

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Ms Serena Serenata (Part 1 of War Trilogy)

by Merlinda Bobis

EXTRACT

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CHARACTERS

TEOFILO CRUZ, a 72 year old Filipino migrant in
Australia; war veteran and widower

FIRST POLICEMAN

SECOND POLICEMAN

NEIGHBOURS

VOICES:

MAYANG, Teofilo's second wife

SARGE, Sergeant Wilson of the US Army

ESTRELLA, Teofilo's first wife

LIEUTENANT of the US Army

Eleven in the evening. A street lamp at centrestage comes on slowly. Underneath the light is a park bench where, in a dreamlike state and like a young man, TEOFILO softly strums a guitar. He is "dressed to kill" in an immaculately pressed though faded and old-fashioned black suit with a matching felt hat. Posed in a cavalier-like attitude at the edge of the bench, he slightly faces upstage, where there is a block of flats with all windows closed.

The scene has the feel of a Western Sydney suburb tucking in for the night. Occasional sounds from the flats (murmurs, to which is eventually turned off, a low giggle, etc.), faint traffic, and other nocturnal noises weave in and out of the scene. But Teofilo seems to be lost in another time, detached from the scene.

TEOFILO *(sings a folk serenade with his playing)*

<i>Dungawin mo, hirang,</i>	Open your window, dearest,
<i>Ang nananambitan.</i>	To one who pleads.
<i>Kahit sulyap mo man lamang</i>	Even one glance alone,
<i>Iyong idampulay.</i>	please kiss to me.
<i>Sapagkat ikaw lamang</i>	Because you are the only
<i>Ang aking dalanginan</i>	Altar of my
<i>Ng puso kong dahil sa'yo'y</i>	Heart which, because of you,
<i>Nabubuhay!</i>	Lives!

A slightly comic version of the serenade plays from the lamp as he begins to transform into an old man. Even his voice changes as he sings a louder refrain; he is back to reality. The comic tune is abruptly halted by a dog barking. There is an angry "Cut that crap!" from one of the windows. A few of them light up and open. Two heads emerge, complaining — "God, he's here again." and "Doesn't he know what time it is?" TEOFILO hides his guitar under the bench and walks away, pretending to be an innocent passerby. More complaints of "Him again. That crazy Filipino who talks to himself!" and "Dickhead!"

Windows slam shut. The remaining lights in the flats are switched off. TEOFILO comes back stealthily and retrieves his guitar. He sits down again, making strumming motions without sound, while rocking himself to the imaginary music. Then he breaks into giggles, which he tries to muffle with his hand.

TEOFILO Dickhead!
 Dickhead!
 Dickhead!
 Malutong na malutong!
 Dickhead! (*giggles*)

*Ay, very crisp on the tongue! First heard it on the day I arrived five years ago, when I jumped the queue at a phone booth. But back home *sa Pilipinas*, I used to get away with it — what with my grey hair. I could easily jump the queue. Interesting phrase. "Jump the queue." I imagine naughty*

kangaroos jumping — jump-jump like, as you say, regular assholes. Assssssholes! Fascinating word. Assholes. *Butas ng Puwit!* Ugh! *Siguro*, it's better to say *puwit ng kabayo!* You bum of a horse! More decent that way. Wait — wait, a minute. I'm mixing it all up — ass and horse. An ass is a horse? (*giggles again, slapping his thigh with such relish, then bucks on his seat as if riding a horse; from the lamp, the comic version of the serenade comes on again and fades*)

Tigidig-tigidig-tigidig! Tigidig-tigidig-tigidig-hiyaaaaaaah!

(*whispers come from the lamp: "I rode a horse once ... a horse ... a horse ... a horse ..." repeated like ripples in the air, and fading as he says the line himself*)

I rode a horse once when I serenaded my first wife. 1941. Oh what bliss, I tell you, before the Japs took her — God rest her soul — then my guitar, then my horse away. (*strums guitar again, humming his serenade*)

Ay, this scene is very familiar — *parang kahapon lamang*. You see, I'm serenading my Aussie blonde tonight, my third wife-to-be. Well, she doesn't know that yet. That's why I'm here every night — to tell her. *Para manligaw sa aking inamorata*. (*makes a theatrical gesture of supplication towards the window at his left*)

O irog!

See that house over there (*pointing to the flat at the left*) — she lives there with her granddaughter. See that window over there — yes, that one — that's her bedroom window. (*giggles*) *Ay, napaka-rrrrromantic!* Aren't you just tickled pink with the thought? I am, you know. Down to my tootsies (*"tootsies" echoed by whispers from the lamp*) — as my grandson would say. Tootsies — love that word. If only she can see them, how they quiver and blush even to the smallest toenail — he-he-he. The dickhead who blushes down to his tiniest toe-nail. Now, who can beat that?

Ms. Serena, you are immensely lucky to be wooed by a man who blushes to his tiniest toe-nail. It is no small feat, my dear!

(lamp whispers: "Sereena ... Sereena ... Sereena ...")

Sereena. Heard her neighbour call her that. *Ay, kaygandang pangalan!* Sereena. But I prefer Se-re-na, the way we say it at home. Serena, meaning sea-nymph — you know, mermaid! But, of course, this Serena of mine is a real Aussie lady, too. And I'm almost sure she's a widow. There's no man in that house, you know, and she always goes out alone. All by her lonesome (*giggles again*) — like myself. I followed her once to church. I'm glad she's Catholic, too, good woman. I sat