



NATIONAL
PLAY
FESTIVAL
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In the Violet Time

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EXTRACT



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In the Violet Time

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THE PLACE

Inner-city Sydney, 1931. The Great Depression has taken hold. Men walk the Hungry Mile of the docks, searching for work. Women eke out what little food, clothing and shelter they have. The recently formed Unemployed Workers Movement is soon to fight one of its first battles: at 143 Union Street Newtown, on June 9 1931, the UWM will support a family under siege from the police because of their refusal to obey an eviction order. This much is true ...

THE PEOPLE

Violet Twelve years old
Lenie Her mother. Thirties. Way back of Irish stock
Liam Her father. Thirties. A Balkan immigrant
Alex Dock foreman. Thirties. A veteran of the Great War
Ah Kit A teenager. Australian-born Chinese.

NOTE: Liam's dialogue, as written, is unaccented. It should be performed with a Bosnian accent.

A girl stands on the stage. Rather worn twenties era clothes. She sings, phonetically, a Chinese children's ditty.

VIOLET

(sings) War eye beijing tienanmen
tienanmen shung tai jung sheung
hway do ling sho mao du chi
ling dau warmen ten cheung jing

She smiles, does a little curtsy, a bow.

VIOLET

That's from the future. I don't know what it means. I don't speak Chinese. I'm Violet. Violet Annie Harwich. It's April the fourth, 1931. And I'm twelve.

Lights up on a woman, Lenie, in the final stage of labour, being supported and ministered to by her husband, Liam.

LENIE

Jesus, God, Li ... I'm splittin' in half ... me arse is going one way and me fanny the other ... this could be the end of a ... beautiful... aaargh ... friendship ...

LIAM

Just one more .. one more ... ah ... it's a girl ..

VIOLET

(to audience) That's me. And I'm not going through that again.

LIAM

(rapidly, in Serbo-Croat) Thank you, God. I will die to protect this child ...

LENIE

English, Liam. None of your wog stuff now. This is neither the time or the place for all that.

LIAM

I said I will die for her.

LENIE

That won't be necessary. Just don't put your leg over in the middle of the month for a bit, there's a lad.

Violet addresses the audience once more.

VIOLET

She doesn't mean that. She can't keep her knees together when he's around. That's what they say all round the street. Union Street, Newtown, that is. At the bottom end, where the working people live. 'Whatever he's got, that wog husband of hers, she can't get enough of it'. Look at them, cutting the cord.

Liam cuts the umbilical cord, swaddles the baby and hands her to Lenie.

LENIE

My darling girl ... my darling girl ...

Liam stands to attention in the spotlight.

VIOLET

My father comes from a landlocked place with dark mountains and fir trees. With wolves and ghosts and curses, where they see only backwards into the dark. His home was in a street that started a war in a town under the yoke of a dying empire. He stowed away on a boat from a port with a funny name. Changed his god and changed his game. And so Amin becomes Liam

and Halilovic becomes Harwich. And Liam and Lenie become one flesh, forsaking all others.

Lenie stands to attention in the spotlight. She speaks to the child in her arms.

LENIE

... And sometimes, if a mortal child wanders from the path, in the land of the fairy mounds, the fairies will steal it away. Their little fairy fingers itch to touch mortals, to tug at their curls and pinch their snowy white skin. You watch yourself, Violet. You run wild at your own risk.

VIOLET

Lenie Harwich née Halilovic née O'Meara. She's not Irish, Lenie. She just bungs it on, so's to keep pace with Liam. Grisly ghosts and gristly superstitions. Mealtime chat in the house of Harwich. Lenie bewitches Liam. She spies him across the length and breadth of Glebe Town Hall, and, though she's still too young and she's climbed out her bedroom window so's her folks don't know, she knows she'll have him. He's shy and strange and alone. But he can dance, so he can. He's a European. He smells rich and strange, and God, but he can move like a dream.

Lenie and Liam are dancing now, back and forth in their spotlight.

VIOLET

Lenie learns about the house on the street that started the war in the town of the dying Empire. She reaches into the glotteral gutteral tar of his voice, and the thick red molasses of his heart. And, on that selfsame night, with the band still swinging, and the zephyr wafting the smell of fish and coal and rotted timber from White Bay, they become one flesh. And that same night, Lenie baptises him.

LENIE

Amin? Amin? What sort of name is that? Ali Baba and the forty thieves, Aladdin and his blessed lamp? Not on your life, lover. I think I'll call you ...
Liam.

LIAM

Liam.

VIOLET

But that was then. It's April 1931. And I'm twelve. And times, the history books will tell you, are hard at the bottom end of the street. It's a blue time. A deep blue time. A Violet time. And when opportunity knocks, you need to open that door real wide ...

Behind her on the stage is an old fruit barrow, apparently unattended. She steals up to it and begins to rapidly fill her pockets with fruit.

AH KIT

Stop thief ...

He chases Violet, who runs. Fruit scatters in all directions. Ah Kit grabs her. She escapes his grasp. Then he takes a flying leap and tackles her to the ground. They wrestle. Violet momentarily gets on top of him.

VIOLET

Lemme go, chink. I'll spit on you. I've got the scarlet fever. Yer yellow blood'll boil and you'll die ...

AH KIT

Three times and you're out ...

He wrestles her back and manages to sit on top of her.

AH KIT

Want to go to the coppers? Uh? Do you?

He gets up, drags Violet to her feet. She struggles like a wildcat. He subdues her and puts her arm in an armlock behind her back, pushing the arm up hard so that it just begins to cause her pain.

