

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Estuary Dream

by Louise Helfgott

EXTRACT

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Characters:

Lancel (Arch) Tuckey	From ages 10 through to 80's Born 1914
Stirling (Mib) Tuckey	As above Arch's twin brother.
Edna (Ed) Tuckey	Their older sister Born 1902
Myrla (Merle) Tuckey	Another older sister Born 1906
Clarice (Lal) Tuckey	Older sister Born 1908
Lorna Tuckey	Older sister Born 1910
Kelvin (Kelly) Tuckey	Older brother Born 1912
George (Melville) Tuckey	Their father Born 1876
Catherine (Emily) Tuckey	Their mother Born 1878
Roy Tuckey	Melville's brother Born 1893
Dudley Tuckey	Roy's son. Born 1921
Tom Cooper	Roy's brother-in-law and Dudley's uncle
Lance Ward	Arch's fishing partner
Melvyn Tuckey	Arch's son
Robert Tuckey	As above
Ross McLarty	Premier of W.A. 1 April 1947 - 27 February 1953
Hobart Tuckey	M.L.C. for South West 1934 - 1951
Billy Nannup	Arch's friend
Bernadette	Care-aid in Arch's retirement village
Mr Williams	Guest at boarding house
Mayor/Shop Assistant/ second guest	

ACT ONE:

Scene 1:

BLACK STAGE. THEN EERILY A RED GLOW BECOMES DISTINCT BEHIND THE CURTAIN. SHADOWY FIGURES SUGGEST A CORROBOREE. THEY ARE CIRCLING AROUND A FIRE AND MOVING IN TIME TO TAPPING STICKS, ALL THE WHILE SINGING A NOONGAR SONG. IN FRONT OF THE CURTAIN ARE TWO YOUNG BOYS PEERING THROUGH THE MESH AS THEY WOULD THROUGH BUSH FOLIAGE. A TWIG SNAPS.

STIRLING: Sh Arch! They'll hear us.

ARCH: I'm being as quiet as I can.

STIRLING: They'll put a curse on us if they catch us. That's what Mum says. We'll end up as zombies.

ARCH: We shouldn't have wandered away Stirling. Dad's going to kill us.

STIRLING: Better him than them. Either way we're going to end up as dead meat.

ARCH: (SHIVERING) Let's go back. I don't like it here.

STIRLING: Don't be a scaredy cat!

ARCH: (DEFENSIVELY) I'm not. I just wanna go back. It doesn't feel right. Like we're not meant to be here.

THE DANCING AND THE TAPPING STICKS BUILD UP TO A FRENZY AND THEN SUDDENLY STOP. A YOUNG BOY APPEARS NEXT TO THE DANCERS AND AN ELDER BEGINS TO DAUB OCHRE ON HIS FACE. HE TALKS IN DIALECT TO HIM. A SPEAR IS LIFTED.

ARCH: They're going to spear him. Quick let's go.

STIRLING: I've heard about this. It's some ceremony. (HE HAS TROUBLE DRAWING OUT THE SYLLABLES) I'm not sure what it's called.

ARCH: (PANICKY) We shouldn't be here.

HE STEPS BACK. ANOTHER TWIG SNAPS. THEY FREEZE. SO DOES THE MOVEMENT BEHIND THE CURTAIN. THE ELDER FACES THE AUDIENCE WITH THE SPEAR POISED. HE CALLS IN AN ANGRY VOICE. ARCH AND STIRLING PANIC RUNNING TO HIDE AS FAST AS THEY CAN. LIGHTS OUT.

Scene 2:

THE BACKYARD OF THE TUCKEYS' HOUSE. A CLOTHES LINE AT THE FRONT OF THE STAGE. EMILY IS HANGING UP WASHING WITH HER ELDEST DAUGHTER EDNA. OTHER CHILDREN, SUCH AS ARCH, STIRLING AND KELLY MAY BE PLAYING A STICK GAME NEARBY. BEHIND THE CURTAIN WE SEE THE FLEETING MOVEMENTS OF A MAN HOLDING AN AXE ABOVE HIS HEAD CHASING AROUND A PIG. IT IS AROUND 1924.

EMILY: Look at him go. The pot's not for that one. He sure is frisky.

EDNA: Who? Dad or the pig?

EMILY: (SMILING) Hard to tell the difference sometimes!

EDNA: Dad's the redder one!

EMILY: He's surely having a hard time with this one.

SHE THROWS THE END OF A SHEET OVER TO EDNA AND IN SO DOING NOTICES A TEAR IN THE FABRIC.

EMILY: What do they do to them? I think we should start charging extra. Remind me to talk to your father about it. Obviously now is not a good time!

MELVILLE TAKES A STAB AT THE PIG WHICH GETS AWAY AT THE LAST MOMENT.

EDNA: Mum .. I want to talk to you about something.

EMILY: What is it Ed?

