

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Unspeakable Acts

by Margaret Davis

EXTRACT

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UNSPEAKABLE ACTS is set in Venice, not very far from the present.

THE SET should be as open and uncluttered as possible to allow total fluidity between scenes.

Characters should be able to move from scene to scene with minimal use of blackouts.

Locations are suggested but not circumscribed by the text.

Venice is both the setting and the metaphor for the action, but it does not need to be literally represented.

THE SOUNDSCAPE, including the stipulated music, is an integral part of the play. However variations can be made according to the needs of individual productions.

NOTES ON LAYOUT

Where Italian has been used in the text, a translation appears in italics underneath the line.

Sometimes dialogue is written to overlap.

A mark / in the script indicates where a second character will start speaking while the first continues, eg.

Maria-Renata: Well we are almost related!
 Hasn't he told you? / It's a very romantic story!

Joe: / We're old friends, at least our parents –

Maria-Renata: My mother was his father's first sweetheart.
 I think she still carries a how do you say, torch, for him.

Joe starts speaking after Maria-Renata says "told you" and Maria-Renata continues to talk over the top of his line.

CHARACTERS:

Zoë Jakubowicz

(née Karen Jacobsen)

40s. A successful novelist.

Obsessed with her career, much more analytical and astute in her writing than she is in her relationships and dealings with the world. Dresses flamboyantly.

Marla-Renata Notorangelo

Late 20s. She is trying to establish herself as a literary agent and is Zoë's assistant and translator.

The kind of beautiful and impeccably dressed Italian woman who makes Australian women feel immediately loud and gauche.

Stephanie Eastman

40s. An old school friend of Zoë's.

Quieter in dress and manner and can at first appear to be self-deprecating. But she is driven by a deep resentment and she often over reacts.

Gerry Wildsmith

50s. Zoë's literary agent.

Bon vivant, likes wheeling and dealing and has a keen ear for gossip.

Likes to get involved in his clients' lives.

Can be manipulative in the pursuit of a lucrative deal.

Joe Chiaravalle

30s. Australian born son of Venetian immigrant parents.

Good-looking, charming, plausible - and very ambitious.

ACT ONE Scene 1

As the lights fade we hear bursts of laughter, which are rapidly swallowed up in fog, the slap of water against creaking pylons, and the warning cries of gondollers. All this fades as the lights come up on Zoë, who is reading from her latest novel, The Mask of the Wolf, at the Ca'Rezzonico. We hear Maria-Renata translating into Italian as an undertone and Ligeti Concerto for Violin (second movement – Aria) plays under.

Zoë

Candle light danced on the short broad blade of his knife.
She knew how sharp it was.
Sharp enough to gouge swift deep lines in the pear wood he used to make his engravings.

He traced the outline of her name across her belly with exaggerated slowness. She fixed her eyes on his wrist. So delicate and fine were its familiar movements she could not believe it would bring her harm.

But all at once, he slashed the downstroke of a "T" and just as swiftly, capped his handiwork with a decisive cross-stroke. A scream came from somewhere, dark and guttural.
She felt his moustache spittle-damp against her ear.
"Did you think I wasn't serious?
Little fool!
Sooner or later life scars us all."

Maria-Renata

Il lume di candela ballava sulla lama corta e larga del suo coltello. Lei sapeva quanto fosse affilata. Talmente affilata da tracciare intarsi rapidi e profondi nel legno di pero profumato che egli usava per le sue sculture. Egli tracciò il contorno del nome di lei sul suo ventre con lentezza esagerata. Lei fissò lo sguardo sul polso di lui. Quei movimenti consueti erano così delicati e precisi che non avrebbe mai pensato che potessero farle del male. Ma tutto d'un tratto, egli sferrò un rapido fendente come per tracciare la gamba di una "T" e con pari rapidità completò l'opera con un contro-fendente. Da un punto imprecisato partì un urlo, tetro e gutturale. Ella sentì i suoi baffi umidi di saliva contro il suo orecchio. "Pensavi che scherzassi, eh? Povera sciocca! Primo o poi la vita lascia il segno in tutti noi."

