



JOANNA MURRAY-SMITH's plays have been produced throughout Australia and all over the world, including *Honour*, which had a public reading with Meryl Streep and was produced on Broadway in 1998, the National Theatre, London, in 2003, and on the West End with Dame Diana Rigg in 2005. Other plays include *Fury*; *Songs for Nobodies*; *Switzerland*; *Pennsylvania Avenue*; *True Minds*; *Day One*, *A Hotel*, *Evening*; *Rockabye*; *Ninety*; *Bombshells*; *Rapture*; *Nightfall*; *Redemption*; *Love Child*; *Atlanta*; *Flame* and acclaimed adaptations of *Hedda Gabler* and *Scenes from a Marriage*, many of which have been translated into other languages. She has been nominated for and won many awards. Her novels include *Truce* and *Judgement Rock*, both published by Penguin Australia, and *Sunnyside*, published by Penguin Australia and Viking in the UK.

**THREE  
LITTLE  
WORDS**

**JOANNA MURRAY-SMITH**



**CURRENCY PRESS**

The performing arts publisher

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*To Poli Papapetrou,  
darling friend.*

## INTRODUCTION

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*'The world is a hellish place, and bad writing is destroying the quality of our suffering.'*

Admittedly not a promising quote with which to begin the introduction to a new published work. This is actually a Tom Waits quote I keep above my desk. As a warning. And a challenge.

Joanna Murray-Smith has been elevating the quality of our suffering for over thirty years. Safe to say she has suffered in the service of doing it too. She lives and breathes her art. She doesn't just lose sleep over it, she forgoes it. She lives life fully immersed and shares its vicissitudes with us. Her body of work is formidable. She is truly a force of nature; prolific, probing and ever questing.

Strangely (considering we are both Melbourne-based writers) I first met Joanna at a New York Stage & Film Festival in the summer of 1996 in Upstate New York. Her masterpiece, *Honour*, was receiving a staged reading with some wannabe actress playing the title role. I forget her name. Meryl somebody... It'll come to me. I had seen the premiere production at Playbox (The Malthouse) in 1995 where I had that crushing/exhilarating theatre experience every playwright dreads/ seeks when you come face to face with a written work that raises the bar at the same time as sending you into a self-loathing foetal position. It was a sublime piece of dramatic writing, the kind of work that makes you... Streep! Meryl Streep, that's it!

One of the quandaries of a writer's professional life is that working with a genuinely great actor is a double-edged sword. For they will both elevate and expose you. Especially in the bare bones crucible of a play reading. On the one hand, they make the text sound better than you ever dared dream. On the other, every flaw is laid utterly bare. Because, frankly, if they can't make it work then the writer has nowhere to hide. What struck me profoundly at the New York Stage & Film reading was that the writing not only held up under the white-hot scrutiny of a great actor, but it actually held Meryl Streep up. It supported her. The play is

so immaculately written that it delivers its actors to rarefied air. Which is not to diminish the skill of actors, rather to celebrate the writer as architect of that truth and beauty.

*Three Little Words* is the kind of theatre that Joanna Murray-Smith specialises in: rocking our foundations by stealth. Using the Trojan Horse of whip-smart social comedy, she gains entry to our inner sanctum before confronting us with ideas that disrupt our default state of comfortable denial. I defy anyone in a long-term intimate relationship not to feel as if their secret fears and desires have been utterly unveiled. Because this is an author with a gimlet eye for the inner workings of heart, mind and spirit. Through her characters she articulates the suppressed doubts, dreads and yearnings residing deep in our core. Her gift is to dance in the shadows of who we really are. To remind us that an unexamined life is not worth living. Never didactic, always provocative and ambiguous, Joanna Murray-Smith delivers substance and existential heft in the most entertaining of packages. Because when she chooses to be she is flat-out razor-sharp funny. And this is a play that makes you laugh out loud often. On stage and on the page. It's sophisticated, top shelf comedy with genuine toe-curling bite.