EDNA: Well, I was wondering if .. you know if I could .. well one of the farmer's sons .. you know Reg .. well he'd like to take me out to the flicks on Sunday night .. is that O.K.?

EMILY: Oh not Sunday! It's really busy. I need you to help dish up the food and wash the dishes.

EDNA: What about another night then ?

EMILY: Are you sure he'll still be inviting you Ed? After all, he'll have to pay if it's another night. That's why he's asked you to go on Sunday. As a matter of fact, your father was saying just the other day how the pastor had to cut the sermon short because everyone wanted to get to the flicks on time!

EDNA: Thanks for your belief in me Mum! So the only reason he's

asking me is that it's free!

EMILY: I just know what young men are like. All enthusiastic until it costs them something!

EDNA: Well we could go somewhere else. (GRASPING FOR AN IDEA) Down to the river for a walk!

EMILY: (SHAKING HER HEAD) My little girl's growing up. (SHE APPRAISES HER)
I don't know. He's a bit wild, that Reg. I'm not sure I trust him .. with you. He's not exactly *our* class either.

EDNA: Oh Mum. You say that about all of them. I'll end up an old maid if you have your way.

EMILY: Now that's not true Ed. But we just gotta make sure .. Some young men they come here from the country for a bit of a holiday and well .. they think they can get away with murder! And we've already had one murder in the district! You remember the story about poor Leah Fouracre who took in that young fellow, gave him a job and all and look how he repaid her!

BEHIND THE CURTAIN MELVILLE TAKES ANOTHER SWING AND MISSES.

EMILY: I'm just thinking about what's best for you darling.

EDNA: (POUTING) What's best for me is that I stay home and help you look after all the guests and never have a life of my own. I may as well just die right now!

MELVILLE STRIKES THE PIG. THERE IS A SUDDEN LOUD SQUEAL AND THEN SILENCE. THE WOMEN SCREAM AND RUN TOWARDS THE HOUSE. LIGHTS OUT.

Scene 3:

IT IS NIGHT A FEW DAYS LATER. INSIDE THE TUCKEY DINING ROOM. A FIRE HAS BEEN LIT IN THE FIREPLACE. OFF TO ONE SIDE THE PIG IS HANGING UPSIDE DOWN ON A HOOK. GENERAL COMMOTION AS MEALS ARE BEING SERVED. THIS SCENE IS SET IN THE EARLY 1920'S.

EMILY: Edna, have you got that duck? Gentleman over here has been waiting for quite a while. And where's Clarice? I haven't seen her all evening.

EDNA: (MUTTERING TO HERSELF) Probably run off with some boy down the back of the shed knowing Lal.

EMILY: What was that?

EDNA: Nothing Mum.

EMILY: It's so busy tonight! Of all nights for Melville to be playing at the flicks..

EDNA: I wish I was over there!

EMILY: We need you both here. I wish someone else in Mandurah could play piano!

EDNA: It won't be long before Myrla can take over.

EMILY: Ah .. she'll get married soon and lose all interest in it.

GUEST: That's what happens to the best of them.

EDNA: Well, it's not going to happen to me. No man's going to rule my life.

GUEST: That's what they all say and they all end up doing the same.

EDNA: I'm going to be a real lady! I'm going to have lots of money one day, a nice big home overlooking the water and spend all my time doing just what I want.

EMILY: (EXASPERATED) Well, let's not start tonight! We need you here. The Williams family are having the fish.

A YOUNG SHY GIRL APPEARS AT THE DOORWAY.

EMILY: Lorna don't just stand there. Come and help.

SHE DISAPPEARS AGAIN.

EMILY: Your sister. Always too shy to show her face. I worry about her spending all that time in her room. It's no good for her. She needs to get out a bit and mix with people.

MR WILLIAMS: This is the best fish. What is it?

EMILY: What you're eating is some of Mandurah's best mullet! Freshly caught today from the estuary!
(TO EDNA QUIETLY) Don't worry Ed! These out of towners can never tell the difference between mullet and pilchards.

MR WILLIAMS: I think I'll try my luck tomorrow.

EMILY: My husband can take you out to a few good spots if you like. Sometimes he goes out along the Serpentine to where the fish mungah is.

GUEST: The what?

EMILY: The fish mungah. Where the Aborigines catch their fish. They put all this grass along the neck of the river where it thins down to a narrow channel and the fish can't get through. Then they quickly block up the other end with grass and whilst they're trapped inside the mungah as they call it they start spearing them. They've taught us a few tricks I tell you. They're so quick. They stand there as still as statues watching the water and then as quick as a flash the spear gets thrown in and out it comes again with a great big fat mullet or tailor at the end. They've been fishing like that for years. All the local tribes come down to Mandurah every year to have a spell by the sea. It was their meeting place .. trading place. That's why it's called Mandurah you know. Aboriginal word for meeting place.

MR WILLIAMS: It sure is a good meeting place here. I met my wife down here on holiday a few years ago and we've been coming back with the kids ever since. Which reminds me you haven't seen Reg have you?

