

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



The Telephone Exchange

by Samantha Bews

EXTRACT

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Notes

The play is set in Melbourne, Victoria 1952

Characters

Reality / Nancy, *a young Anglosaxon woman, 17 or 18.*

Dream / Alma, *an Anglosaxon woman 25 or 26.*

Heightened Reality / Doris, *a young Anglosaxon woman 19 or 20.*

Fantasy / Miss Visinton, *a more mature Anglosaxon woman over 40.*

Note: The actresses working on the Creative Development phase of this play were all first or second generation Australians.

Performance

The play takes place in seven Sections.

The performance takes place in three different areas.

Area 1

The largest area and where the bulk of the action takes place. The Area is fundamentally marked by vertical and horizontal lines, forming a grid pattern across the performance Area. The vertical lines begin upstage at Home and end downstage at the entrance to the Post Master General Building Area 2. The grid pattern establishes the characters' journeys as they travel to work. The characters begin their travel to work at Home, spaced equally across the stage, beginning with the Dream stage left and progressing to Reality, then Heightened Reality (H. Reality) then Fantasy across the space to stage right. As the characters work their way through the sections and text of the play, they further their journeys along the grid pattern heading toward the telephone exchange. Each character picks up their journey on the grid pattern where they last left off at the beginning of each "travelling" Section. For example, H. Reality leaves off her journey to work at the end of Section 1 while still in her bedroom. She then begins her next travelling Section (Section 3) from exactly the same mark on the floor as she left off, and steps into "the kitchen" to begin her text at the beginning of Section 3. There are specific images in the text that can be highlighted across the horizontal lines of the grid pattern. These "potent images" are *horse, golden elm, angel* and *mix-master*. These moments are the only time in the text that the characters fully become "levels of the imagination" of Reality's psyche. The moments of action exploding the potent images are indicated in the text (see *Punctuation and Layout*).

Sections 1, 3, 5 and the beginning of 7 will occur along the grid lines. Section 2 and 4 break with this convention as does Section 7 at the point of the Moment of Betrayal. Thus the grid pattern reinforces the travel to work, and the breaking of this convention opens the space for the exploration of the Landscapes of Loss and Desire, and the rupture of the world as Reality knows it at the point of the Moment of Betrayal.

Area 2

The audience is seated in this Area with no more than five rows (for sight-lines) with the four character lines running in continuance through the space. It is imagined the audience will be seated on stools or some like-fashioned furniture that will allow them to follow the action through all the Areas. The Area is played as the foyer to the telephone exchange in the Post Master General's building. It is a public space. The actors move through the space keeping to their journey lines but acknowledge both pretend passers-by and the audience as other people in the foyer.

Area 3

The Telephone Exchange. The actors are seated facing the audience in Area 2 with the switchboard in front of them. The design reflects an actual exchange however we must be able to see the actors when they are performing the switchboard action. Priority is given to audience sight lines. The actors are seated at the exchange in relation to their character lines but can move around and away from their lines on entering the exchange in the preliminary chatter of the day.

Punctuation and Layout

(Note: not all the punctuation in Draft 5 has been corrected to this convention.)

Punctuation in the text is not conventional. Capitals are not used in the text where a character's thought moves on a lateral tangent in relation to an image, when thoughts are spilling one on top of the other, or when a character's line is related to another's by a common image.

The moments of action, which explore the potent images along the horizontal lines, are indicated thus //. When one character starts speaking before the other has finished during these explosion of the potent images, the mark // occurs mid sentence. eg:

Fantasy: *she speaks though half a sleep*
 hah! she wakes and behold a white horse, another horse was red, and lo,
 a black horse, and behold a pale horse//.

Dream: I had a horse // that wouldn't go unless I gave him a thrashing

H. Reality: A red car!//

Reality: I can hear the nightman's horse //

If one character's speech overlaps another's elsewhere in the text it is simply marked /

The Telephone Exchange

January 2003. Draft 5

Part 1

The play begins with all the characters singing a hearty rendition of Busy Line at the entrance to The Telephone Exchange (between Areas 1 and 2).

All: I put a nickle in the telephone and dialed my baby's number
I get a bzz, bzz, bzz, bzz busy line.
Each time I tried I got a busy tone not my baby's number
Just a bzz, bzz, bzz, bzz busy line.
Called his uncle in Jamaica
Left a message with the baker
Even checked the number in the telephone book.
Got so awfully awfully worried
To my baby's house I hurried
When I looked inside the phone was off the hook.
And as I walked up to my baby then
I got my baby's number
He was busy in the palour doing fine,
Busy kissing someone else
While I was keeping busy
Getting a bzz, bzz, bzz, bzz busy line.

beat

Dream: Alma Maria Dempsey, 26, Anglo-Celtic
Reality: Nancy Evans, 17, Anglo-Saxon
H. Reality: Doris Jones, 20, Anglo-Saxon
Fantasy: Miss Violet Visinton, mature age, Anglo-Saxon

beat

Pleased with their introductions they excuse themselves and leave.

