Ray Lawler was born in Footscray, Melbourne, in 1921, the second eldest in a family of eight. He left school at thirteen in the Depression days of the 1930s, to work as a labourer in a Footscray factory, a job he held for the next eleven years. It was during these years that he started acting and writing plays in his spare time, and several of his early works were presented by Melbourne amateur theatre companies.

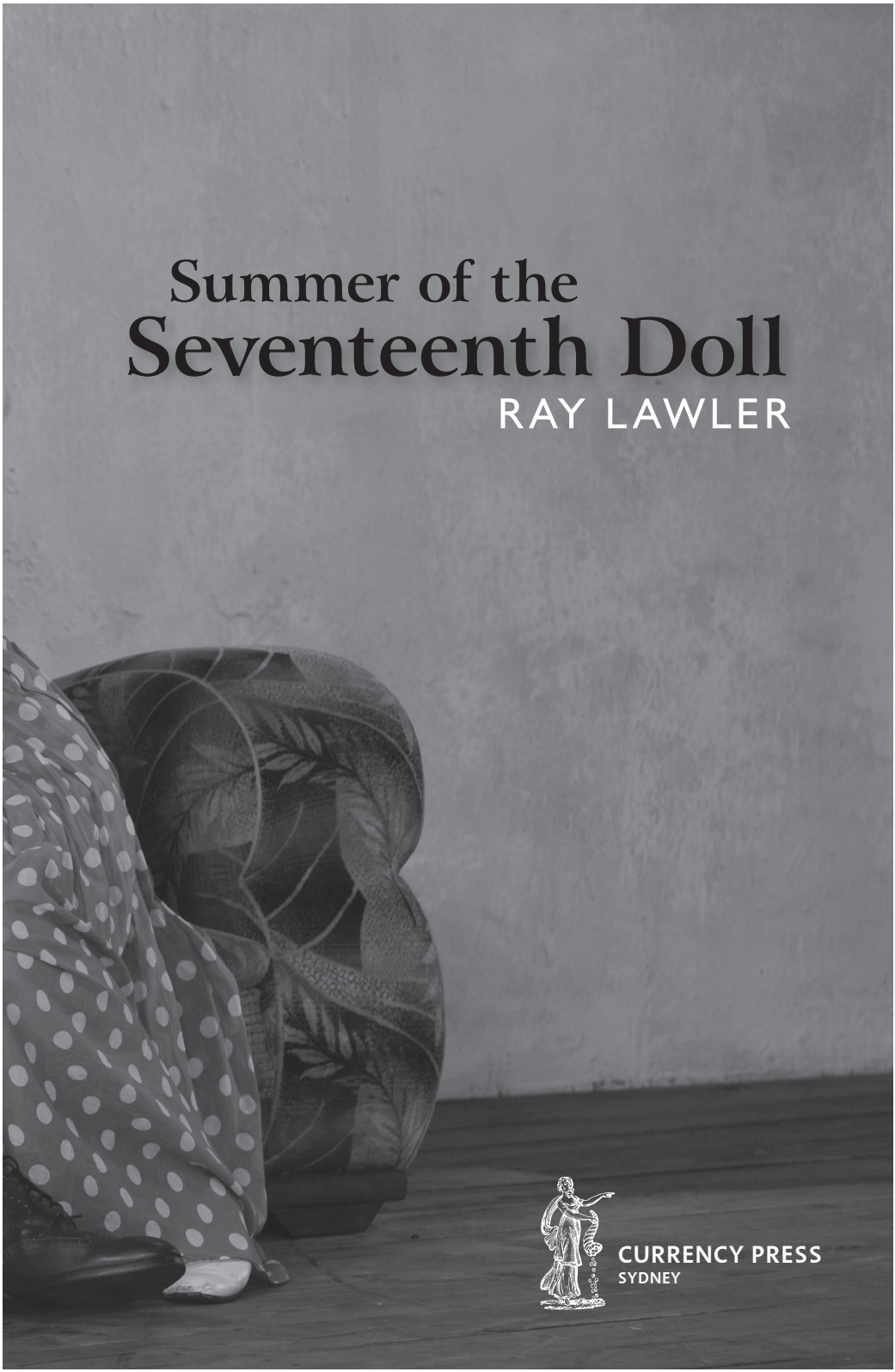
He first attracted wider attention as a writer when his play *Cradle of Thunder* was presented in Melbourne, after winning the National Theatre Movement's Jubilee Play Competition in 1952. By then Lawler had left factory work, and was eking out a living in professional theatre. In 1955 his tenth play, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, shared first prize in the Playwrights' Advisory Board Competition with Oriel Gray's work, *The Torrents*. *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was taken up by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, and presented by that organisation throughout Australia, with Lawler playing the role of Barney. This successful tour led to the Australian company being taken overseas for a London season, presented by Laurence Olivier, and *The Doll* (as it had become known), won the Evening Standard Award for the best new play on the London stage in 1957. The company then went on to play a season in New York, in conjunction with Laurence Olivier and the American Theatre Guild, but this was not a success—its failure perhaps best summed up by *The New York Times*' critic, Brooks Atkinson: 'Since the Australians speak English and so do we, we assume that *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* says the same thing to us as it does to Australians. But … this theatregoer felt that the real quality was escaping him.' Since then the play has been translated into many languages and performed in many countries.

