



The Sun King

and other operas

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Chester
Eagle

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Sun King*

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Introduction

Late in 2006 I decided that I would write a fourth collection of opera librettos, dealing with the theme of power, mostly, but not exclusively, political power. I drew up a list of possible topics – Ming (Menzie's supercilious control), Gough (the excitement of 1972), the two faces of Malcolm Fraser (ruthless in 1975 and the noble spokesman who came later), Paul Keating, and the appropriation by John Howard of Pauline Hanson's vexatious spirit.

As so often happens with my writing, the project had ideas of its own. Power? I began with the clash between Dimitri Shostakovich and the terrifying leader of his state, Joseph Stalin. There must have been many nights in the life of the composer when he expected that the secret police would have taken him away by morning. Yet, astonishingly, it was the composer who won the battle. His 5th Symphony ('a Soviet artist's reply to just criticism') challenged the dictator head on. Music defeated the murderous men who carried out Stalin's will, and audiences applauding the work at its Leningrad and Moscow premieres knew very well what they were cheering. Guns and bullets could, if only rarely, be overcome. I put 'Dimitri' at the beginning of my collection, and turned to my list of Australian figures.

But no. Next came the absolutism of Louis XIV of France. I'd visited the Chateau of Versailles and its gardens in 1982 and could not fail to observe the absence of the democratic spirit which is so important to me. Versailles is the creation of the Sun King, shining on lesser mortals. Absolute power can rise to great heights. The

world needs miracles, and it got one at Versailles. Writing 'The Sun King' forced in me a realisation that the principles I espoused had limits, and people with the opposite point of view might be better placed in certain ways.

For the third opera I turned to the memoir of a woman who'd lived in north-central Queensland, an area I'd lately been exploring. She and her husband might have been killed, or forced off their station, by the blacks whom they'd displaced. This frontier battle was fought most tellingly in the hearts of two black women who worked on the station. Maggie and Kitty, members of the local tribe, save the woman they work for, and hence the station which occupies their tribal land. Were they right to do this? It seems they loved Evelyn, their mistress, more than they loved much else which modern apologists would say they should have given their loyalty to. In any case, they made their choice and everything depended on it. Oddly enough, there is, to my mind, almost as much nobility in their decision as in the panegyrics of the preceding opera, where the sun sets on a great king's reign.

I was by now well and truly in the realm of power. It had a salience which pushed into every corner of my mind. I had for many years admired the cartoons of David Low, the New Zealander who rose to fame in London. He had no way of stopping the events of the Hitler-Mussolini period in Europe, but he could comment, via his cartoons. Cartoons are often described as being funny. This is odd. Great cartoonists have to be apposite in their work;

humour can be there, or not, as the cartoonist pleases. Low, I have long felt, was at his greatest when his themes were darkest. Unlike Louis XIV, he was a democrat, at a time when fascist powers were raging almost unchecked. People in wartime London, and in the worldwide empire of which London was the centre, knew that the expression of their feelings, if it was to happen at all, was most likely to be in a David Low cartoon; this, it seemed to me, was itself the expression of a significant power, even if the powers Low commented on were unimaginably greater. Or were they? Power depends on fear, it is true, but it depends also on the imaginings of those whom the conqueror wishes to control. The mind has to be subdued, and made accepting, every bit as much as the body must be made to tremble. By the time I finished this libretto I was beginning to feel that not only did the project have a mind of its own but that what it was undertaking was right.

I started to relax. The pursuit of power could be farcical. Australian voters have seen two examples in recent years of leadership struggles in which a promise of succession has been broken. In each case, in my view, the body politic, or the public's faith in it, has suffered a blow more significant than the wounded pride of the pretender. This theme is treated in 'The PM's Chair'.

Power need not always be brutal. Coercion can be, and often is, replaced by persuasion and one has only to cast a glance at the advertising industry to see how revolting this can be. Listening to my car radio as I drive around my allegedly democratic city – elected councils, and so on – I notice that the word 'citizen', that precious heirloom of good things brought to us by the French

revolution – which brought much else besides – is well on the way to being replaced by the newer and nastier 'consumer'. Hence my title, 'Aux armes, consommateurs'. I can't say it more savagely than that!

But there is power in the liberating idea. To my considerable surprise a second composer entered the collection. Beethoven followed Shostakovitch. I was fortunate enough to read a book of recollections of Beethoven by those who had known him, and saw at once the possibilities inherent in the gathering of high-caste Viennese in a square shaded by linden trees. I had the book open as I wrote, but my mind was open to another dimension again. I allowed myself to wonder about the power of the great man's music, which we today have now had the better part of two centuries to absorb, on the minds of those who knew him. Beethoven, it seemed to me, had, by creating the famous melody of the choral symphony, and the numerous variants and/or precedent versions that occur in a number of his works, given the democratic, humanistic ideal a form which would surely last, as certain political leaders in the following century liked to say, a thousand years!

Hitler and Churchill, the leaders I refer to, make brief appearances in the David Low libretto which has been discussed already.

Perhaps I can end by saying that when I finished the last of my fifteen librettos, I wondered what they amounted to, and realised that the import of a number of them wasn't clear to me. The librettos about Shostakovitch, Beethoven and Louis XIV are clear enough, because the figures these librettos dealt with are

already well understood, but a number of others, particularly the last two, *That Beam of Light* and *The Ship of State*, speak in a very personal and recently-invented way about modern democracy and it may be that they embody insights which haven't yet surfaced in my conscious mind. I rather hope so, because writing is all about giving life to ideas which haven't yet found their place in the world. I am reminded of Chou En Lai who, when asked whether he thought the French Revolution had been successful, replied, 'It's too early to say.' For years I have been wanting to ask him when we will know and what we will look for in finding an answer. Alas, he is no longer able to reply.

I hope that readers, and in time to come, audiences, will find something to enjoy in this collection.

C.A.E.

Dimitri

Dimitri Shostakovitch is listening to a radio. The music is Beethoven's last quartet. The Russian is affected by it.

Dimitri Must it be? It must be. That's what it's saying. Must it be? It must be. What a question! (Nina, his wife, comes in.)

Nina (as Beethoven fades) Dimitri! Don't go out there!

Dimitri They'll knock the door down and shoot me here.

Nina They wouldn't dare! The greatest composer of the Union ...

Dimitri He's killed millions. What am I worth to him?

Nina Can't you see he's scared of you?

Dimitri Not as scared as I am! (There's a noise.) What's that?

Nina It's a truck unloading coal ...

Dimitri In the middle of the night?

Nina They run out of petrol and they have to wait for more ...

Dimitri It's no good boosting my confidence. I know my end is near.

Nina Stay here with me.

Dimitri I'll sit in the chair outside. They come in the middle of the night.

Nina I'll see an empty chair, and know it will never be filled ...

Dimitri (thoughtfully) When I die, it may take some time. But someone will fill the chair. (He takes Nina in his arms.) I'd like to outlast him. But they take you into a basement. A man sneaks in behind, and you don't know, because they're telling you you're safe now you've confessed. They offer you a drink, then ...

The sound of a shot is heard.

Nina Stay in here.

Dimitri (referring to the time ahead, when he's gone) Sit in the chair where I used to sit. Think of me, and remember.

She follows as he goes out. He sits in a bulky chair beside the lift, and indicates that she's to go inside. The lights lower. Between Dimitri, sitting in his chair, and Nina, leaning against the door, there is a black space.

Nina He's been brought to this!

Dimitri I'll correct the score of my quartet.

He's almost cheerful, with his spectacles on, and studying a score, pencil in hand.

Nina Dimitri my love, let me protect you. I'd die for you, if you'd let me.

Dimitri (not hearing) Careless. My fault, I have to admit. Yes, there it is again ...

Nina If they take him, he hasn't got a thing. 'You don't last long enough to need a change of pyjamas.' He can even make a joke ...

The blackness between them widens, and in the space appears Stalin, seated at a table. Zhdanov is giving the dictator a sheet of paper.

Zhdanov Thirteen names, great leader.

Stalin For me to sign?

Zhdanov Each and every one sir. The power to let them live, or otherwise, is yours.

Stalin Russia will be rid of them. (He looks at the list.) Traitor. A bullet's too kind. They should fill the air with screams ... but it's best to be swift. What's that you've got?

Zhdanov has another piece of paper.

Zhdanov Another list, great leader. With one name ...

Stalin (suspiciously) Whose?

Zhdanov hands him the second paper.

Both Shostakovitch, Dimitri Dimitrievich ...

Stalin (after a long pause) No.

Zhdanov He's been denounced, sir, the matter's been examined.

Stalin No.

Zhdanov He's been defiant, there are no signs of him coming to heel ...

Stalin No.

Zhdanov And the others, sir? Are they to go free?

Stalin No. (He signs quickly, and gives the paper back to Zhdanov.) Within twenty four hours.

Zhdanov (withdrawing) Sir.

Over the next minute or so we hear thirteen shots; it is suggested that they be fired in groups – 4, 5, 4, perhaps.

Stalin (looking at the piece of paper) Why am I afraid?

Dimitri (also looking at a page) That'll make the cellist sweat, and his listeners smile.

Nina Two more hours till light enters the sky. Two more hours and he lives another day ...

Stalin He's wormed his way into my soul, the slug! If I harm him I harm myself.

Dimitri So much for that. Now I'll write a new theme. I'll work on it tomorrow, if I last that long ...

Stalin He has a wife, and children. He's vulnerable through those he loves ...

Nina I'd give my life to give him another day.

Stalin Thirteen traitors dead, and one I wish to bend ...

As he muses, the space he occupies grows dark; there is a rearrangement, the composer is back in his apartment, Stalin's office is to the other side, and in the middle is a screen showing pictures of Russia, its people, factories, farms, rivers and its vast landscape under snow. This middle screen, this vision of Russia, remains until the end.

Nina Challenge him.

Dimitri The army, and the secret police, are his.

Nina You know, and now you tell me; where is he weak?

Dimitri He is so strong ...

Nina ... that he's weak! Strength is weakness!

Dimitri How do I bring him down?

Nina Mozart tells us. (She sings a few notes from The Magic Flute.) Die Vorheit, die Vorheit ...

Dimitri The truth! How strange ...

Nina I'm right, aren't I?

Dimitri (admiring) When were you ever wrong?

Nina Strong men make people fear them. Those who live by the truth inspire love.

Dimitri Love of Russia ...

Nina Love of everything. Our children playing, full of hopes, which that monster ...

Dimitri Sssssshhh ... (smiling) Love of Russia. That's the key.

Nina It's a bitter country. So vast, so cold. Yet there's hope, springing in our hearts. Or there was ...

Dimitri There will be hope again, perhaps.

Nina One day ...

We hear a few swirling bars from the 2nd movement of the 5th symphony.

Dimitri There's an idea now. I can do something with that.

Nina (at the door of the apartment, calling to someone) Vassily Vasilyevich, do you have time to help me? I

want to get that chair inside. We were going to throw it out ...

Stalin If I don't sign, he'll make a mockery of me. I'll have to pretend he's doing what he was told. Nobody will believe me. They'll show fear to my face, and laugh around the corner. He's found his way into my mind and he's undoing me from within. Aaaaaaaarrgh!

Zhdanov (rushing in) Sir?

Stalin (roaring) I want a glass!

Zhdanov Vodka, sir?

Stalin And a block of ice, to freeze my brain! (Zhdanov brings him what he wants. Stalin broods.) We shot the Tsars. They fled like mice. (loudly) We are the hope of the world! (to Zhdanov, who comes on again, in response) When are those English people coming?

Zhdanov They're here sir. They hope to meet you.

Stalin What are their names?

Zhdanov (introducing two guests) The most distinguished Lady Astor. The most famous playwright in the world, George Bernard Shaw!

Stalin (affably) Welcome to Russia. We have much to show you. What would you like to see?

Astor Everything, Mister Stalin. But we want you to tell us your plans for your country, your hopes ...

GBS We're here to learn. The whole world is watching your bold experiment.

Stalin You are too kind. We have our shortcomings too.
GBS The capitalist world is in terminal decline. It has to go. You're leading the way, towards the future ...
Stalin In the name of my party you can see the common good. That is our aim. Needless to say, we have the unwilling, the unconverted, among us. Certain measures have to be taken ...

Shots, far away.

Astor After your years of revolution, is the rule of law established?
Stalin (to the sound of more shots) There is no punishment without fair trial. Many of those who have been guilty of crimes against the state are happy to confess. They list their crimes to the court, begging forgiveness ...
Astor ... and punishment?
Stalin (as if it's a minor matter) ... punishment too. But we are lenient ...
GBS Education, Mister Premier, what are you doing there?
Stalin We work in five year plans. Centuries of benighted rule can't be overcome in a day. We set goals and achieve them. (He signals and Zhdanov comes on with papers and photos.) This is what we set out to do in our first five year plan. These things have been done. The next plan (he picks up a paper) is already underway. There are pictures there of schools we've built, and smiling children. But there is more to do.

We have been a land of miserable peasants. Factories are being built. Russia will supply itself. We will trade anything that other countries want, but our first priority must be the betterment of our people. Homes, hospitals ...

Astor And the arts, Premier Stalin?

Stalin Ah. We will show you our ballet, our opera, you will see our painters' work, you will hear our poets read ...

GBS You may not know it, sir, but I was for many years a music critic in London, and I had a lot to say ...

Astor ... a great deal, Bernard!

GBS I am a man of words! And I am delighted, sir, to be in the presence of a man of action.

Stalin stands, and Zhdanov leads the visitors away to see things that will impress them. The light fades on the dictator and rises on the composer.

Dimitri Nina, can I have some tea? Everything I think of is bleak, and that's my theme. I must make hope rise out of despair. The miracle of Russia, repeated every year, is that ice and snow cover the land, as far as the eye can see, and then the ice melts, waters flow, blades of grass appear, green, a colour we'd all forgotten.

Nina Play it to me, Dimitri. Let me hear.

Dimitri It isn't right yet. I can only hear bits of it, sounding far away. And other bits, very near. It is as if Russia

is at the door, trying to come in, and sometimes I can hear, but too much of the time I'm deaf.

Nina Write it down, Dimitri, every note you hear. The rest you'll fill in later.

Dimitri I'm doing that my love.

He sits back, and we hear music from early in the first movement of his 5th symphony.

Nina Keep going.

Dimitri There's an evil force. A madness, rageing, a dictator striding triumphantly across everything he can see...

We hear some of this music too.

Nina Take care! The secret police are active, day and night!

Dimitri I have to rely on those who listen. They must know the difference between right and wrong. Then they will hear their own voices, sometimes right, sometimes wrong, and they will know their wills, their thinking, have been perverted. The monster will only be visible in his effects on good people. I dare not show him directly. That would invite a bullet in the neck!

Shots, not so far away.

Dimitri They have guns, the secret police, and I have only music ...

Nina Holiest of the arts!

Dimitri Holy it may be, but it must not absorb itself in heaven. This earth is where we live and die. A bullet ends us. (More shots.) I have to be clever, Nina. This music will be about struggle, and triumph, aspiration and despair. It's too big for me, Nina, but if I don't do it, nobody will. All there will be then, will be snow and ice forever. No spring. No melting. No hope bringing life into the world.

Nina You are weak, Dimitri, like us all, but you are strong. The music is in you. You have only to write it down.

Dimitri I need the courage to let myself hear what I know is there ...

He listens, we see pictures of Russia on the central screen, and hear fragments of his 5th symphony, bringing themselves into being.

Nina I can hear it Dimitri, your mind is alive. It's loud with the soul of Russia!

Dimitri Souls! A bullet gets rid of them!

More shots, and some bars of Dimitri's 5th. The screen shows scenes of buildings, factories, and optimistic development. Lady Astor and Bernard Shaw stand where they can see the screen.

Astor There is much to admire, Bernard, but that's all they let us see.

GBS Every nation has its underside, Nancy. There is no darker than ours.

Astor That's something we don't know.

GBS There's optimism everywhere, Nancy. The country's like a giant bear that's shaken free of its chains ...

Astor Do you know what prisoners do when they get out of jail?

GBS They commit another crime, to get themselves back in.

Astor So? Can't you see what worries me?

GBS I can't Nancy. Tell me, plain and true.

Astor I can't Bernard, but I'm worried. It's too good to be true.

GBS You've forgotten the meaning of hope, Nancy. You don't believe in good any more, only in holding on to what you've got. You're a true conservative.

Astor I believe in good, Bernard. And I believe in evil. I can smell it. It's in the air.

GBS We've got factories to visit, Nancy. Schools. You can try to convince me on the way home. (They disappear.)

The screen shows the very thing Nancy Astor has been talking about: hundreds of people waving flags, and hankies, and cheering enthusiastically, as if driven by fear of survival. Stalin appears, smiling, and waving occasionally, then goes off. Dimitri and Nina also consider the cheering crowd, before retreating to their apartment.

Nina Do they inspire you, Dimitri, or make you shudder?

Dimitri They're almost right. Their hearts are in the right place, I believe. If they had the right leader, they

could do anything. The one thing he can't do for them is teach them how to use their freedom. It's hard, isn't it, to do that. They need a voice to tell them what's in their mind.

We hear what's in Dimitri's mind – music from the middle of the last movement of his 5th, visionary music, dreaming of what ought to be.

Nina Dimitri!

Dimitri You hear it too? How wonderful!

Nina How will you make it end?

