE: The dress. I meant the dress.

NONA: What's the matter with it?

MAE: You're almost naked.

NONA: If I was I wouldn't be wearing it. I can't get by without my little black dress. *[She goes to her open suitcase, its clothes are neatly stacked.]* You been at my suitcase?

MAE: Just tidying up.

NONA: [*scattering clothes*] It just makes things harder to find. You got any black knickers?

MAE: [*irritated*] We'll never get there!

MAE goes into the other room. NONA holds up an even shorter dress, this time red, against her body.

NONA: [*calling out*] What about red? Or is that bad taste at your mum's funeral?

MAE: [*off*] Yes.

NONA: [*half to herself*] Is that yes, it's bad taste, or yes, wear the red? [*She throws the dress back on the suitcase and takes out some black high heels. Calling out*] I bought these shoes especially for today.

NONA turns on the radio then lifts up her dress and with a pair of tweezers starts to pluck her pubic hair. On the radio is DOYLE, the local priest.

DOYLE: 'The world is full of temptation. As it should be. Because it is only by confronting temptation that we confront ourselves and become victorious over ourselves...'

MAE: [*off*] No black, what about white?

NONA: [*to herself, incredulous at MAE's bad taste*] White!

DOYLE: 'The Lord will forgive sin but He will not forgive evil and many people have evil in their hearts. They may not do evil unto others, but they think evil and to think evil is as great as committing an evil deed. There are people in this town, yes, in this very town, who work, shop, play sports; seemingly good, generous people, but in their hearts is evil, evil that festers, evil that thinks evil of others and those people are just as severe sinners as those who commit evil deeds...'

MAE enters holding a black dress and stops stunned as she sees an unconcerned NONA pluck out her pubic hair.

MAE: What are you doing?

NONA: Making the perfect bikini line.

MAE: Why don't you just shave the whole lot off and be done with it?

NONA: It would only attract child molesters.

NONA's answer throws MAE.

[*Referring to the radio*] Who's the nutter?

MAE: Father Doyle.

NONA: The one who's doing the service?

MAE *nods*.

I hope he doesn't go on like that at Mum's funeral. [*She turns the radio onto another station.*] Hey, do they still have listings of what's on? Like sports day? Who's in hospital? Rodeos? I was kind of hoping there was a rodeo in town. My father could be in town. Maybe he heard about Mum's death.

MAE: [*abruptly turning off the radio*] There's no rodeo in town. [*Holding out the dress*] I want you to put this on.

NONA: [*taking it with distaste*] This? [*Putting it against her body*] I look like a frump.

MAE: It's respectful. You have to respect the dead.

NONA: Why? It wouldn't be me. Mum wouldn't recognise me in this.

MAE: [*irritated with her*] Just try it on.

NONA: I'll dip it in mud and go grunge. I'll do up this place grunge. Anything would be better.

MAE: You don't like the way I've done it up?

NONA: I'm pretty good at decoration. Now that it's ours—

MAE: Things still have to be sorted out.

NONA: What things?

MAE *looks at the mess NONA has already created around her suitcase and gives an exasperated sigh.*

MAE: Your place must be like a pigsty.

NONA: [*starting to undress*] I'm a pig.

MAE *picks up the red dress and puts it against herself.*

MAE: My God, it's like wearing a handkerchief. You don't wear this in public.

NONA: [*putting the black dress over her dress*] Where else would I wear it?

NONA *gazes glumly at the dress. Indeed, it is frumpy looking.*

Do you wear this one?

MAE: It's not mine. It's Mum's.

NONA: I can't wear a dead woman's clothes.

MAE: She didn't die in it.

NONA: What did she die in?

MAE: You serious?

NONA: Oh, yes. When I die I want to look a beautiful corpse. The sort that turns every man into a necrophiliac. What was she wearing?

Pause. MAE looks at NONA wondering if NONA is pulling her leg, but she seems serious. NONA sits in the chair to put on her high heels.

MAE: I can't remember... just a nightgown, with a dressing-gown, I think.

NONA: Where did she die? Not where I slept last night? I'm not sleeping there tonight.

MAE: Here. That chair.

NONA jumps up.

NONA: Shit! You serious?

