



# Gulls

by Robert Hewett



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## F i r s t P r o d u c t i o n o f t h e P l a y

*Gulls* was first performed by the Melbourne Theatre Company at the Russell Street Theatre, Melbourne, on 1 March 1983 with the following cast:

BILL CLEMENTS    Simon Chilvers  
FRANCES CLEMENTS    Babs McMillan  
MOLLY DWYER    Monica Maughan  
DAN    Robert Essex  
Puppeteers    Christian Hodge, Bruno Annetta

Directed by Bruce Myles  
Designed by Kim Carpenter  
Lighting designed by Jamie Lewis  
Music by Martin Friedel  
Puppets directed by Robert Hewett

## P e r f o r m i n g   R i g h t s

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## C H A R A C T E R S

BILL CLEMENTS, about 40 years old  
FRANCES CLEMENTS, his sister, in her mid 30s  
MOLLY DWYER, a neighbour, in her mid 60s  
DAN, the same age as Bill

Two seagulls.

## S E T T I N G

A house and adjacent beach at Portarlington. The time is the present and the action takes place over a period of eighteen months. The main acting areas are the living room of Frances' house, her brother Bill's bedroom and the beachfront. The house is sparsely furnished and the overall effect is of slight decay. There is a front and back verandah and a single washing line running down one side. The back door leads onto the verandah, which in turn leads down to the beach (the forestage). A dune rises behind the house.

## A U T H O R ' S   N O T E

The two gulls are rod-operated puppets. The operators should use stylised movement and dress. The gulls should be larger than life but not overly so; and be set on poles of reasonable length or extendable so that they may fly over the audience. They should have operable wings and be virtually featureless.



## ACT ONE

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*A wind chime is heard and then the strains of a harmonica as from the back of the house two gulls rise and circle before coming down either side of the house to the forestage. They swoop to either side and hover there as the lights on the living area rise. BILL and DAN are sitting at the table drinking sherry—BILL has hardly touched his. He is dressed in pyjamas and jumper. DAN wears a suit, slightly crumpled from having spent the day in the car. BILL stands and moves to the front of the living area; the gulls swoop and fly off either side. DAN refills his glass.*

DAN: It'll come to me in a minute... he had chalk marks round his fly, from pulling his pants up, and his gut hung out so far they never stayed there for long—what was his name?

BILL: Chalk marks?

DAN: He took us for double geography—had to really battle to keep awake, keep your head off the desk. Oh, what was his name?

BILL: Mumbles.

DAN: Mumbles, that was it. He'd have half the class out on the oval, lining—no, what do you call it?

BILL: Marking.

DAN: Marking, marking the oval. [*Imitating the master*] 'In preparation for the house athletics trials the more iiiiiintelligent boyce can have a pppractical demonstration in soil conservation and mark up the oval. Volunteers?'

*He looks about. No-one is obviously volunteering.*

'Williams and Rycroft, you look eeeager to me. The rest of you can stop slinking behind your desks and rrrread Chapter Four on "The Alluvial Plains of Italy". One word out of you, Clements, and it's straight to the Head.' Remember?

BILL: I don't recall it.

DAN: Soon as he was out the door all hell'd break loose. That fat kid, you know, ate banana sandwiches that had gone brown, soon as Mumbles was out the door we hurled him in the geography cupboard and locked the door.

BILL: Bagley. It was Bagley we locked in the geography library.

DAN: Who was the one we railroaded into that cupboard? There was Williams and Rycroft down the front, you and me and Bagley over by the window. [*Looking to BILL*] Was it Bagley we locked in the cupboard?



BILL: People like Bagley aren't meant to grow old. It's a good thing they go early; they would never have lasted the distance. What chance did he ever have? Sitting there by himself. His only contact with humanity the odd poke in the back with a ruler.

DAN: Mumbles eh... What on earth happened to Mumbles?

BILL: Bagley could never get over the vaulting horse. Endless instructors made him go back, in front of the entire class, 'Make a decent effort, Bagley'. And this huge blubbery whale would lurch into flight, be marooned on top, then come crashing to the mat below. Jeered at. The laughing stock of the class. No wonder he killed himself.

DAN: S'pose he's retired now.