Dimitri Safely, I hope, for us.

Nina What will the people hear?

Again they are looking at that waving crowd, which changes, as they watch, into a Moscow military parade.

Dimitri Something that reminds them of what's gone wrong...

Nina Their fondest hopes crushed by military might ...

Stalin appears, taking the salute at the military parade showing on the screen. He raises his arm in salute to what he's created. As he stands, saluting, the screen shows different pictures, of people being pushed into cars in the middle of the night, of men in overcoats beating on doors, and behind these pictures we hear the sound of shots. Shot after shot after shot. Dimitri watches, and listens, and sits at his piano, playing, or listening to, one after the other, the grinding, appealing chords just before the end of his 5th symphony, then the horrible, decisive drumbeats at the very end, then the

visionary, aspirational music from the middle of the last movement, and so on, over and over.

Nina (as her husband plays) Russia! Russia! Our land is
 a soul in pain, Dimitri, a soul, crying out in pain ...

Dimitri sits at his piano quietly, and the orchestra gives its version of his thoughts, as if to comfort the people on the screen, waving their flags and hands at the dictator who rules them.

The main influence on the writing of this libretto was *Testimony: the memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, 'as related to and edited by' Solomon Volkov, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1979. I have been affected by many performances of the 5th symphony, most notably that of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra conducted by Paavo Berglund, date unknown.

The Sun King

Versailles, 1715. Louis 14, King of France, is dying. Above his bed, where he lies propped up by pillows, is a screen. During the course of the opera, the screen shows pictures as described below; at other times, it offers images of richly patterned fabrics, or any other examples of the intricately formal design, embroidery and delineation of the king's reign, which, as stated, is coming to an end.

Louis (to Mme Maintenon, who is crying) Did you think I was immortal?

Maintenon I wish you could take the whole of France with you. People would remember it as it was when it disappeared.

Louis I lived for France. Why should it die with me?

Maintenon How can France live beyond you?

Louis Kiss me farewell, my love. (She does so.) I have to do this so many times.

Maintenon The people in your kitchens, your gardens, wish you to touch them before you go.

Louis (accepting) I love them all. They may kneel at the foot of my bed.

Mme Maintenon stands, watching, as three humbly dressed people come in – Jacques, Mireille, Ambert. They kneel.

Louis What news, my friends?

Jacques We are in mourning, my lord. When the sun sets, it will not rise again.

Louis makes a gasp, but nothing follows.

Mireille He's crying.

Ambert We'll be punished.

Louis No, Ambert. Never. You caught me by surprise. I love the speech of people such as you.

Ambert My lord?

Louis Those who speak plainly, speak purely. Those who take pride in their refinement are sometimes mistaken. The greatest simplicity is the greatest refinement.

Mireille We have served you many banquets, my lord, and it is our wish that you may know our pride in having done so.

Louis Who will you serve when I am gone?

Ambert Another Louis, my lord, if he will have us.

Louis Serve him well.

Jacques (to Mme Maintenon) Will his majesty touch our hands, if we offer?

She indicates that he will. Each in turn moves beside the chair where Mme Maintenon was sitting before she moved, each offers a hand, and the dying king touches their hands affectionately, then they leave.

Louis I am affected, Françoise. I cannot see them all. Those that have been touched must touch the others. You must explain ...

Maintenon My lord.

Louis (hearing someone enter) Who's there?

Maintenon There's nobody, my lord.

Louis People have come in, invisible to you. My father.

On the screen behind Louis we see the portrait of his father, who died seventy-two years before.

Louis 13 You have outdone me, my son, by many years. No king has ruled France so long. God will grant you peace.

Louis Then he must take me to heaven, for there is no peace on earth. Where there are boundaries, there are incitements to war.

Louis 13 disappears, to be replaced by Louise de la Vallière.

Louis I was a bold young man, and full of passion, but where would I direct it? My brother's wife and I desired each other, but my mother thought to divert me. And she did! Louise imagined me as a king, and I became the king. I was crowned a second time by her love, and she, for all her modesty, became my mistress, for I already had a queen. Of sorts.

The picture of Louise on the screen is joined by a portrait of Maria Theresa, the king's Spanish queen.

Louis (referring to Louise) She could ride like a man ... or better. She could shoot, she could use a sword as deftly as any soldier in the armies of France. Yet she longed for my touch to rouse her. I had a wife, she bore me sons, yet she never glowed as Louise did at the touch of my imagination. Françoise ...

Maintenon My lord?

Louis Year after year, I've sat in Council, listening to argument over policy. This work must be done, and there are few to whom it can be entrusted. France needs brilliant men, but without great name, or they'll rob their monarch and his people. The people see themselves in the glory I've created, and how was this done? A king is hardly mortal, Françoise, and yet when people look at kings they must recognise something of themselves ...

Maintenon What is the difference, my lord? Can you say?

Louis Kings dream dreams. Kings predict, and the things born in their minds come alive on earth. Le Notre!

Louise disappears, to be replaced on the screen by a view of the great gardens of Versailles, and in the foreground, looking at the gardens, is Le Notre, a man wearing humble clothes.

Le Notre (humbly, yet humorously) How many times did I tell you to stop, your majesty?

Louis (in great good humour) How many times did I tell you to go on?

Le Notre When you commanded, your majesty, I was released.
All that was best in me knew it was safe to bring the
world of imagination into the world of light ...

Louis The sun!

Le Notre Every morning, in all those years, I woke with the
birds, and I prayed to God to give light ...

Louis The sun!

Le Notre ... and God gave light to the world, so that everything
might grow ...

Louis ... and yet, what would grow unless the mind was
able to see, to soar? The life of a king is not easy, for
he has to live in this world while imagining another.
The qualities of that other world must be brought to
this one ... Le Notre?

Le Notre Your majesty?

Louis You made me laugh.

Le Notre It was my privilege.

Louis (to Mme Maintenon) I offered to ennoble him. To
my amazement, he refused. "What should I do
with a coat of arms, sire? I have one already – two
slugs rampant on a cabbage leaf." (Louis laughs,
coughing at the same time, in a way that alarms Mme
Maintenon.)

Maintenon Monsieur Le Notre, go to your garden. His Majesty
needs rest!

Le Notre and his gardens disappear.

Louis You brought me to the path of virtue, Françoise.

Maintenon It is a path easily lost, my lord. It leads to God, and
humans wish, all too often, to take another way.

Louis I spent half my life on those paths, Françoise. Those
days were not all bad.

Maintenon You must sleep now my lord, and when you wake,
there will be more to kiss your hand. God will take
care of France for an hour.

The screen shows the interior of the chapel at Versailles, crowded
with people; musicians are playing a *Te Deum* by Lully. At the
same time, three women enter – Maria Theresa of Spain, Louise de
la Vallière, whom we've already seen on the screen, and Athénaïs
de Montespan. They stand at three corners of the king's bed, while
Mme Maintenon sits at the king's left hand. Four proud women,
three of them sorrowful, each of them painfully aware of the others,
they are for a time unwilling to speak.

Maintenon (as the Lully music ends) If we grip the corners of his
bed, we shall know how we are joined.

Athenais I conquered two of you, but you conquered me,
Scarron. (She is referring to Mme Maintenon by an
earlier name.)

Maintenon He was conquered himself, every time. (She points
to the screen, where we see the beautiful Marie-
Angelique de Fontanges, tall, eighteen, blonde.) We
know how he gained access to her!

A panel opens in the wall beside her, Louis is out of bed in a flash,
and up some stairs that connect his *chambre* with another one, above

him, behind the screen, which swings away so that we can see him tenderly caressing Mlle de Fontanges.

Louis Woman is the mysterious, the sensual divinity who joins the spiritual man to the beauties of the earth. God gave man woman, and woman to man, in a moment when he was at his most luxurious. My love?

MA de F I am helpless, sire. I have no wish but yours.

Louis Steps and stairs have brought me to this heaven.

MA de F Your desire, sire, is heavenly rain on this body which is only soil to you.

Louis You are perfection, Marie-Ange. You know I have spent my life trying to create it, and it has come to me ... I don't remember how.

MA de F Your Majesty knows well how I came to be here.

Louis Your Majesty has forgotten everything he ever knew in his excitement at possessing you. I have climbed to reach you, Marie-Ange. You are a cloud, and I am of the earth.

MA de F I am mortal, sire, and I ascend to be received by you.

Louis My love.

He takes her tenderly to the bed in this secret chambre, and as the two of them make love, we hear the voices of his other lovers, still beside the corners of his death-bed, in the room below.

MT I shall return to my grave! He hasn't learned a thing!

She exits through the secret doorway, and disappears.

Louise I too have known those stairs. I shall show you where they lead.

She climbs the stairs and we see her falling on her knees, somewhere above the level of the stage where the death-bed lies. She prays for a time, spotlit, then disappears.

Athenais He is a master of humiliation! Does he know, Madame, how he cuts into the very flesh he has adored? My mind has had no other exercise, these years, than studying how to please him. And he knows this! He says it to me, offering praise in return for my adoration. I adore him, because he is my king ... and I hate him because he is fickle. Look at this Marie Ange. She is lovely as an angel, and stupid as an owl! Why should I be pushed aside for her?

Maintenon Watch, my Athenais, and see what becomes of her.

The lower space darkens as the two women watch. Time passes. Louis, having made love to Marie-Ange, gets out of the bed in their secret place, disappears for a moment, then returns to place a necklace around Marie-Ange's neck. He fondles her where she is showing the signs of advancing pregnancy.

MA de F Will this be another Louis, in the royal line? Or a daughter to marry a foreign king, securing the state of France?

Louis You must wait to see what God sends you, then wait again, for me to decide.

MA de F I am yours to command, my lord.
Athenais Not a brain in her head! How stupid is flesh when there's nothing in it, directing!
Maintenon Watch, Athenais, watch ...

Doctors come into the hidden room, a child is delivered, amid sobs, sighs and shrieks from Marie-Ange; the doctors, using dumb show, report to the king that the child is dead; he dismisses them with a wave of his hand and the child's body is taken away; Louis gives a white robe to Marie-Ange, and we notice that it quickly turns red as it absorbs her blood; on the return of the doctors they point this out to the king and he indicates that they are to take the bleeding woman away. As they do so, he gives her a perfunctory kiss, then comes halfway down the secret staircase; he waits there, until we hear a sombre knocking in the music, telling us that Marie-Ange is dead; after which Louis returns to the bed where he was lying. He ignores Athenais, and turns to Mme Maintenon, as if expecting some acceptable insight from her.

Maintenon Why did you marry me, my lord?
Louis God is incomplete. God sends beauty into the world to observe how we treat it. He wants to know if we can see what he can. Why else did he put that angel in my way? Nothing works in this world as we would wish ... if it comes from God. If, however, we make it for ourselves ...

The screen shows pictures of Versailles, as it has been created by Louis, his architects and gardeners.

Louis ... there is some chance that we may exceed even our highest hopes. I have the palace that I dreamed of, Françoise, but when I lust for joy it comes to me, only to go away. Where does it come from? Where does it go?

Maintenon Your answer, my lord?

Louis It is a perverse condition, this life that God makes us lead, and you, of all the women I've known, Françoise, you alone can see this. You look at it as calmly, as coldly, as God himself. A king I may be, but I am mortal; you understand holiness from inside itself, so you are never surprised by its requirements. In accepting, you are wise. I have any number of clever men to sit on my councils, but only women know the feelings that govern men, and you are the wisest of women because you understand restraint ... as I have never done!

Maintenon More people wish to see their king.

Attendants manage a line of elaborately dressed courtiers at the entry to the room. Certain other figures appear on the screen above Louis' bed. The secret staircase is no longer visible, so an appropriate order has been restored to the functioning of the palace.

Louis (weakly) Mazarin! I knew you would be back.

Mazarin You yourself have resurrected me, my lord, for, let me tell you a secret, between the two of us, there is nothing in the great beyond.

Louis Nothing?

Mazarin Nothing, my lord, but silence, dark, and emptiness.

Louis God keeps us waiting for the resurrection he has promised.

Mazarin So they say, my lord, but if it's true, he's keeping me in the dark!

Louis You were an expert at doing that yourself, my Cardinal.

Mazarin You learned all my tricks, and more, my lord.

Louis The state must function, Mazarin, for the benefit of all, and yet each of its members is unrestrained. (Mazarin looks around, at the splendour Louis has created.) Money, my minister, can be used in two ways: that of taste, or that of waste. The finest minds of my kingdom have been employed to use it here. Thousands of years will pass before anyone does it half as well.

Mazarin Feast your eyes, then, sire, for soon it will be lost to you. (He disappears.)

Louis He thought he advised me. He taught me what to avoid. Where is Fouquet?

Maintenon Locked away in Pignerol, my lord. He hasn't been seen in years.

Louis Perhaps I owe him release, my love. His palace at Vaux was the birth of my idea.

Maintenon I shall tell him so, when the moment comes.

Louis What moment? Oh ... (He weeps. The line of people kneel and they too weep, either because of their

affection for the monarch or because it is what they feel they have to do. Then the king stirs himself.) Marie-Adelaide! Bring your child! I have great need of blessing!

The courtiers at the foot of his bed are confused; should they stay, or go? Will the king be outraged if they move? Or angry if they don't? In come the Duc de Bourgogne, and his wife, Marie-Adelaide, a beautiful woman of 27, carrying a child, not quite two years of age, the future Louis 15.

M-Adel (to all, commanding) Kneel! I bring his majesty the continuity he desires!

She turns so the king can see the face of the next in the Bourbon line.

Maintenon (rising) Hold this moment in your minds as long as you shall live. This is perpetuity, and you are at its heart. Bricks and mortar, diamonds and fabrics, can stand the passage of time, but life is corruptible, and cannot last. It may be continued, with the blessing of fortune, but unless it can be handed on, it dies. Vive le roi!

All Vive le roi!

Louis Am I dying, then?

All Vive le roi!

Louis I am, it seems. (He weeps again.) Mazarin has undone me. I should call for last rites, but why?

The Duc de Bourgogne rushes from the room.

M-Adel He has been unwell ...

Maintenon You may go to him. Hand me the child.

Marie-Adelaide hands the future king to Mme Maintenon, then leaves, taking care to bow to the king.

Louis Marie! Don't go! You won't come back! Something's loose in my palace, its name is death, and it's come for me, not you! You are only safe, Marie, if you stay near, so death will know which of us to choose. Marie! Come back! You are not safe alone! It's in the palace, hunting!

Hunting horns and trumpets begin to blast, near and far, in the palace and its gardens.

Louis Le Notre! Clear the gardens! Set your men to search for the eternal enemy of man! He's there, pursuing Marie and the Duke. They must be brought to me. Only I can make them safe because only I am meant to die! Le Notre! Le Notre!

Louis shouts with all the voice that's left to him, but Le Notre doesn't appear. The screen shows the gardens, and a mighty blast of wind sets the trees and bushes swirling, then we see two groups of people carrying the bodies of (left) the Duc de Bourgogne and (right) Marie-Adelaide. The two carrying-parties stop as they cross, at the foot of the king's bed. Two doctors, wearing blood-stained white, come on from the left and two more from the right. When they show interest in the child of the two dead people, Mme Maintenon rises, the child in her arms.

Maintenon Doctors out! The child is mine, and will be protected. The king, too, is mine, and nobody may touch him. He will neither eat nor drink unless it is offered by my hand! Empty the room!

Everybody leaves.

Maintenon Your majesty ...

Louis I hear a voice ...

Maintenon ... and you don't know whether I am talking to you, or to this child ...

Louis ... or to us both ...

Maintenon ... or to the throne of France, whoever may be sitting there ...

Louis I am the throne, great lady, because I sit on it, and I sit on it because it is mine!

Maintenon I cannot hold back the river of time, my lord. It is in flood, and sweeping us away. Those doctors would take blood from this child, blood that must be handed on to another Louis, not yet born ...

Louis This palace I must give them, then ...

Maintenon Count Mazarin was right, there is nothing that's eternal ...

Louis There wasn't, until ...

Maintenon Time is powerful, my lord, perhaps all-powerful, but genius can outshine it ...

Louis ... briefly.

Maintenon ... briefly.

Louis My time has come, *ma dame*. You may hold my hand.

Maintenon I shall, my lord, but you must be patient for a moment yet. This little one will only be safe in my room, where those doctors are forbidden. They are walking death-worshippers, if they only knew it. Medicine indeed! Doctors of death! The child will be safe with me. The Bourbon line will go on!

Louis Swiftly, then, my love. A void is opening around me, and strange beauties are floating in to fill it.

Mme Maintenon leaves with the child Louis 15, and all the actors seen previously, whether on stage or the screen behind the king's bed, take up positions in the king's chamber, posing themselves formally while the screen above the king's head shows us vistas of the palace, the gardens, the sculptures and the lake. Mme Maintenon returns, without the child, and sits beside the king, in her chair, holding his hand as he dies. The audience is made aware of his passing, visually, by the fading of the pictures of Versailles on the screen, and their replacement by a formal picture of the child Louis 15, and also by the return of the two funeral parties of the Duc de Bourgogne and of Marie-Adelaide, whose bodies are laid on the floor a little way out from the foot of the king's bed.

In writing this libretto I have drawn on *Louis XIV and his world* by Ragnhild Hatton, Thames & Hudson, London, 1972, and *An Introduction to Seventeenth Century France* by John Lough, Longmans, London, 1954 for an overview of the period, and then, for more detail of the lives of the king and the women most affected by him, on *The Sun King and his loves* by Lucy Norton, The Folio Society, London, 1982. I visited Versailles in December 1982.

