

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Memmie Le Blanc

by Hilary Bell

EXTRACT

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CHARACTERS

MEMMIE LE BLANC	9 years old in 1731 14 years old in 1736
CATHERINE MICHEL	Mid 50s
GEORGE LEGENDRE	Mid 20s
ROBERT, an orangutan	Same actor
SHEPHERD	
SURGEON	

The action takes place in the village of Songi, in the autumn of 1731; then a nearby country estate, from summer through winter 1736.

There are five songs lip-synched to the original recordings:

'Wolf Boy' by Martha Raye

'The Princess Poo-Poo-Ly Has Plenty Pa-Pa-Ya' by Abe Lyman

'Abide With Me' by Fred Lowery, the Blind Whistler

'Get Cannibal' by Joe Haynes and his Orchestra

'King of the Bunagloos' by Gene Greene

Grateful acknowledgement is due to Michael Newton, whose book 'Savage Girls and Wild Boys' was an inspiration for the play.

ACT I

1.

Autumn, 1731.

Shepherd's cell. Bare but for a pile of straw as a bed.

Nine-year-old Memmie is clean, barefoot, dressed in a shift.

She's frantic.

She tries to dig her way under the wall.

She tries to climb the wall.

Reaching the barred window, she attempts to squeeze through, and is making headway. Joyfully, she breaks into birdsong, with uncannily accurate mimicry. Suddenly there is the loud toll of a church bell, and the shock of it hurls her to the ground.

Catherine, apart, watches all this.

As Memmie huddles on the ground, occasionally squeaking quietly, Catherine speaks.

CATHERINE

She came into the village as twilight fell, one evening in late summer. She was nine or ten years old. Her feet were bare; her body covered with skins, and on her hair she wore a gourd leaf. Her face and hands were black as a negro's. She was armed with a short stick, thicker at one end, like a club. Those who observed her took to their heels, crying out, There is the devil. They secured their doors and windows against her, but one of them set loose on her a bulldog. The little savage, seeing him advance in a fury, kept her ground without flinching. She grasped her club with both hands, stretching herself to one side in order to give greater force to her action. The dog within her reach, she discharged such a terrible blow on his head as laid him dead at her feet. Elated by her victory, she jumped several times over the carcass. Then she tried to open one of the doors, which action not being able to effect, she ran back into the countryside towards the river, and climbing a tree, she fell asleep.

The Shepherd enters. He opens Memmie's door, careful to prevent her escaping, and slides a bowl of food across the floor.

Memmie regards it warily, keeping her distance.

Lights fade on Memmie as the Shepherd addresses Catherine.

MEMMIE LE BLANC

SHEPHERD

It was last summer, when we didn't have any rain.

CATHERINE

I remember. My lawn was littered with dead birds. All of France was drought-stricken.

SHEPHERD

The grass was brown, I took my sheep a long way out looking for pasture. It was baking hot. No noise except the insects buzzing. I must've fallen asleep.

I open my eyes: it's looking at me. About a hundred yards off, perched in a tree. I don't even know what it is, the more I look the harder it is to see it, just the whites of its eyes. The bough sways – and it's gone. I think I must be imagining things. But look at the hairs on my arm.

CATHERINE

It wasn't a matter of choice.

SHEPHERD

If you see a dead body in a ditch, you can't just keep walking. Like it or not, you have to do something.

CATHERINE

Of course, and this was a living child!

SHEPHERD

I couldn't leave her there.

CATHERINE

Somebody's daughter...

SHEPHERD

I've got daughters.

CATHERINE

You were morally compelled to reclaim her.

SHEPHERD

So I put my water flask under the tree...

CATHERINE

She came willingly: she knew in her heart, if not her mind.

SHEPHERD

No, no she didn't, she shrieked like a cat! She was terrified out of her wits, it was all I could do to throw a sack over her and tie her up.

CATHERINE

But that's because she didn't know what lay ahead.

SHEPHERD

God knows I didn't want her, what was I going to do with her? My wife'd have a fit. Even if we'd had room for one more, we couldn't keep her in the house, she was like a wild animal, rip your throat out if she could. I'd watch her, scratching at the walls with her fingernails, and the way her eyes darted around when I got too close. And I know I did what I had to...

CATHERINE

What's going to happen to her now?

SHEPHERD

(Laughs) Why, you want her?
If I hadn't looked up and seen her, she wouldn't exist.

CATHERINE

But now that she does, there's no going back.

2.

Summer, 1736.

Drawing-room. A piano and an ornate love-seat.

Catherine with a fluffy cat on her lap; Memmie, now fourteen, curtseys. She is dressed plainly.

CATHERINE

Hello, Memmie.

MEMMIE

Hello.

CATHERINE

How was your trip?

MEMMIE

Good.

CATHERINE

It's a pretty drive, isn't it, up through the village? Along the fields?

MEMMIE LE BLANC

MEMMIE

Yes.

Pause.

CATHERINE

Are you hungry?

MEMMIE

Yes.

Memmie's gaze falls on the cat.

CATHERINE

You must be, you haven't had breakfast. There's plenty to eat: coffee and milk, pastries...

She watches Memmie drink a glass of milk. Catherine is unsettled by the way Memmie wipes her mouth with the back of her hand.

CATHERINE

Is that all you want?

MEMMIE

Can I have more?

CATHERINE

Of course you can.

Memmie chooses the most extravagant pastry ...

CATHERINE

Mm, I love chocolate éclairs.

... but discreetly spits it in the corner.

CATHERINE

Do you want something else?

Memmie shakes her head.

CATHERINE

Well, it's very nice to have you here. Did the nuns tell you anything about me?

MEMMIE

They said to be good.

MEMMIE LE BLANC

CATHERINE

Well I'm sure / you're (going to be good.)

MEMMIE

/ And don't talk about your dead husband.
So I won't.

Memmie scratches her bum.

CATHERINE

That was a while ago now. I like talking about Marc. I miss him. Talking about him brings him back.

She waits for Memmie's response.

Why don't you tell me about yourself?

MEMMIE

What shall I say?

CATHERINE

Whatever you like!

Memmie's gaze falls on the cat.

CATHERINE

I imagine you've had a difficult time of it, haven't you?
Passed on from place to place. Do they treat you well in the convent?

MEMMIE

That's a white cat.

CATHERINE

... Yes. This is Puss.

Catherine strokes the cat.

MEMMIE

He likes you going like that on him.

CATHERINE

He's purring.
Do you like animals?

MEMMIE

No.

CATHERINE

I rescued him. The gardener was drowning the whole litter.

MEMMIE LE BLANC

MEMMIE

What about the others?

CATHERINE

Now this weekend, is there anything special you'd like to do?

MEMMIE

What?

CATHERINE

Before you go back.

MEMMIE

What do you mean?

CATHERINE

Well, I don't know... Things you can't do there. Do you like reading, or drawing?

MEMMIE

I can't read or draw.

CATHERINE

You'll have your own room for the weekend, that will be a novelty.

MEMMIE

But I'm not going back.

CATHERINE

Of course you are, on Monday.

MEMMIE

They gave my bed to a new girl.

CATHERINE

They what?

MEMMIE

The Duke's money ran out so they can't keep me any more.

CATHERINE

Where will you go?

Pause.

They're coming to get you on Monday, I spoke to / the driver.