

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Precipice

by Catherine Ryan

EXTRACT

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Precipice

Time	An extreme present.
Place	Your city.
Set	Sparse. Minimal. A sense of the everything and the nothing. Maybe a white-out. Maybe scaffold towers/ramps of varying heights to create above and below spaces. Table and chair for Al. There is a smashed car body somewhere. (<i>Merely suggestions – not direction.</i>)

Characters

There are two characters in the play, Mel and Al, and each of them is played by two different actors. The doubles are dressed identically, and while they are cast to be of the same age, there is physical difference between the doubles in some way.

Mel 1	40 year old woman. Strong yet vulnerable, a struggling single working mother.
Mel 2	Same as Mel 1
Al 1	Age 50's or early 60's. A woman. She is quite androgynous, but is not "butch" – she has an everyperson quality. She just simply is present, still, centred and comfortable in her self – without contrivance or effort. Her's is an external, grounded calm, rather than internally focussed.
Al 2	Same as Al 1, but a man.

Writer's Notes/Tone

This play is primarily an evocation of a state of being or consciousness. That state is the one suggested by the play's title and central image of the child hanging over the broken bridge. It is suspension, balanced right on the edge of something, hovering held in the moment before inevitable change. Held in tension between opposing forces, but not necessarily still, constantly shifting. The moment of both greatest weight and greatest lightness. Life and death. Everything and nothing. It is a moment/state that can happen as easily in the mundane as in the extraordinary, and one that can create a broad range of emotional responses. As I write the text I experience this imagined state first viscerally, then emotionally, and conceptually, and it is these layers of experience (body/soul/mind) that I would hope the play's actors, crew and audiences would also experience as it's strongest affect/meaning in its performance.

Al and Mel, through their twin embodiments, tell stories from their pasts, presents and differing levels of consciousness. Where in these terrains they are speaking from shifts throughout the play. Allowing for this fluidity, in general, Mel 1 follows the path of telling real-time stories, in the present, prior to her death, to being the present observer of her own death and funeral. Mel 2 is the more unconscious, supporting Mel 1 in this journey, offering asides, memories, and observations. In the scenes after her physical death, Mel 2 follows her soul's symbolic mythopoetic journey towards the ultimate letting go from body, life and loved ones. Unless otherwise stated, all addresses are direct to audience.

Al's journey is one of being drawn towards, and unconsciously pursuing, human compassion, connection and empathy. Al 2 is primarily the voice of his/her deep fear (touched on in a defining teenage encounter in a railway underpass), through this fear's manifestation and challenges in adult life. Al 2 is also Al's own unconscious self, struggling to understand and fight the fear, intuiting the pitfalls it holds. Al 1 is

the more present, “real” Al who is confronted, and incrementally moved by his/her unconscious/fear, as the adult taxi driver delivering a baby, and then as an older person, who, after a chance encounter with a customer, is compelled to read death notices and attend the funerals of strangers. As s/he ages, layers of the fear are peeling away, until s/he is finally forced, by circumstance, fate and her own unconscious, to recognise that at its heart, there is nothing (to fear). Sometimes the Al's different states merge to become a unified present in significant moments of storytelling.

Al and Mel's lives begin to converge as Al reads Mel's death notice, through his/her subsequent preparation for attending the funeral, and finally to Al's connection to Mel's son, Nick, at the service in Mel's home. It is there that Mel can let go from the edge on which she balances for the whole play. And it is there that Al begins to become conscious of the forces that move her/him.

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The Play

The 2 Mels speak direct to audience, sometimes in unison, as if one person, standing still, with escalating anxiety. They are present in the story, recounting the memory as it happens.

Mel 1: When it all crashes down, bridge onto ship into water,

Mel 2: no warning, no call

Mel 1: and your Dad says to ssh to quiet to stop shaking blubbering rocking the Monaro

Mel 2: and he slaps you to shock you to shut you up and says everything will be all right everything will be alright and he picks you up and you believe him because he smells solid like nothing else around

Mel 1: and he goes to place you right back careful on firm ground on safe ground no cracks and your Mum screams a scream like a raptor slicing sky and your Dad looks down and you look down over, into the toughest deepest darkest black ...

*A beat. **Mel 2** looks at **Mel 1**, then runs off. **Mel 1** remains still.*

Snap to darkness.

Beat.

Beat.

Beat.

Beat.

*Lights slowly fade up on **AI 1** and **AI 2**. **AI 1** is sitting at her table. She directly faces audience. The table and chair are white. She is wearing parts of a suit – black pants, white long sleeved shirt. Her jacket is hanging up somewhere else we can't see yet in the low light. Her feet are bare. Her hair is short and neatly cut and combed. On the white table there is a white mug of tea, which she drinks from and replaces precisely at particular intervals.. She has been reading a broadsheet newspaper, sitting quite upright in her chair. She is holding a big heavy pair of scissors. **AI 2** stands somewhere in relation to **AI 1**. They directly address the audience, **AI 1** telling the story as if a present participant in it, while **AI 2** recounts it as an observer, initially with a reasonably warm, non-judgemental detachment.*

AI 1: It's close to clock off

She is standing, in the cold, in the rain, in the dark.

In a crushed green velvet dress,

AI 2: Leggings with baggy knees

AI 1: And sheepskin slippers.

She flags me down.

I stop,

Before I notice the red weals and the blood on her face.

Hidden by sticky strands of hair.

AI 2: She will make my seat wet.

AI 1: She may stain it with her blood.

No matter.

Beat

AI 1: It is only when she turns to profile
Her belly appears.

AI 2: Huge.

AI 1: She cradles it with one arm,
On the other hangs a canvas bag, too full of stuff.
Door opens
Bag thrown in first
She levers herself into the backseat
A nod, a sigh, pulls the door closed.
I wait for direction.

AI 2: She is hurt.

AI 1: I can tell that much.
I offer her a Kleenex from the glovebox Travepack.
Her eyes closed.
One swollen, the other resting, thinking.

AI 2: I'm not sure.

AI 1: I'm waiting.

AI 2: She needs time.

AI 1: "Take your time," I say, "It's OK."

Beat.

AI 2: *(with increasing engagement and anxiety/control)* A bellow. A groan. Like a cow.

AI 1: On and on.

She pants, her body seized.

The tissue has fallen to the floor.

I realise the blow to her face isn't her first priority.

She is labouring.

Hard.

Beat.

AI 2: Don't wait any longer.

I am in control.

I take off,

Driving carefully to the nearest hospital.

AI 1: She has swung her feet up on the seat,

Trying to relieve the pain,

Make a passage for the baby.

Dirt from the pavement puddles on my upholstery.

No matter.

AI 2: She pants. She howls.

Eyes flash to my rearview mirror.

AI 1: She reaches for me, desperate.

Beat.