MAE: In that chair. Around this time. Late morning. I'd come back from shopping in town and there she was. Like she was sleeping. Purple lips. Dried saliva on her chin.

NONA: Did she look happy?

MAE: She looked empty. Hollow. Like if you tapped her, there would only be a hollow sound.

NONA: What were her last words?

MAE: I said I was shopping.

NONA: I mean the last words you heard.

MAE: Gurgle, gurgle...

NONA pretends she hasn't heard MAE's sarcastic reply and walks in her high heels, testing them out.

NONA: I should have worn them in.

MAE: Don't wear them if they hurt.

NONA: No pain makes a girl plain. [*Indicating MAE's dress*] You'll need the gumboots for your outfit. I hate this dress.

MAE: I want you to wear it for the funeral.

NONA: It's not me. I bet Cressy is going to wear something stylish. I bet you. And I'll look awful.

MAE: She's not coming.

NONA: What?

MAE: She said it was too far away.

NONA: Why didn't you tell me? You're always hiding things from me.

MAE: No, I'm not. I told you she was in London.

NONA: [*looking at a CD cover*] She looks great. You've never seen her on stage, have you?

MAE *shakes her head*.

I saw her in *Madame Butterfly*. In Adelaide. I didn't tell her I was coming. I dragged my boyfriend along. She was fantastic. You know, dying at the end, singing her heart out, killing her kid. So I ask to go backstage. I tell this creep on the door that she's my sister. Bouncers are such arseholes. And there she is. In her dressing-room. Like a florist shop. She's sitting in her chair, the mirror lights around her like some sort of halo. She's still got her make-up on—Jap eyes, white skin, like a mask. You know the only photo she had in her dressing-room? Me, when I was about five. Can you beat that? I tell her how much I liked *Madame Butterfly* and she goes '*Madama Butterfly*'. Like, how was I to know? It was my first opera. My boyfriend was a bit out of place—he only liked Acid Jazz—so he went out to wait for me and Cressy says, 'Oh, he's so handsome, Nona, but thick as a brick'.

MAE: That's terrible.

NONA: He was just a bloke, right? Dead ordinary. I stayed with him longer than I would have just to prove her wrong, but she was right.

NONA *laughs*, MAE *is bemused*.

MAE: Did you go out with her—

NONA: It was great. Japanese. I mean, like she was still in character, so we had to eat Japanese. On the floor. We had that horseradish stuff that burns your mouth. [*Pause.*] Why did you buy it, you don't have a CD player?

MAE: [*shrugging*] Seeing she doesn't send us any, I thought I may as well. Didn't even get a discount because she's my sister. [*Beat.*] Half price for a half sister.

NONA: It still makes her your sister. Two halves make a whole.

MAE: [*gazing at the CD cover*] She looks... different.

NONA: It's all make-up. I look really different when I'm photographed.

MAE: [*pointing to the red dress*] Is that how you like looking? Like a street walker?

NONA *is so astonished by MAE's outburst, she almost laughs.*
Silence.

NONA: [*pointing to the chair*] Was it always there?

MAE *is puzzled.*

Did she always sit there, in that spot?

MAE: Towards the end.

NONA: Because she wanted to watch the sea?

MAE: Who knows what was going on in her noggin?

NONA: I've never seen a dead person.

MAE: There's no art to dying. It's shitting, farting, crying, pissing yourself.

That's how most people die, Nona.

NONA: You were born a nurse.

MAE: That's how people die.

NONA: I bet you she was looking at the island.

CRESSY *enters and stands there, smiling, expectant. She is dressed in a stylish and expensive black dress. Silence. MAE and NONA are surprised to see her.*

CRESSY: You can tell a small town, everyone leaves their front doors unlocked.

Silence.

NONA: [*pleased, praising her*] You look deadly.

CRESSY: Bit jet-lagged.

MAE: [*incredulous*] Cressy...

MAE *doesn't know how to react to her sister's appearance.*

CRESSY: [*smiling to MAE*] I'm no ghost.

An awkward pause. CRESSY seems tense, uneasy to be back in the house.

It's so hot.

NONA: I'll get you a glass of water.

CRESSY *puts her travelling valise on the chair.*

Don't!

CRESSY: Why?

NONA: Mum died there.