

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Collisions

by John Bishop

EXTRACT

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SYNOPSIS

Into the cruel and greedy Colony of New South Wales rides an asthmatic Don Quixote with a social conscience - the new Governor, Sir George Gipps. Seven white men are hanged, the first in the history of the Colony to be executed for murdering Aborigines. The backlash is immediate and personal and, when Gipps provokes land-hungry William Wentworth, the fight becomes vicious. One of them must be destroyed!

Privately spurred on by his publicly timorous wife, hampered by an inept Colonial Secretary, a victim of his own poor health, blunt personality and a past indiscretion, Gipps continues to drive for the jugular.

THE ABORIGINAL PRESENCE IN THE PLAY

The killing of Aboriginal people is not the subject of the play but is the issue which fuels the central conflict - the power struggle between Gipps and Wentworth.

It would be inappropriate for a white writer to usurp the prerogative of Aboriginal people to speak for themselves, as they are doing through their own writers.

An earlier version of the play included an Aboriginal actor who played several roles and was the voice of Gipps' conscience. These roles have been dropped after consultation with a leading Aboriginal Theatre Director who felt the play would be stronger without an overt Aboriginal presence. The Aboriginal people are still there - spoken of but not seen - which is highly appropriate to the themes of the play. Removing these roles overcomes the problem that although the experience of the Kamilaroi speakers was repeated wherever European settlers came into contact with Aboriginal people, Aboriginal actors other than Kamilaroi speakers (a language now all but extinct) might be reluctant to play characters which tell a story referring to a language group other than their own.

ACTORS REQUIRED: 5

2 Women, 3 Men.

CHARACTERS

Sir George Gipps - Governor of New South Wales.

William Wentworth - Lawyer and Landowner.

Lady Elizabeth Gipps - the Governor's wife

A woman who plays:

Lady Jane Franklin # - wife of the Governor of Van Diemen's Land, diarist,
and an adventurer in her own right.

Sarah Wentworth - William Wentworth's wife

A man who plays:

Edward Thomson - the Colonial Secretary

Father Murphy - a poor Catholic Priest

Major James Nunn - a Soldier seconded to lead the Mounted Police

A Gravedigger

A Crown Prosecutor

Although her adventuring spirit and exploits might imply she was the archetypical Amazon, Lady Jane was young, almost petite, and very attractive. This combination of the alluring femme fatale and the tough adventurer is an important aspect of the character, as it appears to have been of the real woman.

ACT ONE

THE MAN ENTERS AS FATHER MURPHY. HE LOOKS AT THE TABLE, GOES TO MAKE AN ADJUSTMENT TO THE SETTING BUT REFRAINS. HE MOVES TO HIS BENCH AND PICKS UP TWO SOMEWHAT BATTERED BOOKS.

MURPHY: Two books. An abundance of riches. One telling us what we might be, the other what we are. [*HE TAKES HIS BIBLE AND ADDRESSES THE HANGING BODIES*] Didn't I tell you often enough? Do not be adulterous, nor covet... nor kill... [*HE OPENS THE OTHER BOOK AND, TURNING AWAY FROM THE BODIES, ALMOST AS THOUGH HE IS AFRAID THEY MIGHT HEAR, HE QUOTES*] ".....the times have been that, when the brains were out, the man would die, and there an end; but now they rise again..." [*HE WEIGHS THE TWO BOOKS, ONE IN EACH HAND*] Where lies the greater truth? Should I call for an exorcist before the dead destroy us all? God help me if the Inquisition - the defenders of the faith... But such grand people don't come this far from home - only a poor priest who owns two books and wonders why he was chosen for a ministry at the ends of the earth... where beasts and monsters be.

GIPPS AND WENTWORTH ENTER, SEAT THEMSELVES AT THE TABLE TAKE UP THEIR GLASSES AND FREEZE IN POSITION.

MURPHY: The grand ones strut and fret upon the stage. We others merely play our many parts.

HE DRESSES FOR HIS ROLE AS A BUTLER. AS HE DOES SO, THE WOMAN ENTERS AND GOES TO HER TABLE TO PREPARE FOR HER FIRST ROLE AS SARAH WENTWORTH.

WOMAN: Who are you?

MAN: An Everyman. A Common Man. A man who battles for identity! And you?

WOMAN: Let's say... an Uncommon Woman.

MAN: Am I pleased to meet you?

WOMAN: Perhaps. Perhaps not!

HASTILY, HE PICKS UP THE STOLE HE HAS PUT DOWN.

MAN AS MURPHY: Perhaps you'd like to confess? Before it's too late?

WOMAN: I have no faith.

MAN AS MURPHY: Who has, I wonder? Who has?

HE TAKES THE STOLE OFF, THEN, AS THE BUTLER, MOVES TO STAND AT A DEFERENTIAL DISTANCE BEHIND THE TABLE.

WENT: An estimable dinner, Your Excellency. Quite superb.

GIPPS: The job has its perquisites.

WENT: Some men would kill for the position.

GIPPS: That hardly places a value on it! Anyway, you'd have to be mad. It would be like breaking into a Bank knowing the vault was empty. Have you ever seen a more splendid house for a gaoler?

WENT: Really, Your Excellency, a gaoler?

GIPPS: A turnkey with no power and little influence.

WENT: There are...well, were... at least seven who'd dispute that.

