

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



# In Absentia

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by Jacinta Legge-Wilkinson

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EXTRACT

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## In Absentia

(J.M.Legge-Wilkinson)

### Location and Time

The play occurs over one evening, two years after the O'Rielly son, Nick, has killed himself with a gun. He was eighteen at the time, and now would be twenty years. The family have aged accordingly, and now Sarah is eleven, Christine is seventeen, Brenda is thirty-eight, and Neil is forty-one. Their guest, Edward Cummings is eighteen.

The play is set in suburban Canberra in November 1975. The evening is hot and the small government built house swelters.

The main playing area is the family room or kitchen. This room is furnished and decorated in a haphazard manner, with clashing items that have been collected over the years and become a part of the house. For example, mis-matching curtains and furniture. The effect is as though someone has at separate stages attempted to 'decorate' the room, but subsequently abandoned their attempts.

The second playing area is the bedroom of Sarah, the youngest child. Her room is accessed visually from the exterior through her bedroom window. It appears as if her bed is pulled along side the window (though unseen), and all scenes in this room are played against the window.

A staircase or hallway is also hinted at to provide the sensation of distance, and people calling across the rooms of a house. In the La Mama production, the staircase will be used.

Off-stage is used to also enhance the illusion of a complete house. Some lines are said off-stage; it is indicated in the script whether it is necessary for them to be heard clearly or not. The two areas inferred are the entrance-hall and the parents bedroom. In the La Mama production the bedroom is above the stage as dialogue can be heard clearly through the ceiling.

### Details.

A clock hangs in the kitchen. It is set at 7.15, and is referred to at two times in the text, in the evening and the morning. This is to substantiate the sensation of an evening passed.

The family room or kitchen must include a television with trophies and a photo of the dead son on it. Also a table at which five people can sit, and a kitchen stool or step-placed towards the back of the set (for Sarah).

### Film and Sound.

The production incorporates the use of film (or slide) and sound.

The screen is best mounted above the set at an eye level that is comfortable for viewers. The transition between stage moments to film must be seamless and effortless. The audience must be enticed into both worlds without being aware of the transition. The script divides the two worlds clearly, the stage representing the exterior, and the film evoking the interior.

All sets as indicated in the script for the stage can also be used in the film scenes. For example the mother's dream, and Sarah's window (in the opening scene).

Other locations are as indicated in the script. For example a busy street on a hot day, up high on the top of a building with a visible city-scape.

All text used (and some sounds) in the film scenes are **not** synchronised with the image. The effect to be obtained is as if they are separate entities working at different rhythms, but in communication with each other.

The sound is the second factor conditioning the interiority of the play. It should be used to enhance the play and add a surreal quality, in opposition to the naturalism of the text. This can be achieved through either a melodic theme that highlights emotions and narrative development, or a percussive use of domestic and suburban sounds, or both.

It is also possible for the sound to mark the distinction between the film and stage worlds, adding complexity and narrative depth. This can be done though colliding with the transitions or even pre-empting narrative development.

The voice-over (Sarah.2) is written with the intention of conveying an intimacy both with the audience and herself. A 'larger' or more dramatic approach to this monologue would jeopardise the balance of the naturalistic performances on the stage. (*The fear is melodrama, folks*)

### Conventions of the play.

All characters on-stage are contained behind the fourth wall. The exception to this rule is the character of Sarah who is able to see past and look directly into the faces of the audience. She does not, however, see them for what they are, members of the audience, she instead sees them as figures of her imagination.

All film scenes and locations are described in the script. **These texts are not intended to be spoken; rather, they represent an internal monologue describing the dream or fantasy.** The intention is that these scenes will be film prioritising the dramatic intentions from the character's point of view, ie; how they **see** the moment.

## **Character Descriptions.**

### Nick O'Reilly.

Excitable, enigmatic, intense and subject to obvious mood changes.

These are things that we know about Nick from the clues offered by the other characters in the script. His presence in the play is determined through character memories of him on screen and off, and in the rehearsal process, a distinct exploration and clarification of this character will benefit the final production.

His age is approximately eighteen.

### Edward O'Reilly.

Written to be played by the same actor, Edward is the antithesis of Nick.

Careful and considerate, out of his depth in emotional situations, in his element when employing the 'analytical' brain, he is unaware of the dilemma that he has provoked in the O'Reilly family.

