

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Old Sins

by Patricia Harris

EXTRACT

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CAST: In order of appearance.

DOROTHY ARMSTRONG: A sweet natured old lady. Inclined to ramble on about the past.

RUTH ASHTON: Attractive. Mid twenties. Temps for a secretarial agency.

MAGGIE ARMSTRONG: Dorothy's sister-in-law. Widow of John Armstrong. An attractive woman in her mid forties. She has a son of thirty, born when she was only sixteen.

HUW WILLIAMS: Maggie's son. A teacher and artist. Has a strong dislike of Martin Armstrong and doesn't care who knows it.

JESSIE BISHOP: Housekeeper at Martin's country retreat. A pleasant woman of late middle-age. Jessie is in no way subservient, but is always polite. While working she likes to wear her own plain dresses, sometimes with a floral apron. Not uniform.

MARTIN ARMSTRONG: A wealthy businessman aged about sixty. He is mainly interested in himself, and in how things affect him. He has been separated from his wife for a number of years and has an eye for the ladies. Dorothy's younger brother.

PAULA: Martin's spoilt daughter. Aged nineteen.

ANDREW MAXWELL: Company solicitor for the Armstrong Conglomerate. Early thirties.

INSPECTOR CHRISTINE FOWLER: An intelligent woman. Well turned out. Nobodies fool, and good at her job. A nineties woman. About forty.

SERGEANT GREY: Local police sergeant. Has known the Inspector for many years, although they don't normally work together.

ACT ONE:

SCENE ONE: THE SITTING-ROOM IN MARTIN ARMSTRONG'S COUNTRY HOUSE SOMEWHERE IN QUEENSLAND. CENTRE BACK THERE IS A DRINKS TABLE OR CABINET. S RIGHT OF THIS IS A DOOR LEADING TO ARMSTRONG'S STUDY. S LEFT OF TABLE IS A FRENCH WINDOW LEADING TO A PATIO AND ON INTO THE GROUNDS. IT IS PRESUMED THAT THERE IS A WINDOW IN THE STUDY WHICH OVERLOOKS THE PATIO. UP RIGHT IS A WINDOW PRESUMED TO OVERLOOK THE APPROACH TO THE HOUSE. THERE IS A DOOR STAGE RIGHT WHICH LEADS FROM THE HALL, THE MAIN DOOR, AND OTHER ROOMS IN THE HOUSE. THERE IS A SOFA LEFT OF CENTRE WITH A LONG, LOW TABLE IN FRONT OF IT. THERE ARE TWO ARMCHAIRS RIGHT OF CENTRE WITH A ROUND TABLE BETWEEN. THERE IS A FLOWER TABLE IN UP LEFT CORNER, A FIREPLACE LEFT, AND AN UPRIGHT CHAIR BESIDE FIREPLACE. OTHER FURNISHING TO SUIT.

TIME: THE PRESENT: AROUND TEN A.M. ON A SATURDAY MORNING.

DOROTHY ARMSTRONG IS SITTING IN ARMCHAIR CLOSEST TO SOFA, KNITTING. STUDY DOOR OPENS AND RUTH ASHTON LOOKS IN. SHE IS HOLDING A FEW TYPED PAGES, AND HAS A SMALL BANDAGE AROUND HER LEFT HAND.

RUTH: Is there anything I can get you, Miss Armstrong? (MOVING FURTHER INTO ROOM)
Cup of tea?

DOROTHY: Nothing thank you, Ruth dear. (SHE DROPS WOOL. RUTH PICKS IT UP, RETURNS IT, THEN SITS ON SOFA ARM)

RUTH: It would be no trouble.

DOROTHY: You've quite enough to do. Martin should never have allowed things to build up so. You shouldn't have to forfeit your weekends to come all the way out here.

RUTH: The agency explained about the weekend work.

DOROTHY: Just as well they did.

RUTH: It won't be for long. I'm only here until Miss Taylor returns from her holiday.

DOROTHY: If I know Gloria she'll be back when she thinks she will.

RUTH: She is lucky. I wish I could spend three months travelling overseas.

DOROTHY: You don't know just how lucky she is...but, least said the better. I talk far too much these days. The older I get the more I seem to ramble on. Usually about things that happened years ago.

RUTH: Most people would find that interesting.

DOROTHY: Not Martin. Why do you think he insisted I move out here?

RUTH: (GENTLY) Did he insist?

DOROTHY: I was happy in the city...Had my own little place there...friends. (PAUSE) I suppose I was becoming an embarrassment.

RUTH: I'm sure that's not true.

DOROTHY: (SADLY) It's a failing of old age.

RUTH: I expect he thought the country air would be good for you.

DOROTHY: I know you're trying to be kind, dear, but Martin has never been overly concerned with my health. We've never been close. I'm much older than he is you see. Twenty years. (PAUSE) Mother had quite given up hope of ever having another child when along he came, followed less than a year later by Johnathan.

