

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Petrograd

by Van Badham

EXTRACT

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Prologue: *Petrograd, February 1917. Winter.*

Marching. In darkness, the sound of a woman (a Textile Worker) singing a protest song.

This is a constructivist narrative. It is a stylized flicker of an age passed out of history.

A Housewife appears on stage, wearing a red headscarf, marching. Resting against her shoulder is a rolled-up poster, carried like a flag or placard. She speaks in a working-class accent.

Ava, in another reality, sits by herself with a notepad, making notes.

HOUSEWIFE: *(to Ava)* Did it begin here? Yes! Was it us who led the charge? My ordinary face in a sea of faces as blissfully ordinary. Petrograd, the Russian capital, is overrun with women. Housewives in the streets! *(to the audience)* We are protesting the bread shortage, the war, factory conditions! It is International Women's Day - the 23rd of February - 1917.

The protest song is taken up by a chorus of the unseen – a Textile Worker appears onstage, also scarved, also holding a rolled-up poster, carried like a placard.

TEXTILE WORKER: *(entering)* Natalya Andrevna?

HOUSEWIFE: Yes –

TEXTILE WORKER: You don't remember me – Nadezhda Yurevna Markova. They call me Nadya.

HOUSEWIFE: We met at the church –

TEXTILE WORKER: Are you striking?

HOUSEWIFE: Just marching. I felt I owed it to my husband.

TEXTILE WORKER: He's at the front?

HOUSEWIFE: Yes. No. He's – missing.

TEXTILE WORKER: I don't go to the church anymore.

HOUSEWIFE: No.

TEXTILE WORKER: I march for my father. He's dead. Starvation. Like a peasant. And we thought we had come so far.

A man with a drum marches behind the women, beating his drum to the Internationale.

HOUSEWIFE: 24th of February.

TEXTILE WORKER: Two hundred thousand striking workers join us on the streets. They march from the outlying districts to the city centre – Come on, Natasha! *(on a soapbox to the "crowd" – that is, the audience and Ava)* Come, women workers of Russia! The tide of protest builds into a wave of revolution! Let us wash away the foremen and the factory owners, the army recruiters and the secret police! We demand freedom - and the bread to feed our children!

HOUSEWIFE (*horrified*) and TEXTILE WORKER (*exhilarated*): The workers hurl rocks and lumps of ice at police!

HOUSEWIFE: *(to Ava)* Did it begin here?!

THE MAN WITH THE DRUM: *(paternalistically)* Welcome to the red streets of Petrograd!

TEXTILE WORKER: 25th of February!

The man with the drum marches alongside the women.

HOUSEWIFE: Students and teachers – intellectuals are joining the protestors -

THE MAN WITH THE DRUM: / Down with the War! / Down with the Tsar!

/ The Textile Worker shakes open her rolled-up poster. It reads "Down with the War!"

/ The Housewife shakes open her rolled-up poster. It reads "Down with the Tsar!"

The sound of cheering crowds drowns out the singing.

HOUSEWIFE: February 26 –

TEXTILE WORKER: *(raising the alarm)* Soldiers from the garrison are firing on the crowds!

A blast of guns. The man with the drum hides behind his drum, the women hide under their signs.

HOUSEWIFE: Boys, girls, old women! They're riddled with bullets -

MAN WITH THE DRUM: The streets of Petrograd run red with blood!

HOUSEWIFE: There's blood in the canals! *(to the Textile Worker)* We have to get out of here! It's all gone too far - we'll be shot like animals!

TEXTILE WORKER: I'd rather die in the street than starve for that pig of a Tsar!

HOUSEWIFE: I don't want to die!

Bullets fly; the three shield themselves.

MAN WITH THE DRUM: Shoot at your captains!

HOUSEWIFE: Stop firing!

MAN WITH THE DRUM: Soldiers! Join the crowd of thousands in the streets!

TEXTILE WORKER: It's a mutiny...!

HOUSEWIFE:A hundred a seventy thousand soldiers –

TEXTILE WORKER: - attacking police stations –

THE MAN WITH THE DRUM: - Release the prisoners! –

HOUSEWIFE:- arresting officials –

THE MAN WITH THE DRUM: - There'll be bread! They'll be jobs, and conditions, and an end to the war!