GIPPS: Was I wrong to order the second trial?

WENTWORTH: It left people in no doubt where you stood.

GIPPS: Anyone can enforce the law. The difficulty is changing it.

WENT: With due respect, Your Excellency, the difficulty is changing the people - winning them to your cause.

GIPPS: There's not much hope of that with the press fuelling their prejudices.

WENT: Perhaps it's the Editor of The Herald you should be entertaining in this empty vault.

GIPPS: I don't have a long enough spoon!

WENT: It's rumoured you have loftier targets in mind.

GIPPS: Loftier?

WENT: Loftier than thugs like Kilmeister and his gang. Mitchell's collisions on the Gwydir? Major Nunn's little exercise at Waterloo Creek?

GIPPS: What are you trying to tell me?

WENT: The Colony needs the stability which goes with a popular Governor.

GIPPS: Then you shouldn't have been so quick to get rid of Bourke.

WENT: It's Whitehall which has that power. I was merely an observer.

GIPPS: So was Brutus.

WENT: I've always imagined it must be particularly painful for a person in such a high office to fall. The Herald was merciless.

GIPPS: I'm not good at saying thank you, Wentworth. I appreciate your support over the Kilmeister business.

WENT: Oh!... Well in all honesty, I could hardly own to having supported you. Certainly I'm one who didn't speak out against the hangings.

GIPPS: An eminent lawyer refrains from speaking against me. That's as close to support as I come.

WENT: The latest piece in The Colonist supports you.

GIPPS: Does anybody read The Colonist?

LADY ELIZABETH GIPPS ENTERS.

GIPPS: I'm sure you won't mind if Elizabeth joins us.

WENT: I'm honoured... We were speaking, Lady Elizabeth, of the succour His Excellency receives from The Colonist.

ELIZABETH: The Colonist versus The Herald is hardly an even match.

WENT: Justice for the blacks is a divisive issue. I'm hoping His Excellency might turn his attention to something else until the furore dies down.

GIPPS: What had you in mind?

WENT: I've been wanting to have a word with you about transportation and assignment of convicts. I don't think the new brooms in Whitehall realise how effective the policy has been.

GIPPS: You want me to tell a Whig Government that transportation should be continued?

WENT: I'd like you to tell them about the benefits of transportation when coupled with assignment... to the right people.

GIPPS: What would you have me say?

WENT: That it's the most admirable means of reformation yet devised.

GIPPS: Really?

WENT: They're taking wrongdoers away from the environment in which they yielded to temptation, moving them to a healthy climate, and putting them to useful work. Above all they're giving the poor creatures the prospect of a rosy future in a country they're helping to develop.

GIPPS: And providing landowners with cheap labour.

WENT: Which is a very useful side-benefit.

GIPPS: Is that what you and your friends call it?

WENT: I never speak for "friends", Your Excellency. The Colony has already suffered enough from favours done for friends... and relatives.

GIPPS: So, you think the landowners are doing the convicts a favour?

WENT: Without us they'd have been put in chains and made to break rocks.

GIPPS: You make transportation sound positively desirable.

WENT: Compared to the other options, it is. With you in control, convicts experience a level of compassion they couldn't expect in an English gaol.

GIPPS: Don't flatter! [PAUSE] I won't make any promises. Perhaps Thomson could prepare a paper for Whitehall.

WENT: The Colonial Secretary has such an onerous job. I'd be happy to draft the paper for him.

GIPPS: If he objects, it's up to you to make peace with him.

ELIZABETH: The Colonist tends to be extreme in its views, don't you think Mr Wentworth?

WENT: Why, yes, Lady Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: So does The Herald, does it not?

WENT: I suppose it depends on where one thinks the balanced viewpoint lies, my Lady.

ELIZABETH: I would have thought it would be difficult to be more socially conscious than The Colonist nor more conservative than The Herald.

WENT: You might well be right.

GIPPS: Elizabeth reads a lot.

THE BUTLER CONSULTS HIS POCKET WATCH AND TAKES A STEP CLOSER TO THE TABLE, SIGNALLING THE END OF THE DINNER.

WENT: Such a gratifying evening. But I really must take my leave. I look forward to your visit to Vaucluse House my Lady.

ELIZABETH: I....er.

WENT: The charity fête. His Excellency has agreed to come.

ELIZABETH: Oh.

WENTWORTH EXITS. THE BUTLER WITHDRAWS.

ELIZABETH: I thought Mr Thomson advised us not to attend the fête.

GIPPS: His advice is not to take luncheon with the Wentworths in private. We're to arrive late, leave early, and stay in the gardens. I believe the property is quite stunning.

ELIZABETH: They must be extremely wealthy.

GIPPS: I think they might trade it all for acceptance.

ELIZABETH: Some chance! The Queen herself would have trouble breaking into society in Sydney.

GIPPS: I would have liked to invite Sarah this evening.

ELIZABETH: Oh you couldn't possibly have done that. Mr Thomson has given me a list of people he thinks appropriate for us to entertain. Sarah Wentworth is certainly not an appropriate person.

GIPPS: How tedious.

ELIZABETH: It's the scariest list I've ever seen. They'll eat me alive.

GIPPS: No they won't.

ELIZABETH: What did Wentworth mean about the Colony suffering from favours done for friends and relatives?

GIPPS: Probably that he doesn't have any friends or relatives in positions of influence.