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YOUTH

by Leigh Swinbourne

EXTRACT

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YOUTH.

CAST:

Old Man.

Henry: Old man's younger self; artist's model; twenties.

Professor Fulton: Distinguished academic; sixties.

Bert Flaxton: Artist; early forties.

Clarissa Leuwin: Artist; late thirties.

Yvette Smirnson: Artist's model; late twenties.

EXTRACT

YOUTH.

As the audience enters, there is a half-spot on an old man placed slightly apart from main stage area, which is in darkness. He is wrapped against the cold. Also apart from the main stage area is a young muscular naked man (Henry), brightly illuminated, posing as a boxer and lit like a statue. The old man approaches the young man and runs his hand over the body, not in any erotic way, but as though he is handling an object, trying to estimate its proportions. He compares specific features of the naked youth to himself. He then resumes his original position and the naked youth fades. The old man needs to be positioned where, although to one side, he still remains always in the audience's view. As the play progresses he follows the ensuing action with interest, like a member of the audience.

EXTRACT

Spotlight on Bert, main stage.

BERT: I was born in Manly, which in those days was quite separate from the city, before the two bridges were built, and when I was a small boy, what is presently North Head peninsula used to be an island. Always at high tide and at most other times, water would run from Manly Beach through a channel following the line of the Corso out to the surf. The Corso is all reclaimed land. Now there used to be a type of fish that once a year, early spring, came in through the Heads and then swam back out into the open ocean through this channel. When the Corso was built and the land filled in and their passage cut off, following their instinct these fish still annually re-appeared. The local fishermen knew to the day when this school would swim in and get trapped. So they laid their nets; it was the easiest haul of the year. Of course in pretty quick time they fished

them all out, but I remember vividly those early wild harvests. Manly Beach one huge plain of shimmering silver shingles. There were so many fish that a boy like me could get into the water with bucket after bucket and fill them to the brim. Of course you had to watch out for the sharks.

Naturally as I grew older I forgot about my boyhood, when you're young you're always only looking ahead. But every now and then something would snag my memory, and I'd think back to this or that, but increasingly all I'd ever see would be the magical bountiful image of that brief yearly catch. It was like I was looking at it all through the wrong end of a slowly lengthening telescope. And now it seems as if it's the only thing I *can* remember of that time.

So, all of you here just try and imagine this: you're a fish, immersed in your natural element, your home, swimming blindly and happily in total obedience to a power and knowledge greater than yourself. What is that knowledge? Instinct? To the fish it is a kind of God. So there you are, in blind obedience to your, God, heading towards a destruction you can never know. Because that greater knowledge—the passage blocked, men and their nets waiting—lies completely outside the self, beyond all possible imagining.

CLARISSA: (*in darkness*) Just what *is* all this Bertrand? Are you trying to tell us you're presently gasping for breath on the shoals of middle-age or something?

BERT: Maybe. I don't know. I really don't know why it's so powerful for me.

CLARISSA: You know once upon a time Bert used to believe he was a seer. Before it all changed to politics. A puerile allegory! And he doesn't even know what it signifies. Did it ever occur to you that those fish might have known what they were doing?

BERT: No.

Full lights up on main stage. A sitting room is disclosed in style of the 'thirties. Where the naked man posed, or behind where he posed, is Clarissa's statue of 'The Boxer'. Everyone is smoking, except Henry. The Professor smokes a pipe. Henry faces a large viewing window backstage through which can be seen a sublime romantic backdrop of the Blue Mountains. This slowly fades to night as the play progresses turning to a spectacular display of stars with the expected comet shining by the end of Clarissa's story.

HENRY: Darling, if it didn't mean something to him personally, he wouldn't have told it.

CLARISSA: Allegory! Politics! He always hides behind a mask!

BERT: A bit of local *oral* history Clarissa. You might learn something from me for once.

CLARISSA: I already know how to drink.

BERT: No you don't! There's a whole world of drinking out there that's escaped you entirely. A world without end.

CLARISSA: There's an end alright. Yes. Drink. The oral history of Bert Flaxton.

HENRY: Ignore her Bert.

BERT: Oh, you show me how, lover boy!

FULTON: *(to Bert)* And this is 'youth', for you.

CLARISSA: You're meant to be telling us of your own life, not that of a bloody fish!

BERT: I thought I was. You're a very difficult woman to please Clarissa.

CLARISSA: Not for some.

BERT: And always we defer to your pleasure, or the spoilt child might wreck her party.

CLARISSA: It *is* my party.

BERT: And so changeable. How do you cope with that Henry?

YVETTE: Bert, just leave it alone!

HENRY: Not very well.

BERT: Don't worry, what swings away, swings back.

CLARISSA: Not in your case buster.

BERT: Darling, we all shape it when we tell it, even if we don't mean to. Not even junior here speaks the truth. Just thinks he does.

CLARISSA: I'm sorry. I cannot and will not imagine myself as a fish!

BERT: There is a certain scent of fish about you. But suit yourself, as always.

CLARISSA: I hope the Professor provides us with something a little more *tangible*.

FULTON: Don't expect too much from me.

CLARISSA: I never expect anything, and I'm still always disappointed.

BERT: Such a pity the entire world can't live up to your standards.

CLARISSA: It's myself I disappoint the most Bert. If it wasn't for dear Henry here...

HENRY: (*turning from window to embrace her*) This morning, in your arms... I'm just so happy darling! I feel like shouting it out over the valleys, shouting it to the stars!

CLARISSA: Don't shout it too loud my sweet!

HENRY: Why? Why not?

CLARISSA: My sweet sweet boy, you must learn to be a little more discreet.

HENRY: There is nothing in my life for me to be discreet about. What's the point?

CLARISSA: It's just that in some people's eyes, too much candour is... well, 'gauche'.

HENRY: Only eyes that are too weak for sunlight. What I feel, I say!

CLARISSA: Don't tell me! And of course, in a way, it is very much one of your charms. What do you think Professor? You never need to know what my sweet boy is feeling, or even thinking. You just look at his face, and there it is, plain as day.

FULTON: As you say, I think it's charming.

CLARISSA: He has helped keep me young.

BERT: Sure! God I would love to be simple! Simple and empty!

FULTON: *(to Clarissa and Henry)* My dear friends, the fact is you are both, in your different ways, very frank open people. That is one strong and admirable trait you have in common.

BERT: A surface deception Professor. Junior shows it all because he thinks it all matters; our hostess shows it all because she doesn't give a shit.

CLARISSA: Excuse the French. Better than claiming you don't give a shit and hiding that you do! You are such a fool Bert! You could have been so much!

BERT: *(mimicking Henry)* What's the point? *(normal voice)* You're like her plaster of Paris, Henry *(referring to the statue)*. She moulds you to whatever she wants.

CLARISSA: Henry seeks to please me Bert. Is that so strange to you?

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HENRY: *(turning back to window)* And when do we see this star of yours Professor?

FULTON: Comet.

BERT: Whatever.

FULTON: A little after sunset, I estimate.

BERT: And in the meantime, we have our very own star right here to keep us all illuminated.

CLARISSA: Along with your marvellous stories.

BERT: You're asking for them. Only, presumably, so you can tell us one of your own. Typical!

CLARISSA: Just an idea Bertrand, 'pour passer le temps'.

BERT: Oh, excuse the French.

YVETTE: We could play cards.

CLARISSA: I can't stand cards! I'm sorry Yvette.