

# SONGKET

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# THIS

# TERRITORY

Two plays by

Noëlle Janaczewska



Currency Press, Sydney

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# SONGKET

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN  
ONE PERSON'S CULTURE IS  
ANOTHER'S CRIME?

## CHARACTERS

KLAUDIA CSÁSZÁR, anthropologist, early 40s

HAYDEN LEWIS, barrister, early 40s

CHANSOUK SHELDON (CHAN), textile designer, age 23

KOUA NENG VANG (KOUA), garment worker, mid 30s

ALEX LEE, lawyer in her late 30s

(TONY YIA LOR) INTERPRETER, native Hmong-speaker in his late 20s

## PRODUCTION NOTE

In some sections of the dialogue, questions and answers do not always or obviously correspond. This, together with some unorthodox punctuation, is there to create a non-naturalistic patterning. A slash ( / ) indicates the point of interruption in overlapping dialogue.

*Songket* is a tri-lingual play written entirely in English. The different languages are conveyed through differences in syntax, expression and emphasis.

The character of Koua speaks Hmong and (with Chan) Lao, both of which we hear as English. Consequently his speech is fluent. As is Chan's when he speaks both Lao and English. The Interpreter, when addressing Koua, is speaking Hmong and therefore also speaks fluently. When, however, the Interpreter translates Hmong into English, his speech becomes a little hesitant, and grammatically uneven.

Stage directions should be viewed as suggestions, possibilities and hints rather than absolutes.

'Songket' is a widely used term in South-East Asia for a supplementary weft, often a gold or silver thread woven into the textile to create an additional pattern.

## SCENE ONE

*A spotlight comes up on KLAUDIA.*

KLAUDIA: Imagine you're flying. You're looking through a porthole edged with ice. Down at a quilting of clouds. And mountain mist. Then far below the forest to a watery plain of rice paddies crisscrossed by roads. The broad sweep of the river. Then you adjust your eyes to take in the mass of tiny, green dots. The seedlings sewn in rows around the comforts of home. [*Pause.*] Beyond the window is air that can shatter your lungs and a cold so bitter it can snap-freeze your heart. But instead of a knot of fear tightening in your stomach, you're exhilarated. Ten thousand metres above the earth sipping Diet Coke, you've discovered the thrill of uncertainty.

*Lights fade on KLAUDIA, then come up on KOUA NENG VANG (KOUA).*

KOUA: You'll go to another world. That's what this fortune teller told me a long time ago. And that world will have doors that can open by themselves. Whoosh! Doors you don't even know are there, let you in. Bangkok airport with its big waste of light. [*Pause.*] Before the plane we were taken into a room to wait. We're tired and need to sleep. But it's too bright. I want to turn the lights off, but—Look how stupid I was! A grown man and I didn't know how to switch off the light. So we stayed awake, waiting for the sun to rise and our future to take off. [*Pause.*] And now I'm on top of the clouds. Flying towards paradise. I didn't know much about paradise, but I knew that at last I was leaving the camp forever.

*An audio montage of airport announcements, Asian and Western pop music, adverts, voices, radio static and snippets of film soundtracks in various languages.*

## SCENE TWO

*Klaudia's museum workplace. She is securing the textile she described in the previous scene: a representation of village life in Northern Laos.*

*Maps, artefacts and images come into view: Black-and-white photographs of displaced persons from Eastern Europe during World War II; waves of South-East Asian refugees fleeing the aftermath of the Vietnam conflict; newspaper pictures of more recent asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Iraq.*

HAYDEN: Favourite first shot?

KLAUDIA: Hello?

HAYDEN: Is it still that long take that opens *A Touch of Evil*?

KLAUDIA: Who's that?

HAYDEN *steps out from the shadows.*

HAYDEN: Hello Klaudia.

KLAUDIA: Hayden?

KLAUDIA *spins around. Silence.*

HAYDEN: It's been a long time.

KLAUDIA: What happened to security?

HAYDEN: You've got sixty seconds.

KLAUDIA: What?