AH KIT

You ever dug stuff up from a market garden at three in the morning? It's got frost on it. After ten minutes you can't feel your fingers. You already can't feel your feet. You get chilblains. They itch and they sting and they weep from the blisters. Your old man chucks freezing cabbages in your face. If you're lucky you get half a bowl of rice. Then you sit behind a half dead nag for two hours into this slum for the pleasure of being robbed by garbage like you the minute you take a piss.

He gives her arm one last wrench and then shoves her to the ground and exits.

Violet dusts her hands, picks up the scattered fruits.

VIOLET

Shit and fuck and see-you-en-tee. They're bruised now.

She unfurls a pretty tablecloth. Places a pot of soup or stew in the centre, and begins to arrange the fruit around it in patterns.

On one side of the stage, Liam holds up a ticket. Around him the sounds of a number of men, voices: 'Give us a chance, you mongrel, I haven't worked since Christmas.' 'I did well last week, you saw me.' 'It's the Astorias - it's a tub. I've worked it before ...' 'Me.' 'Me.' 'Me.'

LIAM

I'm a good worker. You know that.

ALEX

You. You. You three there. That's it. Go home. No more work today.

LIAM

(sotto, in Serbo-Croat) I won't beg.

ALEX

What was that?

LIAM

And I won't pay your bribes or shout your beer or buy your tobacco.

ALEX

Your funeral, mate.

Liam slumps.

Opposite him, Lenie carries a baby and a shopping bag.

LENIE

A shilling for kidneys. I'd sell my own for less.

Violet has finished arranging her fruit collection and is regarding it with some pride, when Liam and Lenie converge to join her. Lenie places the sleeping baby in a cradle which she will rock with her foot throughout the scene.

In the background of these family scenes is a steaming copper.

VIOLET

Please be seated. I'll now say grace.

LIAM

Where did you get this?

VIOLET

It was bruised. The Chinaman was tossing it out.

LIAM

You're lying.

Violet vigorously shakes her head. And then, almost imperceptibly, as Liam watches her in silence, the shaking begins to turn to nodding.

Liam stands, undoes his belt and pulls it off. Grabs Violet by the arm and begins to strap her legs and buttocks with the belt. All this in silence. Finally he stops, releases Violet, and sits.

LENIE

Well, now that's done, let's eat.

LIAM

A child of mine does not steal.

LENIE

Yes, but the food doesn't know it was stolen, does it? It's still the same in your stomach. Eat.

She serves the stew into bowls, distributes them, and they begin to eat. After some moments:

LIAM

Today is Bejram.

LENIE

Who-ram?

LIAM

A feast day in my country. It is celebrated by each family killing a sheep.

VIOLET

With your own hands?

LIAM

Of course. All over the city... here women carry handbags, there they walk about with snouts and trotters in buckets of blood.

Violet's spoon stops on the way to her mouth. She is morbidly fascinated by Liam's macabre streak.

VIOLET

And eyes? Are there eyes?

LIAM

Of course. Most sheep have eyes.

VIOLET

Did you kill them?

LIAM

Every year of my life. Except one.

LENIE

Ah ...

LIAM

I wanted to. But there was a way this one sheep looked at me. It was an ugly, runty, scrawny sheep. Half starved. But .. such a look - a human look, a forgiving look - a look that wanted to survive - can you imagine?

VIOLET

It knew. That sheep knew ...

LIAM

- and I thought, outside these walls there's a war on -

VIOLET

You let it go -

LIAM

My father spat on the ground and called me worse than a woman, and slit its throat. And I walked out of his house and rode on a truck taking the relatives of that sheep to Dubrovnik. And never went back.

Violet addresses the audience.

VIOLET

The Hungry Mile, that's what my father Liam walks, day after day, hoping for work on the docks. And night after night, he walks it in his sleep.

Liam is sleepwalking. He walks dangerously close to the edge of the stage.

VIOLET

He calls it the violet time. Not quite awake, not quite asleep. Like the deep mauve shadows the fir trees cast across his valley. The shadows that hide all the dark acts of men in that darkest of dark places. The shadows that fall when dread becomes all there is. When you are dread.

Lenie catches Liam right at the edge.

LENIE

Liam, Liam, stop, come to bed. There'll be work tomorrow.

She leads him off.

VIOLET

At night is when I use my gift. I don't walk the Hungry Mile - I fly it. The mile from Millers Point to Pyrmont to Darling Harbour. I fly high above all those broken, trudging men. I fly and swoop and sweep right over the harbour, past the pylons of the great bridge they're building, over the frothing cream on the black of the water. Over this wide, long, town that steams and blisters in the heat. High above the workers and the bosses and the lovers and the black coats of the susso. Above the rats of the half-built sewers, and the night soil collectors, and the whole steaming scorching rolling ball of grief and pain and tarnished pride that it is. And then .. and then .. I see the great arch of that bridge, complete, and the sheen of a building with wide white sails, and soldiers marching to France and Malaya and the pyramids, and workers marching with red flags, and brawls, and back alleys where coppers unsheathe guns for a instant's lethal fun, and there's more and more people and the buildings are higher and higher and a hundred thousand people are marching across that bridge and the sky says sorry and this town will live through the violet time. Into times of blue and red and gold. And maybe, once more, it will be visited by violet.

Blackout.

The sounds of children laughing and taunting, cruel. Balls being thrown, branding a hapless victim. When the lights come up, Ah Kit is tied to the stink pipe in the street.