Lawler stayed overseas for some years, and lived in Denmark, England and Ireland. Returning to Australia in 1975, to take up a position as an associate director with the Melbourne Theatre Company, with an agreement to complete a trilogy based on *The Doll*. The first play, *Kid Stakes*, opened in December 1975 and the second, *Other Times*, in December 1976. *The Doll Trilogy* had its first full performance a the Russell Street Theatre, Melbourne, on 12 February 1977.

Lawler has been married for over fifty years to actress Jackie Kelleher, whom he met when she was cast as Bubba in the first Australian wide tour of *The Doll*. They have two sons, a daughter, and three grand children.

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll

RAY LAWLER



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Front cover shows Susie Porter as Olive in the 2011 Belvoir production at the Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney. Pages ii–iii shows Susie Porter as Olive and Steve Le Marquand as Roo in the 2011 Belvoir production at the Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney. (Photos: Heidrun Löhr.)

Contents

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To John Sumner,
who directed the original production
from Australia to London and New York

The Doll revisited: a truer realisation

Again and again, with particular plays, I find myself drawn back to working on them in an attempt to—what? Do justice to some inner vision of the play that seems beyond my ability to realise it, I suppose. Certainly that has been the case with *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, and this publication of a final draft offers a chance to trace the development of the original work into life as the third play in a trilogy.

Directed with enthusiasm and inventive flair by John Sumner at the Union Theatre in 1955, the first production of what was swiftly dubbed *The Doll* gave us little time for workshopping. We had a rehearsal schedule of only two weeks, and apart from playing the role of Barney, I was heavily involved in preparing the Christmas revue that was to follow *The Doll* in our season of fortnightly repertory. Weighing the merits of what I had written as a playwright was my last consideration at a very hectic time. A confusion that continued—and indeed grew—when the success of the Melbourne season took us almost immediately on to Sydney, then to an Australian wide tour with the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, this in turn leading to a London season presented by Laurence Olivier, and finally to a Broadway opening with the Theatre Guild in New York. It was a giddy whirlwind, in no time the year was 1958, and I was still playing Barney. The opening of the play and its failure in New York hit me far more as a member of the acting team than as a playwright. No use as a writer to tell myself that it was all because the Americans didn't understand our accent, our humour and our slang, what I missed were the laughs and the immediate warmth of audience response. It was only after the company disbanded, and I had taken myself off to a quiet family life in Denmark, that I was able to get the entire Doll experience into any sort of perspective: to consider the play again as a play, and to remember how it came to me as an idea, and what I had in mind when writing it.

