

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre

Still Life with a Dead Artist

by Van Badham

EXTRACT

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Still Life with a Dead Artist

A play by Van Badham

Characters:

(1947):

- *Jakob Ensler, an Austrian emigré to England, 56.*
- *Elisabeth Ensler, also Austrian, his wife, 28.*
- *Christina Ensler, Jakob's daughter, 18.*
- *Anna Ensler, Jakob's daughter, 15.*
- *Carl Stryling, British, 24.*
- *Connie Nicpon, Carl's American friend, 20.*
- *Charles Orton-Thorne, British, 40.*
- *Lydia Orton-Thorne, Charles' wife, 32.*

(2002):

- *Det. Sgt. Lindy Collins, 41.*
- *David Collins, her husband, 46.*
- *Alannah Collins, their daughter, 15.*
- *Sean Ensler-Reucassel, 30.*
- *Thomasina Ensler-Reucassel, Sean's wife, 29.*
- *Dora Bennett, a constable (from Birmingham), 28.*
- *Brian Duffy, a detective superintendent, 59.*

Doubling: *Thomasina/Connie, Dora/Christina and Alannah/Anna should be doubled.*

Scene: *Leamington Spa, Warwickshire. 1947 and the present day.*

Scene 1

(2002)

The garden of a house in the country. Lindy staggers into fresh air, sick, retching. She vomits into the grass.

Dora approaches.

DORA: Sergeant? You all right? You want some water?

LINDY: Has the – forensic arrived?

DORA: 'E'll be here any second. 'E'll have something for your stomach. 'Avin' trouble keepin' it down, meself. Smell that gets me. Rottin' meat. Mick reckons they've been dead least a week. F'rensic'll know. Bloody suicides - Bit silly for an old bugger. Waste of energy, toppin' yeself if y've got one foot in already. Waste of a nice 'ouse. Or it would be. A nice 'ouse. If it didn't 'ave dead bodies in it (*answering a mobile phone call*) PC Bennett. Out here with - yeah, she's thrown up all over –

LINDY: Dora!

DORA: – Really? Gimme ten seconds. (*she shuts her phone*) 'E's found a bottle o'rat poison in the kitchen. Shame. (*leaving*) 'S'a luvverly 'ouse...

Scene 2

(1947)

Anna, dressed for a Sunday picnic, runs into the garden.

ANNA: Papa! There's a strange woman in our garden!

Elisabeth enters the garden.

ELISABETH: Anna, don't shout –

ANNA: She's climbing over the fence!

ELISABETH: - it's not polite – !

Enter Jakob, Charles and Lydia.

JAKOB: A woman with bare feet and fairy wings?

CHARLES: Or a pointy hat and wart on her nose and a bag for catching children?

ANNA: She's wearing a white hat and a red shirt, and she's –

JAKOB: Riding an elephant?

CHARLES: Following tigers through the jungle?

ANNA: You're both stupid!

ELISABETH: Anna, you must stop making up stories!

ANNA: I'm *not*!

Enter Christina.

CHRISTINA: You do it all the time. Just to get attention.

CHARLES: Send that imagination to Hollywood, Jakob, so she can feed you both in your old age.

ANNA: You look over there, if you don't believe me!

ELISABETH: Anna!

JAKOB: Leave her be...

ELISABETH: You spoil her, Jakob! She's as wild as a horse.

LYDIA: I do see a white hat...

CHARLES: *(calling to the distance)* You there - excuse me – ! This is private property!

CARL: *(calling)* I hear you, sir!

CHARLES: *(to Jakob)* Hears but does not listen. *(to Carl)* You're on private land!

CONNIE: *(calling)* We wanna see your house!

CHARLES: American!

LYDIA: As if we weren't to guess!

JAKOB: *(calling)* My house?

ELISABETH: Jakob, you're only inviting – !

ANNA: Papa, they're horrible Americans!

CHARLES: The man's definitely British -

LYDIA: One of each and a bet each way.

CONNIE: *(calling)* We wanna see the Mies!

CHARLES: Meese?

JAKOB: *(calling, jumping to his feet)* Mies! Come up! *(to Charles)* They've recognised the architect! *(calling)* Come! Yes, come up!