Missus Longa River

A huge fire is burning not far from the Mitchell River, in central north Queensland. By the light of the flames we can see the men of the area performing a dance, watched by their women and children, and by a small party from Mount Mulgrave, the station homestead. This party includes Charlie Maunsell (the Boss), his wife Evelyn, a black household worker known as Albert, his wife Mary, and Maggie and Kitty, two other black women. The performance, gently satirical, depicts a man prospecting for gold. The actions of the central figure include him prospecting with an imaginary pan, studying the results, and using an imaginary pair of tongs to pick out particles of gold and put them in an imaginary bottle. The bottle is proudly displayed as it fills with gold. Other 'prospectors' enter, make (silent) inquiries and cause the successful one to pretend that he's got nothing, causing his visitors to go away. This performance causes considerable amusement, but is interrupted when an unknown blackfella strides into the centre of the activities.

Evelyn Who's this?

Charlie Never seen this one before.

Evelyn What's he want?

Charlie Trouble, probably. It's ready for him.

He puts a hand on a revolver that's tucked into his belt.

Evelyn (referring to the natives) Our people can handle him.
Mary?

Mary Albert worried missus. You gonna let this feller dance?

Evelyn Charlie?

Charlie Why not? But tell him if he points that spear, he's a dead man.

Maggie says something to another of the local blacks, who says something to the myall, who drives the spear into the sand, then dances in the light of the fire. As far as we can tell, his dance is a declaration of ownership. He seems to be patrolling boundaries, making vigorous gestures with his arm as if cleansing his area of unwanted occupants. From time to time he touches the vertical spear and glances at those watching him, reserving his most scornful glances for Albert, his wife Mary, and then for Evelyn. One feels that he is resentful above all of Charlie, the white boss, but is unwilling to declare this openly because Charlie is armed. The myall dances with increasing vigour, then, as suddenly as he came, he's gone.

Maggie Corroboree go on now boss?

Charlie (dissenting) Supper now. Dance tomorrow, after we track that fella.

Evelyn Albert! You're shaking.

Albert That fella wanta kill me, missus. I no belong here.
Belonga nother place. Mary too.

Evelyn Where do you come from, Albert?

Albert Batjala country. Not supposed to be here.
 Evelyn Mary?
 Mary Olkolo country, missus. Coleman River. (She points north.) Not supposed to be here, neither. That spear for me if that fella get a chance.
 Evelyn You hear, Charlie?
 Charlie On this station, whitefella rules. You stay here, you safe. (He touches his gun.)
 Evelyn I didn't like the look of that man. He had evil in his eyes.
 Charlie Plenty of it. But fear too, did you notice? He knows who's in charge, here.
 Evelyn Is it us? Or that gun?
 Charlie Same thing in my mind. Supper, darling, then bed.

The fire dies down, and the gathering eats cake and drinks tea. The social arrangements of serving and pouring for each other make it clear that Charlie is, as he's called, The Boss, Evelyn has affectionate relationships with everybody, Albert and Mary are a devoted couple, and that Maggie and Kitty, though full of rogueish humour, are proud to be close to the managers of the station.

Charlie Bit of tracking tomorrow. See where he came from, where he's gone. They don't often come as close to the house as that.
 Evelyn Maggie? You know that man?
 Maggie Think he come from downa river. Come to have a look.
 Evelyn Kitty? What do you know?

Kitty Boss gotta frighten him away. He no good around here.
 Evelyn Frighten him? He was very frightened ... but it made him brave. We need to be careful, Charlie.
 Charlie (apparently cheerful) Bed time, everyone. Up at sunrise tomorrow. Don't forget that cup of tea, Maggie. Can't get breakfast down without a cup of tea.
 Maggie I bring in the morning, Boss. You and missus like it strong!
 Evelyn (laughing) Maggie, you know I have it weak. Two spoons of sugar, well stirred!
 Maggie Yes missus, me never wrong about tea!

Everyone disappears, and we find ourselves looking at the outline of the Mount Mulgrave homestead, a rough dwelling built on stumps lifting it high off the ground. We hear voices in the darkness.

Evelyn Charlie, aren't you coming to bed?
 Charlie Not in here.
 Evelyn Not in here? What do you mean?
 Charlie Spare room tonight. Put your pillow where you were lying.
 Evelyn My pillow? Why?
 Charlie Don't make a sound, and don't let yourself be seen.
 Evelyn Charlie? Why?

There's no reply. The audience is left to assume that the couple have changed rooms, presumably because Charlie suspects there

may be an attack, and doesn't mean to be where he's expected to be. In the darkness we hear the voices of Albert and Mary.

Mary You scared. Okay, we camp with the horses. They let us know if anybody near.

Albert I think that fella gone, but I dunno.

Movement, followed by silence, then two more voices, quiet, yet penetrating.

Kitty Might be we save the missus one day, Maggie.

Maggie Big trouble if anybody know.

Kitty Don't want to show anybody whose side we on.

Maggie Don't know whose side we on.

Kitty That fella kill the Missus, kill Albert, if he can.

Maggie Anything happen, p'liceman gunna blame us.

Kitty Anything happen, everybody blame us. Why we not stop him?

Maggie (confronting an insoluble problem) Stop him? Huh!

Silence returns to the homestead. Time passes, and first light creeps into the sky.

Charlie Up now love. Other bed.

Evelyn This is all a mystery to me.

Charlie Hop in. You've never been anywhere else.

Evelyn (half understanding) Maggie'll find us here.

Charlie That's all she needs to know.

Evelyn We want them to be honest for us, yet we're not quite straight with them.

Charlie Straight! The idea is to appear straight, while you're wriggling like a snake!

Silence again, then movement from the kitchen of the homestead to the main bedroom.

Maggie Boss! Missus! Gotya tea! Two spoon, missus, stir like crazy. Worn out the spoon, gotta get a new one!

Evelyn We'll carve it out of wood, Maggie. Later this morning.

Maggie (laughing merrily) Big spoon then! Make jam with him, missus!

Charlie Off you go, Maggie. See you later.

Maggie (obediently) Yes Boss.

Evelyn Are you going bush today?

Charlie Tracking. Won't find much. He'll cross the stream a few times, slip away on rock. He knows what he's doing.

Evelyn What is he doing, exactly?

Charlie He'd like to get rid of us, for being on his land. He knows we're armed, so he's got his eyes on Albert, and Mary, because they're not from here.

Evelyn Is there only him, or are there more?

Charlie Hard to say. He didn't stay long, he was just nosing around. Seeing how the land lies ...

Evelyn How does the land lie, Charlie?

Charlie Bloody hard land. His mob never did anything with it. But they don't like losing it, especially the bucks.

Evelyn The women are so good. They drive me mad, but they make me laugh, and I don't think about black and white, when we're doing things together.

Charlie The women don't laugh when their men are around. They're watching. That's how you know.

Evelyn Know what, Charlie?

Charlie There's trouble around. The women go quiet. Their minds are elsewhere.

Evelyn Maggie always knows when you're coming home. Half an hour before I do.

Charlie They pick up signals we don't know about. It's clever, and it's dangerous ...

Evelyn Dangerous? Why?

Charlie If there's a fight, they've got the advantage. They know the place better than we do.

Evelyn Not on this station, surely?

Charlie Everywhere. You have this advantage, darling, that they love you. Work it for all it's worth. (He leaves the homestead to get his horse.) Harry!

Harry (a station worker we didn't see the previous night)
Here, Boss!

Charlie Right on time!

Harry Been riding most of the night. It's a good time to ride.

Charlie Didn't see a myall, did you? Somewhere near the river?

Harry Not a sign of him, Boss.

Charlie and Harry leave to go searching. Evelyn takes a watering can to some bushes in her garden, then Maggie and Kitty emerge from the kitchen.

Kitty Full moon tonight.

Maggie Won't be nobody around.

Kitty He come back. Won't be on his own.

Maggie Be a mob, you reckon. Could be.

Kitty Maybe not tonight. Dunno when.

Maggie When the Boss go away. Missus on her own.

Kitty Boss leave a gun. Albert know how to shoot.

Maggie (scornfully) Albert! Brave fella, hide down a hole!

Kitty (amused) Stick him rump up in the air.

Maggie Getta spear, right up his bum!

Kitty (only a whisper) You know his name, that myall fella?

Maggie (whispering also) Secret name, not allowed to say.

Kitty Useta live here?

Maggie He never live here, but it part of his country.

Kitty Our country too, Maggie. What we gonna do?

Maggie Wait and see. Nuthin we can do.

Evelyn comes into sight again.

Evelyn I'm going to make bread in a minute. The oven should be hot. We'll use all our tins, we'll make enough for the camp.

Maggie They like that, missus. You want me to wipe the tins?

Evelyn Thanks Maggie, yes. I'll be with you in a minute.

She goes in, and finds Albert looking around.

Evelyn Albert? What are you doing here?

Albert These shutters, missus. Easy to close.

Evelyn Yes?

Albert (showing her) Whssshh! Drop this bolt in here. (He demonstrates.) Close the room, real quick.

Evelyn I know all this, Albert. Why are you telling me what I know?

Albert (pointing around) Close'em all, real quick. Then open this fella (a small opening, not far from the opening he's just closed), shoot'em any fella come close.

Evelyn There's nobody coming close, Albert. You know that. I know it too. Charlie's told me how to know.

Albert Boss ride aroun' whole station. Away a lot. That when the myall fella come.

Evelyn (sensing danger, but not very sure) Albert, if you ever hear the myall fella coming, you let me know. We might have to do something, and I'm not sure what it will be.

Albert They come for me and Mary.

Evelyn ... because you're in their country. That's what they say. It's my property now, Albert, mine and Charlie's. Well, we don't own it, but we manage it for the owners. They're a long way away, so they leave the job to us.

Albert Long way away no good. When myall fella come, they the only one here, 'cept you and me.

Evelyn And a rifle, Albert, let's not forget that.

Albert Me good shot, missus. The Boss teach me how.

Evelyn Then I'll be relying on you, Albert, because I'm not very good with a gun.

Albert (showing her the gun openings again) Shoot'em when they come close.

Evelyn I don't want to hear any more Albert. I am going to make bread.

She heads for the kitchen, Albert goes outside, time passes, and we see Evelyn, Maggie and Kitty heading for the blacks' camp near the river, carrying baskets of bread. There is a joyful outcry from the black women and children, out of sight, then the bush thickens, and we come across The Boss and Harry Louden, sitting by their fire, drinking tea. Their horses are tethered nearby.

Harry The missus know where we are, Boss, if she needs to find us?

Charlie If she's in need, I'll see the tracks, and get home in time.

Harry Tracks. We're all blackfellas, out here.

Charlie We need to be. There's duffers down the river, got a few head of their own, so it looks like they're running a station.

Harry That why you only have one set of yards?

Charlie If I had another set of yards, they'd have one man watching me while the rest of them were branding my stock. In my own bloody yards!

Harry We're on our own out here. Us and the blacks ...

Charlie What about the blacks?

Harry I never know where I am with'em. They're all smiles, but they don't care about me.

Charlie Human life is cheap, Harry. Nothing you can do will get you very far.

Harry Sleeping under a bush, leaving our blankets by the fire.

Charlie Better the blankets get a spear than me.

Harry They're smart, aren't they, not to have a home.

Charlie I've got a home to protect. I'm on endless patrol. Evelyn doesn't understand.

Harry She's got the gins on her side, she'll be all right.

Charlie That's what I hope.

He stands, Harry stands, and they move away. The bush seems empty for a while, then we see ten or a dozen black men, slipping through in a stealthy way, carrying weapons. Next we see Evelyn, outside the station homestead.

Evelyn There's men about. The women have gone quiet.

At the edge of the bush she sees, and we see, the group of ten or a dozen blackfellas, carrying weapons, talking amiably among themselves, and to the blacks who live on the station.

Evelyn (very quietly) Maggie? Who are they?

Maggie (also quietly) Wild fella. You be all right, missus.

Evelyn I'd better go inside.

She does so. She stands some way back from a window, so she can see without being seen. One of the black men comes to Maggie, who greets him warmly enough.

Maggie Hi!

Myall (after a lengthy statement in the language of the Wakaman people) Where missus?

Maggie She take bread to the camp. Then she go downa river.

The black man resumes talking in his own language. Albert rushes in from another room. He is carrying the rifle, and he's terrified.

Albert Shut'em alla doors, missus. Shut'em tight. Quick!

Evelyn (after a moment's thought) Don't be silly. That would tell them Maggie was lying. They'd know we were here.

Albert Shoot out the little holes!

Evelyn We'd be dead in a minute, and Maggie too. Kitty ...

Kitty joins Maggie and the myall with his weapons. We see her pointing away from the house, towards the river.

Myall Where Albert?

Kitty Downa river with missus. Catch'em fish.

Evelyn (seeing the myall looking curiously at the house) Into the bedroom.

Albert, followed by Evelyn, enters the bedroom, carrying the rifle which he's too petrified to use. Evelyn, seeing the myall approaching, and realising that Albert is no use with the gun he's

carrying, indicates the bed, which has a quilt draped over it and hanging almost to the floor. Albert gets under it, out of sight, still gripping the gun.

Myall (in the house by now) Might be here!

Evelyn takes a deep breath, and slips under the bed, hidden, like Albert, by the quilt. The myall enters the room, carrying his weapons, and looks around. He steps across until he's beside the bed, his feet within touching distance of his intended victims.

Maggie Missus longa river. Albert gotta net. You catch'em, you gettem fish!

The myall thinks this is amusing, and he leaves the house. Evelyn and Albert remain out of sight. We can see Maggie and Kitty pointing to the river, we hear the men talking in Wakaman language, then we see them breaking into the station store, and coming out with things they fancy. After a time, they disappear into the bush. Kitty keeps watch, and Maggie enters the house.

Maggie (barely more than a whisper) All right now, missus, him gone now.

Evelyn slides out from under the bed, looking up at Maggie, who helps her to her feet.

Evelyn Thank you, Maggie, for more than I can say.

Maggie Out you git, Albert. Don't forget the gun.

Albert crawls out too, dragging the gun behind him.

Evelyn Have you got the safety catch on, Albert? It's important, you know.

Albert Never take it off, missus. Boss teach me that.

Maggie Them fella make a mess of the store. Pinch a lotta stuff.

Evelyn I'm alive, Maggie, because of you and Kitty. I'll never forget what you did for me today.

Maggie Them bad fella. Dunno how to do anybody any good.

Evelyn They're your people, Maggie. But you knew how to do Albert and me some good.

Kitty (calling from outside) Gotta clean up dis mess. Boss be angry when he get home.

Evelyn I hope he might be a little bit relieved as well.

Kitty He not wanta lose you, missus. He say we gotta take care of you.

Evelyn You did that, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Maggie Albert, you go find Mary. She nick off somewhere, quick bloody smart. Gotta clean up this store.

Albert goes, while Maggie, Kitty and Evelyn turn their attention to the store.

This libretto is an adaptation of events narrated in *S'pose I die: the Evelyn Maunsell story*, by Hector Holthouse, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1973, based on recollections written by Evelyn Maunsell, one of the pioneers of central north Queensland, and her conversations with Hector Holthouse.

The Emperor's Bed

We are in the emperor's palace at Beijing, and before us is a very large kang. Close to it are two groups of people who are attending a conference at Peking University. As the opera begins, Professor Bo is talking to those on the left.

Bo This was the emperor's bed, where he entertained in public.

Heather As opposed to sitting on his throne? (pointing off stage)

Bo A kang is not only a bed. Servants light a fire underneath, and the kang is warm. The emperor could sit here, and entertain ...

Heather Entertain?

Weng (to the other group) In China, a dwelling is structured according to the family living within its walls. This is not obvious with poor dwellings because they are small. Wealthy families, however, have great spaces so people may approach their hosts with suitable formality.

John (being clever) After which they did a kowtow!

Weng If you look out here, you see a courtyard. Petitioners wishing to reach the emperor would cross the yard on their knees ...

Alison On those bricks?

Weng When they got to the steps, a guard would ask their business.

John The guard decided whether they got in?

Weng He would have instruction, of course. He might give their message to the officer in charge ...

Alison Would he pass it on?

Weng It is possible. (smiling) Beijing is cold, there were fires to warm the soldiers ...

John ... and get rid of anything not wanted?

Weng The emperor was busy. There are only so many minutes in a day!

Alison How much? (referring to the bribe required)

Weng shrugs his shoulders.

Heather (to Bo) Did the emperor receive petitions here?

Bo No. On his throne. (pointing off)

Heather So who did he receive here? Members of his family?

Bo Certainly. (after a pause, because he's letting something out) Also, when it pleased him, his favorite cucumbines.

Heather Cucumbines?

Trevor (whispering) Concubines.

The visitors, on both sides of the kang, overhear this correction and are very amused.

Visitors Cucumbines! Concubines! Cucumbines! Concubines!

Bo For a woman, it was great honour to serve a man of high rank.

Alison (quietly) They never talk about men serving women, do they?

John Perhaps they never did.

Weng Women of high rank have many servants, who must obey. People of high rank are served. The emperor is highest of all.

Bo And must be obeyed. A household would fall if it incurred his displeasure ...

