

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Promenade (Part 3 of War Trilogy)

by Merlinda Bobis

EXTRACT

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CHARACTERS

THE LOVERS:

WOMAN DARK, a black woman

MAN LIGHT, a white man

THE ALTER EGOS OF THE LOVERS:

WOMAN LIGHT, a white woman

MAN DARK, a black man

THE SHROUDED ONES:

Four singer-musicians

(Note: For purposes of clarity, the alter egos' names are written out in another type.)

Late afternoon and a striking sunset. Light is a surreal saffron, washing, dappling everything — the stage as well as the theatre seats. As the audience file in, they feel as if they are walking into that time of day in summer when the sun shows off and life slows down in idyllic languor. At centrestage are French windows that lead to a low veranda with steps descending to a street, alight with dusk, which, throughout the play, progresses into night — light becoming more dramatic, as the shadows deepen, and the mood more grim.

When the audience are seated, light is slowly withdrawn from them, as if the sun had set on them first, and had turned its intense eye onto the stage, now awash with vivid saffron — while this light shift happens, rhythmic, playful whisperings in different tongues are heard from afar, synchronised in a manner which evokes a train passing. Then a hint of light is slightly thrown back to the aisle to light the duo walking in from the theatre door in exaggerated strides, in harmony with the musical whispering. **MAN LIGHT**, flamboyant in red silk shirt and the tightest black pants, walks in front of his alter ego **MAN DARK** in similar attire, though of a lighter shade.

MAN LIGHT leads this promenade which is a coded flirtation — mannered, dance-like, charged with erotic energy generated from hips and groin. Such preening to the audience is echoed by **MAN DARK**, who betrays a hint of resistance. A sense of unity in duality is established by the pair, an invisible rope seemingly linking them. They appear knitted together, yet they never bodily touch each other. An unequal

relationship is suggested — **MAN LIGHT** is active; **MAN DARK**, reactive.

They seem to absorb the sun on the aisle while strutting to the stage.

When they get there, the aisle is completely dark. Under the veranda now, they continue pacing, bonded in each tightening of muscle, wheel of bones.

*But the smooth synchronicity breaks as the French windows are suddenly flung open towards them — in sharp and almost rhythmic clicking of high heels, **WOMAN DARK**, in a crimson mini and silk shawl, rushes out to the veranda, followed closely by her alter ego **WOMAN LIGHT**. She is in a similar frock, but of a paler shade — both are quite breathless.*

Leaning their backs on the opened windows, they punctuate their rush with a seductive pose, briefly held, while their high heels keep on with the rhythmic clicking. This synchronises with the train-like whisperings, which, we now see, come from behind the windows. Four musicians/singers, shrouded in deep maroon, are whispering in different tongues, seated as if in a coven. While we hear them most of the time throughout the play, we only catch occasional glimpses of them — once the women leave the windows shut, the whisperings become subliminal voices again.

Hands on thrusting hips, the women whistle at the men, then lean coyly on the balustrade. Flick of hair, leap of brows, flutter of lids, pucker of lips, twiddling with the edge of shawls, quiver of bellies — again, all coded flirtation in an almost dance. Their movements match, but faces betray the conflict.

***WOMAN DARK** is brazen; **WOMAN LIGHT**'s displeased. There is a strange ambiguity in her though, a sense of repulsion-fascination at the sight of the men.*

This time, the whisperings are no longer as harmonious. They are more like a musical conversation of four voices, this time clearly in different tones and tongues.

MAN LIGHT preens with renewed vigour; MAN DARK apes his movements, but with a sharper edge of protest. MAN LIGHT paces back and forth the street; MAN DARK follows. Even as their bodies synchronise, a marked tension between them grows, while from the veranda, WOMAN DARK laughs, rogueishly slapping her thigh. WOMAN LIGHT follows suit, but still with a censoring look. Then, as if fused together — though they never quite touch — they half-pace, half-dance the veranda, while the men, in a similar physical attitude, continue their promenade.

The scene exhibits "the gaze" and "the walk", coloured with blatant flirting, yet tinged with resistance to open sexuality. Throughout the play, WOMAN DARK and MAN LIGHT are driven by a desire to dance together; the alter egos, by a negation of that desire. There is a blending of Eastern and Western dance and music vocabulary. The whisperings fade, as the following lines begin, intoned with stylised movements —

WOMAN DARK The white man walks

Out for a walk
with my eyes

WOMAN LIGHT In gaudy red

WOMAN DARK Canna-lily red
or ember red
or dream red

WOMAN LIGHT Tucked into his sillyswagger of pants

WOMAN DARK Of the most promising tightness

Tight as a throat lodged with song
as a fist of the white shining knuckles

Ay what dazzle of hips!

WOMAN LIGHT But he whitewalks

WOMAN DARK Out for a walk
with my skin

WOMAN LIGHT Rough unshaven shoddy

WOMAN DARK Cacti-chinned is he?
Grazes the back of my knees
I dream of lichens

WOMAN LIGHT While his underarms splotch darkly

WOMAN DARK With continents
for me to walk on
my palms and soles

braille-ing away
his alphabet of pores

All pacing is sharply arrested — and alter egos disengage from all desire of kinship. MAN DARK spurns his twin and WOMAN LIGHT's distressed. She turns away from WOMAN DARK. But MAN LIGHT and then WOMAN DARK oggle each other with much pleasure. The split in the unities is very pronounced now, as the alter egos deliberately counterpoint the movements of their flirting twins. The shawls of the women become a prop for preening and resistance.

MAN LIGHT How she walks

MAN DARK She darkly walks

MAN LIGHT The curve of her calves
electric!

MAN DARK Beware the current of her black belly

MAN LIGHT That tightens and rounds
and tightens with ease

this half-cheek of the moon

MAN DARK How very brief her skirt

MAN LIGHT Ay my abbreviated afternoon!

*WOMAN DARK slips off her shawl coquettishly. **WOMAN LIGHT** picks it up and wears it with her own like a double veil — first on her hair, then on her whole head, covering her face, as if she were shutting off the wantonness flaunted by **WOMAN DARK** who descends the veranda, while chanting the lines below and stamping on rhythmic heels. Left alone, **WOMAN LIGHT** flinches — at each stamp and chant — as if struck on the brow, cheek, lips, breasts, sex. **WOMAN DARK**'s intonement of lines is almost like a striptease. Halfway down the steps and her lines below, she pauses and coyly takes off her shoes, throws them over her shoulders, then half-sings her final words. The men can only stare in awe — though awe touched with disapproval for **MAN DARK**.*

WOMAN DARK This devilbrow

is a cheek's throw

from my lipglow

and the nippleknowing