HAYDEN: With Sigmund Freud, Amelia Earhart and Elena Ceaușescu.

And you can ask each of them one question. Just the one. What would you ask? [*Pause.*] Surprised to see me?

KLAUDIA: I don't know—I mean yes—how did you get in? The museum's closed.

HAYDEN *takes his time to take in the exhibition. Eventually he stops in front of a photograph of World War II refugees.*

HAYDEN: *Casablanca.*

KLAUDIA: What are you doing here?

HAYDEN: Remember?

KLAUDIA: Tell me.

HAYDEN: Those images of refugees at the beginning of the film? [*He approximates the film's opening voice-over.*] '... and so a tortuous, roundabout trail sprang up... the fortunate ones obtain exit visas, and scurry to the New World. While others wait—in Casablanca...'

KLAUDIA: That was fiction.

HAYDEN: [*referring to the exhibition*] So what's this?

KLAUDIA: A true story.

HAYDEN: Yours?

KLAUDIA: The exhibition is called 'In Visible Evidence'. It's about what refugees bring with them. Mementos, material objects. But also the intangible luggage. Beliefs, attitudes, et cetera. We open next week. That's why I'm still here working at [*looking at her watch*] eight o'clock in the evening.

HAYDEN: Do you think I've changed much in fifteen years?

KLAUDIA: Your clothes are better cut.

HAYDEN: Are you going to hold that against me?

KLAUDIA: Convention obviously suits you.

HAYDEN: I wouldn't say that.

KLAUDIA: The sink's blocked—

HAYDEN: What?

KLAUDIA: In the staff kitchen. The plumber hasn't come to fix it yet. So I can't offer you a coffee. / Sorry.

HAYDEN: So are you?

KLAUDIA: Sorry?

HAYDEN: Surprised?

KLAUDIA: How did you find me?

HAYDEN: It wasn't difficult.

KLAUDIA: Guess not.

HAYDEN: I read your book.

KLAUDIA: Which one?

HAYDEN: Bet you never thought I'd read anthropology. Come on, I'll shout you / a drink.

KLAUDIA: Are you going to tell me the reason you're here?

*HAYDEN is looking at one of the exhibition's images: a twilight scene of some kind.*

HAYDEN: What's the French for dusk?

KLAUDIA: What is this?

HAYDEN: Something to do with dogs.

KLAUDIA: I want to know why you're here. Not play games. And it's *entre chien et loup*.

HAYDEN: The hour between dog and wolf. Very poetic the French. You used to like playing games, Klaudia.

KLAUDIA: That was then.

THIS

TERRITORY

## CHARACTERS & VOICES

THE VOICES OF DUST, our hosts; bizarre cabaret act of songs, myth and social commentary

FEMALE:

TAMARA, a natural diplomat

NIAMH, wannabe good girl

MIN, could be Minh, could be Minimal

AMBER, aspiring film-maker with a bossy streak

OBELIA, looks like a beach chick, acts like a beach chick

SOMEWHERE ELSIE, dreaming a future beyond Australian shores

ADELE, sticks to her boyfriend like glue

APRICOT, looks like an explosion in a hardware shop

SARA, law student treading fine lines

MALE:

DEAN, tough guy with all the menace and bite of an arrowroot biscuit

BRANDON, Adele's boyfriend

RANDOM, spends too many nights loading his iPod with sad songs

HANIF, a star in his own tragi-comedy

VINNIE, real estate agent

GORAN, an unpredictable force

SAMI, convenience store worker with a past

K-JAY, the bloke with the flag

## PROLOGUE

*Barbaros Erköse's haunting, eerie clarinet on 'Aube Rouge à Grozny'.  
(from the Anouar Brahem Trio's CD 'Astrakan Café')*

*Begin in darkness.*

THE VOICES OF DUST: In those days, in those remote days,  
in those nights, those nights far distant—or maybe not so distant—  
there was no snake or scorpion,  
no wild dogs or wolves.  
Humans had neither fear nor rivals,  
and everyone spoke the same language.

