The Golden Age

by Louis Nowra

First Production of the Play

The Golden Age was first performed by the Playbox Theatre Company at the Studio Theatre of the Victorian Arts Centre on 8 February 1985 with the following cast:

WILLIAM / MELORNE Robin Cumming
ELIZABETH / ANGEL / DR SIMON Marilynne Hanigan
STEF / CORRIS Terry O'Brien
AYRE / MRS WITCOMBE Maggie Blinco
MAC / ROSS / JAMES / GERMAN MAN Mark Minchinton
PETER Andrew Sharp
FRANCIS Robert Morgan
BETSHEB Melita Jurisic

Directed by Rex Cramphorn
Designed by Shaun Gurton
Lighting Designer, John Beckett
Original music by Sarah de Jong

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CHARACTERS

WILLIAM ARCHER, a doctor
ELIZABETH ARCHER, William's wife
FRANCIS MORRIS, a young engineer
PETER ARCHER, a young geologist
BETSHEB, a young woman
STEF, an 'autistic' child
AYRE, an old woman
MELORNE, an old man
ANGEL, a woman in her 20s
MAC, a young man
GEORGE ROSS, M.P., Federal Minister for Health
MRS WITCOMBE, a working-class woman in her 50s
DR SIMON, psychiatrist at the asylum
JAMES, a patient at the asylum
PRIVATE CORRIS, an Australian soldier
A GERMAN MAN, a man on the run
MARY, a maid
A SERVANT

SETTING

The play is set during the wartime years 1939-45, and the action moves from locations in Hobart and South-West Tasmania to Berlin in the last days of the War.

In memory of Marvin Gaye.

'There are moments when speech is but a mouth pressed lightly and humbly against the angel's hand.'

James Merrill

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

Hobart, 1939. A garden. It is a hot Australian night full of the sounds of cicadas and crickets. ELIZABETH ARCHER, *a middle-aged woman, stands in front of a small, crumbling Greek temple. She wears a copy of an ancient Greek dress. For a moment it seems we are in ancient Greece, but she is playing Iphigenia from* Iphigenia in Tauris.

ELIZABETH: 'I dreamed I had escaped from this island and lived at home in Argos. There I was asleep when suddenly the earth shook and tore apart. I ran outdoors and helplessly watched the whole house crumble into the earth. Out of this ruin, which was my father's house, one column stood. Brown hair grew from its head and it spoke in a human voice. Weeping, I performed for it this murderous ritual for strangers, sprinkling water, as on one destined to die. I interpret this dream thus: it was my brother Orestes I prepared for death and he has died. For what are pillars of a house but its sons. And those whose heads I touch with purifying water die. So now I want to pour libations for my brother.'

WILLIAM, *about the same age as his wife, enters as Orestes. He is handcuffed, wears glasses and a dinner jacket. He stands before Iphigenia.*

'Do you know where you are?'

WILLIAM: 'Tauris, my High Priestess.'

ELIZABETH: 'And what is it known for?'

WILLIAM: 'Any Greek who lands on its shores is put to death.'

ELIZABETH: 'And yet, mysterious stranger, you are Greek and you dare to step on our island. You should have left when you had the chance.'

WILLIAM: 'I was shipwrecked.'

ELIZABETH: 'I do not believe your story. Do you see the dark stain on the altar? It is the blood of previous sacrifices. Your blood will mingle with that blood to delight the goddess Artemis.'

WILLIAM: 'I would not care to die if my sister were here to prepare me for my burial.'

ELIZABETH: 'A hopeless wish for a lost soul. Your sister would never be in this savage country. I gather you were captured with another man.'

WILLIAM: 'My friend Pylades. He is rich, his house is pure and untainted while I live nowhere and everywhere. I am an outcast, hated by the gods.'

ELIZABETH: 'I too am far from home and live only to perform these dark rites which are so savage as not to be sung. Last night I dreamed my brother, whom I have not seen since we were children, was dead. Killed. His house in ruins. I now have nothing left to lose. Cruelty has overtaken me, possessed me. You are the first to sail here in a long time but you will never return home. You will die in pain and lie in an unmarked grave.'