Weng This I was telling you last night, in my paper.

Anthony (on Weng's side) The Story of the Stone ...

Weng The Dream of the Red Chamber!

Neil (on Bo's side) A chamber can't have a dream.

Weng A chamber can be filled with people whose minds are filled with dreams.

Anthony Life on earth is a dream, is that what you're saying?

Weng That is what our best known book teaches us.

Trevor What happened when the emperor dreamed? Did that become a reality?

Bo His dreams were his desires, and his desires were his dreams.

Neil And his reality too?

Bo coughs, and lets his eyes roam across the kang beside them.

Visitors (very amused) Cucumbines! Concubines!
Cucumbines! Concubines!

Trevor What's this?

He is referring to the appearance of a number of gorgeously attired young women who have entered and placed themselves about the kang.

Women Celestial desires ...

Emperor (appearing) Let wine be served!

Servants rush about, pouring cups of wine for the emperor and his women.

Emperor The heavens look kindly on our desires! (All drink.) Bring the robe of concealment! (Servants bring a lavish roll of fabric to the emperor, and walk around him, enclosing him in a shoulder-high wall. He looks at the women.) There is one who has never yet enjoyed the warmth of my imperial kang. (He gestures, and Yuan-chun, understanding that she has been chosen, approaches the emperor via some steps with a reticence which amuses him. He addresses the servants who have him encircled.) Let her in! (Yuan-chun is allowed inside the circling fabric, and she stands humbly in the presence of her emperor.) Your name?

Yuan-chun Yuan-chun.

Emperor Yuan-chun is beautiful, but there is beauty of the outside, and beauty within.

Yuan-chun Shall I disrobe, celestial one?

Emperor Show me your body and I shall see your soul.

Yuan-chun disrobes, though we cannot see this, because she is hidden by the fabric held by the servants, who have their eyes away from the emperor and his concubine.

Anthony (of the emperor) He's quite respectful of her ...

Alison (suspiciously) Of them?

Anthony As long as he's interested in them ...

Alison ... until he's had them a few times, and he wants somebody new!

Anthony There's nothing new about wanting somebody new!

Emperor There is a soul inside you ...

Yuan-chun It is quivering because it knows there is a soul in search of it.

Emperor (to the servants) Make ready my bed!

Servants place blankets and pillows to one side of the kang, then the servants whose fabric encircles the emperor and Yuan-chun move to the bedding, the imperial couple is given time enough to cover themselves and engage in lovemaking, and then the servants step back dramatically, the other concubines and servants clap and bow, and the emperor and Yuan-chun make love, sometimes vigorously, while at other times they lie somnolently in each other's arms as the dialogue of the visitors goes on around them.

Bo Some concubines only enjoyed one visit to the kang, while others were never honoured at all.

Heather What happened to them?

Bo (pointing offstage) When the emperor was asleep, they could sleep. When he was busy with affairs of

state, they played games. If they were the daughters of good families, they could go home, once a year, for a few days.

Neil To keep up the connection?

Bo Family life, as you know, is everything to us. Families who had provided the emperor with a concubine were honoured. Their daughter who was a cucumbine ...

Visitors Concubine, cucumbine, concubine!

Bo ... outranked her father, and was equal to her grandfather, so highly esteemed was she for having been chosen for ... (He points.)

Visitors ... the emperor's bed!

Yuan-chun (apparently in ecstasy, though whether or not this is real we cannot be sure) Aaaaaaaahhh!

The emperor sits up in bed, and the servants and the other concubines clap daintily.

Emperor Yuan-chun has pleased me. No other partner will be required tonight. You may watch a little longer if it pleases you.

The servants and concubines know that it is their duty to stay, observing and applauding, until a signal allows them to leave.

Trevor How long did they last?

Bo Some were allowed to leave. Others grew in honour as they became precious to their master. These controlled the new ones who brought him new pleasure.

Neil And how were these new ones found?

Bo Families offered their daughters. The emperor's men were familiar with his desires. And, of course, as he travelled his kingdom, his eyes fell on those who pleased him, and eunuchs visited the family to make arrangements.

Heather Where were their rooms?

Bo (pointing) There were many rooms for many girls ...

Heather Women!

Bo Concubines whose honour it was to please heaven's representative on earth.

Anthony That's a fascinating idea ...

Emperor Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Yuan-chun Aaaaaaaaahhh!

Emperor Aaaaaaaaahhh!!!

Yuan-chun Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Anthony He did it while everyone looked on?

Weng As I tried to show in my talk, the distinction you make between private person and public one is not a distinction we make.

Anthony It's central to us. What, then, is central to you?

Weng I will try to tell you. I will use this kang. The emperor and Yuan-chun can perhaps sleep for a time. (He's instructing them, politely, to do so.) Yuan-chun had a brother, Bao-yu ...

A young man puts on white mourning robes, and a simple coronet, before climbing the steps to the kang.

Weng Bao-yu was born with a piece of jade in his mouth. This jade is lost a number of times in the story, and found again, and when it finally disappears, Bao-yu has to return to the heavenly kingdom where he lived before he came to this earth.

Anthony So there's another reality, out of sight to those who are trapped in this one?

Three of the concubines step up onto the kang.

Dai-yu Oft times he sought out what would make him sad;

Bao-chai Sometimes an idiot seemed and sometimes mad. Though outwardly a handsome sausage skin, He proved to have but sorry meat within.

Aroma A harum-scarum, to all duty blind,
A doltish mule, to study disinclined;
His acts outlandish and his nature queer;
Yet not a whit cared he how folk might jeer!

Another man steps onto the kang.

Jia-zheng Bao-yu! Where is that wretched boy?

Bao-yu Father! (He kneels.)

Jia-zheng Get up boy! I wish to instruct you in your duties.

Bao-yu Father?

Jia-zheng The tide is turning in our affairs. I am growing old, and I have been forced to admit all the things that I have never had the heart to do. We are poor, and

our servants have grown rich. We are trapped in ceremony: a living lie. We must close whole sections of our houses, and stop the endless giving of presents that has become a ritual for us. We do not know how to face the future because we are trapped in the past, when we had the emperor's favour ...

Emperor (tenderly) Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Yuan-chun (sweetly) Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Bao-yu responds to these sounds of love.

Bao-yu I fear, father, that I am not the man to solve these problems because, you see, I think that all the stupidity of the human race has been gathered into its male members ...

Alison and Heather start clapping at these remarks.

... while women, who are honoured, but do not rule, incorporate the virtues of our race: sweetness, clarity of mind, delicacy of feeling, intuitive understanding, appreciation of beauty ...

Jia-zheng (angry) You are telling me nothing that I do not know! And I am telling you that you have been born to put this household to rights after many years of ill-judged spending. We are not worthy of what we have inherited! There, that's the problem. What's your solution? I am old and I have no answers, and my generation is dying, and everything that is

hopeless in our lives is my bequest to you. (He leaves the kang in a rage.) It's up to you to fix!

Bao-yu is left in a wretched state.

Bao-yu (to the three women) What can I do?

Bao-chai Sleep. Compose yourself. Take counsel in the morning.

Dai-yu Read poetry in the garden. Every problem has been encountered, and dealt with, before we arrived on earth.

Aroma I shall make you all some tea.

Servants at the edge of the kang pass up the tea, and bowls, to

Aroma

Bao-yu Tea, tea, tea. (as they sip) Tea is ceremony. Ceremony is importance, measured in our relationships to each other. I am useless because I love three women, and I never get a chance to talk to my sister ...

Yuan-chun (tenderly) Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Bao-yu What right have I to be drinking tea?

Aroma Must you always be trying to break some rule?

Bao-yu Why must there be rules to bind me? I came into this world with a jade in my mouth. It reminds me that I've lived before ...

Dai-yu Does it encourage you to break other people's hearts?

Anthony (to Weng, and everybody) You can always tell, by the way someone asks a question, whether or not they think there's an answer.

Weng Bao-yu slips out of the book at the end because he's the one who knows best that we are surrounded by nonsense and cannot distinguish it from wisdom ...

Bo Humans can understand luxury and grandeur, but wisdom comes from emptying out the soul ...

Bao-yu (wretchedly) Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Dai-yu The art of living is to join the heavenly world with the everyday. The heavenly world must rule. The spirit must direct all coarser emotion, creating harmony. Only when the soul is at peace with itself can the spirit shine.

Bao-yu That cannot happen on this earth!

Dai-yu Then I wish to leave. There is no place for me if I cannot regulate my life as I say.

Aroma (to Bao-yu) If you love her, young master, you must live as she says.

Bao-yu I want to, but it's impossible, so there's nothing else to do but go back where I came from.

Bao-chi Your father has put a great responsibility on your shoulders. And when you marry, there will be more.

Aroma (to Bao-yu) Your family has settled on Lady Bao for your wife.

Bao-yu I love three women. How can I be tied to one?

Aroma I am only a maid ...

Bao-yu Your hands make harmony inside me. Without you I am discord and have no peace of mind.

Aroma It is my job to see that you are content ...

Dai-yu None of us are jealous, Bao-yu. We have to support each other because you will not do it for us. If you were forceful we would protect ourselves, but you are an emptiness, and we hold each other from falling in.

Bao-chi You value none of us so much as you value that jade.

Bao-yu It links me to that other world. When I lose the jade, I am tied to this world and the only way to get back to where I belong is to die.

Bao-chi What's wrong with life on earth? You'll be back in heaven soon enough. Dai-yu is right; you should try to make this world like the one we came from. You owe it to your father, to all your family, to try.

Bao-yu I try, and I am nothing but a wretched failure.

Dai-yu Then there is no hope for me. I shall go to the garden and find my own bed, and lie down, hoping never to rise.

Bao-yu Dai-yu! Don't leave me!

Dai-yu You have dishonoured me in not letting our love be the cloud we live on. I do not belong on this earth and wish to leave it. Soon.

She walks off the kang and rejoins the servants and concubines.

Aroma (to Bao-chi) The family wish to economise. They are getting rid of servants, and an offer has been made for me. A husband has been arranged ...

Bao-yu No! Never leave me, Aroma! What would I be without you?

Bao-chi What you have always been. Irresponsible, dependent, demanding everything that others have, in their pockets and their hearts, and giving nothing in return.

Bao-yu What you say is true.

Bao-chi You must study for the imperial exams. You must cover yourself in glory, and rescue the family's name ...

Bao-yu I will!

Bao-chi There must be a moment when we are proud because of you! Can you do this, and be a man at last?

While Bao-yu considers this, some servants encircle him with a white cloth so that only his head can be seen.

Weng (commenting) He sat for the exam. From the whole of China he was ranked at number seven! And then he disappeared.

Alison Disappeared?

Weng The exams were over and he went to the Dragon Gate. That was where he was last seen. The family realised that he'd gone back to the kingdom that surrounds this earthly one.

Neil And what, I'd like to know, is that?

Bo There is much for you to read, and then you will know.

Neil Where do I look if I want to see this other place?

Emperor Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Yuan-chun My celestial lord?

Emperor Yuan-chun?

Yuan-chun Do I please you, my lord?

Emperor You must stay out of my sight until the sun has set, so that my desire is fresh again, tonight.

Yuan-chun Shall I leave you now, celestial one?

Emperor I will rise. We will walk together.

Servants surround them with the fabric that concealed them earlier on, they rise from their bedding and are escorted off the kang, and out of sight.

Bo Greatness disappears. The emperor will find another love.

Aroma (to the audience) Bao-yu has disappeared. If you read the story of my life you will find that a husband was given me, although I wished to die. He was tender, and I lived long. I died in peace. But that is far ahead. Bao-yu disappeared, I was lost, the family handed me to those who wanted me for marriage. None of us can live for our own purposes, except the emperor, and he must live for all. I wanted to die, and I had to live.

She steps off the kang and rejoins those around it.

Bao-chi I was obedient. I married him from love and duty. I did everything I should, and what difference did it make? None at all. It would have been better if I had never lived.

She too leaves the kang, leaving only Bao-yu, who is scarcely visible any more.

Bao-yu I will never see again those who have lived with me. My father, too, and my mother, are lost to me. I am invisible. Where do I go now? I will take my jade, and walk out of this world, and follow the jade's instructions, and when it tells me to stop, I will throw it down, and rest beside it, and find what happens next. Life is a mysterious journey and I do not think there is anybody who knows when and where it ends. There are those who say we live again, and others who say that we change when we attain perfection. Perfection? That's too far away to think about. I think I will follow the emperor ... he seemed to know where he was going ...

Bao-yu leaves the kang and disappears. As he does so, the emperor returns, beckoning to the servants who encircled him with fabric when he joined Yuan-chun to himself. They encircle him again as he inspects his concubines. He runs his eyes over them, and then he beckons. A woman climbs onto the kang, is enfolded by the fabric held by the servants, and is taken by the emperor to the bedding at the edge of the kang. This is done a little hurriedly and her clothing litters the kang behind the servants. Lovemaking begins.

Emperor Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Concubine Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Heather All he ever did was use them!

Alison I know we should respect other people's customs, but this makes my guts turn over!

Anthony They're so different from us that our judgements don't apply.

Heather What sort of an argument's that? You've stripped yourself of the right to criticise, and if you can't criticise ...

Alison ... then you can't force anyone to do better, and the world stays the same as it always was. Spare me that!

Bo Whatever makes you think the world has ever changed?

Weng (looking at his watch) Our driver will be looking for us. We should be getting back to the hotel.

As they leave, they hear the emperor and his concubine making love.

Emperor Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Concubine Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

This libretto draws on, and freely adapts, *The Story of the Stone*, also known as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, by Cao Xueqin and Gao E, in five volumes, translated by David Hawkes and John Minford, Penguin Books, London, 1973 – 1986. I was also influenced by a visit to the Forbidden City, Beijing, in 1998.

The PM's Chair

Two men, Simon and Alex, are at one side of the stage. On the other side, and somewhat higher, is a large chair, with the Australian flag behind it and a bowl of flowers beside it.

Alex Who's your witness?

Simon Denis. My numbers man. (Enter Denis. He takes a seat near Simon.) And you?

Alex Bob. (Enter Bob. He sits close to Alex, and starts taking notes, which causes Denis to do the same.)

Simon Okay, let's start. The way I see it, we either tear the party to pieces, or we work together. Simple as that.

Alex There's got to be something in it for both of us.

Simon We stick together or we sink together.

Alex That's about how it is.

Simon What are the numbers, boys?

Bob According to me, you've got fifty eight, Alex has fifty four, and there's three that haven't made up their minds.

Denis Well, they're not saying ...

Bob Bastards!

Alex Too close to call.

Simon Close enough, but pretty clear, in my mind ...

Alex You think you've got the numbers.

Simon A slight edge, you've got to agree.

Alex The word is 'agree'. What are we agreed on?

Simon We'll go to the next election as a team, we'll win, I'll be the leader, you'll be deputy, with the portfolio of your choice, and after a term and a half, I'll retire. How's that sound?

Alex A term and a half?

Simon No more no less.

Alex Bob?

Bob It's up to you.

Alex Denis?

Denis I think you could call it a fair split of the spoils.

Alex How do I know you're going to do it?

Simon You've brought a witness, and so have I. There are four honourable men in this room. We've got a deal in mind. What do you say?

Alex Read what you've written, Bob.

Bob Simon Carruthers and Alexander Gibson have this day agreed, in the presence of Denis Marshallsaye and Bob McMillan, that they will work on a unity ticket to gain government at the next election, after which Simon Carruthers will be PM. Alexander Gibson will take the ministry of his choice, and after one and a half terms in office, Simon Carruthers will step down ...

Alex Leave parliament!

Bob (after looking at the others, makes the change) ... will leave parliament, allowing Alexander Gibson, subject to party approval, to become PM.

All four The chair! (A light shines on it.)

Simon Signatures, gentlemen.

Alex And a copy!

Denis Shit no. You don't want things like this lying around.

Bob It'll go in a sealed vault at the bank, and it'll take our four signatures to get it out.

Alex I'll agree to that.

Simon Okay by me. (holding out his hand to Alex) Long life, and good success!

Alex The next PM! We're home and hosed, I reckon.

Denis It's only a matter of winning the hearts and minds of voters.

Bob A piece of piss!

Alex Hang on, who's taking the agreement to the bank?

Denis Me.

Alex All right, I'm trusting you. I hope I'm not making a mistake.

Denis No worries, mate!

The four men separate; Bob is the last to leave.

Bob When they call you mate, they're gonna doublecross. When they say no worries, you've got plenty.

As he leaves, a light on the other side of the stage shows us Max and Milly, two voters, or, if you wish, two citizens. They are watching the news on a large screen.

News At a party meeting in Canberra, Simon Carruthers was elected leader, unopposed, and Alexander Gibson his deputy, also unopposed.

Milly They've done a deal.

Max What's in it for Gibson?

Milly Shadow treasurer. Doesn't sound much for an ambitious man.

Max Only hard work. Unless ...

Milly Unless?

Max They think they're going to win. First bloke'll have a term in office, then he'll quit ...

Milly ... leaving the other one to take over.

Max That'll be what it is.

Milly They're shits, aren't they?

Max The whole lot of them are shits. The funny thing is, I don't think many of them think they'll be shits, when they stand for parliament.

Milly So what happens?

Max Bloody good question, darling. What happens?