*Unspeakable Acts***Scene 2**

**Gerry, Maria-Renata rush on.
Gerry is brandishing a guest list.
Maria-Renata opens champagne.**

- Maria-Renata: Brava. Such enthusiasm!
If they had not liked it - ah, a very different story.
La Signora Jakubowicz should be delighted!
- Gerry: Why were there two empty seats in the middle
of the front row?
- Maria-Renata: Claudia Giacona. She sent her apologies.
She is filming in Trieste.
- Gerry: Damn! Don't say a word to Zoë about it.
Giacona's the one film maker she would trust with her work.
And *Mask of the Wolf* would be right up her alley.
You should have put someone else in those seats.
- Maria-Renata: I only found out after everyone was seated.
It would appear rude -
- Gerry: You could have found someone who needed flattering.
Remember the next few weeks are crucial.
This is clearly Zoë's best book to date - the one that will
really confirm her international status.
It's her best chance at the Booker since *Matilda's Moon* -
and this time they can't dismiss her as an antipodean
one-shot. But she'll still need the numbers.
You must introduce her to everyone who counts,
you understand? She's relying on you.
- Maria-Renata: Naturally I will do my best to support her.
- Zoë enters. Gerry swoops on her and hugs
her.**
- Gerry: Fantastic, Zoë!
You had them eating out of the palm of your hand.
- Zoë is ecstatic and hugs him back**
- Zoë: What a relief! What a wonderful relief!
Weren't they amazing?
It was like opening night at the opera!
I've never had such a rapturous response.
- Gerry: I don't know why you were so worried.
The Italians have loved you since *A Weaver of Time*.

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Zoë: Love can quickly sour when you put your lover under the microscope.

Maria-Renata hands her champagne

Maria-Renata: Ah, we are not so proprietorial Signora Jakubowicz! You know what I love most? Your opening chapters! We are used to the conception of Venice as dark and sinister. But it is your artistry to take us so much deeper than the cliché. Teresa encounters such savagery that we think, like Milly Theale, she must surely be killed by this city! But no, she bursts forth like some tidal wave, and it is Venice which becomes her slave.

Zoë: Thank you Maria-Renata. Where would I have been without your wonderful translation!

Zoë kisses Maria-Renata on both cheeks

/ And please, call me Zoë.

Maria-Renata: / It was an honour, believe me!

Zoë: I'm not sure they approved of the mixing of genres -

Gerry: Nonsense! They loved your little games of tag with Fielding and Casanova - particularly as your own style is so assured. They knew they weren't being led on some post modern goose chase!

Zoë: What would I do without you Gerry? Who else would have had the audacity to launch the book simultaneously in two languages, and at Ca' Rezzonico -

Gerry: If it was good enough for Browning's funeral -

Maria-Renata: You should not say that! That is not a good omen.

Gerry: But it is an excellent marketing device! Come on, it's high time we were out amongst the clamouring hordes -

Stephanie walks in, holding a copy of Zoë's book

Oh hello. One of them's jumped the gun.

***Beat. Zoë is staring at Stephanie
Stephanie smiles at her confusion***

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Stephanie: Have I changed that much?

Zoë: Oh my god. I don't believe it.

Zoë rushes to hug her. Stephanie hesitates so their embrace is a little awkward

I'm so thrilled you came! I wasn't sure you'd get my invitation -

Stephanie: Wild horses wouldn't have kept me away!
I hope it's all right, me coming in here.

Gerry's mobile rings. His conversation is simultaneous with the following.

Gerry: *Yes? Where are you? No, not now.
Launch of Mask of the Wolf. Yes, Jakubowicz.
Great night.*

Zoë: Of course it's all right!
I was so thrilled to know you're in Venice.
You must really be in your element.
(to others) Stephanie's an artist, she does these extraordinary montages -

Gerry: *Well right now you are less important!
Look, when I hear, I'll let you know.*

He hangs up.

/ Bloody pushy New Zealander -

Stephanie: / Oh, I wouldn't say extraordinary.
Anyway it's past tense. I haven't painted for years.

Zoë: Really? Why? I can't imagine you not painting.

Gerry: I hate to break this up, but Zoë is overdue in the foyer -

Stephanie: I'm sorry. I knew if I waited out there I'd have no chance of speaking to you.