ELISABETH: These people could be anybody!

JAKOB: They are fine appreciators of the noblest art of -

Enter Carl and Connie. She indeed wears a white hat and a red blouse. They are both dressed for a picnic. Connie is obviously wealthy.

CARL: Please do pardon our ridiculous intrusion –

CONNIE: I saw it from the car and I made Carl stop –

CARL: My friend is American and – has an American level of enthusiasm.

CONNIE: - All the way out here! It *is* a Mies, tell me I'm right!

JAKOB: Carl? You are Austrian or German?

CARL: I'm a disgrace to my upbringing, and have completely forgotten my manners. Carl Stryling; Miss Connie Nicpon.

CONNIE: - A Nicpon of New York.

CHARLES: *(to Jakob)* And we thought you exotic from boring old Vienna.

CARL: *(to Charles)* Horribly embarrassing. Americans, you know – *(shaking Charles' hand)* –

CONNIE: Carl!

CARL: – contagious impropriety. How do you do?

JAKOB: Jakob Ensler. My wife Elisabeth, my daughters Anna and Christina.

CARL: Jakob Ensler?!

CHARLES: Charles Orton-Thorne, my wife Lydia.

CARL: - Orton-Thorne, in the garden of the - !

CONNIE: Carl, what's wrong?

CARL: - I'm so - so - so - so -

ANNA: Repetitive?

JAKOB: Your companion has some knowledge of painting, Miss Nicpon?

CONNIE: Are you folks in the arts?

CARL: I can't apologise enough – so very embarrassing –

ELISABETH: The only embarrassment you are causing, Mr Stryling, is the young lady's.

JAKOB: A genuine Mies Van der Rohe! From custom plans drawn up in 1935, brought out to England in my own suitcase.

CONNIE: You know THE Mies?!

LYDIA: Oh, Mr Ensler knows a lot of folks in the arts.

JAKOB: Would you like to see the inside?

CONNIE: Would I?!

CARL: It was a pleasure – an honour – to meet you, Sir - Connie, we really should –

ELISABETH: Do you refuse our hospitality?

CARL: No! I thought – presumed – I –

JAKOB: I shall conduct the tour. You may all follow, single file, to hear my commentary.

The others fall behind Jakob as he leaves the garden. Carl stands still for a moment, a little in shock.

CHRISTINA: You're a little pale, sir..

CARL: I have – been an admirer of your father's work for – It's an honour – to meet a man of your father's –

CHRISTINA: It's a much greater honour to be invited into his house. Come along.

Scene 3

(2002)

Lindy unlocks the front door of her home. David is reading a book. She's laden down with shopping bags.

LINDY: Why didn't you answer?

DAVID: Sorry - rather engrossed in this book.

LINDY: I had to get the spare key from under the mat.

Pause.

LINDY: How was work?

DAVID: What was that?

LINDY: How engrossed could you bloody be in a book?

DAVID: It's got a very good plot.

LINDY: Married into the force, and the man reads crime fiction.

DAVID: The odd car theft and lost Leamington moggy hardly sustain my thirst for a good story.

LINDY: Because why would you bother to care about my day?

DAVID: So Dora's under your skin, again? Rick or Dick or whatever he's called –

LINDY: His name is Mick, you've met him a hundred times!

DAVID: Thirty seconds, straight for the jugular - that's a record, even for you.

LINDY: I've been sick all day!

DAVID: My wife, Lady Torrent of Misery.

LINDY: Forget that I said anything.

DAVID: – Can't leave the office behind like the rest of us, walk in all this petty angst –

LINDY: Bury your head in a book and it'll all go away.

DAVID: Angry, angry all the time!

LINDY: I was called the scene of a double suicide today. Woman about ten years older than me. Her eighty-something father. No note. No explanation. Only that smell in the house of a – wake up every morning and thank God you don't know what that smell is like. Maggots all over them, blood puddles all over the –

DAVID: I didn't know! I'm sorry!

LINDY: Vomited in front of both constables. Got into the car. Vomited again. I was back at the station before the forensic turned up. I'd hardly call my day a *petty bloody angst*.

DAVID: I – didn't – know!

LINDY: You don't want to know.

Lindy walks out.