His age is approximately eighteen.

### Sarah O'Reilly.

Still young in age, Sarah lives in a fantasy world hidden behind a casual exterior. Her clarity of vision is the gift of childhood preceding those turbulent teen years.

Her age is approximately twelve.

### Christine O'Reilly.

Her calm exterior belies a troubled interior world. In this play we see her explode as she bridges that uncertain world between childhood and adulthood. Through her ungainly but forceful challenge to her mother's lies, we watch Christine overcome her fear and walk into a new world where there is no one truth.

### Brenda O'Reilly.

Her ruthless quest for perfection in a chaotic world leaves Brenda cold and angry with her unfulfilled dreams. The death of Nick has made it obvious to her that her life is empty and passionless. Brenda lives with the fear that it may have been her fault when her only crime is that she herself has not lived her own life.

Neil O'Reilly.

A man to whom passion and expression of emotion has never come easily. The death has opened a chasm in himself that, upon examination, confirms that he has no real emotional life.

Or is it that he has no emotional language? Neil's journey in the play reveals his final confession. He articulates for the first time his sadness over the loss of Nick, and his empty world.

In Absentia.

J.M.Legge-Wilkinson

Act 1 scene 1

NOTE: Throughout the play, Sarah is able to see past the fourth wall staring directly into the faces of the audience, and acknowledge their presence. All other characters are trapped behind the fourth wall, defining the audience as voyeurs. Sarah, however, does not address the audience vocally, the faces of the audience are instead a part of her imaginary world.

It is early evening, a hot suburban summer, the heat is oppressive and can be felt in the small house. Sounds such as outdoor sprinklers can be heard, with crickets, and parents calling children in for tea. These sounds are exaggerated, and gradually become surreal.

The whole set is in darkness, except for Sarah's window.

Sarah is looking out of her bedroom window, day dreaming. Her gaze is focussed as one by one she examines the faces in the audience as though looking for something.

On the screen projected behind her is an image of her dead brother Nick. He is alive, and walking towards her in a haze of heat. It is obviously day-time. This image dissolves into one of Sarah as an adult (Sarah.2) mirroring his movements, but instead in the early evening. She is outside and high up, as shown by the city-scape behind her. She arrives at a free standing window frame that is similar to the one she leans on as child on stage. She too looks out into the faces of the audience as if looking for something, until, smiling wryly, she looks down at her younger self on stage.

Gradually we hear her speak, but the sound is not in sync with the image on screen. The voice obviously belongs to her, but it is intimate, as if she is watching from a distance, as if she is conjuring up the entire event and replaying the evening for her own pleasure. This convention follows through the entire play.

Sarah.2:

Mmmm. Looking out of the window. Ha. Now I know that I was thirteen...

**Sarah.2**

Wondering if I was going to live past his age. Wondering if I was going to live to twenty-one. Have a party. Like Leanne my cousin...Wondering if it wasn't true and I was just going to see him again... And now here I am at twenty-two, and I'm alive, and I haven't. I haven't seen him, I didn't find him. I guess he must truly be gone. 'Though I still wait on street corners, just like I used to. Just stand there waiting, feeling the crowd pass me furiously, I close my eyes, and wait to feel it, that build and then .... I open them.

Still not there. Cry. Sometimes I cry, and feel empty. I still feel this huge empty gap whenever I think about it. Not sure whether it's for me or him. Not sure if its thinking about me sitting there on my school case when I was thirteen or whether its genuine for him.

I can't remember now. I can't remember what he felt like. If I try, I can remember something. If I close my eyes I can picture fragments, like him running, and him jumping, and him kissing me...

And then I can even picture him standing and walking towards me, But he disappears. I can't make him stand still for long.

*During this time, Sarah (on stage) has continued to examine the faces of the audience. On the screen the memories that are mentioned are pictured, with the final image being the camera trying to catch the elusive Nick, who ducks behind a pillar, or wall.*

**Brenda: (from off-stage)**  
SARAH!

*Brenda has entered and is calling from the stairway. Her voice cuts into the moment, and gradually the lights come up on the stairway and the kitchen (or family room).*

*Sarah is brought out of her day-dream.*

**Sarah:**  
Oh, flip!

*On-screen Sarah.2 fades, laughing to herself.*

*Brenda is half-dressed, with dressing-gown over her underwear, she is in the process of making up her face.*

*Sarah begins to scramble out of her wet swimmers...*

**Brenda:**  
Have you started getting ready yet?

**Sarah:**  
yes mum.

**Brenda:**  
Have you changed out of your swimmers?

**Sarah:**  
yes mum.

**Brenda:**  
show me.

(pause)

**Brenda:**  
I said: show me.

(pause)

Well?

