

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Every Perfect Gift

by Michael Richards

EXTRACT

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EVERY PERFECT GIFT

Action should be played on an almost bare stage. The basic set is a prison cell. This persists more or less throughout the play. It should be created by lighting alone so as to form no barrier to players. There are no set changes. Other locations are to be suggested by lighting alone, and by the introduction of a few simple props: a chair, three plain wooden forms, a metal bucket, a hand-gun, telephone, a bag of money, a clasp knife. Use little else.

There are eight speaking parts to be played by four actors.

THE WOMEN

ONE ACTOR PLAYS: TEGAN, about thirty-five.

ONE ACTOR PLAYS: POPPY, a battler, late thirties.
ARWYN, a lawyer.

THE MEN

ONE ACTOR PLAYS: STAN, a criminal, about twenty-eight.
CAMERON, Tegan's ex-husband.
CAMPBELL, a psychiatrist.

ONE ACTOR PLAYS: ARNOLD, a criminal, about forty-eight.
GODWIN, a detective.

These four actors remain on stage throughout the play, moving freely in & out of a central space where most of the action takes place. The area outside this is in shadow. When not active actors retire to this outer area where they hover like ghosts.

Actors will sometimes address the audience as though in a public court.

Actors playing multiple roles will change character on stage and in full view of the audience through simple costume changes. Changes may be quite sudden - and once this convention is established they may become rudimentary & almost instantaneous. Base costumes for these actors (as Poppy, Stan & Arnold) are drab prison overalls.

There are two brief voice only roles, which may be pre-recorded, for A TELEVISION NEWS-READER and A TWELVE YEAR OLD GIRL. A television set is used in two scenes. The screen does not need to be visible to the audience and flickering blue light is enough to give the effect. However if the screen is to be seen it should show a pre-recorded tape made up of The Newsreader, and mug shots of Arnold, Stan and Godwin, interspersed with white noise.

ACT I

1

AN ALMOST BARE STAGE. IN THE CENTRE A POOL OF LIGHT FINDS TEGAN SITTING ON A SIMPLE WOODEN CHAIR IN HER PRISON CELL.

THE AREA ABOUT THIS IS IN SHADOW. IN THIS SHADOWY FRINGE POPPY, ARNOLD & STAN LIE UNDER GREY BLANKETS ON PLAIN WOODEN FORMS.

TEGAN: If you're happy and you know it clap your hands. (CLAPS TWICE)
If you're happy and you know it clap your hands. (CLAPS TWICE)
If you're happy and you know it, then your face will surely show it. If you're happy and you know it ... (CLAPS ONCE) ... if you're hap (WEAK CLAP)

(PAUSE)

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above. Oh Father. Fill me with love.

(PAUSE)

An eagle ... can this be you? ... eyes of blood ... black fire ... wings wrap me like a shroud. I choke on feathers. I can't breathe. Is this your glory? Is this your love?

Your claws - like flensing knives cut deep into my flesh and make me bleed ... and the stench. You fill me with your vile stench. You break my bones. Oh father. Am I in heaven? Or in hell?

(PAUSE)

Your sweet and bitter fruit grows ripe. Oh I am vile and I will bring forth vile fruit ... vile fruit with the stench of burning flesh ... but no ... she comes, and she is perfect. Zed. ... and she smells so sweet.

(STAN, ARNOLD AND POPPY WRITHE BENEATH THEIR BLANKETS. THEY GROAN AND MOAN AS TEGAN CONTINUES)

In my darkest days she comes to me - her sweet face bunched like a goblin's. She might be ten years old, might be a hundred and ten. Wise beyond the years clutched in those clumsy butterfly hands. Eat you dinner, she says. You have to eat. Am I her mother, or is she mine? I wake and she is gone. And I'm alone. Alone.

ARNOLD & POPPY FALL SILENT. STAN CONTINUES TO GROAN AND WHIMPER. POPPY SITS. ARNOLD THROWS OFF HIS BLANKET AND STANDS.

ARNOLD: Shut up! Shut the fuck up you mongrel.

(STAN SITS AND HOLDS HIS BLANKET ABOUT HIM)

You pathetic bastard. My God. What a dump. Where the hell are we?

POPPY: You should know Arnie. You put us here. We're dead.

STAN REMOVES HIS BLANKET AND STANDS.

STAN: Oh no. Not dead. I can't be dead. Not yet.

POPPY: Resign yourself Stan. He killed us both. We're dead.

TEGAN REMAINS IN THE CENTRE – THE OTHERS MOVE AROUND HER, BUT THEY DON'T SEE HER, AND SHE DOESN'T SEE THEM.

STAN: But I had things to do. I had plans. (HE PACES) I was going to take you to Bali.

POPPY: What would I do in Bali?

STAN: Lie on the beach. All them island girls - beautiful brown skin, with sarongs, and flowers in their hair - they'll bring us drinks and rub our backs. We can buy shirts. You know them shirts. Real bright. ... I was going to get a dog.

ARNOLD: A dog.

STAN: I always wanted a dog.

ARNOLD: What kind of dog?

STAN: Black and white.

ARNOLD: Black and white.

POPPY: A Dalmatian.

STAN: You know - black and white. Like in that movie. All those dogs – all black and white - all over - like skewbald.

ARNOLD: Piebald you moron.

POPPY: That's for horses.

ARNOLD: I know that. I was just making a point.

STAN: What did you call it?

ARNOLD: Piebald.

STAN: No - the dogs.

POPPY: Dalmatians.

STAN: They're black and white?

POPPY: Yes.

STAN: Well, that's what I wanted. One of them.