The time was the late 1940s. I had returned to Melbourne, after a year of fortnightly change vaudeville shows under Will Mahoney's management at the old Cremorne theatre in Brisbane. Brisbane then was still recovering from the wild and raunchy lifestyle of its World War II

years—Melbourne seemed very staid and buttoned up by comparison. I felt a stirring, a sense of opposites—the North as an invading life force, perhaps—raw and vigorous and living for the day, coming into mating conflict with a South of cooler values and considered expectations? A union that was bound to lead to unhappiness for both parties, but one with worthwhile qualities that seemed to deserve a better outcome? This having-it-both-ways thinking was pretty well set aside in the process of writing the play, but it did persist with a speech in the first production when the young Bubba, about to repeat the mistake of the older generation at the time of crisis in the lay-off, makes her winning claim to happiness with the statement: 'I'll have what you had, but I'll have it differently.' Various actresses played this scene during our run, all of them convincingly, but I always listened to it with a shameful awareness that it was a cheat—there was no way in which such a situation could guarantee happiness. Anyway this was the first line I blotted out in Denmark, going on to make some small adjustments to the Bubba-Johnnie Dowd scene generally. I then remembered other moments on stage when I felt the writing of the play had been less true and effective than it could have been, and I made minor alterations to encompass those. All very much from an objective point of view, changes I told myself that I may well have made if the initial rehearsal period had been for four or five weeks, and I had not been involved with the play as an actor.

The next revisions were of a different order. I was now living in Ireland, revivals of *The Doll* in Australia kept me thinking of the play, and occasionally of certain criticisms that had been made at the time of the original production. If the year of the seventeenth summer was 1953, what had happened to the annual lay-off seasons during World War II? And why so much talk of Nancy, when the character never appears in person? I had vaguely sorted out a background history of the previous sixteen summers when writing *The Doll*, but only as a lead up to the climatic events of the seventeenth year—oh yes, and I once mentioned to John Sumner in an idle moment in New York the possibility of setting down the first summer as a companion piece to the seventeenth. Now in Ireland it suddenly struck me that the previous years did have their own validity and interest. I wrote to John asking his opinion of a Doll Trilogy, three plays spanning the story from beginning to end.

He replied immediately, liking the notion, and supported it from that time on—in fact, if it hadn't been for John Sumner's encouragement, the project never would have happened.

I was aware from the outset that *The Doll* had to be the final play, and I was working to a pre-determined end. Which made things easier in one way, I knew where I was going, but it also meant that each of the other plays had to be a valid signpost to what lay ahead, as well as having its own merit as a piece of entertainment. Fortunately the seventeen years of the relationships split into three fairly equal sections: 1937 as the start of the story, 1945 marking a midway point, and 1953 being the year of *The Doll*. What is more, these were very different decades in Australian history: in 1937 the country was still in the grips of the Great Depression; in 1945 we were celebrating, in a rather exhausted fashion, having fought and won our way through World War II; in 1953 we had opened our gates to a flood of refugees we dubbed New Australians, who were to transform much of our way of life. Their arrival coincided with the passing of some older Australian ways of life, the sort lived by men such as Roo and Barney, itinerant works travelling the country and making their living from the land—cutting cane by hand, for instance.

All this, and the transforming effect of the character of Nancy on aspects of the story—her relationship with Barney was much stronger than I had anticipated—had to be justified by what already existed in the narrative line of *The Doll*. I found I had no wish to change the shape of events, what emotionally and physically happened to the characters, but I had learned so much about them in the course of writing the first two plays that the reason *why* it happens as it does seemed clear to me for the first time ever. This led to final text and stage amendments in all three plays, adjustments I believe are not changes at all, merely a truer realisation of what I was trying to say when I sat down to write the play sixty years ago.

The world of *The Doll*

The world of itinerant canecutters in Australia is now a thing of the past. Together with the sort of hotel that catered for male drinkers only in the public bars, and relegated women to a side entrance marked

Ladies Parlour. Also city boarding houses catering for lodgers on a weekly basis, with a tariff including all meals and domestic services of a kind that might be loosely classed as home comforts.

Obviously *The Doll* can be understood without any detailed knowledge of the above areas of activity. But because these helped to shape my original awareness of the characters and their story, I would like to set down certain aspects in grateful acknowledgment, and the hope these might be of interest for their own sake.

