

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



# Fragments of Hong Kong

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by Katherine Thomson

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EXTRACT

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## CAST LIST

- SCHOOLGIRL      aged about 14, edgy, troubled. Spends this day deciding how, and whether, to commit suicide
- MRS MA            in her sixties, a working woman. Humble, gentle. Trusting. She worked in a clothing factory until recently, now works as a volunteer for a Hong Kong based democracy movement working for increased commitment to human rights in China. Spends this day protesting against the imprisonment of a journalist in China.
- LUCY              mid twenties, she's energetic, a mover and shaker. She brooks no fools, knows what she wants but knows when to appear to be modest and self-effacing. She works in real estate, is making plenty of money, and is an appointed (by Beijing) District Affairs Adviser. Spends this day suppressing the increasingly potent "evidence" that she's marrying the wrong man but convincing herself that all will be well.
- KATE              a journalist in her thirties. Single, active in the journalists' union. Has an image of herself as a rationalist, but sometimes, to her annoyance, her heart begins to rule her head. Today is the day she has to decide whether to obey her mother and give up journalism, or whether she has the stamina to continue.
- CORAZON          Filipina domestic helper, aged in her thirties. A strong sense of irony helps her through her separation from her family. She's proud of herself, of what she's achieving for her family at home. She suspects her employees are emigrating to Canada.

OVER

CAST LIST CONTINUED

MRS TSEUNG      late thirties, early forties, she is bearing the strain of a philandering husband who is having an affair across the border. This is the day she sets herself the task of discovering the details.

THE SOUND OF RAIN, MIXED WITH MUTED TRAFFIC SOUNDS AND MUSIC. THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF A SOUNDSCAPE WHICH WILL CONTINUE THROUGH THE PIECE.

ACROSS THE SPACE A TRICKLE OF WATER BEGINS TO FLOW. IT WILL BE CONTAINED IN SOME WAY, SO THAT IT DOESN'T COVER THE ENTIRE SPACE.

THE RAIN BEGINS TO EASE UP. THE MUSIC FADES.  
AT THE SIDE OF THE SPACE IS A PILE OF SOIL AND BRICK RUBBLE.

A SCHOOLGIRL ENTERS, SHE TAKES NOTE OF THE WATER. FAINT SOUND OF A WOMAN SINGING CANTONESE OPERA.

LIGHTS REVEAL SOME OF THE ITEMS AROUND THE SPACE. ALL THE PROPS REQUIRED NESTLE INTO SECTIONS OF THE PLAYING AREA. FOR THE MOMENT WE SEE A SMALL ASSORTMENT OF BRIGHTLY COLOURED PAPER MODELS (THE SORT USED IN FUNERALS). THE GIRL WALKS TOWARDS THEM. SHE IS BAREFOOT.

SCHOOLGIRL        On that day, I knew what had to be done. I was decided now, just not made the final decision how. They might say I wasn't thinking clearly, but you can see I was. The day after tomorrow would be my grandmother's funeral. That was good, really. That she was gone. Don't break my heart she would sometimes say. I wouldn't be there at the funeral, but I could still make sure that she had...

SHE MAKES A SELECTION OF SOME PAPER MODELS. AS SHE DOES WE REALISE HER AFFECTION FOR HER GRANDMOTHER.

SCHOOLGIRL      What she would like. She could sing Chinese opera my grandmother. Before all the housewives decided it was fashionable my grandmother could show you the make-up, how to walk. What you should do with your sleeves. When she came from Guangzhou she brought a costume with her in a case, but moths ate it one summer and my mother her daughter found it and threw it away when she wasn't home.

THE OTHER WOMEN BEGIN TO ENTER.

SCHOOLGIRL      (looking up at a building) Since yesterday, since she died, the flat has been full of my grandmother's mah-jong friends. They nearly pushed me out of the way, scurrying to her bed, weeping, on phone. "Have you called your parents in Taiwan? What's the number for Taiwan? She hasn't phoned her parents! What is she thinking of? Out of the way. Out of the way. So secretive." Ha! If they only knew. What would happen today.

Section i

SOUNDS OF THE CITY, AND OF RAIN. LIGHTS REVEAL OTHER PARTS OF THE STAGE. AT VARIOUS POINTS NEAR THE WATER SEVEN PAIRS OF WOMEN'S SHOES ARE PLACED. ONE OF THEM BELONG TO THE SCHOOLGIRL. SHE GLANCES AT THE OTHER SHOES AND STEPS FORWARD.