One of the misconceptions about Joanna Murray-Smith's plays is that they are only concerned with the elite ruling class and reaffirm prevailing paradigms and social hierarchies. I disagree. They are, in fact, deft and deceptive provocations. Cattle prods to our inhibitions and fears. This is an unflinching playwright who creates incendiary characters who dare to turn their lives upside down. Who look the abyss dead in the eye. Who question their long-term marriage or propose giving up their only child. And not just in the heat of the moment but as a considered, angst-ridden decision. Joanna does what every great writer does: she writes what she knows then surprises herself and the audience with what she uncovers lurking beneath. William Shakespeare wrote deeply human plays about kings and queens. Joanna Murray-Smith writes deeply human plays about opinionated, erudite intellectuals, all arguing the toss, fighting for power and primacy in the battlefield of private and personal spaces. This was the world she grew up in. It's in her blood. And she mines it mercilessly, skewering shortcomings and hubris, in search of greater meaning.

Joanna Murray-Smith's plays have been staged all over the world. From large proscenium theatres on the Great White Way and the West End to little black boxes on the wrong side of town. Her words, ideas, characters, stories and the worlds she creates cast a potent spell wherever they go. They pulse and hum and teem with life. They elevate our suffering by offering insight and understanding about what it is to be human while shining a light into the dark recesses of our collective soul.

*Matt Cameron  
January 2019*

Matt Cameron is an Australian playwright and screenwriter.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks go to the passionately engaged Sarah Goodes and the brilliant first cast of *Three Little Words*, Catherine McClements, Katherine Tonkin, Kate Atkinson and Peter Houghton, for contributing so much to the play in the readings and rehearsal period. Thanks, as always, to all at the Melbourne Theatre Company, Currency Press and to Raymond Gill.

*JM-S*

*Three Little Words* was first produced by Melbourne Theatre Company at Southbank Theatre, The Sumner, on 18 April 2017 with the following cast:

ANNIE	Kate Atkinson
CURTIS	Peter Houghton
TESS	Catherine McClements
BONNIE	Katherine Tonkin

Director, Sarah Goodes  
Set and Costume Designer, Michael Hankin  
Lighting Designer, Paul Jackson  
Composer and Sound Designer, Kelly Ryll  
Assistant Director, Elsie Edgerton-Till  
Fight Choreographer, Nigel Poulton  
Tap Choreographer, Nathan Pinnell  
Dramaturgy Consultant, Brent Hazelton  
Stage Manager, Julia Smith  
Assistant Stage Manager, Benjamin Cooper

## **CHARACTERS**

BONNIE, mid 40s, strong

ANNIE, seven or eight years younger than Bonnie, pretty, fragile

TESS, mid 40s

CURTIS, mid 40s

## **SETTING**

The design of the play should be able to accommodate a number of different settings in very swift transitions.

## PROLOGUE

*Evening. Curtis and Tess's stylishly raffish inner-city house.*

*As the audience enters, BONNIE and ANNIE, a couple, are chatting (silent but animated) at the dining table with CURTIS and TESS, who are—metaphorically—their heterosexual twins.*

*The detritus of a meal is on the table with empty bottles of wine.*

*As the lights dim, TESS gets up from the group and walks to the front of the stage, as if looking out through a window. She looks, for a moment, almost other worldly and removed from the scene continuing behind her, her expression one of enigmatic curiosity and deep reflection.*

*She turns her head and takes in the sight of CURTIS at the table. He looks across at her for a tender moment of communion between them—a breakout from the scene at the table.*

TESS: Hey.

*Beat.*

CURTIS: Hey.

## SCENE ONE

CURTIS, BONNIE and ANNIE move over to the sofas, as if post-meal, carrying wine and glasses.

TESS joins them, now a part of the scene and mid-anecdote. The mood is infectiously good-humoured, tipsy and intimate.

TESS: So ... I picked up this rumpled copy of *Tender is the Night* and raced after him over the lawns and said: Excuse me! And he turned.

CURTIS: [*playing along*] Me?

TESS: I think you left this on the bench thing. He hesitated.

ANNIE: Thought bubble: Why is this incredibly beautiful woman calling out to me?

CURTIS: Oh God. Thank you! (She was ravishing. Even in that outfit.)

