



Barmaids

by Katherine Thomson

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First Production of the Play

Barmaids was first performed at Old Customs House by the Deck Chair Theatre Company, Fremantle, on 9 November 1991 with the following cast:

NANCY Lynda Nutter

VAL Laura Black

Directed by Angela Chaplin

Designed by Andrew Carter

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Angela Chaplin for her energy and inspiration and Lynda Nutter and Laura Black for their contributions to changes made to the play during the original rehearsal period. Thanks too, to the barmaids, past and present, of Fremantle. The stage directions in the script are a record of the original Deck Chair production.

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C H A R A C T E R S

NANCY, forties, indefatigable. Married and divorced three times. Loves her customers and sees being a barmaid as a long-term career. Partial to a drink, she has worked in 'the Arms' for twenty-odd years, and is eternally optimistic. She floats, she flirts. She prides herself on the clarity of her speech and the fact she still has her hair set on a weekly basis.

VAL, also in her forties. Stern, but fast on the service. Has recently left her marriage with an alcoholic. Never spends money on herself. Begins the play in an unflattering wig. Tells the customers off, tells them to go home and stop drinking; has always seemingly disapproved of Nancy.

S E T T I N G

The front bar of a hotel in a port town or city in Australia. The year, 1987, is indicated. On the shelves behind the bar are various bottles and knick-knacks, an 'Arsehole of the Week Board' and a line with mini-pegs on which knickers are hung, bearing the days of the week.

Dummies sit on low stools surrounding the bar. These are brought in or turfed out at different times by the two women. At the beginning of the show, there are three or four dummies, the 'all day regulars', covered in calico dust cloths.

The bar is functional and the audience can be served from it before the show, at interval and post show.

One part of the space serves as the 'ladies'. It can be two toilet seats mounted on metal chair frames, a mirror and a basin.

There are two glittery swings which can be raised and lowered for use at the beginning and the end of the show. There is a karaoke machine which is used by the performers and the audience. (The audience will have a menu of its songs and be urged to fill in forms before the show. Three people will be used in the show.)

The performers address each other, the audience, imaginary customers and the stuffed dummies surrounding them.

Nicknames for beer glasses will need to be adjusted according to the Australian state in which the play is performed.



ACT ONE

PROLOGUE

The lights dim. A bell-tree is heard playing heavenly music. Perhaps we also hear the distant sound of the races, somewhat slower and more melodious than in real life. NANCY and VAL seem to be suspended in space. They are perched on swings wearing glittery red high heels, gold crowns, and wings. Perhaps they share a cocktail and for a moment or two they enjoy the view. There is the sound of a light breeze.

NANCY: I know where we are. Oh Val, I knew it! I thought there would be. I've always thought there must have been somewhere. I knew it. This is where they disappear to. Where barmaids disappear to, where barmaids disappear to after they've retired. Somewhere nice for when they've done their time... [*She peers into the distance.*] All flying around on their own little swings... all the old-style barmaids. For when they get a bit long in the tooth. [*Pause.*] Not saying that we are.

VAL: How do you reckon we got up here...?

NANCY: Eerie though, isn't it? I wouldn't have thought it'd be this quiet... [*She is slightly uncertain.*] We're not here for good, we wouldn't be. I'd say this is more like a preview. A peek behind the tent flap... I don't know that I'd need all this quiet. [*She looks around.*] More or less like a big tent...

VAL: A Big Top, would you say?

NANCY: Well, doesn't that make sense? A hotel's a circus from one week's end to the next. Only appropriate there should be a lot of action up here as well. [*She looks.*] Now I can see them... Dozens and dozens of them—bright red nails, hair set and over they go—loop-the-loop on their little trapezes. Aunty Ronnie on the high-wire, Big Gwennie, Little Dot—I bet they swoop down from time to time to give us an invisible hand, can't keep away and why should they? Phyllis. Popular. They chipped in that much money when she retired she went straight out to a travel agent and bought a berth on a cruise. A good one. Went on it, enjoyed herself, had a week at home and was back in at work on the Monday. Got bored and who'd blame her. Tea at 6.30 and what do you do after that? That's what I keep thinking of. But of course, when she left the last time not a lot were keen to contribute. Fair enough, but she wouldn't have minded another cruise. Rowie... Could tick off a customer for fifteen minutes, Rowie, not a foul word and hardly be seen to draw breath. There's



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ACT ONE

a skill in that and Rowie could deflate an entire school. Big hands, Rowie, same as Phyllis... and now all in their white gloves, little crowns. Always knew there'd be some sort of reward. [*Pause.*] But I don't know that we're ready for it...

