

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



# Between These Lines

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by Michael Butler

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EXTRACT

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The play has a fluid nature as the story follows altering members of the cast, creating an interwoven journey of stories. Locations change overtly, transforming by suggestion. Upstage is a frame-work with three doors and bordering these on an angle are two racks with hooks. There are a variety of items on these hooks which are used to create different scenes as actors use them to transform into different characters. Actors also shift blocks to change the location (kitchen, library, park, hospital etc.). These changes do not necessarily precede a scene, but occur as the scene unfolds. The play does not attempt to mask its theatrical nature. Set changes are symbolic and occur in full view. Actors may play several different characters and these alter with simple, representative costume changes that occur on-stage. Music (and perhaps multi-media) complements the action. Scenes follow characters, but not a logical geographical location (so the character may be transposed into a different setting without explanation). The action of the play is, however, chronological and occurs in the space of one day.

While the performance style is generally Realist – reflecting normal (domestic) life; real-life characters in real-life circumstances with real-life motivations – it is interspersed with moments of more symbolic/representational staging and some scenes that are more expressionistic. This lends an eclectic nature to the play, with the story itself taking precedence and the style simply being the theatrical vehicle to tell it. In this way the play tells a series of stories in which single fabrics form an interconnected patchwork. It shows the way in which people’s lives are interwoven, like the unsuspecting members of the cast of a play. The aim is not to tell a story with a beginning and an end; but rather to combine fragments of on-going stories. Thus, like the on-going human drama, there is little closure and few resolutions.

The play contains – in one day – the many phases of life: family life; school life; pre-school; marriage life; mid-life; old age. It is therefore a snapshot of human experience. The title of the play also suggests the notion (*these* lines) that there are numerous other stories that could have been chosen, countless other “lines” that could have been included. The title does not use the definite article (“*the* lines”) to suggest that these are just some of many. Thematically the play examines the way in which people’s lives are interconnected – the way we affect each other knowingly and without realising. The way we treat each other then has an influence on how the future unfolds – as do the choices that we individually make. As the play involves just one day there are some stories that are not resolved and that lack of closure is the nature of human experience.

The metadrama and the repeated phrases and scenes are a reminder of the commonality of the experiences and stories contained in the play. Like a play we “write” our own futures and those of others. Yet we are also subject to things beyond our control. These elements mix together to form the ‘plot’ of the human story. The play’s title is metadramatic to an extent: it refers to ‘lines’ (the lines in a play; the lines that are learnt). It also indicates a central structural element of the play – that the story develops as the audience ‘reads between the lines’ and pieces together those elements that are not explicitly explained but some of which become clearer as the play unfolds. Ambiguity (the need to read between what is said) is also a feature of a number of scenes – as is the comic potential of lines with double meanings. The title also suggests connection – the thing *between* these lines (the thread running through). A line can connect points. While this play unfolds around a series of vignettes there is a line that runs through it.

**Central Characters**

Helena  
Matilda  
Martin  
Simone  
Peter  
Olivia  
Joanne  
Edna

**‘Cameo’ Roles**

*Olivia’s Friends*

Andrea  
Sarah  
Bindy

*Peter’s friends*

Mac  
Phil  
Mark  
Joey

*At Preschool*

Kevin Grosser  
Miss S  
Stephanie  
Tahlia  
Sarah  
Kevin P

*Fertile Valley Retirement Village*

Howard  
Fred  
Maureen  
Marcy  
Claudia

*Others*

Julian (Joanne’s friend)  
Wendy (Martin’s sister)  
Tania (Edna’s daughter)  
Assistant  
Librarian

**‘Extras’**

Voices (1 – 5)  
Visitors to library  
People in street  
Customers in Café  
Old folks  
Patients in waiting room  
Hopefuls from the audition

*Soundscape: morning radio, a series of stories and events; a patchwork of stations and voices. The sense that the world is a huge place. The volume gradually increases. The stage remains dark. The sound snaps out. Lights up.*

*Setting: the blocks create a table and chairs centre stage; downstage left blocks at an angle create a kitchen bench. On the table there are breakfast things: cereal boxes, bowls, a carton of milk, a few dirty dishes. On the bench are the makings of lunch: a loaf of bread, board, knife, cheese, lunchboxes etc.*

*Matilda is at the table, head propped up with one hand, the other prodding at her bowl of cereal. She is four and a half and does not want to go to preschool.*

*Helena manages the house like a director, trying to get everyone else's act into gear. She is efficient more than harried, but is frustrated when others are slow to respond. As the lights come up she is at the bench, finishing Matilda's lunch box. She snaps the lid shut.*

Helena: *(fetching Matilda's bag from the hooks, to pack it)* Come on Matilda, you've hardly eaten anything and we have to go in eight minutes.