Section 1: Waking

Area 1

Each character then takes her position Home at the start of her vertical line.

Reality: I wake and all is still. I wake at 5.00 in the morning and have done so ever since you left me here. I want to be awake before everything else begins but I can already hear the night-man's cart clanging down the back lane. I can hear the horse neighing and whinnying and I can imagine his breath turning white in the cold air. my breath turns white with the cold air and I imagine I have the strength of a horse. in and out, in and out. I get stronger with each breath.

Dream: I dreamt last night I had a horse that wouldn't go unless I gave him a thrashing

Reality: The clock ticks like a soldier's march. Uncle Bill was a soldier. had three bullet holes red raw jagged scars on his stomach like a madman's bite.

Dream I dreamt I had to bandage the hoofs of the horse so it could run away.

Reality I take a deep breath and blow out and a veil of white appears in front of my face and if you were looking at me from the outside I would suddenly, discreetly, disappear. Imagine that! And what would you do if you lost me?

Dream: It must be Wednesday. start the fire. bark and leather, yes. no coke. where's the coke? I must tell Pat to get some coke and Charlie should've brought home more leather from work. the kettle, fill the kettle. boil the water. next, what's next? wake the boys. wake Emily. don't wake Emily – she looks more like an angel than a bride. Emmy's sweeter than Georgie. Georgie'll be alright. but Emmy... that wedding dress must be fixed. attach the arms and the hemming has to be done and Mum will need some help with that braiding, the needle eye is so small she can't possibly do it with her hands. oh they're so much worse. *hears a sound* Was that Chrissie?

H. Reality: Yes! A red car! I always thought I'd prefer cream or white, but why not red?! The horse and cart went out with buttoned boots!

Reality: I had a dream last night I had a horse that wouldn't go unless I gave him a thrashing and this morning I do not want to get out of bed. oh it's so cold.

Dream: it's so cold

Reality: everything is wet and damp like the inside of a mouth as though I were a particle of breath not yet breathed out. Auntie Eileen used to say wet walls were the cause of pneumonia. bright green moss is growing along the skirts. well if this were a mouth I wish it would shout – wake-up! I want you to kiss me, John. I will make you reappear.

H. Reality: Six minutes past seven by my Westclox Bell Bird clock made by the makers of Big Ben Alarms. Home on terms and it works so perfectly.

Reality: The tick of the clock guards the time like a sentry. Soon the ratty children will begin to wake. Mrs. Baker says there's nothing wrong with them but the young one is always coughing and spluttering and clinging to my dress or soiling my suit, always wanting something. I haven't got even a little something for it. Four children under four, their big eyes staring at me when I come home at the end of the day like they're surprised to see me every time even though I have been boarding here in Fitzroy for over two months. What they need is a good spanking my father would say.

I really should get up.

I used to get up at 6.00 and put the kettle on the Primus stove to have a cup of tea ready for Aunt Eileen. Auntie Eileen would come down at 7.00 eyes fat and swollen, heavy on her feet. All day she eats sweets from the shop, she has three sugars in her tea but she cannot get sweet enough and in the morning she sits down puffed out like three day old tea cake. But how you would charm her. She thought she was sixteen.

Fantasy: Hah! *she wakes*

Reality: Oh but remember that sunny Sunday afternoon I had been here two days. You borrowed a car and we went for a run to the Dandenong Ranges. it was a lovely autumn day, soft ill defined, forgiving. I wore my hair high with floral dress and you talked and talked you had just come back from Perth. You travelled all the way across the desert on the train and I asked you was it so hot you wanted to burst, did you want to melt away, did you think of me, did you see any snakes, was it as dry as a river bed? your laugh was as quick as a lit match and you kissed me square on the lips without a care as we sped away.

Fantasy: *she speaks though half asleep* Hah! *and behold a white horse, another horse was red, and lo, a black horse, and behold a pale horse//.*

Dream: I had a horse that wouldn't go unless I gave him a thrashing //

H. Reality: A red car! //

Reality: I can hear the nightman's horse //

Fantasy: *And I saw heaven opened and he that sat on this horse was called Faithful and True.*

fully awake Speak to me *silence* Michael my archangel, are you there?

Reality: After that trip I thought to myself this is what Sunday should always be like.

Stop

Reality: Seven o'clock

Fantasy: Seven o'clock a hinge upon which my working days do turn

H. Reality: Mrs. Figell likes us girls to dress respectably for work as if the fellows ringing in were peeping at the length of our skirts. Leroy has a flair for suits, stem skirts for the sophisticated suit in Marquette red; Hill and Dale shoes – fashion's favourite