Zoë: But you're staying for the party?

Stephanie: I don't think so Karen. David's expecting me.
And I'd feel really out of place / among all those big-wigs-

Gerry: / Karen! You really are a blast from her past, aren't you?

Stephanie: That's one way of putting it, I suppose!

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Zoë: I'm sorry - Gerry, Maria-Renata, this is Stephanie Woodley, probably my oldest friend -

Stephanie: Eastman. It's Stephanie Eastman.

Zoë: Of course! Sorry.

Stephanie: You must come and have lunch. If you want to, that is -

Stephanie fumbles in her bag for a pen to write her phone number and drops her copy of Zoë's book. Maria-Renata picks it up. On the cover is a portrait of a young woman, circa 1770, naked except for a carnival mask. The dust jacket of the book is torn and Maria-Renata flicks open several crumpled pages in the first chapter.

Maria-Renata: What happened to this?

Zoë:
(to Gerry) I hope you didn't pay for it Steph!
/ Didn't anyone check these?

Stephanie: / Well of course I did!
It - it just got crushed in all the excitement.

SI Beat

Enjoy your night. You deserve to.

***She goes, leaving the book
Zoë stares after her***

Gerry: Your oldest friend? How come I've never heard of her?

Zoë: I haven't seen her for more than twenty years.

Gerry: I wonder what other surprises await you in the foyer?

***He takes her arm and propels her out,
Maria-Renata briskly following with
the champagne.***

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Scene 3 Zoë, Joe

The slapping of water against pylons and the creaking and rubbing of mooring poles. Zoë has escaped her party for a moment and is leaning on the railing of a bridge outside the Ca' Rezzonico, Stephanie's torn copy of *Mask of the Wolf* in her hand. Joe comes up beside her and follows her gaze. Zoë is a little startled and is about to move away when he speaks.

Joe: "La Venezia: that slippery duplicitous Queen of the Seas, hiding her ancient pockmarks behind a mask as luminous as the flesh of martyrs on a thousand gilded ceilings."

Zoë: You learnt that by heart?

Joe: I didn't have to.
Words so beautifully threaded together simply seep into your soul! / That is your genius I think,

Zoë: / I'm sorry, you know who I am, but -

Joe: the excavation of the unconscious -
oh, sorry, I'm Joe. Joe Valle.

He offers his hand, she shakes it briefly

I'm a friend of Maria-Renata's.

Zoë: I'm glad I didn't disappoint you.

Joe: How on earth could you disappoint me?
Challenge me, yes! Push me to the edge.
Astound me with your endless versatility -
you're my kind of writer exactly!

Beat

Zoë: What are you doing here?

Joe: I'm sorry - I just wanted to - (congratulate you)

Zoë: I mean in Venice.

Joe: Oh - I'm living here. Taking advantage of my dual citizenship.
And I teach - Comparative English Literature. At Padua.

Zoë notices he is staring at the mutilated book. She turns the torn cover away from him.

Joe: Aren't you enjoying your party?

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Zoë: I just needed a break from all the academic theorising.
No offence -

Joe: None taken.

Beat

If you could celebrate tonight in whatever way you wanted,
what would you do?

Zoë: That's easy -I'd do what Teresa did. Sneak out and swallow
all Venice has to offer in big hungry gulps. What a pity all
those secret debauched casinos are long gone!

Joe: You just don't know where to look.

She throws him a doubtful look

Just a stone's throw from here is a Venetian miracle.
A bacaro that does not pander to outsiders or the glitterati.
Strictly Venetians only.

Zoë: Then how do I get in?

Joe: The owner remembers my father, and grandfather.
Treats me like the prodigal son.

Zoë: What are we waiting for?

Joe: You'd really leave your own party?
How do you know I'm not a dangerous predator?

Zoë: That's the thrill of it.

Joe: Let's get out of here!

He goes to take her arm but she laughs

Zoë: Did you think I was serious?

SI Beat

Joe: You'd better get back.
The semiotics debate will be in full swing.

She turns to go back inside

Pity the food's all gone. You must be starving.
You haven't eaten anything all night.

Zoë: Have you been watching my every move?