

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



# Mrs Petrov's Shoe

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by Noëlle Janaczewska

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EXTRACT

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## CHARACTERS

The same actor plays Anna, 9-year-old Ania and 14-year-old Ann. Other characters are played by an ensemble of performers; a minimum of 3 (1 male and 2 female), preferably 4, ideally 5. The actors who play Nina and Radek should also play Helen and Trevor. Likewise Joe and Paul.

ANNA

ANIA

NINA

RADEK

WENDY

JOE

MISS SCOTT

LOTHAR

ROYAL COMMENTATOR (RECORDED VOICE)

TV ANNOUNCER (RECORDED VOICE)

HELEN

TREVOR

PAUL

ANN

RACHEL

MATTHEW

EMMA-KATE

KERRY

VAIA

PUBLISHER (ON VIDEO)

EPHRAIM

SKYLER PARK (ON VIDEO)

RENATA (ON VIDEO)

MUSIC. AN EXOTIC WORLD MIX OF FOLK AND DANCE BEATS.

LIGHTS FADE UP.

THE CAST PERFORMS A SLAVIC FOLK DANCE.

APPLAUSE. CAMERA FLASHES.

ANNA STEPS INTO THE LIMELIGHT. IN A BLEND OF POLISH FOLK COSTUME AND DESIGNER CHIC. CLUTCHING A LARGE GOLD STAR.

ANNA

Thank you. Thank you so much. Dziękuję bardzo.

TRIUMPHANTLY, ANNA HOLDS HER STAR ALOFT.

Yay! Finally, I've won a gold star!

MORE CAMERA FLASHES.

BEGINS HER AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH.

At my school competition was a dirty word—off the sports field. We had no stars. No stars to stick on our work, no stars to look up to. Our teachers meant well. They just weren't very bright, or the theory was wrong—or something. They spent their time trying to help us emotionally, which they couldn't, and forgot to teach us anything, which they maybe could.

BEAT.

But I was fortunate: I had my parents. Growing up in a migrant family, money was scarce, but although we didn't have the cash to buy books, my mother and father—like so many immigrants—prized education. So every Saturday, while our Aussie neighbours went to the footie or hung out at the mall, I was taken to the local library, where I'd borrow my limit. The kind of books with small, dense print and hardly any pictures, which I chose because they took the longest time to read. Most kids' books took me only half an hour. They had large type and contemporary themes. Shit, if I wanted contemporary issues I only had to open my eyes and look around me.

LAUGHTER.

In the street I grew up on, everyone tucked into pasta and Chinese. But the history I was taught, the voices I heard on TV weren't mine. They were never mine. My parents spoke a language of gołąbki stuffed with pork and buckwheat; of forests of consonants, of Ls with lines through them pronounced as Ws, Ws pronounced as Vs, Es and As with trailing fishhooks and more words than you can possibly imagine for melancholy. An alphabet I've gleaned from titbits and guesswork, a language I barely understand; my mother's tongue that isn't my mothertongue. Yet despite my lack of Polish,

this heritage permeates my being, and shadows my English expression like an inept spook. A no-man's-land between here and now, there and then, Australia and Poland that inspired *Mrs Petrov's Shoe*.

BEAT.

My whole life, I've lived on frontiers. Night, fog, psyched-up guards, tension. Last month I was in Berlin for the launch of the German edition of *Mrs Petrov's Shoe*. After the party, I went for a walk. Down the snow-covered Friedrichstrasse, through a musty East German checkpoint, from a place called West to somewhere called East. Nothing changes and everything changes. At another border post, in some current trouble-spot—Bosnia, Somalia, wherever—refugees cross from one darkness to another. As my parents and grandparents did after the Second World War.

BEAT.

My mother spent her adolescence in shanty towns for displaced persons. An interminable transit of mutton fat, mud and latrines. From Poland to England and from there to here. She rarely speaks of that period, but I remember her telling me about the makeshift recitals she gave in the dining hall on Sunday afternoons. On a battered upright with a mute middle C. I know too that she married my father in a dress made from a lace curtain. That hydro-electricity took them to Tasmania. I remember too my mother telling me how the social worker—or whatever they were called back then—was always asking her what she played in Poland.