Matilda: Don't wannoo.

Helena: But it's your favourite. *(a little irony after glancing in the bowl)* Soggy dinosaurs.

Matilda: *(not following)* Not the dinosnores. They're okay.

Helena: *(unpacking Matilda's bag)* Then what's the problem?

Matilda: *(after a moment)* Kevin Grosser.

Helena: Who's Kevin Grosser?

Matilda: He's one of the Kevins at preschool. There's two. One which still wets his pants. That's Kevin P. And then Kevin Grosser. Which is the mean one.

Helena: *(to correct her)* Who is the mean one.

Matilda: *(annoyed)* Kevin Grosser. I just said.

Helena: No. You say 'who is the mean one'.

Matilda: But you can't say because that's dobbing and then he gets even meaner. And yesterday he said the 's' word at me.

Helena: What 's' word, honey?

Matilda: *(reluctant to say it aloud)* Shutup. *(To add to the drama)* And when we were doing afternoon rest he made a smell and it was on purpose even though Miss *(struggles with the name)* Schnisw...witzer said he

probably couldn't help it because I saw him go...*(she puckers her face and strains to show what he did)* like that, and then it was really loud. But Miss Schnisw...witzer didn't listen and that's another reason I don't wanna go.

Helena: *(after pulling out a whole range of things from the bag, pulls out crusts)* Matilda. What's this? Why are all these crusts in the bottom of your bag?

Matilda: Because you said not to throw them in the bin.

Helena: I meant that you should eat them. *(takes bag to 'sink' to clean it, sighs)*

Matilda: *(still focussed on the previous conversation)* And the other thing is that Stephanie S says her sister says that her mum saw Kevin Grosser's Mum kissing a man which isn't Kevin Grosser's Dad. Kissing like this *(she crooks her arm and gives it a long smooch)*.

Helena: Matilda, those aren't things for little girls to be talking about. Now eat your dinosaurs. We're running out of time.

*Martin enters. Matilda continues prodding at her bowl. Martin kisses her on the head.*

Martin: How's my little girl this morning? Snacking on *(mimics a lisp – childlike to make her laugh)* Sssthego-saurus I see!

*Matilda giggles.*

Martin: Lena, I can't seem to find the other one of these. *(holds up one sock)*

Helena: *(glances)* Washing basket.

Matilda: Daddy can I go to work with you today?

Martin: To work with me?

Helena: Toast? *(hands him a slice)* Avoidance technique.

Martin: Ta. Why?

Helena: Some boy.

Matilda: Kevin.

Helena: Eat!

Martin: Love?

Helena: Bully.

Martin: Bad?

Helena: Survivable.

Matilda: Can I? Pleeeeeease.

Martin: Daddy's work is no place for a little girl. *(to himself)* Somedays I wonder if it's even a place for Daddy.

Helena: *(yelling through door, upstairs)* Hey – you two! It's seven fifty five *(more to herself, coming back into the room)* and I can't afford to run late today. *(to Martin)* I'm giving a presentation.

Martin: Where?

Helena: Fertile Valley Retirement Village.

Martin: On?

Helena: *(a little sheepish)* Fibre and the bowel.

Martin: Well – that should be a crowd pleaser.

Matilda: Yesterday he put Kevin P's wet pants in Stephanie Smith's lunchbox.

Helena: *(to Matilda – a 'final' tone)* Matilda - you're going! Now put your bowl in the sink and go brush your teeth.

*Matilda puts on her best grump-sulking face and mopes her way to the bench.*

Matilda: Stupid dinosnores. Stupid crusts. Stupid preschool. Stupid Kevin Grosser.

*As she exits, she crosses Peter's path...entering. He looks rather dishevelled.*

Peter: *(teasing)* Oh look – it's grumpybum.

Matilda: *(continuing her tirade in response)* Stupid Miss Schnisw...witzer... *(as she exits)* Stupid teeth. Stupid...stupid. *(exits)*

*Peter looks rather bemused.*

Helena: *(annoyed at the sight of him)* Peter, I'm going in five minutes and you're not remotely ready.

Peter: Of course I'm ready.

Martin: *(exits, to escape what's to come)* I'll be in the laundry rescuing a sock.

Helena: Ready? You look like you've been dragged backwards through a nightclub bombing.

Peter: Yeah, well – it's the style.

Helena: Yeah, well – I'm not prepared to drop you at school looking like that.

Peter:           *(brightens)* Fine by me.

Helena:          I haven't got time for this Peter. I have a presentation at midday and a couple of hours to do at the clinic first. Now go and tidy yourself and do your hair and teeth.