Canecutting

Normally a team of itinerant canecutters would come together at the beginning of the season, around the end of April. These would consist of nine or ten men, usually young single males or older drifters, assembled by a recognised leader known as a ganger, with the understanding that the team would stay together for the seven-month season. Travelling by truck from cane farm to cane farm, living in barracks on the premises, and cutting the harvest by hand, at piece-work rates or at an agreed sum for the overall crop. The success of a full season could depend very much on the quality and organising ability of the ganger. He would need to fulfill many functions, be able to bargain with cane farmers on his team's behalf, making sure that the working conditions and pay rates were satisfactory, and that the barracks supplied for living quarters were of a reasonable standard. On the team level, he would need to ensure that the hard-working men were well fed—a cook usually travelled as a member of the team—that they were kept as fit and well as possible, and that the morale of the team wasn't undermined by the loneliness and circumstances of their nomadic life. Once a man was known for these qualities, he would become a top ganger, able to attract the cream of experienced workers, knowing that they could rely on him for decent living conditions, and the best monetary return for the season's back-breaking slog.

I saw Roo as a man with a great pride in being a top ganger, relishing his ability to cope with all the demands of the job and enable his team to make a success of every season. It is a post that demands both authority and a sense of responsibility, and yet gives him the freedom to order life on his own terms. Elements, on the other hand, that make it difficult for him to shape a life away from the cane fields.

Olive as a barmaid

Olive's employment in the male chauvinistic pub life would have been both a refuge and a protection. The morality of the times, particularly in the 1930s, had a much stricter sense of what was acceptable in terms of public relationships, a Housewives' Union mentality that saw marriage as the only real union between a man and woman. Olive would have been aware of the disapproving attitude of the majority of women in her neighbourhood towards the lay-off, and would have been even more aware of discrimination if her daily employment had taken her among other females in the workplace. But the totally male clientele of the public bar created a swaggering masculine atmosphere in which rumours of a barmaid's racy lifestyle would have a jovial acceptance, even be the subject of a certain amount of knowing and good-natured banter across the bar. This would be a help in easing any sense of community rejection on Olive's part, and also play its part in confirming her fierce belief in the lay-off as an alternative to what she regards as the humdrum round of workaday married life.

The boarding house

Emma's Carlton boarding house is the sort of suburban establishment that offers full board on a weekly basis, and its success in 1937, the first year of the lay-off, would depend on its reputation for respectability and service: qualities likely to attract the sort of steady lodger looking for a home away from home, who could be relied on to settle in for a comfortably long stay and promptly pay board on time. It was a highly competitive field in the Great Depression days of the 1930s, and any loss of reputation would soon see a boarding house depending on short-term lodgers, and shady characters likely to fly by night, leaving unpaid bills. Emma's fall from grace as the proprietor of a well-run boarding house is inevitable once she accepts the lay-off situation, and the relationships of those involved. But it is also a loss on a much more personal level; once she abandons her strongly held notions of suburban morality, she loses what she believes to be a proper future for her daughter. Life after that is a matter of compromise, making the best of a bad job—which, for all her love of Olive and

innate respect for Roo, is how she eventually regards the seventeen-year course of their relationship.

The Dolls

The souvenir dolls appearing in the plays—kewpies with a decorative ruffled skirt, attached to cane walking sticks—are no longer a popular carnival novelty. The modern version, when seen, usually features a smallish doll of no particular style, with a wisp of coloured net for a skirt, and a meagre feather or two for decoration. These are a far cry from the glittering prize specimens of the 1930s, '40s and '50s.

Canecutting is now done by machinery, pub life is enjoyed by both sexes, and lovers coming together to live in an open sexual relationship for five months every year wouldn't raise an eyebrow in today's Australia. In retrospect, perhaps the key to all three plays is the moment in the last scene of *The Doll* when Emma tells Roo that his world has been lost by time.

Ray Lawler
Elwood, 2012

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll was first produced by the Union Theatre Repertory Company at the Union Theatre, Melbourne, on 28 November 1955, with the following cast:

PEARL	Roma Johnston
BUBBA	Fenella Maguire
OLIVE	June Jago
BARNEY	Ray Lawler
EMMA	Carmel Dunn
ROO	Noel Ferrier
JOHNNIE	Malcolm Billings

Director, John Sumner
Set Designer, Anne Fraser

Ray Lawler wishes to acknowledge the Emeritus Award granted to him by the Literature Board of the Australia Council, which was a great help in developing *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* into *The Doll Trilogy*.

