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BURNING

by Verity Laughton

EXTRACT

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77 Salamanca Place Hobart
7004 Tasmania Australia

admin@australianplays.org
<http://australianplays.org>
Tel +61 3 6223 4675
Fax +61 3 6223 4678

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CAST LIST

June Matthews, around 40, an ex-dancer

Stephen Matthews, 48, a professor of History (Colonial Studies) at an Australian university, her husband

Aphrodite Xenophon, late 20s, Doctoral Fellow at the same university

Liam Riordan, a policeman of Irish extraction, early 20s

Lizzie O'Shea, a skeleton, a voice, an hallucination or perhaps a ghost, aged 14, an Irish refugee from the potato famine, forced emigration to Australia in the 1840s/50s

(The play quotes a three-line extract from a Van Morrison song, INTO THE MYSTIC. Rights held by Warner Chappell music))

BURNING: ACT 1, SCENE 1

A Forest Of Bones

NIGHT: IN A GROVE IN A GARDEN

JUNE
Aren't they your speciality?

STEPHEN
What?

JUNE
Bones!

STEPHEN
I work with the past, June.

JUNE
So. Bones.

STEPHEN
For heaven's sake!

JUNE
It's a skull!

STEPHEN
And the rest.

JUNE
See? It *is* your speciality. For God's sake
how can you know there's more?

STEPHEN
Calm down!

JUNE
Stephen! [BEAT] There's more.

HE SHOWS HER

PAUSE

JUNE
What do we do?

STEPHEN
Call the police.

JUNE
'Scuse me officer I just found a body in
my back yard?

THEY LAUGH

Stop it. It's sick.

STEPHEN
No. Dead.

MORE LAUGH

JUNE
Stop!

STEPHEN
June?

JUNE
This is my grandmother's house! That's
why we came back!

STEPHEN
And the job.

JUNE
Darling.(beat) You said. Time to wind back.
You said.

STEPHEN
You said. My body hurts when I dance.
My soul hurts when I teach.

JUNE
Yes.

STEPHEN
Sweetheart. Bones are bones are bones.
Whatever it is it's in the past.

JUNE
How past? How long do bones last?

HE DOESN'T KNOW

STEPHEN
They're not very big.

JUNE
Oh Stephen.

PAUSE

So cold. Lying there. In the cold ground.
With the trees above, all circling. Look, they
lean. In. Why here!?

STEPHEN
Shhhh...love...

JUNE
We had cubbies here. I played - right here!

STEPHEN
Long ago.

JUNE
When we stayed here, when you were away, in the
afternoons - Gran'd be fixing dinner and/

STEPHEN
/June.

JUNE
/ I'd sit - here - under these trees - this one -
this very one -

STEPHEN
Let's? Not?

PHONE - VERY LOUD

Christ!

JUNE
Gran had the bell - amplified - something.
So she could hear.

THEY LISTEN

Leave it.

STEPHEN
Professor Matthews could not be contacted
for comment?

PAUSE

JUNE
Sweetheart, no-one's the golden boy forever.

STEPHEN
June, I am pissed off. Not - "suffering."

THE PHONE STOPS

JUNE
There's no shame in suffering.

STEPHEN
I was walking!

JUNE
Till 9 o'clock?

STEPHEN
I like the beach.

JUNE
No. Shame.

STEPHEN
No. Not.

PAUSE

JUNE
It's Tuesday. You've read the New York Times
on the net.

A SOUND

What's that!?

THEY LISTEN

STEPHEN
Nothing. The wind.

JUNE
What do we DO?

STEPHEN
In the morning, you call the police and -

JUNE
Sweetheart.

STEPHEN
I'll go to meet the rest of the faculty -

JUNE
Stevo, I am so sorry about the book.

SHE TOUCHES HIM

JUNE
There's food.

STEPHEN
Thanks.

PHONE

She must have been really deaf!

EXIT STEPHEN

JUNE STAYS, LOOKS AT THE HOLE IN THE GROUND, AT THE TREES
AND BACK AT THE DISTANT HOUSE. THERE IS A RUSTLING IN THE
BRANCHES, A FLICKERING, AS IF A SHADOW MIGHT BE PASSING

JUNE
Who are you then? And what are you doing
in my good house?