Peter:           *(mimicking Matilda – humorous)* Stupid school. Stupid hair. Stupid teeth. Stupid...stupid. *(exits)*

Martin:          *(enters through one of the other doors, holding up sock)* Found it. *(sniffs)* Not too bad. It'll be in my shoe all day anyway. *(sits to put shoes and socks on.)*

*Simone enters. She is holding a script.*

Simone:          Matilda's upstairs. She says she's dying of something.

Helena:          *(heading off to deal with it, a sigh)* Well – she may be closer to the truth than she knows.

*Helena exits. Simone sits, she is focussed on her script. Martin watches as he finishes tying his shoes. Finally he asks:*

Martin:          What's that?

Simone:          *(glance up and then back again – it seems an obvious question)* Script.

Martin:          What for?

Simone:          My audition today.

Martin:          Another audition?

Simone:          *(a tad frustrated, but used to it)* I told you last week – Dad. It's for a film that's being shot locally. They're looking for people to play some brief roles – cameos. *(a wry glance)* For an investigator, details somehow frequently elude you.

Martin:          *(ignoring the dig)* Here – give it to me. *(nods, gestures at the script)*

Simone:          *(handing it to him)* Why?

Martin:          I'll help you.

Simone:          Help me?

Martin:          I'll read the other lines; you do your part.

Simone:          It's a monologue, Dad.

Martin:          So?

Simone:          So. Mono. One. One actor.

Martin: (*glancing at the page*) Nah. Look. Fisher lass. Mother. Dream. Three characters.

Simone: Yeah – three characters. One actor.

Martin: Three characters, one actor? That’s stupid. The audience won’t follow that.

Simone: Actors can play more than one character Dad. (*takes script back*) Audiences get that. It’s artistic.

Martin: Artistic? More like postmodernist twaddle if you ask me. (*resigned*) Go on then. I’ll just watch. (*sigh*) That’s my life story.

Simone: You’ll watch what?

Martin: You.

Simone: Doing?

Martin: The three character one actor postmodernist monocycle thing...

Simone: *Monologue.*

Martin: Who is it anyway – that one (*thinking of name*) Shakespeare?

Simone: Who is it what?

Martin: The writer.

Simone: (*a little reluctant*) Me. I wrote it myself.

Martin: You wrote it? So why didn’t you just do one character – why make it all complicated?

Simone: It’s symbolic, Dad.

Martin: Of?

Simone: Of a girl being torn between two worlds.

Martin: So – it’s science fiction, then?

Simone: (*rolling eyes*) Two *real* worlds. Her culture. And her dream. Sometimes, Dad –

Martin: Sometimes what? It’s just that arty farty is not my thing.

*Simone just looks at her father – bemused. Helena enters, prodding Matilda gently into the kitchen.*

Matilda: (*pouting*) You don’t care about me.

Helena: (*kind but firm*) Honey, of course I care about you. It's just that Mummies know when little girls have sick stomachs and when they don't. Now – get your bag and we'll put your lunchbox in it.

Matilda: (*still moping*) What did you pack in my lunchbox?

Helena: An apple and some grapes...

Matilda: (*unimpressed*) Urgh...

Helena: And a Freddo.

Matilda: (*trying to maintain her grumpiness but obviously pleased...mispronounces:*) A calemral one?

Helena: (*correcting her*) Caramel. Yes.

Matilda: What else?

Helena: A sandwich.

Matilda: What kind?

Helena: (*at some point she has resigned to the inevitable mix*) Smiley fritz and strawberry jam.

Matilda: (*a smile slips out – it is her favourite*) Smiley fritz and strawberry jam!

Helena: *And if you can stop that pouting I might just get some chocolate ice-cream for tonight.*

Matilda: (*eyes light up*) Can I have my banana quick on it?

Helena: Yes – you can have your banana quick on it.

Matilda: (*the cry of ultimate accomplishment*) Yes!

Helena: (*hands her the lunchbox*) Now pack this in your bag and get your other things ready and don't even try to pretend you've got a sore tummy.

*Matilda takes the bag and lunchbox and – talking to herself, restating the facts: 'chocolate ice-cream and fritz and strawberry jam and calemral freddo' – goes to the racks where she packs the bag with books, an art smock, a toy or two etc...and zips it up.*

Helena: (*to Simone*) What are you having for breakfast Simone?

Simone: Nothing. I don't think I can eat.

Helena: Honey – breakfast is the most (*interrupted*) important meal...

Simone: (*interrupting*) important meal of the day. Yes – I know. And I know that you're telling me because you're a dietician and it's your job even