CHARACTERS

BUBBA RYAN, 22
PEARL CUNNINGHAM, early 40s, a widow
OLIVE LEECH, 39
EMMA LEECH, approaching 70
BARNEY IBBOT, 40
ROO WEBBER, 41
JOHNNIE DOWD, 25

SETTING

The Leech house in Carlton, Melbourne. A Victorian two-storied dwelling with verandahs of the period, featuring decorative lacy ironwork.

There is a sitting room on the ground floor, with an archway that gives access to a hall containing a flight of stairs, together with a passage that leads in one direction to the kitchen and in the other to the street door. A window in the sitting room overlooks the front verandah, and there are also French windows leading out to a largely unseen side verandah, heavily laden with shrubs in pots, along with hanging ferns and plant baskets.

The setting in 1953 reflects Olive's taste rather than Emma's, and marks the passing of household power from mother to daughter. Most of the solid pieces of furniture have been retained (among them Emma's piano and a chaise longue), but the dominant decorative features are the souvenirs from past summers. Most notable of these are sixteen kewpie dolls on walking sticks scattered around the room, stuck behind pictures on the wall, flowering in twos and threes from vases, and clustered in a pattern over the mantelshelf. They are accompanied by a collection of colourful mementos that feature a number of brilliantly-plumaged, stuffed North Queensland birds, as well as coral pieces and shells from the Great Barrier Reef, and picture frames backed with black velvet to which cling crowds of shimmering-winged tropical butterflies. A string of Christmas cards is looped from the mantelshelf, and a festive decorative centrepiece hangs from the overhead light bracket. The riot of colour disguises the fact that the house interior has not been renovated in recent years.

The house garden has been allowed to become a wilderness and, together with the overgrown ferns and shrubs on the side verandah, enshroud the house in a tangle of plant life. The overall effect is not one of gloom, however, but of a glowing interior protected from the drab outside world by a shifting curtain of light-filtered greenery.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

It is five o'clock on a warm Sunday afternoon in early December 1953. The sitting room table has been set for a celebration meal.

BUBBA *is busily tying wide blue ribbons to a couple of red-and-white striped candy walking sticks. At the same time, she is chatting with shy but determined authority to* PEARL CUNNINGHAM*, who is sitting nearby, smoking and ostensibly leafing her way through a fashion magazine.* PEARL *is a widow in her early forties, driven back to earning a living by the one job she knows well, that of barmaid. Given the choice, she would prefer something of a more classy nature—head saleswoman in a dress salon, for instance. The pub game, she feels, is rather crude. She is wearing what she refers to as her good black, with a double string of pearls. Very discreet.*

BUBBA: So—I was the only one went to the wedding. Autumn it was and the boys were away, though of course, when Olive wrote up and told them, they sent down money for a present. But I was the one who had to buy it and take it along. Olive wouldn't have anythin' to do with it. Wouldn't even help me pick anythin' out.

PEARL: [*a fishing expedition*] The—boys—didn't mind her getting married, then?

BUBBA: [*frowning a little*] Bound to. 'Specially Barney—must've been a shock to him—but like I say, they wouldn't do anythin' to stand in her way. That's how they are, see. Olive was the one really kicked up a fuss. Wouldn't believe, even up to the Saturday afternoon, that Nance'd go through with it.

PEARL: Seems to me this Nancy had her head screwed on the right way.

BUBBA: [*caught, forgetting the candy sticks for a moment*] She got tired of the waitin', I think. Olive doesn't mind it, she just looks forward to the next time, but it used to get on Nance's nerves a bit. And of course, she reads a lot, and this feller, this Harry Allaway—he runs a bookshop, and he'd bring books into the pub for her. I s'pose that's how he got around her, really. I don't reckon Barney's ever read a book in his life.

PEARL: Mmm. [*Turning a page*] Well, I'm fond of a good book myself, now and then.

BUBBA: [*tolerantly assured*] You won't need any till after April. Even Nancy, she only used to read in the winter time.

OLIVE*'s voice is heard calling urgently from upstairs.*

OLIVE: [*off*] Bubba?!

BUBBA: [*moving to the archway*] Here!

OLIVE: [*off*] Those earrings of mine with the green stones?

