

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Under Mulga Wood

by William Christie

EXTRACT

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Under Mulga Wood

FIRST MOVEMENT

[*Silence*]

FIRST VOICE [*rising softly out of the silence*]

Let's start from scratch.

It's a dead still, dry season, never-never night in the small town of Goadabuggerai; not a star for the askin', it's tarblack as far back as the blind eye can't see and dark as a blackfella's navel. The dirt roads are dead silent, now, as the bush hard by holds its harsh breath and slumps down past hushed mudflats, smallpocked by the black eyes of yabbie pools, to the dream-haunted shores of the Mulga Lagoon, where dunnarts and wattled-bats, wallaroos and water rats fumble and forage for their wide-eyed lives.

Unleering, now, are the long windows on the second storey of Goadabuggerai's one, proud pub; the brick bungalows, baked fibro, and weatherbeaten weatherboards of the back country town are blind as bats — or pie-eyed as Snakebite Dave, dead to the world in his three-legged dining chair on the pub's verandah. The tides of silence surge through the shadowed air, and all the people round the dumb and blinds-down town are sleeping now.

Shoosh. The milk-pukers and the toddler-warriors are asleep at last, spread-eagled on their mothers in the sticky midnight. The cockies are sleeping, the stockmen and shearers, punters and pensioners, garbo, grease monkey, copper and cook, teacher, tennis coach, postie and publican, the stock and station agent and the surly wives. Young girls lie webbed in their sweaty hair and grope down the crowded aisles of their strobe-lit dreams after lead singers on a country tour of their bodies, while the boys are dreaming thump and tackle, try and triumph in the ruck and tumble of the rugby dark. And in the paddocks, the black silhouettes of horses asleep on their legs cut sharp against the star-lit bruise black of the night sky. The feral cats slink and fossick among half-empty tins in the town dump, while the mange-mottled, three-legged guard dog, Rascal, keeps his proud distance and his snout intact. In the yards of the houses, night lets sleeping dogs lie whimpering in their makeshift corners, and sleeping cats practise for the sleeping they'll do all day.

Only you can hear the seeds bursting in the dry quiet, the houses shrinking and settling, and the snuffed town snoring.

Only your eyes are unclosed, yours and the eyes of that moonstruck army of mammals and birds mobilized by the dark;

only your eyes, and the eyes of the bronze digger on the Anzac memorial in Federation Park, vigilant in the eternal dark.

And you alone can trace the fine, faint whistle and metallic gallop of the still far away first Western mail train from the hub of Dubbo, on its ritual round of Narromine to Trangie, Nevertire and Nyngan, Mullengudgery, Girilambone, Coolabah and Byrock, slowing down to Goadabuggerai, then Bourke and back.

SECOND VOICE

Listen. It is the ghost gums mourning the dying fall of a lost breeze in the drought-and-out paddocks all around, the sleep of silent laughter in the kookaburra bush. It is night turning in its sleepy streets; night, lost in the wide emptiness of Cook Drive and Centennial Parade, where the one set of traffic lights in the slow down town acts as referee.

Listen. It is night in the town's one weatherboard Presbyterian church, squat and cubic like an overgrown letterbox; night in Ben Peters pub, like an empty glass; in Trim Rowlands' barber shop, like a bald head; in Doc Bradshaw's surgery, like a black stump; in Johnno Johnston's general store, like a ratsak custard. It is tonight in Macquarie Street, drifting up the asphalt like a barge, in Gungun Street, goosestepping in bare feet along the troughs of pale sand.

Look. It is night celebrating its reign over the talismanic skulls of dead sheep on the banks of the Mulga Lagoon, over rust and woodpile in the dark yards, over time and tedium, good and bad; night, glorious in obscure pomp and circumstantial emptiness. But still . . .

FIRST VOICE

Time passes.

SECOND VOICE

Listen.

FIRST VOICE

Life passes.

SECOND VOICE

Come closer now.

FIRST VOICE

Come with us to the back blocks, up the concrete jigsaw-puzzle strips of driveway fighting back the buffalo grass, past the Holdens with furry, stuffed dice unrolling in their windscreens and blunt threats on their bumper bars. Be careful of the bindi-eyes, slide behind the dehydrangeas and camelias, browned and withered in the flower, and come quietly onto the patterned split and warp of wide verandahs where you alone can see the blind venetians behind bare glass, the blank backs of Christmas cards slotted in

rows and the black and white photos curling on the sill. Come to the flyscreens, fraying along the slits of kitchen knives and cats' claws, through the scuffed and smudged front doors with bells for belly buttons and curtained portholes and into the dead still, dead quiet of the living rooms that only you can see.

SECOND VOICE

And what you see are the pastel-coloured walls, flecked with constellations of swatted flies, where porcelain ducks yearn on the wing past faded Namatjira calendars. On tiny book cases, the Reader's Digests and ageing, urine-coloured paperbacks collapse like dominoes, while on matching tables, still, silent dregs of Coke and beer keep watch from stolen Leagues Club coasters. In the kitchens, hidden in the plastic filagree folds of café curtains on the sills, the chipped mugs and ashtrays from Port Macquarie or Ulladulla house a treasure trove of chewed biros and pencil stubs, matchsticks, twisted ties, pins, paperclips, dead keys and currency no longer current.

The smell of fried onions, chops and mystery bags is thick in the warm air and, over the patchwork fridges, wall clocks pick at the seconds in the silence, measuring out the long watch of a world bound for the pandemonium of morning.

FIRST VOICE

But stay with us yet. Stand still awhile and let time pass.