VAL: I thought I recognised that carpet, that bar top—Nance, it's last week spread out below. Our week. Like it's all part of the circus as well... Looks quite colourful really.

NANCY: [*looking down*] Colourful. Psychedelic. [*She peers into the distance again.*] Russian Gina and Mavis. Couldn't Mavis play the piano?

VAL: [*looking at the week*] Except... could we have handled it differently? You wonder if you did the right thing.

NANCY: [*also looking*] Well, don't ask me. I don't know if we did.

VAL: Monday... Tuesday. Top of the taps and the drip trays and all those bald heads...

NANCY: Of course knowing my luck lately when I am finally ready for a rest, when my time comes I'll be up here spinning non-stop round and round on one of those ropes you grip onto with your teeth... Never mind a crown, and I'll be losing all my sequins. Whole life flashing before me. Again and again and again and again. [*Pause. To VAL*] Well, don't ask me. I don't know if we did.

VAL: Passing over Thursday, Nance. From up here it doesn't look too bad. Went quickly anyway.

NANCY: If I'd known what it was going to be like, I'd've never got out of bed. I'd've checked myself into hospital. [*Pause.*] Very quiet really. I mean all right for the older ones who are ready for it.

VAL: We're the old ones now.

NANCY: No. Older older. Some of these worked till they were fifty-five, sixty.

VAL: We're older now.

NANCY: Exactly why it's hard to know whether we did the right thing. Push came to shove and we kind of went limp.

VAL: Oh my God, there I am. Coming out of my shell in a single bound.

NANCY: [*to the audience*] Only took her fifteen years to loosen up. [*To VAL*] You don't think you've left your run a bit late?

VAL: Bill or Fred, not sure which, telling me, 'You're acting like you're still with him, Val. And you're not anymore.' Never really listened to a customer before.

NANCY: All falling into place for this one, meanwhile I'm lurching from bad to worse. One week life's a field full of flowers then all of a sudden it's a paddock full of cow shit. Just like that, magic.

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ACT ONE

VAL: I *had* been thinking how you can't be a barmaid all your life—

NANCY: Well I could be. You wouldn't think it'd be too much to ask.

VAL: When we heard how Jan and Bev had their eye on a pub of their own. [*Realising*] I should have been learning to run the place. If a sub-wit like Marcus could soar from moron to manager...

NANCY: [*looking down*] Hitting me like a brick—how come I'd never saved for *anything*?

VAL: [*continuing*] Learn the cellar and the kitchen and the books, not too late to start.

NANCY: 'They try to get rid of you Nance, we'll stop drinking here, how about that.' [*She waves down to them.*] Thanks, boys. [*Pause.*] Nothing wrong with recognition, I don't think. When you think what a terrific send-off they gave Gwen, and Little Dot and Jean. They all had spectacular send-offs.

VAL: ... Friday... That's definitely Friday. Mightn't even have noticed that we went.

NANCY: Wasn't my idea to slink out. Not as if we'd done anything wrong. Except keep harping how happy we'd be if it was flat-out like the old days. [*Pause.*] This is giving me the tom-tits up here. Give me the thick of it any day.

VAL: As if you could go through that again.

NANCY: I've had worse weeks than that, thank you very much. All right, there was a lot going on...

VAL: You went to pieces.

NANCY: If I wasn't stuck up here I'd been down there like a shot. In the middle of it. Take this lot here with us. [*She means the audience.*] Be like throwing ourselves a party.

The music begins: 'Friday on My Mind'. They both listen.

[*To the audience*] Bung on a bit of a sideshow for you.

They begin to descend, striking a circus pose.

VAL & NANCY: The girls return for another go at the front bar of the Arms.

The introductory music continues as they land on the bar top. They pick up microphones. NANCY goes into a slight panic.

NANCY: But not the lot. Quite a bit you'd want to leave out... I mean if it's a party it'd be more or less just highlights...

VAL begins to sing. The two women, dance on the bar top, sharing the song: 'Monday morning feels so bad/ Everybody seems to nag me/ Coming Tuesday I feel better/ Hey, I'll change that scene one day/ Wednesday goes too slow/



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ACT ONE

Thursday just won't go/ I've got Friday on my mind/ Gonna have fun in the city' etc.

SCENE ONE

Monday. VAL and NANCY finish singing. VAL takes Nancy's crown, sparkly shoes and wings, and disappears.

NANCY: Monday morning feels so bad...