BUBBA: Haven't seen them.

OLIVE: [*off*] Ooh, I'll bet the old girl's taken a loan of them. She knew I wanted to—no, it's alright. Here they are. Couldn't see 'em for looking.

BUBBA *moves back into the room, smiling at* PEARL *with a half-apologetic explanation.*

BUBBA: Olive always gets a little rattled. Nance and me, we used to have to joke her out of it. And she's prob'ly worrying a bit today on your account—

PEARL: [*sharply*] Why should she be worried my account? All I'm here for is a visit—and if Olive's told you anythin' else—

BUBBA: [*hastily*] Oh, she hasn't. She'd hardly said a word.

PEARL: In that case, then, there's no need for insinuations.

BUBBA: I wasn't—

PEARL: Yes, you were. Very cheap and underhanded. What you said about not needing any books till after April was bad enough.

BUBBA: I was talking of the lay-off. I'll bet Olive never said there was anythin' cheap and underhanded about the—

PEARL: Never mind what Olive said. Strikes me you know too much of this place for your own good.

BUBBA: I've lived next door all my life. Why shouldn't I—?

PEARL: I'm not going to argue. You just shouldn't, that's all.

Her tone is final enough to silence BUBBA*, and it is in this hostile pause that* OLIVE *comes swiftly downstairs.*

OLIVE: Hang on to your hats and mittens, kids, here I come again.

She moves into the sitting room with a determined and excited gaiety, wearing a crisp green-and-white summer dress that she displays with a brash self-mockery.

What d'you think this time? Snazzy enough? Mightn't knock your eye out, but it's nice and cool, and it's the sort of thing Roo likes. Fresh and green, and not too got-up—

She postures for their comments, and BUBBA*, still a little unsettled by her spat with* PEARL*, volunteers automatic approval.*

BUBBA: Yes, it's lovely.

OLIVE: Pearl?

PEARL: Ye-es. Not me, but it suits you.

OLIVE: Well, have to do, anyway. Haven't time to change again. Now, what else is there? I know—nice cold bottle of beer.

BUBBA: [*quickly*] I'll get it.

OLIVE: [*after her departing figure*] Would you, love? Top lot in the fridge. Ooh, she's a good kid, that.

PEARL: Yes. I'd say she knows more than her prayers, just the same.

OLIVE: Bubba? Don't be silly. Only a baby.

PEARL: Not too much of a baby. If Vera spoke to me the way she does, I'd put her back across my knee. And it's more than talk, it's the way she acts—

OLIVE: Oh, c'mon.

PEARL: Far too much at home.

OLIVE: Well, what d'you expect? She's been runnin' in and out here ever since she could walk—Roo and Barney, she treats 'em like they was uncles.

Deliberately making light of PEARL*'s reservations with a head-shaking laugh.*

God, you're a wag. Talk about Cautious Kate.

PEARL: How?

OLIVE: Look at them suitcases by the stairs. You'd think someone was gettin' ready for a moonlight flit.

PEARL: Only common sense. I've taken my overnighter up, and I'm not takin' anything else until I'm certain.

OLIVE: Wouldn't have asked you, y'know, if I hadn't thought it worth your while.

PEARL: I'll find that out for myself, if you don't mind.

OLIVE: Your decision. Said so from the start, no-one's tryin' to talk you into anything. Just don't take too long mullin' it over, that's all.

OLIVE *dismisses these foolish quibbles for a survey of the table, and* PEARL *feels the need to make amends.*

PEARL: Where's that photograph you said you'd show me?

OLIVE: Oh, yes.

She collects a framed photograph from somewhere and takes it to PEARL.

You can see him much better in this one. Those others, he was always clownin' around.

They study the photograph together.

It's the four of us at Luna Park, the year before last. Roo, me, Barn—and Nance is on the end there.

PEARL: She looks drunk.

OLIVE: She was, a bit. Right after that was taken, she got sick on the Ocean Wave.

PEARL: I know the type.

OLIVE: No, you don't. Wasn't like that really. Nance was… [*a hundred memories*] … she was a real good sport. Barney, he was pretty mad about her.

PEARL: 'S obvious. The way he's holding her. Bit intimate, isn't it? Even for Luna Park.