NINA APPEARS IN THE BACKGROUND. A KIND OF ECHO.

ANNA & NINA  
The piano,

ANNA  
my mother said. But the social worker meant what sports did she play.

NINA  
What is it with Australians and team games? Is this what we've left Poland for?  
To chase a ball round a paddock like idiots?

ANNA  
The frontier between the literature of fact and fiction is an open one, unmarked. Some writers stray across it quite casually, as you do when travelling about the new Berlin—no customs or passport control, the same architecture, same trees, the same dog piss staining the snow. And just as the borders of geography and politics can be passed though, adjusted, renegotiated, so too do these literary border crossings come in many forms. In travel narratives we find details of dubious veracity; in memoirs we find claims unlikely to survive the scrutiny of a fact-checker at an American magazine. And in novels like mine you find a story that's grounded in real, lived experience.

IMAGES ARE PROJECTED BEHIND ANNA. BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOS OF POLAND CIRCA 1940s. MIGRANTS ARRIVING IN AUSTRALIA IN THE 1950s.

ANNA & NINA

The train pulled alongside the platform at Kraków with a horrible screech of brakes.

NINA

Look! There's Ciocia Małgorzata!

ANNA

In a scarlet dress and a straw hat that's beginning to unravel.

NINA

I liked my aunt for her unruly dark hair that springs from its clips as she wades through puddles on long, meandering walks. Because she lets us eat meringues and éclairs for breakfast, and because she tells us stories Babcia says are 'unsuitable for the ears of young ladies'.

BEAT.

Our aunt's house is creaky.

NINA & ANNA

Full of photographs and antique woodcuts moulding in their frames.

ANNA

With shutters that rattle in the wind that blows from the mountains at night.

NINA

One evening, my aunt shows me her favourite engraving, which she calls: *Katya and the Wolf*. 'There's Katya in her red cloak on the right,' she said, 'the lone wolf on the left, and a vast empty space in the centre of the image. A gap between the child and the animal that is so much more intriguing than either of them.'

A SINGLE BLURRY PHOTO IS PROJECTED.

ANNA

This photograph was taken in 1939, during that last, glorious Polish summer of childhood when everything was possible. Małgorzata's face is shaded by that oversized fedora, and she's smoking a cigar. On the left is my mother's eldest sister, Klaudia, and this little girl is my mother.

NINA

Małgorzata drove Klaudia to the station. I was staying on another week or 2 with my aunt and grandmother. We waved goodbye as the train pulled out.

THE PROJECTED PHOTO GOES UP IN FLAMES.

ANNA

That was the last time my mother ever saw her sister Klaudia. A few days later the German army marched into Warsaw, and the long night of occupation began.

BEAT.

*Mrs Petrov's Shoe* is however, only partly based on my parents' and grandparents' migration. The bulk of the novel is about the Latkiewicz family, as seen through the eyes of 9-year-old Ania. And it's set in the early 1960s—about the time I was born. You see, we keep zigzagging from the West of fact to the East of fiction, although the transition is nowhere explicitly signalled.

BEAT.

It's a helluva long way from the fibro blocks of Hobart to overseas publication. For helping me negotiate that particular crossing, huge thanks to my parents. And to the Glenorchy Public Library, for opening the doors to a wider world. Although my schooldays came some years after Ania's, it was still pretty rugged being the kid whose parents spoke accented English and couldn't tell one end of a cricket bat from the other.

BEAT.

I'd also like to thank the judges—obviously!

SHE LAUGHS.

And a special thank-you to the Polish community, and everyone who's written to me to say how much the novel spoke to their own experience of migration.

A SEQUENCE OF IMAGES LIGHT UP BEHIND ANNA. THE COVER OF THE NOVEL: *MRS PETROV'S SHOE* BY ANNA LUBANSKY. A PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR LOOKING SUITABLY 'ETHNIC'. A GOLD STAR WITH THE WORDS: 1994 STELLA CUNNINGHAM AWARD WINNER: ANNA LUBANSKY.

PLUS VARIOUS MEDIA QUOTES: 'SEARINGLY TRUTHFUL ...' 'A REMARKABLE DEBUT ...' 'LUBANSKY DRAWS POWERFULLY ON HER OWN LIFE ...' 'A QUESTING IMAGINATION AND A STRONG SENSE OF HISTORY ...'