Max and Milly are suddenly overwhelmed by the appearance of all the commentators and vote-displaying paraphernalia of the national tally room. Names of electorates keep coming up on a huge screen, with numbers updated by the latest counting. Presiding is a broadcaster called Kerry, who has two experts on either side of

him, Mick, Robert, Barry and Michele, and also, with his nose in his screen, Tony the number-cruncher.

Kerry There's a swing against the government. Will it bring them down? Robert?

Robert One moment, Kerry. (He takes a phone call and talks animatedly, but quietly.)

Kerry Mick? What do you think?

Mick We're holding up pretty well in Queensland. I think that's going to be the key.

Michele In Sydney and Melbourne, you're not doing so well.

Mick It's a matter of which booths get their results in. The smaller the booth, the quicker they are with counting. Bigger booths get to the tally room later.

Robert (off the phone by now) You've been kidding yourself about Queensland, Mick. The numbers we've seen are from coastal cities. The outlying regions aren't in yet, but they're starting to come and the figures we've been seeing (indicating the screens behind him) are going to swing. I'm predicting the government will lose seven seats in Queensland.

Kerry Seven? You sound pretty sure.

Robert It's sure as hell going to happen.

Tony (working his keyboard, eyes on his screen) It's starting to happen. Quite a development. I don't think anyone was expecting this ...

Kerry While we're waiting for news from Queensland, which looks like it's going to be the deciding state, we

might see how the leaders are getting on. First, the Prime Minister ...

Numbers come up on the screen, raw numbers followed by a bar graph of the parties' votes.

Kerry Looks pretty safe. No change there. Now his deputy, Mary McLachlan, how's she getting on?

More numbers and bar graph.

Tony Swing against Mary McLachlan of one point eight per cent. She holds the seat by a margin of four point four, so she's right unless the swing goes further ...

Kerry Simon Carruthers, in the seat of Gorton?

Numbers and bar graph come up.

Kerry Swing to Carruthers of one point six per cent. Looks like the party picked a winner there.

Robert Alexander Gibson?

Kerry Alexander Gibson?

Tony (busy with his keyboard, calling up the numbers which appear on the big screen) Hello, this is interesting! Alexander Gibson's got a swing of six point four per cent. Biggest swing of the night.

Kerry He might be starting to wonder if he made the right call when he let Carruthers have the running ... (The PM's chair glows under an intense light.) Let's go back a bit, what do we know about Queensland now, Tony?

Tony It's gone against the government. Here's the figures for the whole state. Looks a disaster, doesn't it, but it's actually worse when you examine it, seat by seat ...

These numbers and associated bar graphs appear on the screen behind the commentators.

Michele You were right about those seven seats, Robert. It could be eight.

Robert (triumphantly) Or nine!

Barry (getting off his phone) I'm only conceding five so far. It's not as bad as it looks.

Mick Nowhere near as bad. Postal votes used to favour the wealthy, but not any more. We've been telling our supporters to vote early. Those votes will cut in later and go against this swing, as you (looking at Robert) like to call it.

Tony No, the swing's there clearly enough. And you're right about postal votes, they don't favour either side very much these days, certainly not enough to overturn a swing like we're seeing here tonight ...

Max and Milly are watching in their lounge room.

Max The government's gone.

Milly They all have to fall some day, and it's good when they do.

Max You wanted the government to lose? They've done a bit for us.

Milly Once they've been in power for a while they forget who put them there. One or two terms, then out! That's what I think.

Max You're hard, love, but maybe you're right.

Kerry (to the nation) Yes, it's looking pretty clear now. The government's crashed in Queensland. I understand the PM has phoned the opposition leader to tell him there's a vacant chair ... (A light glows on the PM's chair again.) ... so it's a matter of waiting for the incoming leader to claim victory ...

Alex (out of sight; most miserable) Aaaaaaaahhh!

Kerry What was that? Anyone hear anything?

Robert The cry of a dying government!

Michele It didn't sound like that to me.

Tony (as they all look at him) When you've got an election, there's disappointment all over the place, while others are over the moon with joy. Is that a good thing, or a bad thing? Who knows? Only the numbers are sure!

Kerry Well, the numbers are with Simon Carruthers, and here he is now, live from the Eldorado Town hall, not far from where he's been holed up, watching. Simon Carruthers, the next prime Minister of Australia!

Alex Aaaaaaaahhh!

This cry of pain is only just heard because Simon and his entourage appear on the big screen to the sound of clapping and cheering.

People are waving. Simon takes the microphone and everything settles.

Simon Men and women of Australia, I thank you. To remind you of how special this result is, I want to say that many people give a lifetime of service in politics without getting to where I am tonight. My party's won a great victory, with a landslide in Queensland. I thank the voters of that state, and voters everywhere, for the confidence they've shown in us. I'm proud of our team, in particular my loyal, true, and trusty deputy, Alexander Gibson, without whom none of us would be where we are tonight!

Alex (heart rendingly, and dying away in a feeble sigh) Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Simon And now a promise! Despite all the divisions, the passions and excitement of a political campaign, I give you my word that mine will be a government for all Australians! For all Australians, each and every one!

Max Turn him off for Christ's sake!

Milly (switching off Simon and all the people in the tally room) They all say that, don't they. They think they're being humble, and when they say it, you can see their heads starting to swell.

Max Well, if we've got to have that mob in power, I'd rather Carruthers as leader than that other bastard ...

Milly Gibson?

Max That's him. Though if what you were saying is right, he'll be PM in a couple of years. It'll all be fixed ...

We see that despite Milly switching off the coverage, Simon is making his way up the steps to the PM's chair. A light shines on him, and the man is glowing with pride in his achievement.

Milly We do the voting, they do the deals.

Simon Let's see what it's like. (He sits, and his satisfaction is apparent. Then a thought occurs to him.) Ah, Denis?

Denis (appearing to one side) PM?

Simon Just remind me about that agreement we signed ...

Denis The bank sent it back with a form, if you remember. Four signatures. It can't be released unless the same four people sign.

Simon (with obvious hypocrisy) We may have made a mistake there. If one of us died, for instance, it could never be released.

Denis If one of us didn't want it released, the bank can't let it out.

Simon (lying through his teeth) We didn't think it through very carefully, did we. On a thing like that, it may not be easy to get everyone to agree. It could be stuck in that vault ...

Both ... forever!

Simon Have you given any thought to the ministry you'd like to hold?

Denis (surprised) Ministry?

Simon No need to be modest. Your abilities are known ...
 Denis (thoughtfully) Ministry ...
 Simon Give it some thought. But don't be long because I've got to announce my cabinet by the end of the week.
 Denis Give me five minutes, PM, and I'll get back to you, no worries. (He disappears.)
 Simon When they tell you no worries, you've got something to worry about. (As Denis reappears.) That was quick!
 Denis I spoke to my wife. I'd like foreign affairs.
 Simon (coarsely) I bet you didn't say that to your wife!
 Denis She said it to me!
 Simon (quietly) If either of you has an affair, keep it under wraps. What people don't know doesn't bother them. (loudly) It's yours! A high office for a man of high principle. A great servant of the party!
 Denis Wonderful news, PM. I'm right behind you, every which way, you can be sure of that! (He leaves.)
 Simon Behind me? Be buggered. I want'em in front where I can see'em! You there, Alex?
 Alex (appearing) Congratulations, PM.
 Simon Thank you. And let me say, in the privacy of this office ...
 Alex How long since it was checked for bugs?
 Simon According to the last man who sat in this chair, it was checked regularly.
 Alex He would tell you that, wouldn't he?

Simon He had no more wish to be overheard than we do. But I'll have it checked again.
 Alex It might be better if we took a walk outside.
 Simon We'd be seen by everybody in the building. No. (He's almost shuddering at the idea.) I was going to say, there's a piece of paper in the bank, with four signatures. It's very, very safe.
 Alex Will it be honoured?
 Simon There's no way anyone can get out of it.
 Alex That's reassuring. We've got to work closely, so it's good that I'm certain of your trust, and you of mine.
 Simon Your mate Bob. What ministry do you want for him?
 Alex Bob'd like Finance. I think he'd do it well.
 Simon Good thinking. That's the place for Bob, Finance. Couldn't have wished for better.
 Alex Who're you going to have for Treasurer?
 Simon That's yours, of course. You're my deputy. (Alex is pleased.) Denis has asked for Foreign Affairs.
 Alex That'll keep him out of the country.
 Simon It's what he wanted, and his missus too, according to him. Though you never know quite who's pushing for what ...
 Alex Foreign affairs. Funny name, isn't it? Could mean all sorts of things ...
 Simon That's why I was surprised when he said his wife wanted it.

Alex Foreign affairs. If my wife said that to me, I'd start to wonder ...

Simon (chuckling) Wouldn't we all! Still, we could both name a few names who've had spice added to their lives by going overseas! (They both laugh.)

Alex (boldly) Would you like an overseas appointment when you retire?

Simon Oh, it's a bit early to spring that on me. I've got a couple of terms in office before I need to think about that.

Alex One and a half.

Simon Didn't we write it down as two?

Alex One and a half. I can always get it out of the vault to show you.

Simon Ah, you could do that. If you had four signatures.

Alex Four?

Simon Four. That would include mine.

Alex Yours?

Simon It's too early to be worrying about this. A term and a half it is, if that's how you remember it ...

Alex It is!

Simon A term and a half it is then. No worries at all.

Alex No worries?

Simon No worries ...

Alex (examining the words) No worries? There's something funny about those words.

Simon Not at all. (solemnly) They're your guarantee.

Simon and Alex move off in different directions, with each pausing before leaving the stage.

Simon I've got a simple bastard for treasurer. Oh well, there's some good people behind him, they'll keep the ship afloat ...

Alex The bastard's trying to weasel his way out. I've got to trap him, which means using Denis or Bob. Hmmm.

A newsreader appears on the screen.

News With votes still being counted in three doubtful seats, the PM has announced his cabinet. As expected, the deputy leader, Alexander Gibson, will become Treasurer ... (The reader clears his throat.) ... while two not so well known men, Mr Bob McMillan and Mr Denis Marshallsaye will take Finance and Foreign Affairs respectively.

Milly (turning off the news) So now we know who's in the know.

Max Come again?

Milly That man who's deputy, I feel sorry for him.

Max He's got a plum job!

Milly He's at the start of a painful learning curve.

Max He's only a heart attack from the top job.

Milly Silly man! (humorously) So near and yet so far ...

Max Who's the silly man? Him or me?

Milly Well, he is for sure ... (implying that Max might be too)

Max So why are you sorry for him?
Milly He wanted to be PM. Carruthers was too smart. He told Gibson he'd get it later, if he gave it to Carruthers now. Trouble is, now is now, and later never comes.
Max It comes later.
Milly When it comes, it's now!
Max Aha!
Milly Watch the bastards. They think they're royalty.

As we watch, we see Simon, under his Australian flag, receiving, with increasing subservience, visiting figures carrying the British flag, the Japanese flag, the Chinese flag and, last, the American flag.

Max Makes me sick, actually.
Milly He's swallowed us in his greedy guts, to be more than we are. (sourly) The embodiment of the nation!
Max I used to have pride!
Milly And we'll have pride again. We have to outlast these people. Their three year term is our protection ...
Alex (offstage) Aaaaaaaahhh ...
Max That's Gibson, still yearning for the job he gave away.
Milly The job he wasn't smart enough to seize when he had his chance.
Max He's done his dash, you reckon?
Milly There's no way Carruthers will step down.
Max There's rumours about a signed agreement. Someone's got it in their pocket. Hang on, what's this?

A news flash appears on the screen.

News In news just in, the Minister for Finance, Bob McMillan, has claimed that the Prime Minister has defaulted on an agreement to hand over the Prime Ministership to his deputy at the midpoint of the present term of parliament. He further claims that an agreement to this effect was signed by four people, he being one of them, and that the signed agreement was lodged in a vault at the Commonwealth Bank in Sydney. Mr McMillan further claims that the four signatories, of whom he has only identified himself, all had to sign the release of the document, failing which, it would remain unavailable.
Milly Just what we thought!
Max They've got Carruthers by the throat!
News It's widely accepted that the Prime Minister, and Treasurer Alexander Gibson, must have been signatories, so the corridors of Parliament House are rife with rumours as to the identity of the fourth man ...
Milly Denis Marshallsaye!
Max And his fuckin' foreign affairs!
Milly Doesn't half smell, does it!
Max You can sniff the whiff from here!
Milly They've got a way of making things respectable ...
Max What are you thinking, love?

Milly (mocking) So as to bring about an orderly transition, and avoid the debilitating effects of struggle, it was felt that the leadership should be passed on, by amicable agreement, at a suitable time, to ensure that the stability of government would not be disturbed by rivalrous elements acting out of control ...

Max Denis Marshallsaye!
News In news just to hand, the fourth signatory to what is now being called the Prime Minister's Agreement has become known ...

On the screen we see Denis Marshallsaye, facing a large crowd of journalists.

Denis I knew it would get out one day. It had to. When four people share a secret, it's not a secret, is it.

Journo1 You're Minister for Foreign Affairs; was that your price?

Denis It was my reward, shall we say.

Journo2 Bob McMillan's the Minister for Finance ...

Denis That was his reward, shall we say ...

M,M, journos Shall we say! Shall we say! Will we say it? (sarcastically) Shall we say? Shall we say?

Denis Every one of us has the right to call things as we see them. Isn't that so?

M,M, journos Shall we say? Shall we say? What shall we say? Shall we say?

Simon (appearing on the screen by way of explanation) There was an understanding ... an understanding,

I said, that if and when a suitable time for a transfer presented itself, and if all parties involved felt that such a transition would be beneficial, then consideration would be given to finding an opportunity for such a transition, but let me say that it was understood right throughout the discussions we are talking about that the national interest would at all times be paramount and that no such transition would take place without an agreement, tacit or otherwise, that the proposed transition would be unconditionally beneficial to the nation and its thirteen million voters. This would have to be something of which the public would approve! How could this approval be known? Well, it's up to the government of the day, at any moment of decision, to be the judge of the public interest, and my government has taken the national interest into consideration and has determined that the present moment is not the moment for such a transition. Power is derived from the people and only the government of the day, elected to adjudge the public's wishes, and its best interest, only the government of the day can make such an assessment. And we have! In our judgement, this is not the time for a mere faction to impose its requirements on the greater numbers of a popularly elected party, elected, might I say, by the voters of the nation in order to serve the voters of the nation, and those future voters who will come after them, in years yet to come!

Journo1 Are you going to have an inquiry?
 Simon There'll be no inquiry, because there's no material that isn't known!
 Journo2 What about the agreement? When are we going to see that?
 Simon If you want to see the agreement, you can go to the bank. I understand you know which one it is. (He departs.)
 Milly Democracy undone.
 Max Democracy cheated!

Alex walks, slowly and as if carrying a terrible burden of loss and shame, from the side of the stage where we first saw him until he is close to the steps which lead to the PM's chair. Max and Milly watch him, then Kerry and his group of commentators (but not Tony) appear at their seats, with microphones in front of them.

Kerry What do you say, Michele?
 Michele The voters hate this sort of thing, but if you're an insider, watching, as we are, then it's hard not to be moved by such a sight.
 Alex (quoting *South Pacific*) This nearly was mine!
 Barry It's a tough game, politics. I feel for him, a little.
 Alex (still singing *South Pacific*) Who can explain it, who can tell me why ...
 Mick He's got no one to blame but himself. If you're going to play the toughest game in town, you have to know how to win. They say it was going to take four signatures to get the agreement out. Well, how could

you get the four of them to sign? They'd only ever do it once! When it suited them! As they thought!
 Alex (broken) Some ... enchanted ... evening ...
 Robert It's all about numbers. If you've got'em, you win. You haven't got'em, you lose. Some people need to wake up to themselves.
 Alex Fools give their reasons, wise men never try ...
 Max Is he a man of principle, or is he ready to swallow the poison they've dished up?
 Milly He played his best cards in what he thought was his best way, and he didn't win.
 Max He's a loser, then. Once you know that about someone, you stay away. That's how I see it.
 Alex You must fly to her side, and make her your own ...
 Milly What about us? Nobody asks if this is what we want. If we say we don't want these people to carry on like this, who takes any notice? People let them get away with this, but it's done in our name and I resent it. Let him suffer! Let him lie there groaning until they bury him!
 Max You're hard, love, but I suppose you're right ...
 Alex ... or all through your life you will stand there ... alone ...

He slumps in despair. Simon comes on and, ignoring his deputy, strides to the PM's chair with papers in his hand.

Simon You there, Denis? (Denis Marshallsaye appears.) It's time we made some changes. Treasury's come in for

a lot of criticism lately. I want you to freshen it up. Give it a new face. More human, as it were. Gibbo can have Foreign Affairs. All that travel will give him a new outlook. You there, Bob? (Bob McMillan appears.) I'm putting Denis into Treasury. Your mate's taking Foreign Affairs. I'm putting you back in Finance, but it won't be forever. You'll get Treasury when Denis takes over from me. Which won't be long. My wife says she hardly knows me any more.

Bob (to himself) You wonder if she ever did. (to Simon) What did she say she wanted, the day you got married, PM?

Alex (miserably, to himself) Some enchanted evening ...

Simon She didn't say that. She said, you play it the way that looks right to you ...

Max Erck!

Simon ... and it'll be right for me!

Milly He never heard what she said, because he wasn't listening!

Simon That's it, then. I'll get some cars to take us to the Governor General. No, one car, it'll look better that way. For Chrissake, someone get Gibbo on his feet. You gotta be presentable in Foreign Affairs.