RUTH: It can't have been easy for you. I mean, to have been an only child for so long, then suddenly find yourself with two small brothers.

DOROTHY: You're very perceptive, Ruth. My parents never gave my situation a thought, and I suppose that's as it should be. I was an adult, and they were happy to have the boys at last. Especially father. Martin was always his favourite.

RUTH: But not yours.

DOROTHY: I said you were perceptive. John was different. Such a kind man, and very thoughtful.

(SHE CONTINUES AS IF THINKING ALOUD)

I don't know what father would have said about his marriage to Maggie, had he lived to see it. He had very strong views about things like that.

(SHE REALISES WHAT SHE IS DOING, AND THAT RUTH IS LOOKING AT HER CURIOUSLY)

Sorry, dear. Rambling again.

RUTH: I know about your brother Johnathan's death.

DOROTHY: He and Maggie were so happy.

RUTH: Best not to think about it. It's more than a year ago now, isn't it?

DOROTHY: Not quite. (SHE BEGINS KNITTING AGAIN)
But you're right. The clock can't be turned back, although I sometimes wish that it could be, for Huw's sake.

RUTH: You mean, because he was driving the car.

DOROTHY: I didn't know you were acquainted with Huw.

RUTH: I'm not. I read about the accident.

DOROTHY: I suppose it would have made the papers.

RUTH: The Armstrong's always seem to be newsworthy. Especially when one drives his car over a cliff and survives.

DOROTHY: Huw is a Williams, Ruth, not an Armstrong. Johnathan was his stepfather.

RUTH: Whatever his name is, he did survive.

DOROTHY: He spent months in hospital, and although he may have recovered physically, he still has to live with the knowledge that he was driving when Johnathan was killed. Huw was very fond of his stepfather...and it broke his mother's heart. (PAUSE) So much guilt to bear.

RUTH: His mother doesn't blame him?

DOROTHY: (SHAKES HER HEAD) There was nothing
Huw could have done. The steering
went. Maggie's over the the worst of
it now. (SHE EASES HERSELF OUT OF CHAIR
PUTS KNITTING ON SEAT AND MOVES TO WINDOW
(R)) No sign of them yet. They did say
ten o'clock?

RUTH: (LOOKS AT HER WATCH) It's only ten past.
They may have stopped somewhere for
morning tea...and I think we should do
the same. (SHE STANDS, PUTS PAPERS ON
TABLE IN FRONT OF SOFA, AND MOVES TO DOOR (R)
I'll ask Jessie to make some.

DOROTHY: I think I could manage a small cup after
all. (AS RUTH LEAVES SHE MOVES SLOWLY
BACK TO HER CHAIR, PICKS UP KNITTING, SITS,
COUNTS HER STITCHES AND CONTINUES TO KNIT)

RUTH: (AS SHE RE-ENTERS) That's organised.
(SETTLES HERSELF ON THE SOFA)

DOROTHY: (NOTICING BANDAGE FOR THE FIRST TIME)
Whatever did you do to your hand, dear?-

RUTH: I did it earlier. Jessie took care of it
for me.

DOROTHY: But how did you do it?

RUTH: I cut it on Mr Armstrong's paper-knife.
It's far too sharp for a letter opener.

DOROTHY: I've warned Martin about that knife. Gloria brought it back from one of her trips, so he won't part with it, not while she's in favour. I think it's some kind of weapon. Not a paper knife at all.

RUTH: I'm inclined to agree with you.
(NOISE OF ARRIVAL OFF R)
Mrs Armstrong and Mr Williams! Should I go?

DOROTHY: Of course not. Stay where you are and wait for your tea.

MAGGIE AND HUW ENTER (R) HUW STOPS TO HOLD THE DOOR OPEN FOR THE HOUSEKEEPER, JESSIE, WHO IS CARRYING A TEA TRAY. HUW IS CARRYING A NEWSPAPER WHICH HE EVENTUALLY PUTS ON THE SOFA TABLE.

HUW: Don't bother with the bags, Jess. I'll carry them up later.

JESSIE: Thank you, Mr Williams. (TO MAGGIE AS SHE SETS TRAY DOWN) Shall I bring extra cups, Mrs Armstrong?

MAGGIE: No thank you, Jessie. We stopped for tea on the way.

JESSIE EXITS (R) MAGGIE MOVES TO DOROTHY AND STOOPS TO KISS HER CHEEK.

MAGGIE: How are you, Dorothy? Sorry we're a little late.

HUW: How do like being exiled to the middle of nowhere? Any sign of Martin relenting?

DOROTHY: I can't see that happening, but things have brightened up since Ruth came. (SHE LOOKS FROM ONE TO THE OTHER AS SHE INTRODUCES THEM) Ruth Ashton, Huw Williams.