ARNOLD: Bit late now. My God. Eternity with you.

POPPY: I'm glad you're here Arnie - that's my only consolation - to see you burn.

STAN: Burn? No no. Not now. That's not fair. To be dead, to burn now, after such a rotten life. I never had a chance. No dog. When I was five years old ... my mother cut my throat.

POPPY: Not that again.

STAN: I can't breathe.

ARNOLD: Shut the fuck up.

STAN: I can't breathe.

ARNOLD: Give me a knife. I'll cut your throat.

POPPY: Leave him alone Arnie. You've done enough.

STAN: My mother, my own mother. I thought she was going to kill me. Flat on my back. I couldn't breathe. I tried to get up. She held me down. I saw sunlight glint on the blade.

ARNOLD: Get over it Stan.

STAN: It wasn't a lot of fun.

ARNOLD: No-one gives a fuck what happened to you.

STAN: It's your fault I'm here. It's his fault. He got me in all this shit.

ARNOLD: You sniveling worm. Never had the guts to live a man's life. I should have strangled you when you were born.

POPPY: Leave him alone.

ARNOLD: Tell them what happened the first time you got arrested. I'll tell them.

POPPY: Give it a rest.

ARNOLD: The first time Stan got arrested he shat his pants.

STAN: I was fifteen.

ARNOLD: He'd just had his first root.

STAN: It wasn't the first.

ARNOLD: It was the first, and you wouldn't have got that if I hadn't paid for it. He still had his pants around his ankles when the pigs kicked in the door. Stan shat himself like a girl.

STAN: I was fifteen.

ARNOLD: You were pathetic. Jesus knows Stan, I tried to make you a man. You've been a fuck-up since the day you were born.

POPPY: Leave him alone. ... Poor Stan. The young brother. The devil's shadow, flapping at his heels, tripping him up like a broken thong.

STAN: I don't need your pity.

POPPY: I met Arnold when I was eighteen. Too young and too stupid to know.

ARNOLD: You were as innocent as a snake.

POPPY: You've got a lot to answer for.

ARNOLD: And you're lily-white? You think I'd do it different, if I did it again? You've no right to judge me. No-one has. If you want to judge somebody, if you think you've got the right, judge the judge. Judge the one that set up the game, that created the players, that made the rules. ... I am what he made me, not what I chose to be. I wasn't asked.

POPPY: None of us are.

ARNOLD & POPPY RETIRE TO THE SHADOWS. STAN REMAINS IN THE LIGHT AND MAKES A SIMPLE COSTUME CHANGE TO BECOME DOCTOR MARCUS CAMPBELL. HE APPROACHES TEGAN.

CAMPBELL: How do you do?

TEGAN: Do what?

CAMPBELL: How do you feel? ... (NO RESPONSE) ... I'm sorry I should have introduced myself. I'm Marcus Campbell. I thought we might have a chat.

TEGAN: How civilised.

CAMPBELL: We can start where-ever you like.

TEGAN: But where will we finish?

CAMPBELL: That's up to you.

TEGAN: Can you get me out? Right now?

CAMPBELL: No.

TEGAN: Then you're no use. I've got a daughter to look after. She doesn't know where I am. She doesn't know why she can't see me. Why? Why don't people believe me? ... They all think I'm lying.

CAMPBELL: Who?

TEGAN: Everybody. Godwin. Arwyn. How can they think that? I was the victim. I thought I was going to die.

CAMPBELL: Why do you think they don't believe you?

TEGAN: I don't know.

CAMPBELL: Could it be the money? A hundred and forty thousand dollars. It's a lot to keep under the bed.

TEGAN: It wasn't for me.

CAMPBELL: Still, you arrive in the middle of the night, with that kind of money, at a cheap motel ... people have suspicious minds.

TEGAN: It was for my daughter.

CAMPBELL: You miss her very much?

TEGAN FIXES HIM WITH A SUDDEN GLARE.

TEGAN: What sort of question is that?

CAMPBELL: I can see you care about her a great deal.

TEGAN: Then why ask - when you know the answer?

CAMPBELL: I want to help you. I'm trying to understand.

TEGAN: You're playing mind games. ... I'm not dancing with you.

CAMPBELL: No. We won't dance, but I would like you to tell me what happened.

TEGAN: I've been through it a dozen times.

CAMPBELL: I'm familiar with the facts. I'd like to know how you feel about it, how you felt at the time, how you feel now.

TEGAN: I don't feel.

CAMPBELL: You mean you don't want to feel.

TEGAN: Have it your way. It's none of your business how I feel.

CAMPBELL: I'm afraid it is. The magistrate's waiting for my report.

TEGAN: I've done nothing wrong. I was lucky to escape with my life.

CAMPBELL: I believe you survived an extra-ordinary experience. I'd be surprised if hadn't left scars.

TEGAN: You think I'm mad.

CAMPBELL: Do you want me to think you're mad?

TEGAN: You can think what you like.

CAMPBELL: I don't think you're mad.

TEGAN: Good. (BEAT) Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above.
(BEAT) I want you to go now.

(PAUSE)

Well. Go on. Get out.

CAMPBELL: What are you frightened of?

TEGAN: I'm not frightened. I want to be alone. Is that too much to ask?

CAMPBELL: You're not frightened of me? Of having me understand? ... Is it the nightmares?

TEGAN: I don't have nightmares.

CAMPBELL: That's not what you told Arwyn.

TEGAN: Who's Arwyn?

CAMPBELL: Now who's playing games. You told Arwyn, you had nightmares.

TEGAN: I lied.