

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Little Hitler's Ode to an Australian Bentwood

by Maxine Mellor

EXTRACT

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CHARACTER LIST

- CHAIR** Any age. Essentially an Austrian Bentwood chair that has come to life. The chair may or may not be physically attached to the person, and they may or may not wear lederhosen.
- OLGA** Thirty-something. A Russian woman, married to Herbie and into another country by a misleading personals ad.
- HERBIE** Eighty-something. Olga's husband. Ex-Australian Army. Basically, a corpse in a birthday hat.
- REVEREND GEORGE SCAGG** Forty-something. Father of the voice in the attic. Carries out God's work with his cardboard, 'correction' box.
- BUCK** Forty-something. Linnie's husband. A washed-up Wild West TV series star. Now running horse-riding lessons from his garage. Strings attached.
- LINNIE** Thirty-something. A disappointed wife-cum-receptionist for her husband's illegitimate home-based business.
- MAUDE** Thirty-something. Buck's nervous and simple client. Unfortunately decided to do something bold – horse-riding. Won't be doing it again.

Plus additional characters of **MAN**, **WOMAN** and **GIRL**.

Chair number fourteen. The consumer chair. Light, strong and affordable. Made entirely from six pieces of bentwood, ten screws and two washers. Simple. Sturdy. A chair to last the ages.

[*A clock ticks.*]

CHAIR

I sit. I wait
I count ticking time
To occupy myself
I make a little rhyme

It's the ones who come out
Slightly bent
Who go on living
A life misspent

A kinky kink
A fatal flaw
A missing link
With something more

It's the ones who come out
Slightly bent
Who are the most interesting
Lady and gent

How do they shape?
How do they make
A man into a monster?
It's a beautiful mistake...

A beautiful mistake...

[*CHAIR takes out a sign which says, 'Herbie and Olga, 25th February 1986'.*]

SCENE ONE

HERBIE is propped at the kitchen table. Atop his head is a party hat; on the table, a birthday cake and a present in a box.

There is a larger box on the floor with "Happy Birthday" (sic) painted on it.

Military tattoo music from an old record plays. The box on the floor shakes.

OLGA emerges from the box on the floor. She is a busty woman with deep red lips, a bumbag around her middle and two birthday hats strapped to her chest à la pointy bra.

She sings.

OLGA *[With a thick Russian accent]* Happy birthday to you...
Happy birthday to you.
Happy birthday -
dead Herbie...
Happy birthday to you.

CHAIR I like the noisy ones best. The nasty ones. I like the ones who scream and shout. Bite. Kick. Spit. I like the ones who it seems will last forever. *[Whisper]* The Little Hitlers... They scream and shout, bite, kick and spit and it's music to my ears. A song. A poem. An affirmation. An ode.

I like to watch them writhe.

OLGA No candles for you. Burn the curtains. Set off the fire alarm... Then the fireman will come. *[Pause. Wistfully]* My... what a big hose you have...

[She takes out a knife.]

What's the matter? Oh... this? *[Tracing the knife across his neck]* Silly man, I'm your wife.

[She cuts the cake.]

A beautiful big bit for the birthday boy...

PROLOGUE

Blackness. A ticking clock.

Yodeling.

Two figures, perhaps in lederhosen, cross the stage, doing part of a folk dance, and disappear.

Darkness except for an eccentric looking face of a MAN with a wild moustache.

MAN *[Austrian accent]* My first experiments with bentwood began in 1830 in my mountain top workshop. Sheets of veneer were laid together and cut it into thin strips. Next the wood was boiled in a solution of hygroscopic glue - made from the skins of tiny bunnies - and, once malleable, was bent into the desired shape. However I noted that the final wooden form was very weak, even when further strips of veneer were added; a result of water absorption throughout the boiling process. I wondered if yet more layers of veneer would solve the problem. But I think I was becoming too venereal at this point.

Later I used wood cut from where it had naturally grown, and in the direction of the grain. After a long process of watering and steaming I was able to bend it into the desired shape using casting moulds. The final product was strong, but delicate, flexible and light. I could bend solid wood.

Before bentwood, early designs of chairs I had drafted were very poor. They lacked clarity, function, ergonomics or aesthetics. They were very rigid and angular, and disregarded the supple nature of the sitters' buttocks. As one can see here, in such a design -

[He reveals a sign. There is the Nazi symbol on it.]

I was more concerned with the direction of the legs than its functionality.

Bentwood allowed me to design chairs with organic lines, and contoured edges; much more appealing to the curved spines and bow legs of its users. Of course there were many mistakes and prototypes using bentwood as well.

But it was from this mockery that I developed chair number fourteen...

[CHAIR is heralded in.]