BILL: Even the gesture was wasted. Nobody missed him.

DAN: We'd be out on the oval marking up for a week beforehand.

BILL: Bagley was something that dragged the class average down. There was never any question as to why this should be so. That there could be something scaring the shit out of him. One less in the class to worry about. Allowed the averages to increase. Never questioning their motives—or his. Better out of it. That death was quicker and less painful than the one he would have faced if he had survived.

DAN: You were the only one who had their head screwed on the right way. The right attitude. I was envious of you then.

BILL: We were cruel bastards to Bagley.

DAN: They never had any power over you, Billy. You had it in perspective, and it rattled them. Never the most important thing it was to them or us. It scared them, Billy. They respected you for that, so did I.

BILL: You place an importance on something that was never there.

DAN: You must have been aware of it. God, I can still see Mumbles' face. Red with contained rage. He never gave in. Trying to break you down. Baiting you, catch you out. Every time he tackled you he failed. You always had the answer. And every time he failed he exposed his own basic weakness. [*Smiling to BILL*] He hated you for that.

BILL: You're talking crap.

*He stands and walks toward the audience and addresses them directly.*

I don't understand much of what this man is talking about. He in fact is doing the talking. He's talking to himself. I don't remember or wish to remember what he is talking about. He is talking of another life.

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DAN: What's the matter, Billy, you're not drinking much?

BILL: Drinking. He'd been drinking.

DAN: Want some more?

BILL: It was Friday afternoon. House athletic trials.

DAN: You know what? I reckon Mumbles is probably still shoving the same old garbage down the throats of unsuspecting school kids.

BILL: I found a bottle of gin. Empty. Stuffed into the top of a garbage bin, behind the grandstand. You were still changing.

DAN: He would have given his right arm to catch you out. Just once.

BILL: A thud on my shoulder almost knocked the bottle from my hand. I was spun about. It was Mumbles. His fingers digging into my shoulders. Yelling at me. Didn't stop to ask if the bottle was mine or not. Just starting yelling. You were changing and had just come out of the shed.

DAN: Remember he'd perve around the corner of the changing shed. Trying to catch us smoking was his excuse.

BILL: All those veins across his cheeks and nose, filling with blood. His face was screaming at me and all I kept looking at was this map of the world on his face. He sniffed the bottle, then held it up in the air. Triumphant. Grabbing my hair he pulled me around the front of the grandstand. Paraded me victoriously before the entire school and parents watching the trials. I looked back for you, and you were bent double, pissing yourself with laughter, clutching your sandshoes.

DAN: Looking back on it, I suppose he wasn't such a bad old stick.

BILL: He hurled me through the office door. Then someone came in, whispered, and he left. The corridor filled with voices. Hushed. Something had happened. I was forgotten about. Stood for hours. Five o'clock. Stuck my head outside. No-one. They'd all gone home. I fled the office. Grabbed my bag. A pencil case spilt its contents. I didn't stop. I tore, raced, ran breathless to the station. As I came through the gate I could see a group of people standing up the other end. I walked closer and recognised a few of the teachers. I froze. Mumbles was standing in the centre waving his arms about. He turned. Screamed at me. I've never seen such a look of hate. His face was about to crack open. I couldn't understand what he was talking about. Someone ran and told me to go to the next station along and catch the train home. I turned to go and caught sight of a school uniform being put into a bag. Then I realised it was only a sleeve, and it had an arm sticking out of it. It was Bagley. Mumbles was screaming at me. He would see me in the morning in his



office. But I couldn't move. I just kept staring at these bits of clothing they were shoving in the bag. That night we both got drunk. That was the night...

DAN: What do you mean by those strange sounds? Do you understand what I'm saying? Reckon I might as well talk to a brick wall.

BILL: We'd taken three books out of the geography library. Identical books. All in his name. *Deserts of the World*, Antony Bagley. *Deserts of the World*, Antony Bagley.

DAN: Will you stop babbling.

BILL: Three copies.

DAN: Sit down, Billy, come on.

BILL: We shoved them up the other end of the shelves near the Ws. He must have found them and put them in his bag.

DAN: I can't understand. Calm down.