TESS: It was the era of those goat-wool ponchos. The ones the Flutes of the Andes guys wear when they're blowing whistles in shopping malls?

BONNIE: I absolutely cannot see you in a poncho, Tess.

CURTIS: She totally rocked a poncho.

TESS: He took the book and I said: It's kind of great, isn't it?

CURTIS: Isn't it? My God! What a writer!

TESS: What a writer, he said. The language, I said.

CURTIS: His fascination with the surfaces of privilege but his ability to plumb the ironic, tragic depths beneath—I guess you have a class now?

TESS: I guess you have a class now, he said.

CURTIS: She said no. Miracle.

TESS: We went to Genevieve's. I had a cappuccino. They were ninety-five cents. He had a Rage Against the Machine album.

CURTIS: She said she liked Alice in Chains.

TESS: I didn't really but I was trying to be cool.

CURTIS: I hated Alice in Chains. I told her that.

TESS: So I said: I don't know why I said that. I don't like them either. He thought I was an airhead.

CURTIS: You were beautiful and funny.

TESS: Walking home from Genevieve's, we passed a dog that had been hit by a car. And the driver was standing on the footpath crying and there were onlookers and everyone was comforting her but Curtis just sat down on the kerb and stroked the dog. He died with Curtis patting him.

CURTIS: [*not true, modest*] It was all an act.

TESS: Note to self: He cares.

CURTIS: Later, I was carrying on about saving rainforests and she suddenly started tap-dancing! Right there on the street!

TESS *does a fabulous little tap-dance. Cries of delight.*

Why are you tap-dancing?

TESS: [*dancing*] Whenever someone says 'rainforest', I tap.

CURTIS: Like that was normal!

TESS: It was a dare I lost. Had to tap on 'rainforest' for a year.

CURTIS: She keeps her word, I thought.

TESS: He looked like an artist. All wild hair and that little tattoo on his wrist: the Rolling Stones tongue. I hated tats, even then, but there was something irresistible about a bad boy who loves Scott Fitzgerald. I'm in.

*Laughter.*

*Cute noises from BONNIE and ANNIE, touched by the romantic story. They kiss lightly but attentively. No self-consciousness.*

*CURTIS walks over to the bookshelf and pulls out a battered copy of *Tender is the Night*.*

CURTIS: And somewhere, some poor guy is wondering whatever happened to his copy of *Tender is the Night*.

*Exclamations. Laughter. Convivial castigation.*

TESS: What a phony!

BONNIE and ANNIE: [*simultaneously*] Total phony! / God, what a fake!

*Beat.*

*TESS and CURTIS look at each other, watched by BONNIE and ANNIE. A serious moment amidst the merriment.*

*BONNIE and ANNIE lift their glasses, recognising the unspoken.*

BONNIE: Congratulations you two.

ANNIE: Amazing feat.

*They drink but neither TESS nor CURTIS drink on cue.*

*After a powerful moment of eye contact, CURTIS raises his glass to TESS. They drink.*

I can't believe you weren't going to mark it!

BONNIE: Twenty years!

CURTIS: No, you're right. When we saw you at the installation thing with the meerkats, we re-evaluated. We said:

TESS: 'They're right.' [*Aside to BONNIE*] Great shoes.

BONNIE: [*aside to TESS*] Vintage Prada. Seventy bucks.

CURTIS: We have to give thanks for what we've had.

BONNIE: You bet you do.

ANNIE: Sometimes you know, just when Bonnie is folding the laundry or chopping carrots, I just say: Hey, babe, let's just stop and recognise that here we are, chopping carrots, folding laundry ...

BONNIE: Stop or I'm going to cry!

ANNIE: I know it's kind of hokey ...

TESS: Don't make fun of her, Bon. It's really true. We need to say these things: I love you. All of you.

ANNIE, BONNIE and CURTIS: [*simultaneously*] Oooh. / That's so lovely.

/ That's beautiful, babe. / Right back at ya ...

TESS: Did Curtis tell you? Lola got a tattoo!

ANNIE and BONNIE: [*simultaneously*] No! / She did not!