He dashes off. Denis and Bob pick up Alex and try to steady him.

Alex Who can explain it, who can tell me why? Fools give their reasons, wise men never try ...

Max That's the way they play it.

Milly Men!

Max And women. Don't tell me they'd be any better.

Milly looks at him scornfully, takes his hand, and leads him off.

Pinchgut

A tourist vessel is taking passengers around Sydney Harbour, and the captain, a man called Smog, is providing a commentary.

Smog On the starboard, ladies and gentlemen, you can see Fort Denison, commonly known as Pinchgut. That was its name in convict times. It was where they put hardened criminals.

Joan They had'em even then.

Smog Even more in those days because that's what Sydney was about. Punishing criminals from England. Long time ago. Have a look around! What a wonderful city! Finest Olympics of modern times! Tunnels taking traffic under the water we're sailing on. Planes bringing visitors from the whole wide world. A city to be envied!

Colin What did you say it was called?

Smog Pinchgut! They didn't feed'em much, took out a few slops now and then to keep'em alive. They'd have felt their tummies pinching. Which reminds me! Did you enjoy your dinner last night?

Tourists Balmain bugs! Spaghetti Marinara! The wines ...

Joan Anyone living on Pinchgut these days?

Smog It's deserted most of the time. Odd thing though, they're making a film there at the moment. Watch closely as we go past, you might see some famous actresses. (excitedly) Who's that?

Colin Nicely made, isn't she!

People press to see Tammy, a blonde starlet, naked except for a couple of strips of cloth.

Smog I thought I'd seen everything!

Colin Well you have, just about!

Smog She's not what you expect on Pinchgut. There's something new every day.

Joan What you're seeing is as old as the human race. Nothing new at all.

Smog Now the Opera House! There it is, ladies and gentlemen, and we're letting you see it the way you were supposed to!

Colin They'd have had no trouble building it if they'd had computers. Look at that Guggenheim in Bilbao.

Joan What's that got to do with the price of fish?

Colin Nothing much. (to Smog) Why didn't the convicts catch their dinner? They didn't have to starve. For that matter, why didn't they swim ashore? It's not very far.

Smog Scared of the water. They'd been told about sharks.

Joan Do you see sharks very often in the harbour?

Smog From time to time. Hello, she's got someone with her! (He's spotted a man with Tammy on Pinchgut;

he calls to the two of them.) What're you doing, guys? You're not sleeping on Pinchgut are you?

Leo (Tammy's man) We've got a hotel, mate. It's primitive here.

Joan (to Tammy) What's your name, darling?

Tammy Keep your eye on the credits. That's where you'll find me!

Colin Half your luck, mate!

Leo If you fellas'd sail past, we could get on with it. (He puts his hand on Tammy's lower strip of cloth.)

Smog Are you going to swim?

Leo Got a boat! (He points to a powerful, luxurious boat tied up to the island.)

Smog You got it made! See yez! (He revs his boat and takes his passengers away.)

Tammy Pour me a drink, Leo. It might put me in the mood for something nice.

Leo Pour yourself onto the boat and we'll see what we can do.

The two of them move from Pinchgut to the boat, but to their surprise they hear voices on the tiny island they've just left.

Cable I'd do it if I had to. I'd do it if I could.

Nick That's why they've got you on a chain. Protecting me! (He laughs.)

Cable Come a bit closer. I want to hold you.

Nick You want to look in my eyes?

Cable And slit your throat. I'd cook up your liver, I'd eat your leg, and I'd throw the rest ...

Nick ... to the sharks!

Cable Aarrrgggghh!

Nick You wouldn't even cook me. You'd let them have me raw.

Cable Flesh.

Tammy (to Leo) You hear that? Let's get out of here!

Leo Fascinating. The place is haunted.

Tammy Those voices! Uuurrh!

Leo Listen. We might be able to work this into the film!

Nick I never learned to swim. If someone dropped me over, I'd sink like a stone.

Cable I'd like to see that.

Nick No you wouldn't. When they brought food they'd put it out of your reach. Without me, mate, you'd starve.

Cable When I get out of here, I'm heading for China.

Nick You'd never get there, mate. There's oceans between here and China. Full of sharks.

Cable It's a coupla weeks march, up the coast. (He points.)

Nick Blackfellas'd wipe you out on the first day.

Cable Black women could feed me.

Nick And why would they do that for you?

Cable Because I'd be making them happy, morning, noon and night.

Leo Lives in fantasy-land, that fella!

Tammy Pretty frightening.

Leo What'd'ya reckon about putting him in the film. 'Escape from Devil's Island'!

Tammy That's not the name of this place is it?

Leo Christ no. This is Pinchgut.

Cable Aaaaaaaaahhh. When're they coming to feed us?

Nick They're sleeping off a bottle of rum, probably.

Tammy Keep me out of the script for this part. It's giving me the creeps.

Leo Another drink and we can go below.

Tammy Let's save it for the hotel. The bed's a lot better.

Leo You've got the bounce, Tammy. The mattress only supports. (They go below.)

Cable What's the food like in China?

Nick Dunno. They eat ducks, don't they?

Cable Ya right, I think. Ducks. (loudly) Fuck a duck!

Nick That'd be hard.

Cable If the duck was as hard up as me, it'd be easy.

Nick Ducks do it with ducks, mate. You could be as horny as an old ram, it wouldn't stir the duck.

Cable How can we get some women on this island?

Nick They make it hard, don't they?

Tammy (softly, below) Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Leo My beautiful love ...

Tammy Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Nick You hear something?

Cable It's all Chinese to me. What're ya talking about? Hear something?

Nick I thought I did.

Leo We'll have lots of lovemaking in the film. In a great big bed.

Tammy What about the whole film in bed?

Leo What about a theatre where's there's no seats, only beds?

Tammy They watch us doing it in the film then they do it themselves.

Leo There's little breaks when everybody has to go to another bed.

Tammy You can make an appointment, or you can see what luck brings you.

Leo How are you feeling darling? Lucky, or disappointed?

Tammy It's like a dream ...

Leo It's a beautiful dream for me.

Tammy ... but I'm going to wake up one day. I have a sensation ...

Leo (troubled by the tone of her voice) What?

Tammy ... that one day I'm going to wake up, and there are no films any more, just everyday life, and people don't know whether they've been robbed, or it's better.

Leo What? What's this you're talking about?

Tammy I'm not sure. It's something I need to say, that's all.

Leo You're a mystery to me, Tammy. You've got a body to die for, but you get these ideas ...

Tammy Well, they come into my head, so I've got to tell somebody.

Leo I'm your man. I want to know what's going on in there. (He caresses her hair.) It's just that you say things that are strange.

Tammy Don't you have thoughts that puzzle you? Sometimes?

Leo I suppose I do, yeah.

Tammy Well ...

Leo Put your arms around me.

Tammy Do you want to have a baby?

Leo Not just yet. Let's make our fortune first.

Tammy How much? And how are we going to do it?

Leo With this film ...

Tammy Have you worked out what you're going to call it?

Leo Haven't the faintest.

Tammy (hearing a sound) What's that?

Leo Someone flying low.

We see a plane flying over the harbour. This can be shown by a few seats, a wing and a tail at the top right of the stage area. In the plane are Thy Ho, a Singapore billionaire and Bruggen, a Sydney developer.

Thy Ho What's that in the water?

Bruggen Pinchgut!

Thy Ho It's near the Opera House.

Bruggen Yes?

Thy Ho We could serve dinners there for people going to the opera. And big banquets after the show.

Bruggen Wouldn't be allowed.

Thy Ho We could buy permission.

Bruggen The heritage weasels'd scream their heads off. Anything that's got convicts in it is big business. They're starting a film there any minute.

Thy Ho There's a boat tied up. A man and a woman.

Bruggen That's the formula, isn't it.

Thy Ho Formula?

Bruggen A man and a woman.

Thy Ho There's no other story. Man get woman, woman get man. Happy ever after. Or not happy at all. Sob. (He wipes his eye with a hanky.)

Leo They're more than low. I reckon they've come for a look.

Tammy At us?

Leo They would if they could. No. They want to know what we're up to.

Tammy We did it out of sight.

Leo I reckon they've heard about the film. I reckon there's money in that plane.

Tammy Could be our chance, Leo.

Leo We need to get in touch.

Tammy steps back on the island, waving; the plane goes around in a circle to have a better look, and the convicts, Cable and Nick, are disturbed by Tammy's presence.

Nick There's someone here. I can't see 'em, mate, but I know they're there!

Cable Did you get a funny feeling? I can't tell you what it was.

Nick Sure did. It was like I'd been taken into the future, and left. Abandoned. And there were people who were going to use me when they thought of a way to do it. Meantime, they left me locked up, ball and chain, till they got a bright idea.

Cable China's lookin good. We've got to get ashore.

Nick Have to find our way through the blacks. They'd smell us, I reckon. We're high as heaven, you know, we just don't notice it because ...

Cable ... we're used to it by now.

Nick That's the pity of it, isn't it.

Cable The pity of what?

Nick The pity, mate, of us.

Cable What?

Nick Nobody thinks we're any good. We've done the wrong thing too many times, so they've got sick of us. Dumped us here.

Cable I'd do what I've done again if they let me out. A man's got to live!

Nick Not according to those bastards. They think a man's got to die if they can't find a way to use him. And if they're too squeamish to kill us, they let us rot ...

Cable ... on Pinchgut! Pinch! Fucking! Gut! Would you like to hear it louder?

Both Pinch! Fucking! Gut!

Tammy Leo? Don't tell me you can't hear that! There's voices here! There's something alive, on this island, that you and I can't see!

Leo Darling, what now?

Tammy What *now*?

Leo Well, what next, then?

Tammy How do I know? When everything's a mystery?

Leo Darling, we have to keep the public entertained. They expect us to know.

Tammy But I don't know anything. I don't even know if I have a soul!

Leo Who cares? You got a body. (moving up to caress her again)

Tammy I care! You might have lost your soul, Leo, but I care about mine!

Leo (not very sincerely) Yeah, me too. Soul. Of course.

Tammy Did you hear the voices?

Leo Matter of fact, I did.

Tammy So what are we going to do about them?

Leo Put 'em in the film.

Tammy How're we going to do that?

Leo That's the scriptwriter's problem, Tammy. It's why they get paid.

Cable If we die on this island, Nick, they'll throw us to the sharks.

Nick What do you expect? Full military honours?

Cable What do I expect? I expect what I deserve!

Nick (scoffing) You expect what you deserve!

The plane flies lower, and closer.

Bruggen I like your idea but there's no way we'd get it through. Council, state government, every bastard'd be against us.

Thy Ho Everybody has their price. Once we got control, we'd make profit for a thousand years! (He's pleased with himself.)

Bruggen Nothing lasts that long, except memory.

Thy Ho Then we make money out of memory.

Bruggen They do it already, with harbour trips. They bring tourists here on boats ...

Smog's boat returns with a fresh load of tourists. The singers who took the parts of Joan and Colin are now in the roles of Jan and Geoff.

Smog On the starboard, ladies and gentlemen, you can see Fort Denison, commonly known as Pinchgut. That was the name in convict times. It was where they put hardened criminals.

Jan They had'em even then.

Smog Even more in those days because that's what Sydney was about. Punishing criminals from England. Long time ago. Have a look around! What a wonderful city! Finest Olympics of modern times! Tunnels taking traffic under the water we're sailing on. Planes bringing visitors from the whole wide world. A city to be envied!

Geoff What did you say it was called?

Smog Pinchgut! They took out a few slops now and then to keep'em alive. After a day or two they'd feel their tummies pinching.

Leo How many times have I heard that today?

Smog Which reminds me! Did you enjoy your dinner last night?

Leo (loudly; abusive) It was lousy!

Smog What?

Leo You know what you're like, mate? You're like a bad dinner that keeps on repeating itself. You know what that means? (He goes through the motions of vomiting.) Uuuurrrk!

Geoff This is a novel kind of tourism!

Smog Sorry, ladies and gentlemen, some of the locals have forgotten their manners! We'll leave them to their bad digestion.

Jan (to Tammy) Sorry we won't be getting to know you, darling.

The tourist boat disappears.

Tammy I'm sorry they've gone.
 Leo The fellow that runs that boat is a pig.
 Tammy There were some nice people on board.
 Leo Nice people and pigs. That's the mixture, always was, always will be.
 Tammy Where does that leave us?
 Leo That's a good question, Tammy, and I don't know what to say.
 Cable Get me out of here!
 Nick Would if I could, mate, but I don't know how.
 Cable Yell!
 Nick What?
 Cable Yell!
 Both Aaaaaaaahhh!!!
 Cable Again!
 Both Aaaaaaaahhh!!!
 Leo What in God's name is that?
 Tammy I'm scared but I've got to see!

She scrambles onto the island, with Leo close behind, and this time she sees, they both see, Cable and Nick, who, this time, see the modern people.

Tammy My God! Men in chains!
 Leo Keep back darling, while I look.

There is a moment of stillness while the two pairs appraise each other, then Cable starts an incoherent, frothing, raging snarl, as

if he'd like to devour Leo and possess Tammy. Nick, on the other hand, is still and silent, trying to find his reaction.

Nick He can't hurt you. He's on a chain.
 Leo Who did that to him?
 Tammy Let's get him off, Leo. Nobody should be in chains.
 Leo He'd be bloody dangerous! How do you fellas find anything to eat?
 Nick They bring us a bucket of scraps. Stuff that nobody wants.
 Leo No wonder he's wild. Reckon if we could let him off he might calm down a bit?
 Tammy We could give him a part in a film.
 N & C A what?
 T & L A film. We make films. You know what I mean.

Nick falls on his knees, grovelling. Cable goes quiet, sensing that there is some inclination to mercy in these visitors.

Nick (puzzled) A film?
 Leo You wouldn't be locked up any more. You'd be stars!
 Nick Stars?
 Cable Stars?
 Tammy They don't know what we're talking about, Leo.
 Leo So I notice. What do we do now?
 Tammy Get your camera. Get a few shots before they disappear.

Leo rushes to get his camera and aim it at the convicts.

Leo Swing your shoulder round so we can see those arrows.

Nick Mercy! A couple of days on land before we die!

Tammy Nobody should be brought to this!

Cable I shouldn't have tried to grab you. I was mad.

Leo Ah, that's all right I suppose.

Nick You don't know how hard it is.

Tammy You want to tell us? You mind if we record what you say?

Nick We're not good enough. You can't take us with you.

Leo On film's okay. Speak up a bit if you don't mind.

Cable I'm nothing but a beast. I'm going back inside. Please don't be here when I come out.

Leo Why do you say that, mate?

Cable I'm ashamed.

Tammy Everyone's got a right to be proud of themselves, whatever they may have done.

Cable turns his back and disappears inside.

Nick There's a couple of little cages in there. That's where we spend the night. They're usually fairly dry.

Leo Dry?

Nick They only get wet when there's a storm. They're good enough for us.

Tammy Don't say that. Nobody should ever say that!

Nick (also disappearing) You reach a point where there's nothing left to say.

Cable (out of sight) You're not human any more. They take that off you and you're dirt.

Leo Well guys, the best we can do for you is make a film.

Tammy Called?

The plane carrying Thy Ho and Bruggen can be heard, fairly high. Tammy and Leo look up.

Leo Whatever it's called, there's the money, buzzing around up there ...

Tammy Looking for a place to settle.

Leo Wave, Tammy. They'll take notice of you!

Tammy What are we going to call it?

Leo Stuffed if I know. Wave! They're the boys with dollars!

Tammy They won't give us money if we don't know what it's for.

Leo For an extra million they can have naming rights!

Tammy (calling in to the convicts) What do you want to call it, boys? What are we going to call this film?

C & N Pinch Fucking Gut! Pinch Fucking Gut!

Leo Can we leave out that word in the middle?

C & N Pinch Gut! Pinch Gut!

Leo Sounds good to me. What do you say, Tammy?

Tammy It makes me proud, and I don't know why, but that's what we're going to call it.

C & N Pinch Gut! Pinch Gut!

Leo Here comes that boat with their buckets of slop. Let's
 get out of here, darling, we're heading for shore!

He and Tammy jump on their boat and roar towards the land.

Obligation

This piece opens in the office of Prime Minister Simon Carruthers, and with him are two other characters from *The PM's Chair*, Denis Marshallsaye and Bob McMillan.

Denis Where's Alex? A pity he's not here.
Simon He's in Canada. Can't do much damage there.
Bob (musing) He missed out, really, didn't he.
Simon That's how it goes. Luck of the draw ...
Bob He wasn't smart enough.
Simon Take your eye off the ball for a second, someone grabs your chair; you've got nowhere to put your bum.
Denis Elegant, Prime Minister.
Simon Elegance be buggered. I was watching a game of tennis last night ...
Denis Federer versus Hewitt, was it? (Change names to keep this up to date.)
Simon ... and I noticed something. You're in the game as long as you keep the ball moving. You have to get it back on the other side of the net.
Bob That was new to you, PM?
Simon A reminder. Certain things in politics do not change. Ever. War or peace. Boom or bust. Polls up, polls down.
Bob What are the eternal, PM? I'd be curious to know.
Simon Keep everyone happy. If they want vision, you're gazing at the horizon. If they want war, you're

buying guns. If they try to pin you down, shift the ground and sound decisive. If they say something that sounds good, say BUT! But! Take the discussion down another path. If you're the leader you've got to be leading, even if it's from the rear! (He's vastly amused.)