Scene 4
(2002)

The detective superintendent's office. Brian Duffy sits behind a desk, reading a report.

A knock on the door.

BRIAN: Come in!

Lindy enters.

LINDY: Sir.

BRIAN: Heard you're a bit under the weather.

LINDY: I'm much better now. I've got a lot of paperwork that I have to –

BRIAN: Me too.

He indicates she should sit. Pause.

BRIAN: Lindy – you're not well. Bennett told me about yesterday –

LINDY: I'll ensure from now on she's got less time for idle gossip and concentrates on her work.

BRIAN: She's a good kid. Worried about you. I thought you might consider taking some time off.

LINDY: Because PC Bennett's been tattling in your ear?

BRIAN: You've been off the air for... Months – we've all noticed – I've been there, I know what's it's like –

LINDY: I have, at all times, maintained the most professional –

- BRIAN:** – denial of trauma I've ever seen. Lindy, I'm retiring in eighteen months. You are a shoe-in for this position, if you want it –
- LINDY:** What about Harry Garvey from Stratford?
- BRIAN:** If you take some time off, shed your tears and get on with it, I will sign you out for some stress leave, I will give my personal recommendation for you to replace me in a year and a half. If you don't, I'll recommend Harry Garvey and you will be out.
- LINDY:** So I don't have a choice.
- BRIAN:** Do you want the big comfy chair or not? *(pause)* I'm doing this for you. As a colleague. As a friend.
- LINDY:** I won't know what to do with myself.
- BRIAN:** Try and work out why an eighty year old man and his middle-aged daughter cuddled up and passed 'round the ratpoison instead of the Earl Grey.
- LINDY:** Coroner ruled suicide.
- BRIAN:** No doubt.
- LINDY:** What are you asking?
- BRIAN:** Exercise the muscle while you're on the bench and come back in form as star striker next season. I'm 59, I've quit smoking, drinking, sugars, saturated fats and Sharon Stone movies because I've had one cardiac and I'm terrified of bloody dying. Less than ten miles away from me, two people throw themselves into the very pit I'm trying to crawl out of and my existential curiosity wants an answer. I'll see you in three months.
- LINDY:** Three months!
- BRIAN:** That'll be all, sergeant.

Scene 5

(1947)

The distant sound of music on a piano. Charles, Carl and Jakob are crossing the yard from Jakob's studio back to the house.

CHARLES: The old man's studio impresses you?

CARL: The paintings – the house – music! – who plays...?

JAKOB: My wife.

CHARLES: His daughters' efforts make Chopin sound like Schoenberg.

JAKOB: You are from Warwickshire, Carl?

CARL: Somerset.

CHARLES: Stryling - your father's some sort of scientist.

CARL: Some sort. My elder brother inherited my father's passion for rat dissection. When I was a child we had a man come to do some paintings of the house. I found him one day at his easel, with an orange in his hand, holding it above his head... Fifteen minutes he sat there, absorbed in the colour. He never noticed me. Transfixed by something as simple as an orange! I've not envied another man more in my life.

CHARLES: I thought that most young painters were in it to woo women.

JAKOB: A drive in the countryside works just as well, yes?

CARL: Connie just *had* to see Stratford...

CHARLES: For the authentic experience of ha'penny postcards and souvenirs...

CARL: She's unusually well-educated. For an American.

JAKOB: You will marry Miss Nicpon?

CARL: I believe we are very fond of one another.

CHARLES: And Connie's father is very fond of a suitable, young American already picked out, yes?

JAKOB: It's Carl's very good luck to be young and enjoy the company of a beautiful woman no-one expects him to marry.

CHARLES: How very European.

JAKOB: What do you paint?

CARL: Landscapes. Mostly.

CHARLES: A very devoted disciple!

JAKOB: Do you know much of our Austrian painting, Mr Stryling?

CARL: A little, of the Secession -

JAKOB: When I was a young man, I was Schiele's assistant! As a painter my role in the Secession came very late -

CHARLES: Whatever you do, don't tell my buyers that.

JAKOB: – As a collector - that is another story.

Enter Anna.

ANNA: My mother says that if the gentlemen want to be fed, the gentlemen should take their seats at the table.

JAKOB: And if they do not?