NANCY sits on the bar, crying into her hanky. She pulls herself together and tells the audience.

What we Decided Was, Someone Should Go and Talk to Marcus First Thing. Nicely. Which counted me out. [*Mumbling as she blows her nose*] Find out what the fuck's going on. It'll be me. Bound to be. 'One of yez is going and they're putting on a young one.' Who listens to rumours, but you hear it half a dozen times... some of them running their little legs off dying to be the first to tell you.

She roots in her bag for Visine. In the process she discovers a photo of herself and the man she is pretending not to be in love with, Alan. She is short-sighted, and declines to wear glasses out of vanity. She speaks to someone in the audience.

I don't suppose you'd be carrying a pair of scissors.

Presumably the person isn't. NANCY roots some more and looks again at the photo.

Still, it's a nice one of me even if I do say so myself. Better than how I usually come out. [*To a member of the audience*] If you wouldn't mind holding onto it for a sec...

She marches to the bar to find scissors and glances upstairs for any sign of movement. She is very tempted to pour a brandy but resists. She finds some scissors and returns to the person with the photo.

Thank you.

She cuts the man out of the photo.

So long, farewell, auf wiedersein, goodbye, snip snip snip snip. [*To the audience member*] You can have him if you want, might have more luck with him than I did.

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ACT ONE

She decides to burn it instead.

No, I've got a better idea... ta-ta, dickface.

She sets fire to it in an ashtray and looks at the rest of the photo.

Well, that was stupid. I've only left myself with one arm.

She puts the other half in the fire as well. She watches it and looks up.

What's keeping her? See Nancy's life collapse around her. Great timing from you, Marcus, you little weasel of a manager. [*She blows her nose.*] Normally, and I don't think you'd find too many'd disagree, I am a very happy sort of person. Always have been. And of course if you were starting behind the bar today [*she selects someone in the audience*] which you very well could be because you look about fourteen and that's about the age they're after—the first thing I'd say to you—and I've trained dozens so I should know what I'm talking about—I'd say, sweetheart, whatever might be going on in your personal life—Who Cares? Leave it at home. When you walk behind that bar if anything's eating you, you only remember at the end of your shift. You're paid to pour drinks and be cheerful as sunshine while you're doing so. If they wanted to see a sour face they'd go home and drink. Normally, as I said, normally I'm that bright [*she can't sustain it any longer*] but I'm not officially on today, so as far as I'm concerned I can be as miserable as I please.

She pulls out a packet of cigarettes, rather heavily bound with elastic bands.

Well, I don't suppose he's going to suddenly appear this morning. Dickface Alan of the Ashtray. I'd say it's a safe bet this is one morning he won't be catching me out. A thousand dollars if I could give up for a year. Help me sing even more like an angel—his words not mine—and I'm not silly I know people'll tell you anything but... when I told him he was the first fella who didn't laugh. That I have always had this dream of being an entertainer. And he's in radio so you'd think he'd know. Life ain't a dress rehearsal... Was going to invite him tomorrow night but... [*This upsets her.*] Can't invite someone if you haven't heard from them for eight and three-quarter days. [*Pause.*] I'm not the sort of female who calls up men. Call me old-fashioned if you like but I've never chased a fella in my life. And of course there'd be an explanation. There would have to be a reason why someone who mentioned marriage and floating you around in his little boat day after day, there'd be a very good reason why all of a sudden he'd just drop off the face of the earth. Like... death. Death and he wasn't carrying any ID. I trusted him, and very few fellas I trust who wear a gold chain. [*Pause.*] Once

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PLAYWRIGHT'S BIOGRAPHY

Katherine Thomson began her career in the theatre as an actor. For the stage she has written *Harbour*, *Navigating*, *Diving for Pearls*, *Barmaids*, *Mavis Goes to Timor* and *Wonderlands*, all published by Currency. Other plays performed by leading theatre companies include *Kayak*, *A Sporting Chance*, *Darlinghurst Nights* and *This Hospital is My Country*. She has also written extensively for television where her credits include *Grass Roots*, *Blackjack*, *Wildside*, *Fallen Angels*, *Halifax fp*, *GP* and *Something in the Air*.

She has been nominated for five New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards, winning for *Harbour*, and three Australian Film Institute Awards and has won multiple AWGIEs—three in 2006 alone, two as co-writer of the television series *Answered by Fire* and a third for her screenplay for the film *Unfolding Florence—The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst*. She has been Vice-President of the Australian Writers' Guild and President of Sydney PEN. In 2005 she received the ANPC Award for her contribution to the Australian theatre industry.