OLIVE: Look, Pearl, you'd better make up your mind. [*She takes the photograph away to replace it*.] These are a couple of canecutters from the tropics. Not two professors from the university.

PEARL: He'll never lay hands on me like that in public, just the same.

OLIVE: Wouldn't be too sure. He gets away with murder, Barney.

PEARL: I'll believe that when I see it. Didn't seem to stop her goin' off and gettin' married.

OLIVE: [*a touch of steel*] She made a mistake.

PEARL: Who says?

OLIVE: I say. Marriage is different. And Nancy knew it.

PEARL: I'll guarantee she made herself cheap. A woman keeps her self-respect, any man will toe the line.

OLIVE: Wouldn't bank on that, Pearl. Not with Barney.

PEARL: Oh, I'm not anticipatin' anything. But from what you've said, it's time some decent woman took this feller in hand. Never heard of anyone with more reasons to toe the line in all my life.

OLIVE: Maybe I shouldn't have told you?

Helen Thomson as Pearl in the 2011 Belvoir production at the Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney. (Photo: Heidrun Löhr)

PEARL: Don't you worry, I'd have found out. I'm a mother myself—a thing like that, you couldn't fool me.

OLIVE: Prob'ly tell you himself, anyway. Doesn't make any secret of it.

BUBBA *enters hurriedly, with a glass in each hand and a bottle of beer tucked under her arm.*

BUBBA: Ooh, this beer is co–old—

OLIVE *moves to relieve her of the bottle and glasses.*

And we forgot the salad dressing.

OLIVE: Sugar.

BUBBA: 'S alright, I mixed some up in the little blue jug. Wasn't any vinegar, though, I took a bottle from your mother's cupboard.

OLIVE: She'll love that. What about your walkin' sticks?

BUBBA: All done. Bows and everything. [*She moves to collect the candy sticks.*] Only got to put them up—

PEARL: What are they in aid of?

OLIVE: Tell her, Bub.

BUBBA: [*lamely*] Nothin', really—just a bit of a joke. One's for Roo, and one's for Barney.

OLIVE *puts the bottle and glasses aside and takes over the narrative. Generally from a wish to involve* PEARL *in the ritual of the lay-off, but there's also an element of defiance, daring* PEARL *to sit in judgement.*

OLIVE: Started off the first year they came down here. She was only a little scrap of a thing—how old were you, Bub?

BUBBA: [*positioning the sticks on the mantelshelf*] Five.

OLIVE: She was always in and out the house, and when Roo brought me the first lot of presents and she saw the doll among 'em, she howled her eyes out. She wanted a doll on a walkin' stick too, she said. So out the two of them go—after eight o'clock at night it was—tryin' to bang up a shop to get her one. But all they could find were these lolly walkin' sticks, and in the end that's what they brought her back, tied up with coloured ribbons. Well, she was as happy as Larry, didn't miss the doll a bit. So after that it got to be a habit, every year the boys'd bring her down these candy-striped things, all tied up with—

BUBBA: Till I was fifteen.

OLIVE: Oh yes, this is funny—listen. Didn't seem to wake up she was gettin' far too old for lolly walkin' sticks and hair ribbons—kept on bringin' 'em down, bringin' 'em down—so in the end, Nancy put her up to a dodge. The year after the war, when she was fifteen, and they arrived with their bundles of presents, there she had a walkin' stick for each of them—gussied up with blue ribbons, and sittin' on the mantelpiece. Taught 'em a lesson alright. Ever since then, when they've brought me down a doll and things, they've always brought her gloves, or scent, or—somethin' she'd appreciate.

A faint pause. PEARL *is unimpressed with the story and makes little attempt to hide it.*

PEARL: I see.

BUBBA: [*a trifle shamefaced*] I said it was only a bit of a joke.

OLIVE: Makes them laugh, though. Every time.

BUBBA: Anythin' else you want me to do, Ol?

OLIVE: No, thanks, love. But you're goin' to stay and see them in?

BUBBA: No, no, no. I've got to change, and everythin'.

OLIVE: [*understanding her reservation*] Well—just as you please.

She walks BUBBA *to the French windows, adjusting the collar of her dress as they go, a fond accustomed patronage.*