*Sarah emerges in the window in a dress. We can see her looking at herself in the mirror. Her face is filled with disgust.*

**Brenda:**  
Well young lady, do I have to come and get you, or will you come out here?

*Sarah slowly enters the kitchen from one side as Brenda enters from the opposite. When Brenda sees Sarah in the dress her eyes light up with joy.*

**Brenda:**  
Princess! You look wonderful. Turn around. Turn around. Turn around you little...

*Sarah reluctantly turns around, as Brenda fusses over the dress, pulling it in at the back, and doing up the tight collar. Sarah winces.*

Very nice. Don't you look wonderful. A real young lady. Did you look at yourself in the mirror?

*Sarah nods, and Christine rushes in to the kitchen. Brenda diverts her attention to Christine who is late. While this is happening.*

**Brenda:**  
Where have you been, Christine? I've got your dress all ready. Its in your room on your bed.

**Christine:**  
Thanks mum.

*She starts to exit but notices the jatz and biscuits on the table, and Sarah's dress.*

**Christine (cont):**

Mum! I said not to go to any bother. He's just picking me up! He doesn't have to come in or anything.

**Brenda:**

Well we'd like to meet him anyway. It's just a little offering.

**Christine:**

But why is she dressed up? Oh, you're not going to-

**Brenda:**

I just thought that it would be nice if we all dressed up for a change.

Is that all right with you, Madam? Or would you like us to greet your new boyfriend in our pyjamas?

*Sarah sneaks out of the kitchen into her room, where she changes into shorts and a singlet.*

**Christine:**

He's not my boyfriend! We're just going to a dance together!

**Brenda:**

Oh well. As you like.

You don't mind if I comb my hair?

*Christine leaves the kitchen and ascends the stairs, still annoyed with her mother. Brenda rearranges her jatz and cheese again, removing the cling rap from the plate. She then good naturedly goes upstairs to get ready.*

*Neil comes in from outside and throws his briefcase down, and switches on the telly. He grabs a beer from the 'fridge (in the laundry) and takes a biscuit. Sarah comes into the kitchen and sits on his lap. Together they watch television.*

*Christine rushes in with her dress half on.*

**Christine:**

Sarah! What did you do with my hair clip? The brown one. Oh no, it's quarter past seven.

*Both Neil and Sarah ignore her, and she rushes through the kitchen to Sarah's room. She yells from the room.*

**Christine: (off-stage)**

Sarah! What did you do with my hair clip? Have you lost it?

**Neil:**

Don't worry. I'll buy you another one.

*He smiles down at baby, who smiles back.*

**Sarah:**

Yeah, don't worry, Dad will buy you another one!

They laugh at their little joke.

**Brenda enters the kitchen. She is still not completely dressed.**

**Brenda:**

Neil! What are you doing? Have you eaten the...?

They're for guests. Remember? Christine's young man is coming to take her to the dance tonight.

Quick, go upstairs and change into a clean shirt.

And young lady. What are you doing out of your dress? Go straight back in there and put it on.

**Christine re-enters the kitchen.**

**Christine:**

Mum! Leave him alone! Dad doesn't have to change his shirt! It's me and Edward that's going out!

Christ! How embarrassing!

**The door-bell rings.**

**Christine:**

God, he's here!

**She rushes up the stairs.**

**Brenda:**

Oh Lord! Forget the shirt. Just let him in and show him to the front room and offer him a drink.

**She rushes up the stairs as well.**

**Neil:**

Yeah, yeah. You go and get ready.

**He walks off-stage to the front door and brings in Edward who has a small box in his hand. He is dressed in 'groovy' evening clothes of the times. Sarah is now perched on her bar-stool at the back of the kitchen. The television is still playing.**

**Neil: (off-stage)**

Ah, G'Day. You must be Edward. Well I'm the girl's father.

**Edward:**

Hello Mr O'Reilly.

**They enter into the kitchen.**

**Neil:**

Look, sit down. The ladies have just gone up stairs to finish getting ready. Shouldn't be too long.