

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



A Closer Sky

by Louise Helfgott

EXTRACT

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Cast

MANDY:	A Noongar girl, mid-teens at beginning of play
OLIVE:	Mandy's mother - middle-aged, tired but still high spirited (Noongar).
BERT:	Mandy's father - middle-aged and weary (Noongar).
LEE: her.	Mandy's partner. A couple years older than her.
ETHEL:	Olive's sister
JAKE:	Olive's brother
LUKE:	Mandy's cousin. Aged about 16.
STORE OWNER:	Wadjellah lady about 45 – 50 years.
LUCY:	Wadjellah girl about 17 years old.
INTERVIEWER:	Homeswest employee.
MANDY'S FRIENDS:	Noongar teenagers
TEENAGERS AT CAFE:	Wadjellahs (Non-Indigenous people)
TEACHER:	Wadjellah
CAFÉ ATTENDANT:	Wadjellah

Some of the latter parts can be played by the same actors.

Setting

The setting is of a simple nature with abstract scenes, juxtaposed with naturalistic settings.

The script moves between a dark area which represents Mandy's inner world to different outer settings.

The outer areas depicted in this script are Mandy's room, a cafe and a classroom. Simple props and furniture can be used to represent these different settings. The time period of the play is contemporary.

Synopsis

This play began as a trilogy of scripts linked together by character, theme and plot.

In the first part the audience is introduced to Mandy, aged approximately sixteen years old. She is struggling with identity issues and trying to find her place in the world. When we first meet her she feels that she neither belongs in the Indigenous community nor in mainstream culture. She confronts teachers who present a European perspective when dealing with history and shop-owners who serve non-Indigenous people before her. On the inner front, she rebels against internal voices which are externalised in the play as spirit voices. The conflict generated by this battle between inner and outer forces leads to much confusion on her part. This original script was the one used for the production at the Mandurah Performing Arts Centre in 1999.

The second part encounters Mandy a few years later when she is trying to find both a job and a house for her partner and her to rent. She meets racism head-on in the job interview, being cast aside in favour of a non-Indigenous young person who has no more qualifications than her but who is given the job on the spot. Mandy has been wandering around the shop listening to the second interview and absent-mindedly returns an article of clothing to a different rack from which it has come from. Upon leaving the shop, the owner calls for security, believing that Mandy has stolen the item of clothing and a fight breaks out when Mandy's friends come to her defence. Although the charges of theft are dropped Mandy receives a criminal record on account of the fracas that she has been involved in following the false accusation.

A resolution to these problems but the introduction of new conflicts emerges in the third and final part which completes the trilogy. It is a few years later and Mandy has a young child when they finally are granted a house through Homeswest. She also is able to procure a job at another shop in the shopping complex introduced earlier. New conflicts emerge when Mandy's uncle and cousin wake her up one night and ask for protection from the police after committing a felony. Mandy is torn between loyalties to family members and the need to protect her own life and family. Her course of action taken in resolving these issues leads to unforeseen consequences which will strongly impact on the rest of her life.

These three parts have been connected together in this edition and formed the basis of the production that took place in October 2004. **"A Closer Sky"** was requested and approved by members of the Peel Indigenous community of Western Australia, receiving their backing and support for its production. Elders from the community read through the script before it went into rehearsal, giving it their approbation. Sandra Hill and Lesley Morrison initiated the creation of this play

SCENE 1

MANDY - CENTRE-STAGE, CURLED UP IN FOETAL POSITION, FOLDING IN ON HERSELF. AUDIENCE ENTERS 5 MINUTES BEFORE PLAY BEGINS, WHILE MANDY IS ON STAGE. ABORIGINAL TAPPING STICKS. VOICES FROM ALL DIRECTIONS CHANTING.

VOICES BUILD UP IN VOLUME UNTIL MANDY SLOWLY UNFOLDS, LOOKS UP FRIGHTENED, HEAD DARTING FROM SIDE TO SIDE ALL AROUND, SEARCHING FOR THE LOCATION OF THE VOICES.

VOICES: Nanaij ... Nanaij ... Nanaij ... M
 Nanaij ... Nanaij ... Nanaij ... M

MANDY: Where are you? What do you want? You've got the wrong person. It's not me. Not me. I'm Mandy ... Mandy.

SCENE 2

MANDY IS LISTENING TO ROCK MUSIC WHILST SHE COMBS AND TRIES TO STYLE HER HAIR UNSUCCESSFULLY. THE SCENE IS SET IN OLIVE'S LOUNGE ROOM.

OLIVE CALLS FROM THE SIDE WINGS.

OLIVE: Mandy girl, you come in here this minute. You give some help look after these bloody kids. Get that music down. What you listen to it all the time for - that Wadjellah music. Do you no good. You listen to me Mandy girl. Put ideas into your head. Make you think you can be like them. You never be like them. They're Wadjellahs and you're Noongar. Always Noongar ... and they never gonna let you forget it.

