

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



The Wilderness of Mirrors

by Van Badham

EXTRACT

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The Wilderness of Mirrors

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Characters:

- Violet Gobbo – 26, a Campaign Coordinator for Human Rights International (Australia).
- Beth Doors - 32, the President of Human Rights International (Australia).
- Richard Pascal – 28, Violet’s partner, a PhD student researching ASIO intervention in 1960s activism.
- Paul Bonyngge - 34, a documentary filmmaker.
- assorted media voices

Scene:

Sydney, sometime in the future.

In memory of Mark Osland, who encouraged me

Production history:

- June 28 - June 4, 1999, at Studio One @ The Wharf, presented by Studio One and the Australian Theatre for Young People. Winner of the Write Now! Young Playwrights’ Competition.
- December 13 - December 19, 1999, at Studio One @ The Wharf, presented by Studio One and the Australian Theatre for Young People.
- June 24, 2002, at the Gasworks, Melbourne, as a reading presented by Women Working in Theatre (WWIT).

Prologue

VIOLET: Ever seen someone with a scar from a mortar bomb? The cavern of purple flesh where there'd once been a belly... as if it's been scooped – as if human flesh could be as watery as ice-cream.

Billy Naing showed me a scar like this. He'd got that in the Burmese Student Army. He'd been hit – he fell in the mud and had to lie there for two hours, using his hands to press his intestines back into his body while his unit searched for him, regime soldiers all around.

Because Billy would tell me his stories in a deadpan voice – because he'd just flash a scar like that in a crowded restaurant, then roll down his shirt and get on with his meal – sometimes maybe it didn't go in. I had this job working for a human rights agency, right? I got a job in the office but they upgraded me to liaison, and I'd go to meetings with Billy Naing and listen to him talk about guerrilla warfare, murder and torture... all the things about the fighting in Burma and prison in Thailand, and my job was to smile and nod my head and see if he needed any money or wanted to do any media and pretend that seeing something like that chunk out of his stomach happened to me every day!

But then there was that night... We were at a restaurant, and Billy slid a book toward me: The Year of Living Dangerously. Something was stuck in the inside cover, right? A photograph – there was this big blond guy in an Australian army uniform... and he had a gun pointed at the back of someone's head - a guy from the Burmese student army... and because there were two bodies lying on the ground, and because there was blood spattered on the Australian soldier's face, you knew the guy he was standing behind was going to die – he was going to die because the Australian soldier was going to shoot him... and I looked at this photo and looked back to Billy and he wasn't deadpan any more.

He said there were more photographs – better ones, more blood... Australian forces were shooting rebels on behalf of the Burmese dictatorship, he said, they were safeguarding a gas pipeline Australia had investments in. He would have to hide, he said, his situation was dangerous.

I could barely hear a word he was saying. I just sat there in the restaurant, the photograph shaking in my hand, and thinking “I'm the receptionist! I was only employed as the fucking receptionist!”.

Scene 1: *A telephone rings. Lights up on the Human Rights International (HRI) office in Haymarket. News plays in the background. Violet answers the phone.*

VIOLET: Certainly, John – I'm putting you through now.

She hangs up the phone, hears something on the radio and turns it up.

RADIONEWS: *The federal Government has reacted strongly to accusations by lobby group Human Rights International that yesterday's approval of Australian involvement in*

the Burma Gas Pipeline amounts to an endorsement of the Burmese military regime.

FOREIGN MINISTER: *Australian involvement in the pipeline project by no means compromises the tough stand the government is taking against human rights infringements in Burma. The views of extremists should never be taken seriously.*

RADIONEWS: *Foreign Minister, Felix Hughes.*

Violet yells at the radio as it enters the next story.

VIOLET: Then neither you or your fucking government should be taken seriously, you right-wing arsehole!

BETH: Violet!

RADIONEWS: *The impact of a goods and services tax on the Australian wine industry –*

BETH: Please keep it down! I'm on the phone!

Violet turns down the radio.

BETH: *(on phone)* It seems there is something there, John - no - no, it isn't - when I can, I will... I will. Bye. Violet, please don't do that again – I could have had Bishop Rathglen on the phone then, or anyone! I spend time trying to build our profile up with these people...!

VIOLET: Sorry, Beth... but Hughes is a fucking lying arsehole! Triple J just had the news on –

BETH: Did they use my soundbyte?

VIOLET: Just our name.

BETH: I still might make the midday news.

VIOLET: What are you looking for?

BETH: That leaflet on current investments. That was the American office on the phone –

VIOLET: What did John say?

BETH: He almost dropped off the phone when I told him – America don't know anything about forces. Those photographs of Billy's – are they...?

VIOLET: Beth, I saw one with my own eyes!

BETH: Given these circumstances it's a good idea for Billy to keep his head down.

VIOLET: You think.. someone could come after him?

BETH: Violet, if this is real, this has international implications. Australia could get hauled before the UN – we've got to take it to the media while we've still got interest. Are you meeting Billy in the next 48 hours?

VIOLET: He said I'd get a call.

BETH: You'd better. John said France and China have signed to the pipeline now, too.

VIOLET: You're joking!

BETH: I'm not. This isn't multinational, it's positively interplanetary.

VIOLET: And so many deals within deals no-one is going to dob in anyone else for the odd human rights abuse. I know what I'd do with their fucking gas pipeline...

BETH: Violet – that's very offensive! How are you coping with that fax?

VIOLET: Memory's completely gone - I've done the whole media list from manual.

BETH: I'm sorry for the state of things in this office - if only we could...

VIOLET: Beth, the government axed our grant, not you.

BETH: I know, I know... But you're such a darling for putting up with it.

The telephone rings.

VIOLET: Human Rights International, Violet speaking... For comment on the press release? Certainly, please hold. (*On hold*). Can you do 2UE now?

BETH: I'll take it in my office. And NO SWEARING!

VIOLET: No problem.

Beth goes into her office, closing the door.

VIOLET: Putting you through now.

The phone rings again.