TESS: You know how I feel about tattoos!

ANNIE: You hate tattoos!

TESS: I hate tattoos!

BONNIE: Is that even legal?

CURTIS: All the weapons in Cluedo. You know, the gun, the rope, the dagger—

TESS: Six, because her phone died so she couldn't Google the seventh.

CURTIS: We gave her hell! If you're going to rebel, do your research!

BONNIE: The dagger, the lead pipe, the wrench—

ANNIE: There's definitely another one!

BONNIE: When she worked for me that weekend of the art fair, she just kept saying: Bonnie, you are a genius. The implication being that I was pulling the wool over everyone's eyes.

TESS: How rude!

CURTIS: That's my girl!

BONNIE: I said: Lola, this artist is a profoundly interesting interpreter of this time and place.

ANNIE: Whatever, she said.

*Laughter.*

'Whatever'!

CURTIS: She's the patron saint of consumerism! Once upon a time you were dragged to church. You were delivered a meaning for existence. Now kids find it at Zara.

TESS: Thank God! Religion is the biggest terrorist of them all.

BONNIE: Amen.

CURTIS: Sticking with the red?

ANNIE: No more!

BONNIE: I'll have a Scotch if you've got it.

ANNIE: Really?

*BONNIE and ANNIE exchange a brief glance.*

*As CURTIS continues to speak he walks across to a shelf and pours the Scotch from a crystal decanter in a beautiful, antique tantalus.*

*As he pours, BONNIE notes it:*

BONNIE: That's fancy.

TESS: Grandpa's tantalus.

CURTIS: They used to lock them so the maid couldn't take a slug!

BONNIE: Hey, are you two going to Stig's dance-thingo?

*CURTIS catches TESS's eye.*

CURTIS: Luckily, it's parent-teachers' night.

BONNIE: God, Curtis, I really wish you'd get out of teaching. You're underpaid and overqualified. Come over to the dark side.

CURTIS: Bonnie, I admire you for selling rich people high-concept shit to put on their walls but I'd rather see kids' faces light up when you read them *Madame Bovary*.

BONNIE: So you *do* read the classics?

CURTIS: I came around.

TESS: Every time we go out some kid says: Mr Miller, you were the best teacher ever.

ANNIE: Of course he is!

CURTIS: Once in a blue moon!

BONNIE: What's sexier than a bright student and a good-looking teacher?

TESS: You could be jailed for that!

BONNIE: Fantastic *tarte citron*.

TESS: Annie made me buy it. We saw that girl at the patisserie. That student, Curtis. The one who got expelled.

CURTIS: Who?

TESS: She was always running down everyone.

CURTIS: Oh, Greta something? The stream of consciousness reputation-slayer! Frida Kahlo—'OVERRATED'! Wei Wei—'Wish he'd go away'.

TESS: She's just made a short film. Wants us to come to a screening.

ANNIE: [*to BONNIE, waving a postcard*] She invited us, too.

CURTIS: Good for her. She was clever. A bit precocious, perhaps.

TESS: Great looking.

ANNIE: Amazing breasts.

BONNIE: You noticed?

ANNIE: Of course I noticed! My father was a cop—he was always prepping us in case we had to do an identikit.



TESS: She was pretty sexy!

CURTIS: She's a student, guys! Young women are constantly objectified, as you well know. I would have thought better of all three of you.

TESS: [*teenage voice*] Does this mean we get a detention, sir?

*The three women giggle.*

More Scotch!

CURTIS *pours*. *They all laugh.*

BONNIE: If you're having one.

ANNIE: [*to BONNIE*] Is that a good idea?

TESS: So listen.

*Beat.*

We're splitting.

BONNIE: [*going along with the joke*] You're splitting!

TESS: We are. We're breaking up.

ANNIE: Stop it!

BONNIE: Not funny! You're horrible!



*From left: Peter Houghton as Curtis, Catherine McClements as Tess, Kate Atkinson as Annie and Katherine Tonkin as Bonnie in the Melbourne Theatre Company 2017 production. (Photo: Jeff Busby)*