*Lights fade slowly up.*

Then one day, Enki, the ancient Mesopotamian god of craft and  
wisdom, marshlands,  
freshwater and a whole heap of other things,  
bored perhaps with all this harmony,  
changed the words in people's mouths,  
introduced contention,  
and the speech that had been universal and understood by everyone,  
broke into a kaleidoscope of different tongues.

*A confined space. A crush of bodies. Myriad versions of 'the incident'  
are acted out. Simultaneously.*

In those days, those remote days,  
those nights, far distant, or not—  
the goddess Ereshkigal was carried off to the Underworld, by a  
monster.

When Enki learnt of the abduction, he left his watery domain,  
and travelled into the penumbra in search of Ereshkigal.

What happened?

Rocks and hailstones were thrown at him;  
slabs of natural reality dropped from the sky,  
turtles and huge waves got in his way.

Yeah, but did he rescue her?

Who knows? Only a fragment of the myth survives.

*Blackout.*

*A roll of thunder, which gives way to shouting and sirens.*

*A group of young people are tipped into a dark space. Slowly they rise to their feet, looking about them. Where the hell are they?*

## SCENE ONE

*Shadowy Mesopotamian script and bas-reliefs of mythical figures. Australian flags, a small stage area. Is this a beachside RSL club or some ancient limbo?*

ADELE, BRANDON, DEAN *and* OBELIA wait...

MIN *looks to* VINNIE, *who is busy checking his mobile phone.*

NIAMH, APRICOT *and* SOMEWHERE ELSIE *stick together.*

*As do* HANIF, TAMARA, GORAN, AMBER *and—plugged into his iPod—*RANDOM.

SARA *whips out a notebook and starts taking notes.*

SAMI *keeps to himself. Eventually pulling a book from his backpack and reading.*

*Dialogue in this section can overlap.*

TAMARA: Hot day.

NIAMH: Yeah, it is—was.

DEAN: Supposed to be hot tomorrow as well.

NIAMH: Really?

BRANDON: Even hotter than today, that's what they're saying.

TAMARA: Who?

BRANDON: The scientists who measure the weather and IVF.

MIN: Don't you mean UV?

AMBER: What on earth is this place? It's really weird.

OBELIA: It's the RSL, and it's not weird. Boring maybe, but not weird.

AMBER: Is it ever.

SOMEWHERE ELSIE: What does RSL actually stand for?

TAMARA: Everything's initials now, isn't it: ATM, SMS, DNA—like a code. No words anymore, just three letters. I suppose the idea is it saves you a whole heap of useless characters.

THE VOICES OF DUST *start playing, expecting the visitors to join in.*

RANDOM *sings along to a sad song on his iPod.*

[To RANDOM] What?

*He hums/sings on. Oblivious.*

ADELE: Couldn't be this hot two days in a row, do you think?

OBELIA: Well, I hope not.

APRICOT: But then why couldn't it?

ADELE: Don't know.

APRICOT: I mean, it is December.

DEAN: Good point.

BRANDON: Summer.

ADELE: True.

APRICOT: Like it or not.

OBELIA: Not.

MIN: Wasn't the sea blue—

HANIF: Same colour you'd turn after living here for a year.

MIN: That intense, inky blue. And the sky—it was amazing.

VINNIE: Don't go all New Age on me, Babe.

MIN: Vinnie, I've been thinking about—

VINNIE: Not now, Babe—waiting for an offer on that unit. Remember the one? Boutique development, water frontage...

*GORAN, full of restless energy, paces the room. Takes in the flags and Anzac nostalgia.*

DEAN: They let Turkish veterans march now.

BRANDON: Anzac Day's never been what it used to be.

DEAN: They were honourable, that's why.

APRICOT: And there.

DEAN: Well, yeah. Of course they were there. It was their country.

GORAN: What about the Italians, then?

DEAN: What about them?

GORAN: Why don't they get to join in?

BRANDON: Because they were the enemy with Hitler and the Japs.

OBELIA: So were the Turkish.

ADELE: There's a man who looks Turkish, I don't know what he is, maybe Indian, who owns the corner shop across from our house.