

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Empty Shells

by Ramez Tabit

EXTRACT

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CHARACTERS:

- AHMED: 13 years old. Muslim Sunni.
- ALI: 13 years old. Muslim Shiite.
- SAM: 12 years old. Christian Orthodox.
- TONY: 13 years old. Christian Maronite.
- LAILA: 18 years old. A student. Sister to Ahmed.
- FAWAZ: Late 30's. Works as a builder. Father of Ahmed.
- AMINA: Mid 30's. Works at home. Mother of Ahmed.
- ABDULLAH/Driver: Early 20's. A Lebanese Sunni Muslim. Student.
- MAHER: Early 30's. Ex-teacher. Leader of a Sunni Muslim party.
- GUARD:

SCENE 1 HOMEWORK

A street scape. Dawn. A block of apartments with balconies face the street. An ancient wall borders a cemetery in which a mandarin tree full of fruit grows and beyond are the woods. A modern office building uses part of the ancient wall within its design. This peaceful neighbourhood could be anywhere. Church bells echo in the distance. Moments later the Islamic call to prayer sounds. There is a peculiar but harmonious unison between the bells and the call, two parts to a song.

Music. Ahmed enters. His eyes far reaching, he sways in tune to his dream of sailing. Three other boys join him. The dream of sailing music stop. Sam departs. location change. The three remaining boys call for him.

Tony: His mother locked him in his room. She won't let him leave.

Ahmed: Oh no, not again.

Tony: He was supposed to go to church with his family but he took off with me.

Ahmed: If his mother locked him in his room, means he wont give us the homework today.

Tony: He'll bring it to us tomorrow in school.

Ali: What if he forgets?

Tony: If he forgets we'll cop a thousand rulers and if we cop a thousand rulers, we'll feed him two thousand rulers.

Ahmed: We'll go and knock on his door.

Ali: If we go and knock on his door we'll never get our homework. You know his mother doesn't like him playing with us.

Tony: You mean you two, not me.

Ali: Al right she likes you, so why don't you go?

Tony: Just wait for him.

Ali pulls out an apple from his pocket and bites into it.

Tony: Give me a bite.

Ali: Piss off, get your own.

Tony: Where from?

Ali: The Phoenician cemetery idiot.

Tony snatches the apple off Ali and bites a big chunk from it.

Ali: Get lost idiot. A Dick of a Christian. You can go and get me another one now.

Tony: Nahh... I don't feel like dodging the dog and the guard.

Ali: Then give me back my apple. (Tony is not about to give the apple back.) Come on Ahmed tell him to give it back to me.

Ahmed: You should've got us all one while you were there.

Ali: Fucken Dick of a Sunni. You're just too scared to get your own.

Ahmed and Tony pretend to be scared. Sam arrives.

Sam: Are you happy? It took me four hours to do. I still haven't finished mine yet.

Ali: Give me mine.

Tony: (Reading his paper.) This is good Sam, I'll get top marks for it.

Ali: Sam, what's mine about?

Sam: What difference does it make, it's done isn't it?

Ali: (Ali reaches for his paper and reads.) What! Santa Claus!

Sam: Yeah, you know, the one that comes down the chimney on Christmas eve and gives presents to everyone.

Ali pulls himself away from the others and paces up and down in anger.

Ali: Idiot! Why would I want to write about Santa Claus? The teacher will say, I didn't know that you celebrated Santa Claus? Maybe you didn't write this. Idiot? I'm a Muslim. She won't believe I wrote this!

Sam: All right. Give it back to me, I'll give you mine instead.

Ali: But you haven't finished your homework.

Sam: I'll finish it tonight.

Ali: Don't forget.

Sam: How can I forget, you'll wing me to death.

Ahmed: Shut up you two! You want to work out how we're going to build the boat or not?

Tony: We need wood. What's the use of talking if we don't have wood?

Sam: We also need an engine.

Ahmed: An engine costs too much. We should build one without an engine.

Tony: We need sails. We should draw wings on the side.

Ali: We're sailing away, not flying away, idiot.

Sam: Where are we going to get the wood from?

Tony: We need long and wide pieces of wood.

Ali: Why don't we get it from the Palestinian school?

Sam: Oh yeah idiot, we'll go and get all the wood that we want.

Just like that.

Ahmed. They use the wood to build shacks to live in.

Sam: And make wooden guns to train with

Ahmed: They're not going to give it to us to build a boat.

Ali: If only my father would let me go into training.

Sam: Training for what?

Ali To free our land from the Zionists idiot.

Tony: What land idiot? You're Lebanese not Palestinian.

Ali: Southern Lebanon is crawling with Israelis idiot.

Ahmed: Your father's got brains because all you'll do is get yourself killed if you fight.

Ali: No I wont. I'll be the best fighter there is.

Tony: You can't even beat me in wrestling and you want to be a Shiite hero.

Ali: I can beat you. Come on you want me to show you.

Tony jumps Ali and wrestles him into submission.

Tony: Give up?

Ali: Never.

Tony: Get out of it then.

Ali struggles but can not free himself.

Tony: Come on give up.

Ali: In your dreams.

Tony: You're beat.

Ali: Nah.

Tony lets Ali go.

Tony: You always do this, it's boring.

Ali: (Feigning innocence) Do what?

Tony: You've got to give up when you're beat.

Ali: I wasn't beat.

Ahmed: Yes you were idiot.(pushes Ali)

Ali: No I wasn't.

Ahmed pushes Ali and wrestles him into submission.

Ahmed: You're beat now?

Ali: (Unable to free himself) Al right I give up.

Ali laughs, Ahmed and Sam join.

Tony: Let's pick some fruit.

Sam: I'll get some bones from the butcher to divert the dog.

Ahmed: Look out for the guard?

Ali: Is it a big dog?

Ahmed: Ha! And you call yourself a Shiite here.

Ali: Alright let's go.

SCENE 2 WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?

Laila enters, she stops still, clearly something has happened to her. Amina is on her knees in prayer. She raises her hands to her face and recites from the Koran.

Amina: (In Arabic) A ootho Bikalimtil-lahittammami min Ghadabihi Wa iqabihi-washarri-ibadihi Wamin Hamazatish-shayateen Wa an Yahderoon.

(Translation) I seek refuge in the perfect words of Allah, from his displeasure and punishment, and from evil people and from the promptings of devils and from their presence.

Amina repeats the verse two to three times. Laila enters carrying her books. Amina interrupts her prayers to thank Allah. Laila walks to the couch, sits and stares ahead. She is deeply preoccupied and answers Amina's questions as if from a distance.

Amina: Where have you been? You're four hours late.

Laila: To the American University in Beirut.

Amina: What took you so long? (pause) What is it Laila?

Laila: I saw four people shot dead. A car sped past my taxi and shot four men outside a building. Bystanders were blaming the Palestinians and Muslims. A group of men ran into the street with machine guns screaming for revenge.

Amina: There has always been bickering between Muslims and Christians. The same story with different spicing. It will pass.

Laila: Cars were crashing into each other, mothers were scooping children off the footpaths and out of nowhere great numbers of Christian students were marching in the streets cursing Muslims.

Amina: Their curses rhyme because they are old and rehearsed.

Laila: On the way back there were checkpoints everywhere. Not