BILL: They were sprawled all over the track. Someone had taken notice of him.

DAN: Come on, mate, take it easy.

BILL: Oh God, I've wet myself. Frances is going to be so angry.

*He goes back and sits down. DAN stares at him. They settle.*

DAN: You know, kid, you've got it made here. Nothing to do but sit around all day, waited on hand and foot; it's a dog's life, eh? You're sitting pretty and don't even know it.

BILL: When you have all the time in the world it's frightening what you can uncover. He must have been able to see all that way. That's what frightened the shit out of Antony Bagley.

*FRANCES approaches the house carrying a box of groceries. She pauses momentarily, looking back at Dan's car, then enters the house.*

My sister Frances.

FRANCES: I wondered if we were going to see you again.

*DAN rises to greet her.*

How are you, Dan?

DAN: Let myself in, hope you don't mind.

FRANCES: No, 'course not. Bit of company for him.

DAN: Yeah.

FRANCES: It's been months.

DAN: I was working in the district, thought I might as well pop in, see how the kid's getting on.

FRANCES: Don't call him that.

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DAN: Just a turn of phrase.

*A slightly awkward pause until FRANCES decides to put away the groceries.*

House is looking better than the last time.

FRANCES: The other time.

DAN: Yes... Looking better.

FRANCES: Haven't done anything to it, have we, sport? You made yourself a cup of anything?

DAN: Helped ourselves to a glass of sherry.

*She removes BILL's untouched glass.*

FRANCES: Not for him. You know better than that, Billy. You want something to eat?

*BILL shakes his head.*

Fill up the jug, then.

*He remains seated.*

What's the matter with you, cat got your tongue?

DAN: He's been babbling on for hours, couldn't stop him. He's put on a bit of weight, Frances.

*She goes and fills the jug.*

FRANCES: I can't give him much exercise, and he won't budge from in front of that television set.

DAN: Oh, yeah.

FRANCES: It's my Billy sitter. Got it with money left over from the sale of the other place.

DAN: Can I put anything away?

FRANCES: No, I'm right.

*She smiles and walks past him to where BILL is seated.*

How are you, Billy, have a nice chat to Dan? What's the matter with you, sport?

*BILL places his hands over his lap and turns away.*

Have you wet yourself, Billy?

*She shoves her hand inside his pyjamas.*

DAN: He went to the dunny about half an hour ago.

FRANCES: What have you done, then? Didn't you aim right? You're a grub at times, Billy, you know that, don't you? You can understand well enough what I'm talking about, can't you?



BILL *shakes his head, no.*

Oh really, I didn't come down in the last shower, you know. Was there something really interesting on the telly, eh? Couldn't wait to get back to watch it?

DAN: Telly wasn't on.

FRANCES: [*going off to make the coffee*] Well, you've just been a lazybones then, haven't you? You can stay wet till I've had my tea and Dan's gone. And you needn't sulk, it serves yourself right. [*Re-entering with the coffee*] Black, one sugar, right?

DAN: Right.

FRANCES: [*sitting down*] How's Elizabeth?

DAN: Expecting.

FRANCES: So I heard.

DAN: Oh.

FRANCES: Can't remember who told me.

DAN: Beginning to show. Only four months to go now.

FRANCES: That's flown.

DAN: She doesn't think so. [*He sips his coffee. It's too hot.*] If it's a boy we thought we might call him Billy.

FRANCES: Oh.

DAN: You're still looking a hundred per cent, Frances.

FRANCES: Thanks to the move down here. I knew I made the right decision. For both of us.

DAN: He's got some red blotches round his neck and face. They anything to worry about?

FRANCES: Mossie bites. We put our fist through the flyscreen the other night, didn't we, sport?

DAN: Bit of a temper.

FRANCES: Haven't a clue what it was all about. Saw a bird or something and tried to catch it.

DAN: He and I used to go bird catching when we were kids. In the vacant block next to your mum and dad's. Never caught a single bloody one. Remember?

FRANCES: No. Why do you want to call your son Bill?

DAN: Oh, it's only a gesture. You know.

FRANCES: I see.

DAN: You don't like the idea?

FRANCES: Call it what you want. [*Getting up*] Sure I can't fix you some food?

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