Denis You can fool all of them some of the time ...
Bob ... but you can't fool all of them ALL the time!
Simon Not forever, no. But the art of politics, the sheer joy of playing to win, is to have a shot in your locker when the other side thinks you're done.
Bob For example?
Simon For example? Ooooh ... Let's say someone thinks you owe him something.
Bob Anybody in mind?
Simon We're talking principles here. Principles, you understand? And let's say, again, that you know you owe him something. What can you do? You can pay him back – but you've got to over-pay by a long way, so everyone thinks you're generous. Or you get rid of the man and the debt, all at once. But you have to have a reason that hides the real reason, which is, or was, that you didn't want to pay him back.
Denis So you done him in!

Simon (amused) Very elegant, minister! But your timing has to be good. When he's gone, everybody should be saying, he had to go!

All three (mocking) The PM had no choice!

Denis I'll give you another example.

S & B Do tell!

Denis There was a young lady in my electorate ...

Simon A flame of yours?

Denis Not one of mine! Julie?

Julie, his secretary, has walked in.

Julie Excuse me gentlemen, but there's a delegation from the Murrumbidgee Irrigators in your office, minister. I've been looking for you all over the place.

Denis Oh shit! How long have they been there?

Julie Five minutes. Maybe ten ...

Denis See what happens when you start talking ...

Simon That's okay. You see what happens when you don't!

Simon and Bob leave, and Denis rushes to the head of a table where the Murrumbidgee Irrigators are waiting, and Julie sits opposite him. The irrigators are Hendrick, Kevin, Mirabelle and Neil.

Denis My apologies for keeping you waiting. The PM needed advice.

Mirabelle He could do with plenty at the moment.

Denis Consultation is vital when you hold office. Now! You're worried about stream flow in your river. So am I, and I wish I had the power to make it rain.

Hendrick No rainfall, no income. Simple as that.

Denis We won't let you starve. Rest your mind on that.

Kevin Starve? We've got kids away at school. That's eleven bills to be paid at this table alone, excluding you, minister, and this lady ...

Julie Julie.

Hendrick You got kids, Julie?

Julie That's not the sort of question I'm normally asked.

Denis Julie's here to take notes. When you're in as many meetings as I am, you need reminders occasionally.

Neil Like rain.

Denis What?

Neil Reminders must be like rain.

Denis (confused) Ah, probably. Yes. You're worried about your water rights?

Hendrick You'd be worried if you were in our shoes.

Denis What do you want?

Hendrick A guarantee.

Denis Of?

Hendrick No reduction in our water rights ...

Kevin ... that's the right to pump out of the river ...

Mirabelle ... for stock, for crops, and domestic use, of course ...

All ... for twenty years!

Denis (staggered) A modest little claim! You've got support, I take it?

Hendrick We've got the signatures of every irrigator on the river ...

Kevin Both banks!

Denis You went along both sides?

Mirabelle We did!

Denis You didn't miss a single property?

Neil Not one!

Denis Well, full marks for being thorough. You didn't turn up any extra water while you were about it?

Mirabelle There are farmers drilling up and down the river. Looking for bores.

Denis Shouldn't be hard to find.

Mirabelle Artesian bores!

Denis We have to be careful, there. They might run out, you know. If there's no rain on the surface, the underground water has to run out one of these days.

Kevin Not for twenty years, you can be sure of that.

Denis Can I? What's your guarantee?

Kevin My guarantee is this. Your boss has to call an election later this year. If we don't get the backing we're after, I guarantee you won't be sitting in that seat next time we come to town.

Julie (trying to break the tension) Minister, you've got another meeting in two minutes.

Hendrick We only need one. What's the answer? People are waiting on us to bring back your reply.

Denis I was putting to the PM when you came that we need a commission to examine all aspects of saving water in order to enable us to guarantee supply, though

at what percentage levels of previous capacity is a matter still open to question ...

Hendrick Bullshit. You're giving us nothing.

Denis You see my hands? They can't turn on that tap in heaven that we'd all like to control.

Mirabelle Useless. When you're voted out of office, you think you'll be able to resume the life you used to lead. You won't, you know. You'll be a pariah!

Denis (as the delegation leaves) Pariah ... Look up that word, would you Julie? I'd like to know where it comes from.

Julie I can tell you that, minister. It entered the English language in sixteen thirteen. Pariahs were low caste people from southern India, especially near Madras. They provided Europeans with most of their domestic servants. From lowly people, the word was applied to dogs that hung about the outskirts of the villages. Pariah people, pariah dogs.

Denis Most informative, Julie. I'm humbled by the extent of your knowledge.

Julie The word has been used in this room before.

Denis That's an interesting concept. Know a place by the words that are used there. What other words does this room think of as its own?

Julie Obligation, minister. "You owe it to us to provide ..."

Denis ... when I can't! Stuff them, they ask too much!

Julie But they expect ...

Denis Who's next, did you say?

Julie I didn't, but it's a delegation from Tiger Airlines ...

Denis There's more tigers in the telephone book than in the wild these days. What do they want?

Julie They asked me to call it a courtesy call, minister, so they're trying to have a few friends around the table when their application to fly to the US comes up ...

Denis ... which it does about once a week. Don't sit in on this one, Julie, but when we've had five minutes, come in and say the PM wants me.

Julie He's flying to Perth this afternoon, minister.

Denis Then he's called me to the airport for discussion before he leaves.

Julie The tigers are outside, minister. I'll bring them in.

Enter a suave man, Akhmar, and a glamorous woman, Teriel. They greet Denis effusively.

Akhmar Your time is precious, minister, so we appreciate you receiving us.

Teriel This room feels full of power. I should have come prepared.

Denis I thought Tiger Airlines was always prepared. Isn't that your slogan?

Akhmar We're ready for take-off, minister, but personalities can always surprise ...

Teriel ... and atmosphere. There's such a presence in this room.

Denis Tell me the words that come to your mind when you look around.

Teriel Awareness ...

Denis What are you aware of?

Akhmar My companion is very sensitive, minister.

Teriel Awareness of other people's needs, and ...

Denis And what, I wonder?

Teriel Awareness of our obligation to provide everything we can for others. Service!

Denis Struth!

Akhmar Minister?

Denis That's just what my secretary and I were talking about.

Teriel Thoughts are part of the atmosphere of a room. They linger, long after the people that used them have left.

Denis You believe that?

Akhmar Think of a temple, minister. You enter, and at once you are aware that the air is full of prayers. For hundreds of years people have brought their needs to the sacred place, and they have poured them out in prayer. The place where they pray becomes changed, over time. This is mysterious, but it's true.

Denis I'm sure you're right. (recovering) What was it you came to see me about?

Akhmar Two years ago your government allowed us to fly to your country. There were certain conditions. All

have been observed. We would like to do more for your great nation ...

Denis ... by flying to the US. The national airline doesn't want competition, as you know ...

Akhmar ... but they would like some more flights to our country. I think we might be able to help them there.

Denis This is not my portfolio, you understand. We're having a general, informal sort of chat!

Teriel (sensuously) I like informality. I like being with great men when they relax.

Julie (entering) Excuse me, minister, but you're wanted in the PM's office. He's in a hurry to get to the airport, so ...

Denis (to the visitors) Can't keep the PM waiting. Unfortunately. Lovely to meet you. Very interesting. Charming ... (to Julie, as the visitors disappear) Thanks Julie. She was getting to be a handful. Indian women!

Julie (ignoring this) It's real, minister. The PM's waiting. Really.

Denis What's cropped up?

Julie shakes her head, and urges him to the PM's room where Simon is seated, as before, and has with him Bob McMillan and Molly O'Deagan, a strident member of the back bench. Denis nods to her as he sits.

Simon Molly's raised a problem. We've got to start working on it. I'll release a statement as soon as I get back from Perth. (handing over) Bob?

Bob Molly says the church is preparing a campaign against abortion. They're going to name doctors, have demos at clinics. In particular, they want to shame women who're having their second or third abortion. They want to humiliate them by making details of their lives public ...

Mollie When women go to a clinic for a procedure, they're going to sing out their names.

Denis How will they know them?

Mollie My people think they must be hacking the records of the clinics. I don't know if that's true.

Simon (as the Minister for Health joins them) Ah, Tony. We've only just started. Mollie's been bringing us up to speed. What do you think?

Tony We issue a statement, to be called "The Sanctity of Human Life", containing suitably pious statements. The usual stuff. Then there'll be a bit, which I need to write carefully, very carefully, linking sanctity with the individual's right to choose ...

Bob The ultimate motherhood statement!

Simon Shut up, Bob.

Tony ... and the need for the individual, in making up her or his mind, to be heedful of all that's been said and

thought on the matter. I'll refer to the long tradition of the church giving direction ...

Denis I think that's called backing every horse in the race because you don't know the winner.

Tony They all vote. This government has no plan to change the law, so we have to reaffirm the status quo. Have you got any plan to do something else?

Mollie (as the men shake their heads) Tell the church to stay out of what's not their business.

Simon Eh!

Bob Oh ...

Denis Ah ...

Mollie There are many faiths in the community these days. No one of them has the right to dictate to people outside their group. Big trouble if you go down that path! The leaders of any one group can say these are the rules for us, but they can't say, these are the rules for everybody. Everybody's rules are the rules of concensus, and that's for government alone to decide!

Simon That's exactly what we are doing, Mollie, if you care to have a look. Tony?

Tony I've nothing to add, PM.

Simon Right. Tony. In your speech, you'll have to make the regulations governing abortions, or the running of the clinics, or something, ever so slightly tougher than they were before. That's the concession. Then,

in a review of the regulations, which you announce at the same time, you loosen a couple of the regulations so the pro-abortion people know we're on their side. Let the review run for a few weeks and announce the changes, when you've got them, in a busy week. Budget time might be a good one. We'll leave that to you. Get it? A few fiddles, but nothing changes very much!

Tony Right, PM.

Mollie But why do we give in to these people who want to rewrite the law so it coincides with their rules? Catholics, Shariah people, anybody who wants the state to be ruled by the laws of their particular church. Faith. Dogma. We ought to be telling them, you can have rules for yourselves but you can't impose them on others.

Bob We are telling them that, if you notice.

Mollie Oh no we're not!

Denis Yes we are. Society's an endless flux. You want things to stay the same. You can do nothing, and that gets noticed. Or you make balancing changes, and you make them at different times, so it's not clear for quite a while that you've actually left things pretty much as they were.

Simon Couldn't have put it better myself. Did I tell you what I heard the other day? Some chap who lectures in politics – Ha! – said he was going to run a course

in political rhetoric. How to search what's being said for what's not being said. How to analyse, how to quantify, silence! Pretty good, I thought.

Tony Dangerous.

Simon We'd have to lift our game, I admit. But that's a good thing. I was watching a game of tennis the other night ...

Denis Federer versus Hewitt? (using the same two names as earlier on)

Simon No, two women, though they play like men, these days. There was this big, tall, Russian blonde ...

Tony Very attractive, aren't they?

Simon ... and I thought, none of us cares about the tennis, that's no more than a justification for a great crowd, at the court and at home, watching television, feasting – that's the word, feasting! – on the beauty of a lovely woman. Anyone who says they're watching tennis is deceiving themselves. They're watching a woman's body, stretching and straining, and they're wondering – begging your pardon, Mollie – what it would be like to be in bed with her.

Tony Well, you're right, PM, that's what they're doing, but for heaven's sake, don't ever say it! They've got to be able to say, I was watching the tennis ...

Mollie ... when they weren't! As the PM says ...

Denis ... as the PM says, they're doing one thing and they're saying another.

Bob Aren't we all? Every one of us, every day?

Simon It's our job. It's our duty ...

Denis ... our obligation, as we might say ...

Simon That's a word I've been hearing a lot of recently. What brought it to your mind, Denis?

Denis I was talking with Julie, a minute ago, about the way that certain words get spoken in certain places. It's almost as if rooms dictate the things that people will say in them, when they enter ...

Mollie Men's words!

Simon (dismissing her) Thanks Mollie. I think we've got that little matter covered.

Mollie (leaving) Men's words. Pride. Status. Promotion. (more and more mock-solemnly) The ability to make tough decisions. Getting the numbers ...

Tony (after Mollie's gone) What was she going on about?

Simon Having a grumble because she'd have handled it differently. They say women are better at compromise than men. Bullshit. You don't stir up anything unless you're going to make a change, and even so, you make the change first and as far out of sight as possible. Then you play down the reactions to whatever it is you've done. No dramas, if you can avoid them. If we let everything be played out as a whizzbang drama, we wouldn't last a week. We'd all be dead with heart attacks and strokes and breakdowns ...

Tony You'd all be a burden on the National Health Scheme.

Bob I wouldn't mind that, if I had a decent doctor. I'd die if you walked in the door with your archbishop over your shoulder, waving his crook ...

Tony That word 'crook' has more than one meaning, you know ...

Denis Which meaning belongs in this room?

Tony What?

Simon Now, Denis, steady on! Crook? What do you mean?

Denis As I was saying, certain words belong in certain places ...

Bob I think the word 'crook' should be abiding with the shepherds in the field ...

Tony Watching their flocks by night!

Simon I need to get to Perth. Not sure what's going on over there.

Bob You'll handle it, PM.

Denis Somebody's got to.

Simon And on this occasion, and for the time being, gentlemen, it's me. Seeya!

He's out the door, leaving the others to consider what they've all been doing and saying.

Tony Thanks for your backing boys.

Bob I'd do the same for anyone. You're welcome.

Denis We'd be pretty helpless on our own. The pressure'd break us before very long.

Tony It's a madhouse, isn't it.

Denis That makes me wonder; what do you think would be the words you'd hear most in a madhouse?

Bob (shouting) Get me out!

Denis So why do we all want to stay in?

Tony That suggests to me, in fact it tells me, that we belong where we are.

They all think about this, then they burst out laughing. After a time Julie puts her head in the door to see what's going on.

Denis We have to crack up occasionally, Julie. It's the only way we can be sure of being sane tomorrow!

The Linden Tree

A place – *ein platz* - in Vienna circa 1809, and also, at the end of the piece, many years later. The space is paved in an old-fashioned way, and shaded by a circle of large linden trees. Two women and a man are talking as the opera begins.

Therese Men want to use us.
Giulietta They want to turn us from women into wives.
Gallenberg You blame this on men, but we know you are endlessly pricked by your own desires.
Giulietta You speak of something I do not know.
Gallenberg (laughing) We'll ask Ignaz his opinion.
Therese He isn't here.
Gallenberg But his tree is. (He touches a linden tree, then moves behind it.) Go ahead, my adorable Giulietta. Inquire.
Giulietta (to the tree) Ignaz von Seyfried, I demand of you, tell us all you know of marriage. Is it a blessed state, or a burden?
Gallenberg (affecting a voice) Both. To make it good, you must marry well.
Therese That means with passion!
Gallenberg (the tree) No, it means with wisdom. Think of everything you will need in a long life ...
Therese ... if I'm lucky enough to have one.

Gallenberg ... and you will see that no one man can give you everything. You must decide, then, what you need most, who will give it to you, and at what cost.

Giulietta Cost?

Enter Ignaz von Seyfried, a conductor with Schikaneder's theatre group.

Ignaz You don't get anything for nothing. We'll give you an afternoon in the theatre – if you pay!

Therese You'd better go around the other side of your tree. It's talking for you.

Gallenberg (coming out) They're well trained, these trees. They know us pretty well.

Giulietta As well as we know ourselves.

Therese We can't know ourselves till we reach the end of our lives. Our last words are the ones that say it all.

Ignaz (against his tree) For some of us, yes. For others, no. When we're young, it's possible for our minds to reach to the very edge of the life we're going to lead, and overlook it all. If we're like that, all we have to do with our life is to lead it.

Therese That's a miserable way of thinking.

Giulietta I want my life to be a mystery, a shroud wrapped over everything ...

Gallenberg And passion, my dear?

Giulietta I want my passions to surprise me, when they come.
(Count Moritz von Dietrichstein enters.) Moritz!
What's troubling you?

Moritz The French armies have crossed the border.

Giulietta They will be driven back!

Moritz And who's going to do that? They've reached
Wagram, and on their way they fired cannons at the
gates of our city.

Gallenberg Wagram, did you say?

Moritz A host stretching as far as the eye could see.

Therese God curse them for invading! Let them stay in their
own miserable country.

Ignaz I feel as you do, Therese, but they won't go back
unless they're driven out. Did you hear about Herr
Ludwig?

Therese Beethoven?

Ignaz Ludwig van Beethoven. He had a symphony
dedicated to Napoleon, but he tore off the title page
and threw it on the floor. In his rage he could not
be brought to write a new dedication. It will be
performed without one.

Therese (loyal to the composer) He is devoted to freedom.

Gallenberg To equality, rather. He thinks himself the equal of
people who have breeding ...

Moritz ... and yes, it makes him silly. But no sillier than
those of us who uphold our titles. Napoleon will

clean us out, lock, stock and barrel. We know what's
happening in France.

Josephine von Brunswick, sister of Therese, enters.

Josephine Therese, our father wants you to come home. He's
locking the doors until he hears of Napoleon's
defeat!