APPLAUSE.

ANNA HANDS HER AWARD TO ANOTHER CAST MEMBER.

OK, *Mrs Petrov's Shoe*. Here goes.

ANNA OPENS THE NOVEL AND BEGINS TO READ FROM IT.

It takes all sorts to make a world. There was Mr and Mrs Lepik, there was Old Tomek and Mum's friend Henka. There was Eva Radauskas from Guadalcanal Road. Ciocia Teresa who wasn't a blood relation but liked us to call her Aunty; Pan Maruszewski, Bruno, Vera, Galisha, the Zelenows, Peter Trauman and his little grey mouse of a wife. Jan who was partial to brandy and had a nip or two every morning with his breakfast coffee, and Marysia Kulbak who brought gifts of pickled fish and Milky Ways for the kids.

LIGHTS BEGIN TO FADE UP ON A BACK DECK CIRCA 1963. RADEK LIGHTS A CIGARETTE.

When she wasn't exhausted from her shifts, and he wasn't stuck in a cloud of gloom, my mother and father were generous and ebullient hosts, and friends and workmates would often drop by for a chat or a meal.

NINA BRINGS IN A TRAY OF FOOD.

Polish many of them, but also came Latvians, Croatians, Slovaks, Dutch and others with their blackcurrant vodka and lemon vodka and schnapps and yoghurt and cigarettes and soccer and slivovica and kasha and Linzer torte and paprikas and strudels and mazurkas and old chestnuts and medleys of the most deliciously sad songs you've ever heard.

MUSIC BEGINS.

LIGHTS SHIFT.

1963. AN IMPROMPTU LUNCH PARTY IN FULL SWING.

Whenever visitors arrived, I'd leave my colouring and toys to hug the edges of grown-up conversation. Always on the lookout for clues. And if someone came while I was out, I'd ask my parents: What did you talk about?

RADEK  
This and that.

NINA  
Ivor kissing Hannah Novak—who's young enough to be his daughter.

RADEK  
The political situation back home.

NINA  
The best spots to pick mushrooms.

RADEK  
All the usual problems of living in exile.

ANNA (STILL READING)  
I took the map to my bedroom, spread it on the counterpane and tried to pinpoint this suburb of Exile where so many of my parents' friends resided.

North of Glenorchy ... west of Claremont ... on the other side of the river perhaps?

BEAT.

I couldn't find Exile on the map. But I knew it was there, bone-tired and blistered; big-drinking, full of Slavic syllables, terrible hardships, and fierce debate. I knew it was there, hovering ghost-like over the streets and subdivisions of Hobart.

THE ACTOR PLAYING ANNA NOW PLAYS 9-YEAR-OLD ANIA.

ANIA PINS THE MAP, BLANK-SIDE FACING, ONTO THE WALL. WITH COLOURED CRAYONS, SHE STARTS MAPPING OUT HER WORLD.

ANIA

Here's our house: Midway Island Road. Number 19. From my bedroom window, I can see next door's sink and the wooden draining board Mrs McPherson's always scrubbing because of her nerves. Baba Yaga—the witch—is at Number 26, next-door to 28 where Archie Cameron lived til God burnt his house down. The railway line runs past the end of Coral Sea Road, and the secret tunnel where spies come and go—which I would've explored if my bother Joe hadn't dragged me home to change the gravel in the hamster's cage. Up beyond Coral Sea Road is Robinson Crescent where Wendy Hill lives with no stupid brothers to take up space and confuse everything. The oval where enemy agents land under cover of night. Oh and this is the waste ground at the back of our house where I did stuff for Projects' Week. Wendy and me—and I—have lots of projects. Our last one was Mr Elmsley, the murderer whose house has a name instead of a number: Dunrovin, and where we dug up bones in his back yard. That's Town where Miss Scott's taking us to see the Queen. Over there's Africa where all the starving children live ... and this is Poland where my mum and dad and all the sorrows in the world come from. My mother's name is

ANIA & RADEK

Janina.

ANIA

But it's only ever my father,

ANIA & NINA

Radek,

ANIA

who calls her that.

RADEK

To everyone else she's

RADEK