Only you can see — above the beds and kennels, baskets and cushions, sofas and folding chairs, utes and panel vans, haystacks and hammocks, floors and gutters where the entire cast of Goadabuggerai sleep out the one play of their lives — the light, fantastic circus of their dreams.

SECOND VOICE

From where you are, the curtain rises on their dreams:

FIRST VOICE

Snakebite Dave, a drover who crossed as many women as deserts in his walkabout life before being retired by a dingo and a dark night, lies straight and stiff as a magician's sidekick on the two back balanced legs of his three-legged chair and dreams of

SECOND VOICE

purple evenings gully-raking up the Cuttaburra Channels against a breeze as tender as the touch of love, the sun kept lively by the long shadows beyond its reach, and the sky a canopy of forever, wider even than the luminous and saffron earth.

And out of the galloping twilight drift all his mates, the lost and lame whom life has since put down.

FIRST DEAD

Remember me, Snakebite?

SNAKEBITE DAVE

You're Snowy Parker

FIRST DEAD

Lost me mount in Brian's Ranges . . .

SECOND DEAD

Can you see me, Snakebite? It's Billy Crescent with your dreams intact. Moon to your sun I was, even rode your favourite mare once you'd left the track. Bessie Bennett, 'member?

WOMAN'S VOICE

Elizabeth Gordon to the Court Recorders and the Registrar of Births and Deaths . . . and so forever, being dead. But some round the Alice'll know of Bessie Bennett yet, and one or two will smile to think of me . . .

SECOND DEAD

Like you're smiling now, Snakebite, in your sleep — but Jeez you could be a maggoty bastard with a three week thirst . . .

THIRD DEAD

Hold me horse, Snakebite, it's Frank McCallum, grinning dead from all the dreadful things I done on pink-eye up in Darwin.

FOURTH DEAD

Robert William Missenden, David, remember? a man of law and background — albeit Colonial. The two things I never told the lads you seemed to know already: about the trouble I got into over my little brother's schoolmates, I mean, and that I never really understood those fancy books by writers none of you had ever heard of.

FIRST DEAD

The blistered mouth that bellows at you, Snakebite, is

FIFTH DEAD [*angrily*]

Red Chester. Tell the blokes that, given 'alf the chance, I'd cry the shame of class and inequality again. [*more apologetically*] And tell 'em that I tried to love 'em, Snakebite.

SNAKEBITE DAVE

I'll tell 'em, Red.

SECOND DEAD

Tell 'em I loved 'em all, Snakebite, from lubra black to barmy Irish red, however much they charged me.

THIRD DEAD

Tell Fran to tell the kids to eat their vegies and no questions, Snakebite. Don't mean ta stick me bib in, but tell 'er not to argue with 'em. And Snakebite?

SNAKEBITE DAVE

Frank?

THIRD DEAD

Do the little buggers miss me?

SECOND DEAD

Do any of yous miss us? Anyone at all?

SNAKEBITE DAVE

I do, mate, I do. Enough to vex me sleep with dreams like these and wake in pain. But then me last run's nearly over.

THIRD DEAD

Before you cark it, Snakebite, give us the drum. What's it like down there in the land of the living?

FIFTH DEAD

Has the pay gone up?

FIRST DEAD

How's the beer, Snakebite? Is it cold? Is it *really* cold?

FOURTH DEAD

Is there still a Sunday lunch? Beef and Yorkshire pud?

SECOND DEAD

With the spuds browned to tapping with a knife?

FOURTH DEAD

Oranges in stocking toes at Christmas?

THIRD DEAD

Tuppenny bungers and catherine-wheels on cracker night?

[from here, the women begin to hum the first note of the refrain of "The Stockman's Last Bed", joined by the dead drovers as each concludes his last speech]

FIFTH DEAD

Cinnamon and brown sugar on buttered toast?

FOURTH DEAD

Are there yarns and dirty jokes and songs, Snakebite, and rum around the fire?

THIRD DEAD

Is it on for young 'n old?

FOURTH DEAD

Is there laughter, Snakebite?

SECOND DEAD

And are the sheilas true, and fair?

SNAKEBITE DAVE

Oh, my dead mates, I'd tell yous if I could. If I only could.

CHORUS OF DEAD DROVERS [*hushed singing*]

Tread softly where wattles
Their sweet fragrance shed,
And the tall gum trees shadow
The stockmen's last bed.

FIRST VOICE

From where you are on this hot and weathered night you can see a burning dream hovering above the Corramoonee Station, north-west of Goadabuggerai on the Mangle Road. Miss Eustacia Dalrymple Croft, maiden legatee of above a hundred years of pillaging and marriage, occupies her fixed, rich point in a spread of fifty thousand acres and dreams of

SECOND VOICE

her married lover — swarthy and swaggering, wholesouled, wholesale, rent and retail — holding her with a dark gaze and overpowering her yet-to-be, never-to-be-adulterated body.

EUSTACIA DALRYMPLE CROFT

Tom Middleton, you are wicked, winking, vulgar, spruiking, bottom-pinching man, and I love you.

TOM MIDDLETON

Oh my Eustacia — can I call you Stacey-poo?

EUSTACIA DALRYMPLE CROFT

Certainly not!

TOM MIDDLETON

Oh Eustacia! I am a retailer mad for your every needy and unnibbled inch, a visionary middle man triumphant in a brave, new world — but lost, alas, to love and you. Throw away your brass bed with its hand-painted porcelain insets; melt down the silver family silver; smash the fine-worn china and firelit, eighteenth-century