The Textile Worker embraces the Housewife.

TEXTILE WORKER: A kiss for the beginning, comrade. A kiss to begin!

They exchange kisses in joy. The man beats his drum.

THE MAN WITH THE DRUM We will elect our own deputies! Form our own worker councils!
Join militia - seize all channels of communication! Postoffices! Printeries!
Daughters of Russia - the revolutionary moment has arrived in Petrograd!

The man puts down his drum. He grabs his own poster to unfurl.

TEXTILE WORKER: A red fire burns that will ignite the world. *(to the Housewife)* It's happening, Natasha –

HOUSEWIFE:*(to Ava)* Here is the crowd. For the first time, the man with the gun sees my ordinary face. For the first time, the gun is not pointed at me, or my ordinary sisters, or my ordinary sons.

THE MAN WITH THE DRUM: Comrades, farewell the world as you knew it –

HOUSEWIFE: *(intimately, to Ava)* It's beginning, Ava. It begins with one short step onto the street.

TEXTILE WORKER: *(fist in the air)* All power to the people!

TEXTILE WORKER and THE MAN WITH THE DRUM: *(brandishing their posters)* All power to the Soviets!

A flourish of triumphal music. The man with the drum shakes out his poster with a flourish. It reads: "TATE MODERN – History, Memory, Society".

The man with the drum, the Textile Worker and the Housewife make their posters become the walls of the Russian propaganda room at the Tate Modern, London 2004.

Scene 1: *The Tate Modern, 2004. February. Winter.*

This is a contemporary realist narrative.

Ava is here, waiting on a bench for Chris, who duly arrives. They don't speak for some seconds. Palpable tension between two attractive people who know more about one another than we can guess.

CHRIS: Hi.

AVA: Hello.

Silence.

CHRIS: *(of the notepad)* You're writing?

AVA: I'm having a revolutionary fantasy.

Silence.

CHRIS: Good to see you.

AVA: Is it?

CHRIS: Do I get a kiss?

AVA: No.

CHRIS: Right.

Silence.

AVA: How was your flight?

CHRIS: Fine. Good. You look well.

Silence.

CHRIS: One kiss.

AVA: No.

CHRIS: Half a kiss.

AVA: Why are we here?

CHRIS: To demonstrate our appreciation of art. What do you want me to say?

AVA: I'll know when you say it.

CHRIS: Do you find the men in these posters attractive? They're all incredibly *buff* for factory workers. Shovel-wielding's great for the lats and you can get flatter abs with a five-year plan. You're incredibly brown for the middle of winter.

AVA: I've been in Australia.

CHRIS: Nice holiday?

AVA: My father died.

Silence.

CHRIS: I'm so sorry.

AVA: That's a start.

He moves to hold her but she's having none of it.

CHRIS: How did he - What caused - ?

AVA: He was seventy years old and he had cancer.

CHRIS: Did you get to see him - ?

She shakes her head.

CHRIS: It has - been a long time.

AVA: It has been three years, two months and maybe eight or nine days. *(of the walls)* He loved this shit. There's a shed full of shit like this back in a self-storage unit in Sydney. Marx posters, Mao posters. The all-star Trotsky cheerleaders. Books, posters, medals. Flags. Commemorative plaques.

CHRIS: Enormous collectors' market for it. Be worth a fortune -

AVA: It is.

CHRIS: Something of a silver lining. Not much of one, I understand – except that I don't – can't – really – Look, I'm sorry. I'll say it a thousand times. But I'm here, you're here – you agreed to meet and that means – that indicates – some kind of forward progression is possible. We do not need to remain unresolved - I'm aware – there is some remonstrance I can make for past – There are opportunities for collaboration. There are present opportunities. *(beat)* Did he leave you any money?

AVA: Yes.

Pause.

AVA: It's a great aesthetic. Passionate reds, muscular arms, the fists in the air. And laying behind it, the grey bleakness of scarcities, the dystrophies of famine after famine and secret police breaking fingers one by one. Papered over by professional bullshit artists and I've inherited a warehouse of bullshit. Just tell me if you're after - bloody - money.