SCENE TWO

The same place, next morning. A SERVANT *sets up outdoor tables and chairs. Off, in the distance,* FRANCIS *and* PETER *play tennis. While the* SERVANT *sets up,* MR TURNER *enters. He is blind and confused. The* SERVANT *doesn't see him and heads off, humming, to get another chair.* MR TURNER *hears.*

MR TURNER: Am I in the garden?

The SERVANT *doesn't respond.*

Excuse me, am I in the garden?

Silence. He goes a little further and finds himself on the steps of the temple. This confuses him further.

Hello, is anybody here?

He enters the temple and disappears.

[*Off*] Mrs Archer?

The SERVANT *re-enters with another chair, followed by* WILLIAM.

WILLIAM: I admire the boy's stamina playing in this heat.

ELIZABETH: [*entering behind him*] His driver said he dropped him at the front door and now he's disappeared. Vanished!

She exits again. The boys appear. PETER *looks very English in his whites.* FRANCIS *wears tennis shoes with football socks, a T-shirt and black football shorts.*

WILLIAM: Who won?

PETER: Francis, by a whisker.

FRANCIS: By a mile.

They laugh. PETER *pours lemonade for his friend and himself.*

WILLIAM: [*to* FRANCIS] You know what you two are about to do is quite dangerous.

PETER: Don't nag, Father.

WILLIAM: Francis, didn't Mary lay out some tennis whites for you?

FRANCIS *is embarrassed.*

PETER: She did, but Francis didn't know they were for him.

ELIZABETH *enters.*

ELIZABETH: I can't find him anywhere.

WILLIAM: He'll turn up.

ELIZABETH: I want to personally give him his cheque. I think the School for the Blind should be quite pleased at how much was given last night. [*Glancing at* FRANCIS' *clothes*] Francis, didn't Mary—?

WILLIAM: [*interrupting*] We've been through that.

ELIZABETH: [*sitting*] The weather is exquisite! Have you been to Tasmania before, Francis?

FRANCIS: First time. Thank you for letting me stay here—

ELIZABETH: [*waving this away*] Our pleasure. Half the time we think we're a separate country from the rest of Australia.

The boys finish their lemonade.

PETER: We'll go and clean up.

ELIZABETH: Make it snappy. I'd like you to meet Mr Turner.

The boys exit.

Did you speak to them about their trip?

WILLIAM: They're determined.

ELIZABETH: They should consider something less hazardous.

WILLIAM: It's part of the attraction.

MR TURNER *emerges from the temple behind them, lost and confused.*

ELIZABETH: That Francis, he's a strange boy. I watched him playing tennis from the balcony. He plays with such ferocity.

WILLIAM: It's why I like him, he's had to fight so hard to get where he is.

MR TURNER: Hello?

ELIZABETH *turns around.*

ELIZABETH: Mr Turner! [*Rushing to his aid*] Stay where you are.

MR TURNER: Where am I?

ELIZABETH: On the steps of the temple.

MR TURNER: Temple?

ELIZABETH *grabs him and escorts him to the chairs.*

ELIZABETH: I've been looking everywhere for you.

MR TURNER: [*still confused*] I thought I was in the garden, and then…

ELIZABETH: Sit down… Some lemonade? [*Pouring it without waiting for an answer*] You seem flustered.

WILLIAM: How are you, Mr Turner?

MR TURNER: Is that you, Mr Archer?

WILLIAM: Yes.

ELIZABETH: [*putting the glass in his hand*] There you are. You certainly won't be going home empty-handed, Mr Turner. The Greek tragedy wrought a financial miracle.

MR TURNER: I was lost.

ELIZABETH: Excuse me?

MR TURNER: I thought I was in the garden. I smelt roses. Flowers. And then I stepped into another world. I felt like Alice in Wonderland. I said 'Hello' and it echoed all about me. I was lost. I thought I was dead.

The Archers have no idea what he is talking about.

SCENE THREE

The wilds of south-west Tasmania, evening. Two lanterns sit on the ground. FRANCIS, *tired and dirty, rests against his knapsack looking at a map in the frail light cast by the lantern. He eats some biscuits.*

FRANCIS: [*to himself*] Jesus…

Silence.

[*Calling*] Are you alright?

No answer.

Peter?

PETER: [*off*] Coming!

FRANCIS *returns to his map.*

FRANCIS: Could be anywhere… anywhere.

A noise comes from the bush behind him. FRANCIS *looks.*