MANDY I don't wanna just spend the rest of my life living in this

hole. I wanna real place like those Wadjellahs got. I wanna proper job. I don't wanna live on the edge all the time.

OLIVE (ENTERING STAGE) Those kids been putting ideas into your head. You'll never be like them Mandy girl. You'll never be treated like them. You'll always be black feller. Tolerated maybe but never one of them. You'll always be treated different. You go shoppin' and they see you comin' and they pull their bags in closer. You go to the pub for a drink and they say they don't serve people like you. You walkin' down the street and the munartj pass by and they try to blame you for a break and enter that happened miles away. You never be one of them Mandy girl.

MANDY (DEFIANTLY) Can and I will. I don't wanna be that Noongar kid down the road with the frizzy hair who's got no life.

OLIVE (PICKING UP MANDY'S HAIR) You're hair's beautiful. Whadja doing to it? You don't want it to be straight like those Wadjellah kids. They got no character. All look the same. dyed yella hair. Jeans. designer tops. Tryin' to look cool, like they don't care how they look but they're really busy studying the latest fashions. Whadja wanna be like that for?

MANDY (PASSIONATELY) What do I wanna be like this for? Kids screamin' all the time. No job. Bad at school. No life. No hope. What do I wanna be like this for?

OLIVE (SHE SITS DOWN AND SIGHS.) Oh Mandy girl. Don't break my heart!

PAUSE FOLDS CLOTHES SLOWLY

Back at Moore River the only thing that kept me goin' was the thought of you kids ... one day I'd have me own kids and bring them up the way I wanna. Never let anyone take them away from me the way I was taken away from me own people. Me Mum screamin' and screamin' as the car pulled out of the driveway. She

followed it for a while you know and me heart was breakin'. She lost her whole family that day. Me and Ethel and me brother Jake. (SHE LOOKS AWAY.) Never again. And they told me, those nuns, that it was for me own good. To lose me Mum was for me own good! (SHE LAUGHS BITTERLY.) How could it be good to lose me own Mum?

MANDY

It's OK Mum.

OLIVE

Nuh! It's not OK Mandy girl. Never be OK. So you know what I did when those Nuns weren't lookin' ... Ethel and I .. we'd go and pinch their cat and we'd put it in the middle of the shed and we'd do terrible mean things to that cat ... that cat. We'd pull its tail and throw things at it and ... but you don't wanna know. We said it was the Nuns ... they taught us how to act like that.

MANDY

Oh Mum – how could you?

OLIVE

How could we? How could they? They treated that bloody cat better than they treated us! At least it had a warm bed at night and plenty to eat. We'd be lyin' on a cold mattress, our bellies rumblin' and rumblin'... couldn't sleep coz we were so hungry.

MANDY

It couldn't have been that bad surely.

OLIVE

They use to say we used to sleepin' under the stars but it was cold where I came from up in those hills and me Mum used to wrap me up warm. Even if the sky was closer there, the night was darker and colder. And they used to say we could catch our own grub in the day .. but me people hadn't been huntin' for a long time. Not where they were. Get in big trouble if they went on the wrong bit of land or catch the wrong thing.. (ANGRY) and YOU wanna be like them? Whatdja wanna be like that for?

MANDY

(STANDING) I just don't wanna be like this for the rest of my life.

OLIVE

Well, I know it aint great .. but at least you got us .. yer family .. I didn't even have that. They separated us after that incident with the cat you know .. they moved Ethel to Sister Kate's and the boys were farmed out. It took

years for me to find Ethel and Jake again. (PUTS FOLDED CLOTHES INTO CABINET)

MANDY

I just wanna life Mum. What have we got here? Waitin' all the time for something to happen. The only thing that ever happens is that we're kicked out coz we can't pay the rent. Then we go and live with Aunty Iris for a while til the neighbours complain about the noise. Then we're back on the streets for a while until someone takes pity on us. And when we finally get a place again and start making a go of it then Aunty Ethel and Jake and the boys come over and we're back at square one. Lost our place because of the trouble they cause and no money to pay the rent again.

OLIVE

(CONCEDING) Well, I know it aint much of a life but it's only for a little while .. until Dad gets a job.

MANDY

You're kidding' yourself Mum. He's never gonna get a job.

FROM THE STAGE WINGS A SLURRED VOICE
(BERT) CALLS OUT...

BERT

Don't you talk to your Mum like dat girl. You show some respect .. you hear?

OLIVE

Now look what you done girl.

MANDY

Respect! How can we respect him? You don't even respect him sittin' around all day .. drinkin' himself to death.

OLIVE

Don't you talk like that. I respect him. I respect him plenty

BERT STUMBLES IN UNSTEADILY, STANDING IN THE DOORWAY.