RUTH: (REMAINING SEATED) How do you do?

HUW: (UNSMILING) Not as well as Martin does from the look of things.

MAGGIE: Huw! Really! (TO RUTH) I'm Maggie Armstrong, dear. Forgive my son's bad manners...it's sometimes best to ignore him.

RUTH: I'll bear it in mind.

MAGGIE: A girl after my own heart. Andrew told me what a find you are. (SHE SITS ON THE ARM OF DOROTHY'S CHAIR)

HUW: Where is Maxwell?

DOROTHY: Chasing after Paula somewhere I shouldn't wonder.

HUW: There isn't much that gets past you is there, Dot?

DOROTHY: Not a great deal.

RUTH: (SHE LOOKS TOWARDS STUDY DOOR AS IF SEEKING ESCAPE) Perhaps I should... (PICKS UP TYPING)

HUW: Don't let us frighten you away, Miss Ashton. (TAKES TYPED PAGES FROM HER AND SETS THEM DOWN) Weren't you about to have tea?

MAKING NO ANSWER RUTH POURS TEA FOR HERSELF AND DOROTHY.
HANDS DOROTHY HER CUP AND RETURNS TO SOFA.

MAGGIE: It's still on between those two then?
 I thought Martin would have put a stop
 to it by now.

DOROTHY: Martin likes having Andrew around. I
 think he admires him in a way. He's
 worked his way up from nothing you know.
 He's a very clever young man.

HUW: He's clever all right.

DOROTHY: Martin insisted that the board make him
 company solicitor now that old Mr James
 has retired. (PAUSE AS SHE SIPS HER TEA)
 But I think he'll draw the line at making
 him his son-in-law. I've seen the way he
 looks at Andrew when he and Paula are tog-
 ether.

HUW: Things will only go as far as Martin wants
 them to. They always do.

MAGGIE: Anyway, Paula is such a child.

HUW: She's a spoiled brat. She always has to have
 what she wants, and at the moment she wants
 Maxwell.

RUTH: (HALF RISING) I really think I should...

HUW: Stay and finish your tea, Miss Ashton. I'm
 sure Martin has no secrets from you.

MAGGIE: I think you're right, Dorothy. Martin will
 never agree to a match between them. Andrew
 must be at least fifteen years older than Paula.

HUW: If Maxwell was better connected, or better off, Martin wouldn't care if he was as old as Methuselah.

MAGGIE: Don't be such a cynic, Huw. (TO RUTH) You must know Andrew quite well by now, Miss Ashton.

RUTH: Ruth, please! It was Mr Maxwell who interviewed me for this position, and he's driven me down for the past two weekends. He seems very nice.

HUW: He seems to have charmed you.

MAGGIE: Well that's not something you're in danger of doing.

HUW: Sorry, Mags.

MAGGIE: And so you should be. (STANDS) Well, if you'll excuse me I think I'll go and freshen up.

DOROTHY: I'll go with you, Maggie. (EASES HERSELF OUT OF THE CHAIR) I'd like to hear the news from town. (HUW HELPS HER UP)

AS THEY LEAVE RUTH STANDS.

HUW: (DROPPING INTO DOROTHY'S CHAIR) Relax for goodness sake. Anyone would think that you really are here to work. I'm sure Martin won't begrudge me five minutes of your time.

RUTH: You seem to be suffering from some kind of delusion, Mr Williams.

HUW: Do I, Miss Ashton. (HE PICKS UP THE NEWSPAPER AND OPENS IT)

RUTH: Obviously. Or are you always this rude to people you barely know?

HUW: It rather depends on the people.

RUTH: You seem to think I've some ulterior motive for being here. (THE PENNY DROPS) You can't think I'm here to...?

HUW: (LOOKS OVER NEWSPAPER) To what, Miss Ashton?

RUTH: (JUMPING UP) Is Mr Armstrong in the habit of bringing women here for..?(VOICE FADES)

HUW: (LOWERS PAPER COMPLETELY) Do you mean you're not one of the old man's weekend amusements? (LOOKS HER UP AND DOWN) It wouldn't be difficult to understand if you were.

RUTH: If I was it would be none of your business.

HUW: None whatsoever. (CASUALLY) Any more tea in that pot?

RUTH: Look for yourself. If I wanted to temp as a parlour maid I'd work for a different agency.

HUW: (HE SMILES BUT DOESN'T TOUCH THE TEAPOT. HE LEANS FORWARD AND PICKS UP THE TYPED PAGES) What's this? Perfect work? Maybe I owe you an apology.

RUTH: Maybe! (SHE SNATCHES AT PAPERS)

HUW: Careful, or you'll have to do them all over again. (RETURNS PAPERS TO TABLE WITH EXAGGERATED CARE)