

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



The Butcher's Wife

by Noëlle Janaczewska

EXTRACT

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PRODUCTION NOTES

Layout and punctuation are used to suggest delivery, and where there is a slash (/) in the text, the speech is designed to overlap, and should begin at that point. Some of The Naga's lines can be sung, and some of these sung phrases can be repeated or echoed to underscore the actions and speech of the other characters.

Sound cues should be viewed as suggestions, possibilities and hints rather than absolutes.

Music is an integral part of the script and I'd like it to have not only an East-West flavour, but also support the magic realism of the work. Percussion, tuned and non-tuned, was an important element in the writing of both the stage play and radio adaptation.

CHARACTERS

SOPOLINE

Cambodian-Australian woman, mid thirties.

THE NAGA

Mythical water serpent who appears in female human form.

CALLIE

Agricultural aid worker, mid thirties.

GAN

Her brother, a police officer, late twenties.

Brief montage of news footage about Cambodia – current and recent past.

GAN Day one.

Segues into the quiet of a country town: cicadas and the occasional vehicle. CALLIE and SOPOLINE are in different locations in the same town.

CALLIE (Reading.) The day Agnès Sarraut turned fourteen she saw a cobra devour a live Chicken.

SOPOLINE's lines begin pianissimo and slowly grow in volume and intensity. They sit underneath CALLIE's reading. Overlapping.

SOPOLINE Topside,
Brisket,
Barbecue, chuck, stewing / fillet steak.
Sausages, schnitzels.

The turn of a page in a book.

CALLIE That birthday afternoon in the year of our Lord 1937, they strolled Agnès and her tutor, Mademoiselle Decoux,

SOPOLINE Cuts off a juicy ham /
Trim the gristle –

CALLIE past the Hôtel le Phnom with its European garden, towards the Mekong waterfront where the banyan trees were tossing great sheafs / of green scent into the air.

SOPOLINE Hit a raw nerve
Veal chop the meat from the bone –

The delicate tinkle of chimes or other tuned percussion.

SOPOLINE Luke?

CALLIE Near the silver pagoda they came upon a cluster of cages. Agnès paused in front of the largest, transfixed, as a king cobra pulled itself over its prey, like a voracious stocking.

In the distance, a faint roll of thunder. CALLIE stops reading.

SOPOLINE Hello? Luke?

CALLIE *(Continues reading.)* Shivers of pent-up energy ran down its length before it settled down to digest. Had Agnès been religiously inclined, the spectacle might have led her to the contemplation of God; the forces of evil and the powers of good.

A sudden hissing. Not a snake, but the low buzz of lights when the power supply wavers.

Another rumble of thunder. Slightly louder than the last.

SOPOLINE Shin of beef,
Duck –
Legs of pork, belly, smoked like bacon.
Shoulders, necks
Of lamb.
Split the ribs –

Chop! A meat cleaver hits a chopping board.

Chimes or other percussion. This time closer, more musical.

SOPOLINE & CALLIE Hello?

SOPOLINE Is anybody there?

CALLIE *(Resumes reading.)* Afterwards Mademoiselle Decoux invited her pupil back to her room, where Agnès sat, picking at a lemon tart, pondering the malevolent beauty of the cobra. When suddenly Mademoiselle sighed, proclaimed the weather unbearably sultry,

SOPOLINE Rip the skin from the breasts and thighs.

CALLIE and began to unbutton her blouse.

Chop!

SOPOLINE Scoop the liver from its protective muscle,
Kidneys from their trailing sinews.
Sever the tongue / that came unhinged in a bitter and bloody sauce.

CALLIE “Did you notice the Naga balustrades near the National Library?” / asked Mademoiselle Decoux.

SOPOLINE Carve up the heart. Knee joints floating in moon-splattered canals. The odour of rotting flesh.

Chimes or tuned percussion come still closer.

SOPOLINE Luke?

CALLIE Agnès shook her head, confused by this turn of events; by the cobra, and by the rivulet of perspiration in Mademoiselle's cleavage.

Again a low hiss, as the power supply falters.

The chimes repeat. Louder. Nearer.

SOPOLINE Is that you Luke? Why don't you turn on the light?

Silence. Then SOPOLINE resumes her cooking.

CALLIE Nagas, Mademoiselle explained, are mythical serpent-beings who dwell in lakes and oceans. In the hoods of their seven heads, gleam precious jewels to illuminate the penumbra of the underworld. Guardians of rain and propagation, they gave shelter to Buddha, but are armed with venom, and can be lethal. Although they usually appear as snakes, when needed –

The music that heralds the presence of THE NAGA. A rippling of chimes, tuned percussion and gongs.

CALLIE & THE NAGA Nagas can assume human form.

The dancing footsteps of THE NAGA.

A soft hissing. Possibly the power, possibly a snake.

SOPOLINE What are you doing here?

The distant rumble of thunder.

SOPOLINE What's happened to the moon?

THE NAGA I'm afraid the moon's taken a bad turn. It's been carried away by the storm
To sober up.

SOPOLINE And the lamp? It keeps flickering on and off.

THE NAGA I don't know.

SOPOLINE What time is it?

THE NAGA Redemption has no time. Only vehicles. Speaking of which. You know why the council have decided to remove that old eucalypt from the edge of the car park?

SOPOLINE Uh-unh.

THE NAGA When Ken Sawley walked under it, the tree spirit jumped down from the branches. Snap! Broke his spine.

SOPOLINE Luke told me he died of a heart attack.

THE NAGA Why do you think it's called a ghost gum?

SOPOLINE How do you know that?

THE NAGA It's up to me to find the truth behind the press release.

Another roll of thunder. This one a little louder than the last.

THE NAGA So what are you cooking up?

SOPOLINE Eggplant with pork and spring onions.

SOPOLINE starts chopping vegetables.

THE NAGA Shush! Or Fiona next door will wonder what you're chopping up at this time of night.

SOPOLINE Oh very Australian.

THE NAGA Meaning?

SOPOLINE Worrying about neighbours complaining.

THE NAGA Negotiate a river by following its bends;
Enter a country by adopting its customs.

SOPOLINE How did you get here?

THE NAGA Same as you.

SOPOLINE So when we migrate, you – the spirits migrate with us?