BURNING. ACT 1, SCENE 2.

The Warm, The Loving House

INSIDE JUNE'S HOUSE. THE HOUSE IS LIT UP, WARM, ENVELOPING,
OLD, FAMILIAR

PHONE IS STILL RINGING.

STEPHEN
Stephen Matthews.

SPOT ON APHRODITE, A YOUNG WOMAN. SHE IS ISOLATED IN LIGHT
IN THE OUTER DARK.

APHRODITE
Oh. Hi. I rang earlier. They said you'd be
home but when you didn't answer -

STEPHEN
Who is this, please?

APHRODITE
Oh, you don't know me yet. I'm at the uni. I'm in
Colonial Studies, like you. I'm a post-doctoral
Fellow.

STEPHEN
Oh, I see. Right uh - Ms - ?

APHRODITE
Xenophon. Aphrodite Xenophon.

STEPHEN
[BEAT] Is this a joke?

APHRODITE
No. It's my name.

STEPHEN
I'm sorry, it just has - a certain...
extravagance...

APHRODITE
My parents didn't think so.

STEPHEN
No, I suppose they -

APHRODITE
It was hell at school, but.

PAUSE

STEPHEN
That *was* a joke?

APHRODITE
Yep.

STEPHEN
Excuse me. Why are you ringing me?

APHRODITE
Professor Matthews. I'm quite desperate
for your feedback on my work.

STEPHEN
Why is that?

APHRODITE
I would've thought it was obvious. Someone
of your reputation coming to a small university
like this -

STEPHEN
I think you'll find my reputation is in eclipse.

APHRODITE
Bullshit. It's a fabulous book.

STEPHEN
What did you say?

APHRODITE
Your book.

STEPHEN
I'm not sure we're thinking of the same one.

APHRODITE
I bet we are. The new one that everyone hates.

STEPHEN
The book's only just out!

APHRODITE
Advance order. I finished it last night.

STEPHEN
[BEAT] They do hate it.

APHRODITE
Yeah. Isn't that great?

STEPHEN
Not my choice of adjective.

APHRODITE
Listen. People don't drop their professional standards to *howl* if you haven't got them somewhere where they don't want to be got. When even your mentor -

STEPHEN
I beg your pardon.

APHRODITE
That reviewer in the New York Times, he mentored you early on -

STEPHEN
I don't think -

APHRODITE
Well - you can see he's jealous - you've just leapfrogged over him -

STEPHEN
Just a minute, Miss -

APHRODITE
Xenophon. Aphrodite.

STEPHEN
Aphrodite.

APHRODITE SMILES

I'm afraid I don't have time to -

APHRODITE
Please! Just - hear me out?!

SILENCE. SHE WAITS

STEPHEN

[BEAT]All right. Between three and three-thirty tomorrow. My room is -

APHRODITE

I know where your room is.

STEPHEN

Right. I'll see you there at three.

APHRODITE

Beauty.

STEPHEN

Till tomorrow, then.

APHRODITE

Yeah. You bet.

BURNING: ACT 1, SCENE 3

The Old High Moon: The Dream And After

THE MOON, VERY HIGH

WHISPERS, LAUGHTER, URGENT VOICES, INDISTINCT, SHUFFLING

THE SOUND OF MANY STEPS, MOVING TO A RHYTHM, SLOWLY, THEN
FAST, THEN FASTER

BREATH, PANTING

A SHADOW, RUNNING. STOPS.

A SCREAM

A LIGHT SNAPS ON. JUNE AND STEPHEN'S BEDROOM

JUNE
(waking, screaming) No!

STEPHEN
What is it! What is it?! For Christ's
sake! June!

JUNE
A child?

STEPHEN
Darling? June. What was it? Do you
need your pills? Is your - ?

JUNE
Arthritis doesn't do that, Stephen.

STEPHEN
I can't not ask!

JUNE
A dream. Oh glory. Just a dream.

STEPHEN
A dream of what?

JUNE
I don't know. It was so dark. Someone.
Maybe a child. Just this... face. Someone?