SCHOOLGIRL      The coroner will describe it well. He's gweilo, speaks slowly. "At the bottom of the slope is a footpath, with plants and shaded seats. (over)

SCHOOLGIRL (cont'd) This is important" he will say, "Because people use this path to get in and out of the estate. Then we have this retaining wall, holding up the embankment. Further back are the old and new high rise buildings on this estate. But the wall is what the inquest is all about. At the bottom of this wall is where the three deaths occurred. It was built in the 1890's, solid-looking indeed.

MRS MA People have no doubt looked at that wall and said they don't build them like that anymore."

MRS TSEUNG Someone could make a joke and say "they never did".

THE WOMEN ARE STANDING NEXT TO THEIR SHOES. THEY ARE ALL CARRYING UMBRELLAS, OR, IN THE CASE OF MRS MA, A NEWSPAPER OVER HER HEAD.

SCHOOLGIRL He will say to the jurors, who had to decide who should be blamed, "All day people had walked beneath this wall. Some of them two, three times, perhaps more.

KATE "Some were witnesses to the flow of water on the days leading up to the event, some were witness to the collapse of the wall itself."

THE SCHOOLGIRL TURNS TO THE WOMEN.

SCHOOLGIRL But for me, that day, everything, the buses, even birds, even my feet, everything had collapsed really. (over)

SCHOOLGIRL (cont'd) Closed down. So everyone that day seemed even busier, more frantic. Everyone else seems to have hope. That's what I can't understand, why I missed out on hope, that's what you're not allowed to say. Everyone who saw me, they wouldn't even be able to guess at my secret. (to Kate) You saw me too. Didn't you.

KATE What. No. Not quite. No...

SCHOOLGIRL One of them knows the truth. She should tell. I want her to. I am connected to her, like a silken thread. Maybe she'll dream about me, have nightmares. Maybe she'll see me as a ghost.

SHE RUNS, ARMS OUTSTRETCHED TOWARDS THE WOMAN, MRS MA. BUT SHE DOESN'T FLINCH. SHE DOESN'T SEE HER.

SCHOOLGIRL Nuh. I can't even do that right. (pause)

THE SOUND OF THE RAIN STOPS, THERE IS A FLURRY OF UMBRELLAS, AS THEY ARE CLOSED.

LIGHTING CHANGE.

MRS MA, A WORKING WOMAN IN HER SIXTIES, DRESSED IN HUMBLE CLOTHES TAKES THE NEWSPAPER FROM HER HEAD AND HANDS IT TO ONE OF THE OTHER WOMEN. SHE STEPS FORWARD THROUGH THE WATER.

MRS MA Three days before the ground was flooded in that area. There had been mud and silt and water coming through the drainage holes. (over)

MRS MA (cont'd) It must be all part of the storms we'd been having, that's what I was thinking. (PAUSE) On that morning... I was rushing past. My head down. Maybe there was water in the gutter, I was in too much of a hurry to notice I think.

MRS MA STEPS FORWARD, OUT OF THE BRIGHT LIGHT. SHE PICKS UP A BOX AND SOME POLES FOR A BANNER, ALTHOUGH WE DO NOT SEE THE BANNER YET. THE DIM SOUND OF TRAFFIC, INTERWOVEN WITH MUSIC CONTINUES TO FORM THE SOUNDSCAPE. SHE WORKS METHODICALLY, TYING SOME WIRE TO THE POLES.

MRS MA On my way to the organisation. There is so much to do. Pressing it into such a short space of time. I just help a little bit, but... it's true. Tryi ng to do as much as we can. Even though I'm illiterate, I thought even if I can clean the office, whatever the group would like me to do. Once you start how can you stop. Eldest son won't talk about what I do. He talks about lists, they'll come for you, they've got lists you know. But I'm just a small potato, it's other people who might be on lists. When the organisation sends me letters, he scolds me for giving my home address. My youngest son defends me by saying this home belongs to everyone, and I should have the freedom to do what I want. Mummy's boy. It's true. Pity his poor wife but that's the way it goes. I was never involved in politics before. Perhaps I should have thought more, perhaps I should have been. (PAUSE) In the 50's, 60's (over)