EMILY: Reg? I thought I saw him out the back before. Funny thing Clarice has gone too. She's always running off here, there and everywhere that girl. Probably down at the flicks when she's meant to be helping in here. At least my other 3 girls are more responsible!

EDNA FLASHES HER MOTHER A LOOK.

MR WILLIAMS: I couldn't take some of your canned fish back could I?

EMILY: Of course you could. The cannery is full to the brim at the moment. We've had a good season.

GUEST: I suppose you can't compete with all those imported fish coming into town as well.

EMILY: (DISPLEASED) Well, there's that factor too of course. But our fish tastes nothing like those imports!

MR WILLIAMS: Yours are much better. Nothing tastes quite like freshly canned fish!

EMILY: Yes Melville surely knows how to can his fish fresh!
(YAWNS) Oh I'm so tired. I've been up since 6 and on the go ever since!

MR WILLIAMS: You work too hard Emily. And on a Sunday too! You should be taking it easy!

EMILY: The good Lord made me give birth to the twins on a Sunday and the good Lord knows I've been working ever since on Sundays! He didn't spare me just because of it being a Sunday!
(SHE YAWNS) I'm used to it now. As a child I'd have to milk all the cows before walking the six miles to school each day. A bit of hard work never killed anybody, my parents used to say. (TO EDNA) Might be time for some music eh? You can play some of that new ragtime can't you?

EDNA: Oh Mum! Why don't you get Myrla?

EMILY: I don't think anyone's in the mood for the classics right now.

EDNA SITS AT THE PIANO AND BEGINS TO PLAY. THE GUESTS MILL AROUND AND SOON JOIN IN ON THE SONG. IN THE BACKGROUND BEHIND THE CURTAIN WE SEE THE FIGURES OF CLARICE AND REG PULLING AWAY FROM A KISS AND GOING IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS. EMILY LOOKS UP AND NOTICES THEM ENTERING THE HOUSE.

EMILY: What the .. (SHE STOPS HERSELF) The little monkeys!

EDNA: (SUDDENLY AWARE OF WHAT HER MOTHER HAS SEEN. SHE STOPS PLAYING THE PIANO.) Oh Mum! You should have let me go. (SHE BURSTS INTO TEARS) It's not fair. She has all the fun.

EDNA GLARES AT HER MOTHER WHO LOOKS AWAY SUDDENLY FRIGHTENED BY THE ANGER IN EDNA'S GAZE. LIGHTS OUT.

Scene 4:

ALONG THE BANKS OF THE MURRAY RIVER. MELVILLE IS STRIDING AHEAD WITH THE SAME GUEST (MR WILLIAMS) AS IN THE PREVIOUS SCENE. IN TOW, STIRLING AND ARCH. BEHIND THE CURTAIN THE SILHOUETTE OF A TREE WITH THE INDISTINCT FORM OF AN ARM HOLDING A GUN. GRADUALLY THE FORM MOVES OUT FROM THE TREE

AND WE SEE BILLY NANNUP. IT IS THE FOLLOWING DAY FROM THE PREVIOUS SCENE.

MELVILLE: Just smell that fresh air! I bet you don't get air like this where you come from!

MR WILLIAMS: It's a bit dusty out near Northam that's for sure.

MELVILLE: There's nothing like the estuary to make you feel good about life. If I'm feeling tired or a bit down I come out here and before too long I feel on top of it all.

STIRLING AND ARCH SNEAK BEHIND THE BUSHES/CURTAIN AND START TO RUB STICKS TO MAKE A FIRE. A PLUME OF SMOKE RISES.

MR WILLIAMS: Yes. I see what you mean. (HE SNIFFS THE AIR SUSPICIOUSLY)

MELVILLE: I was never much interested in living anywhere else. I like my home by the sea. Fresh air! (AS HE SNIFFS THE AIR HE NOTICES THE SMOKE AND LOOKS AROUND PUZZLED)
Where did those boys get to anyway? As I was saying, fresh air, fresh food .. (HE LOOKS AROUND STILL CONFUSED) Out here a man can be king.

MR WILLIAMS: Well king of his castle at any rate.

MELVILLE: (SATIRICALLY) I used to be king of Mandurah you know. That's before I abdicated in favour of my younger brother Hobart .. Now he's the king .. king of something anyway. Hobnobbing it up in Perth with all those other rich members of Parliament. I wouldn't be surprised if he was the Premier one day.

MR WILLIAMS: (BAFFLED) Yes. Once they start hobnobbing .. next thing you know they're telling you what to do. These politicians. Can't trust any of them if you ask me. (PAUSE AND IN A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT VOICE) So you're related to Hobart Tuckey then?

MELVILLE: You could say that, him being my brother and all. And over here is another of my brothers. (INDICATING THE SILHOUETTED FIGURE) It's Billy Nannup. Spearing fish like they've been doing for years. Eh Billy?

BILLY STEPS THROUGH THE CURTAIN, CARRYING A GUN.