Moritz How long is he prepared to wait? The times are in
turmoil. We'll have Napoleon's men hammering on
our doors. There's going to be a battle. Nobody's
beaten him yet. The empire will be torn to pieces and
swallowed, bit by bit!

Therese No!

Moritz Yes!

Ignaz It could be ...

Giulietta We'll ask my tree!

Therese (as Giulietta touches a tree) That one belongs to me!

Giulietta May I not share it?

Therese You do, though I don't think you know it.

Ignaz Whose tree is it, then?

Therese (laughing) Listen to the voice!

Josephine Sister! Sister! You must come home with me now!

Theresa In a moment. We have to find out what we want to
know!

Josephine Quickly! For heaven's sake. Karl! (Karl von
Brunswick, Therese's husband, enters.) Persuade
Therese to do what her father tells her. It's growing
dark!

Karl What is delaying you, my love?
 Therese My need to know.
 Karl What do you want to know?
 Therese (giving him no chance of refusal) Stand behind this tree. (He does so.) Now answer my question, but – you are not speaking for yourself. You are the soul of this tree!
 Karl Does this soul have a name?
 Therese It does, but he is not known to you.
 Several He?
 Therese (to them all) What do we want to know?
 Moritz We want to know ...
 Giulietta What do we want to know?
 Ignaz We want to know what's going to happen.
 Therese To us!
 Josephine To us all, every one.
 Therese Every one of us?
 Josephine I'm selfish. I want to know about me. You're my sister. I want to know about you.
 Ignaz And the times ... everyone surrounding us ... the whole wide world before it tumbles like a pile of bricks ...
 Karl (behind the tree) What's the question?
 Gallenberg What do we want to know?
 Karl (laughing) Trees can't tell you that. We give the answer, not the question.

Therese I want to know the world's fate. That's what I want to know.
 Karl The world? The whole wide world?
 Therese As far as the mind can reach ...
 Karl That's not easy. Let me consult my fellow trees.
 Giulietta The silly man doesn't know what to say.
 Karl (almost choking) Aaahh!
 Josephine What is it? Is Napoleon going to win?
 Karl (in a strange voice: fervent, impassioned, yet sure) We live by ideals. Napoleon has trampled on those he stood for. He will be defeated. Where and when, we cannot know. We must live pure lives, each for the other, all the time. That is all.
 Josephine All?
 Therese It's a start. Come out, Karl, my tree. I didn't expect you to say those things.
 Karl I don't know what took me over, but something did. I felt a spirit enter me, and heard a voice that wasn't my own.
 Giulietta It's what we've always told you.
 Karl I confess I never believed.
 Therese And now?
 Karl You are wiser than me, my love. You tap into thoughts that aren't available to others. Whose voice was speaking through me, do you know? (There is a silence.) Does anybody know? Yes, I know myself.

It was the voice of the time. It wanted to make itself known.

Gallenberg You are affected, Count Karl. Shaken, I think. What was it like, when that voice came out of your head? Were you aware of someone inside you? Tell us now, while it's fresh in your mind.

Karl I've always laughed at Therese for coming here, though somewhere inside myself I was a believer too, because anything that Therese believes in is very dear to me.

Therese My love. Go on.

Gallenberg We need to know. We talk among these trees, half-believing, and playing the fool as well. Tricking each other with voices. Sometimes I've thought how wonderful it would be if we could have a masked ball of the trees ...

Giulietta ... dancing, all the trees dancing, with us, and lifting us up ...

Gallenberg ... into their branches, into higher air, so we learn, and know, and see things hidden from our normal sight ...

Josephine We shouldn't talk about these things. They're a secret that we share. That's enough!

Moritz But the times are breaking up the sanctities of our world. Our city is the heart of an empire; now an army is at our gates, there's a battle to be fought, and none of us will be there, to fight and die for our cause ...

Therese Whatever that may be!

Moritz That's true! We are unutterably selfish people, wanting everything for ourselves. Peasants die, farmers see everything they own destroyed by armies, rampaging everywhere, firing cannons, shooting each other with rifles, carts and horses crushing everything in their path, the homes of people on the battlefield set alight in flames. Wreckage is all that's left behind ...

Therese ... and the wounded, the dying, the men whose bodies have been broken by the guns ...

Giulietta The men who do the killing, and live to know it, their salvation's taken from them by the voices of command!

Ignaz I have always loved this city. Cities make men better than themselves. When I see people leave the city, those who go away as pilgrims, I ask myself what crimes they will commit before they return to the standards of this place. A city asks of us who we are, and what we are. We have to rise to its demands, if it's any good.

Eybler (coming on) My city's good!

Kreutzer (also coming on) If it's still here tomorrow!

Wilhelmine (also arriving) Cities? Let's think about souls! We're all rising and falling, we're like pots on the boil!

Therese (clutching the tree which Karl was behind when he spoke in a strange voice) Karl! When you spoke strangely, whose voice was speaking in you?

Karl I cannot say. I was not myself.

Ignaz We do that all the time. It's strange.

Eybler I tell my singers they should sing under these trees, and listen to the echoes.

Kreutzer And they don't, of course. They sing in their bath. They sing in their beer!

Wilhelmine We'll all be dead one day. It could be soon.

Karl Our homes, our huntsmen, our soldiers, our musicians ... that Corsican will take them all away ...

Therese (thoughtfully) ... leaving us as poor as the poor.

Eybler Our trees never told us that, did they?

Therese (quietly, again) We never asked.

Eybler Why should we have asked?

Therese We only find out what we want to know. That's one of life's rules. If you don't bother to ask, you never know.

Karl What are you thinking about, my love?

Therese We need to know. Karl!

Karl (afraid) My love?

Therese Go behind that tree, and put your arms around it.

Karl Oh! Don't ask me that.

Therese How else will we know who was speaking through you? What else he had to say?

Others No. No. No.

Therese Then I'll do it myself. (She moves toward the tree, but before she can get there, they all hear a sound – a cello playing the great theme, the Ode to Joy, or is it Freedom, from the last movement of Beethoven's 9th symphony.)

Karl (falling to his knees) Oh!

Giulietta The river of time is sweeping us away. We're losing our places. I prophesy ...

Gallenberg Whatever is happening to us? Giulietta, my love, there are no tongues of flame around your brow! For the sake of heaven's sense, speak as you would on an ordinary day.

Giulietta This is no ordinary day.

Kreutzer The Corsican has made us, first, afraid, and second, mad! Let's have sanity prevail!

Wilhelmine But your madness, my dearest friend, is my sanity. If you fear something, and I want it to happen, which of us is mad? If it succeeds, you are mad because you wanted it to fail. If it fails, I am mad, because I wanted it to succeed!

Josephine I'm afraid! Therese! Our father sent me to take you home!

Giulietta I prophesy ...

Gallenberg No, my love, no more of this. There's a battle to be fought in the fields outside our city. Death will swoop along the lines, clutching fathers and sons, surgeons will hack off the limbs of wounded soldiers,

and if the French are victorious, our women will be ravished. The future is too ghastly to be invoked. Giulietta, my love, no more!

Giulietta I will! The future is not too terrible to tell. The future will soon be here, and we'll be dealing with it, right enough. I prophesy ...

Enter Amalie, a serving maid in the von Brunswick household, accompanied by the three children of Therese and Karl.

Amalie Madam Therese, your father is beside himself with rage. (She also looks at Josephine.) He sends your children to you, with this message: if you wish to live on the streets when the city is under threat, then perhaps the presence of your children will make you aware of what you are doing.

Therese And you, Amalie? What did he tell you to do?

Amalie I pleaded with him not to send the children. I said I would go on my own. He told me to take the children, and to stay with you, whatever you chose to do.

Therese (to Karl) Come, my husband. Our duty is clear. The children will sleep in their beds, even if our fields are running with blood. Giulietta ...

Giulietta Si?

Therese We must exercise our gift of prophecy at some other time. You and your husband, like me and mine, must close our doors against the future. Let it happen when and as it will.

Therese, Karl her husband, Amalie and the children, and Josephine, her sister, leave the platz. So too do Giulietta and Count Gallenberg. Those who are left stare glumly at each other.

Wilhelmine We came to this place because we wanted to know. When the sun rises, the knowledge we fear will shape itself ...

Eybler News will get to the city soon enough ...

Kreutzer Those first, wild reports, so unlikely that you can't believe them, are rarely wrong.

Ignaz News travels fast ...

Eybler ... from mind to mind.

Wilhelmine Minds are connected. How else does music change us?

Kreutzer How else indeed? (looking up) The trees are shaking.

Wilhelmine What do they want to say?

Ignaz They're getting ready for tomorrow ...

Eybler Perhaps they'll know before we do, in their remarkable way.

Ignaz Tomorrow ...

Eybler Tomorrow ...

Kreutzer Tomorrow ...

Wilhelmine ... and tonight, we go home alone.

The platz empties, sadly, slowly. The stage darkens, then lightens until the new day is brilliant. Enter, after a time, the three children of Therese and Karl, grown up now: Liese, Wolfgang and Heike. They look curiously at the platz.

Liese Mother says these trees can talk.
Wolfgang Father says they only talk when someone stands
 behind them.
Heike Let's try it. Come on, we'll pick a tree. (They do so.)
 Liese, ask your tree to speak.
Liese (looking up) Green, dark, wonderful tree, what do
 you have to say? (Silence) No more than that?
Heike Wolfgang, get your tree to speak.
Wolfgang Shall I caress you, adore you with a poem, or make
 music beneath your branches? Tell me what to do to
 make you speak?
Heike Silence again. I've chosen you, dear tree (putting her
 hands on it) because I think my mother heard you
 speak ...
Wolfgang Heard the man of her generation, hiding behind.
Heike Men. Of our generation. Are we so powerless that
 we can do nothing without men?
Liese Heike my darling, we are. Even to be mothers, we
 have to lie with men.

We see that four people are merging into the scene: Giulietta and
her husband, Count Gallenberg, and Therese von Brunswick, the
mother, and Karl von Brunswick, the father, of the three young
people.

Wolfgang Men and women. It's all the world is made of. You
 can't get away from that.
Heike This was mother's tree. The one she loved ...
Liese ... and why did she love it so?

Wolfgang Because it stood for a man she loved before she loved
 our father!
Therese Karl!
Karl I've always known, my love.
Liese Hug the tree, Heike. Maybe it will love you.
Heike Maybe it will speak. If our mother heard it speak,
 she'd have asked it to give its utmost ... in meaning,
 in scope. Mother has always looked to the furthest
 horizon ...
Therese Oh!
Karl She understands you well.
Giulietta Our moment is at hand.
Therese What moment, my love?
Gallenberg You said that a generation speaks best when it's about
 to die.
Therese Die ...
Karl We all have to do it once.
T, K, G, G Once. And is this our time?
Heike (to her mother) Let's see.
Therese Darling, what are you doing here?
Wolfgang We're finding our way back to the heart of your
 stories ...
Liese ... to see what you knew, mother dear.
Therese I knew nothing. I was agitated by the French. Their
 armies were outside our gates.
Karl They went away.
Gallenberg Napoleon was defeated, in the end.

Giulietta Napoleon wasn't the end, only the sign of something,
coming after ...

Therese What's that? Listen!

Again we hear the cello playing the famous melody from
Beethoven's 9th.

All Ah!

Liese What is it?

Giulietta My prophecy came true!

Gallenberg We've lived long enough to see the old world
disappear.

Karl Are we sorry? Are we sad?

Therese Yes! No! Oh, I can't stand it any longer!

Karl What's inside you, my love?

Therese This song! My times demand it of me that I sing!

And sing she does, with her back to the tree, her hands gripping
the trunk. Her words are the third verse set by Beethoven from
Schiller's Ode to Joy, chosen because of the floridity of the setting.
Note that Beethoven has given the first two lines to the men,
so Therese will have to sing a transposition of their lines, or an
adaptation of the women's lines in the chorus that follows.

Therese Freude Trinken alle Wesen
An den Brüsten der Natur;
Alle Guten, alle Bösen
Folgen ihrer Rosenspur!
Küsse gad sie uns und Reben,
Einen Freund, geprüft im Tod;

Wollust ward dem Wurm gegeben,
Und der Cherub steht vor Gott!

Heike (as her mother kneels) You waited so long!

Giulietta My everlasting friend! The voice of our time!

Karl All time. There's an idea loose in the world that will
capture the hearts of men ...

Gallenberg The hearts of us all. There was never any stopping
you, my dearest friend.

Wolfgang How long did you have that song inside you, mother,
getting ready to sing?

Therese Before he wrote it he used to search for it. It was a
melody he knew was there, if he could only find it.

Giulietta It had to be there. He brought it to life because the
world had need of it.

Heike Does the world still need it now?

Therese Look around, my darling. The need is always
there ...

Gallenberg ... but now, to the world's need there is an answer.

Karl We have our ideal. We know now what we have to
do.

Heike Will you ever sing again, mother?

Therese I've had my moment of being fully alive. I pass the
moment to you.

Karl Home, now, everybody, for the trivialities of tea.
We've seen the world in a blaze of light. Revelation
must turn into the light of day.

Giulietta It never happens, but we have to try. Lucky children.
 You've seen your mother completely alive.

Therese Fading now. Freude trinken ... No, no more.

Heike Liese, Wolfgang, father, hold her now.

Therese Take me home, my loves. It's only mid-morning, but
 the day is over ...

Karl (wondering) The day?

As they leave, the cello ponders again the famous melody.

The idea for this libretto was born while I was reading *Beethoven: impressions by his contemporaries*, Dover Publications, New York, 1967, a reprint of an earlier book by the same name, published G. Schirmer, New York, 1926. The idea of the linden trees housing the spirits of group members and their friends comes from the reminiscence of Countess Therese von Brunswick, regarded today as one of the numerous candidates for the position of Beethoven's "immortal beloved".

The Disappearing Trick

We are in an art gallery, and the director, Lewis Randall, is showing his committee around. In the centre of the space is a sculpture of *Circe*, on a platform with arms outstretched.

Lewis And there is *Circe*. I keep telling myself to move her, but I can never bring myself to do it.

Millicent Why's that, Lewis?

Lewis The public love her, especially children. You'd be amazed. If you saw a group of schoolchildren wondering if she's going to step off that platform and turn them into swine ... as I have, many times ... you'd be in awe of her too! (He notices Lesley, a beautiful young woman, standing at one side of the space.) One moment. (He moves toward Lesley.) Can I help?

Lesley I hope ...

Lewis (after waiting for her to finish) What do you hope?

Lesley It would be good if she stepped down ... but have you ever stepped up to her? She's a challenge I don't think you've accepted.

Lewis (to his group) I'll be with you in one moment. (to Lesley) I'm busy now, as you see. I'll meet you here tomorrow. Same time. You can tell me what you mean.

Lesley (accepting) You can tell me what you dream ...

She goes, and Lewis returns to his committee.

Lewis Now what I really want to show you, the area where I have some rather costly plans, is through here. (They follow.) It's rather boxed in. We can't change the structure, you'd notice that from the outside, but we can change the way it affects you when you're there. Come through, and I'll explain.

They disappear. After a short time, *Circe* disappears too, and at the same time, Lesley reappears, standing where she was when she spoke with Lewis. Then he too returns.

Lesley How did you sleep?

Lewis Terribly. As I'm sure you know, though I don't know how.

Lesley You've moved her?

Lewis I've a feeling I've done a terrible thing, and I've been punished for it.

Lesley No, that's still to come.

Lewis What's still to come? That's what I want to know.

Lesley If you want to know your future, follow me out the door. We have a long dialogue to begin.

Lewis People will see me following you. It'll be all over the city by nightfall.

Lesley More than that will happen. After nightfall comes the dark. We won't know what's in us until we meet in the dark.

Lewis I'm making a terrible mistake.

Lesley If you don't make it, you'll always wish you had.

He follows her, the stage darkens, and when we adjust to the change of light, we see that Lewis is on a couch, and a psychiatrist called Moran is listening to him.

Lewis When I realised she'd gone, I got them to put the statue back.

Moran You what?

Lewis There was a statue of Circe. It had been in the same place for years. I had it moved the day she came into my life.

Moran Why?

Lewis To make room for her, or that's what I tell myself.

Moran When you put it back, did that have any effect?

Lewis I can't enter that space without thinking she's there, on the platform, with her arms upraised, and she's reminding me of how much of myself I lost when she disappeared, and how helpless I really am.

Moran Tell me about the statue.

Lewis It feels alive. It knows what's in my mind. It tells me I'm helpless ...

Moran It tells you?

Lewis What I'm telling you is what I feel when it's looking at me. She had penetrating eyes and they're there, inside the statue, watching me still.

Moran Where is she today?

Lewis That's the frustrating thing! I have no idea! Do you know, I look at a map of the world. The whole world, between my two hands, and I ask, where are you, my love? Why aren't we together? Sharing, the way we did? I can't tell you how frankly we gave ourselves to each other. I never thought it possible for two people to exist with no barrier between their souls. I can't tell you how wonderful it was, and how wretched I feel now.

Moran Nobody else ever affected you to the same degree?

Lewis No. And as for you, I come here, not to be cured, because I know that's impossible ...

Moran Why do you come, then?

Lewis I think, if I talk about it long enough, I'll get to see, eventually, how much damage has been done.

The stage darkens, Lewis and his psychiatrist disappear, and then we are in a tree-lined road. Two people are waiting under a tree.

Julianna She likes to keep people waiting. It's one of her little games.

Russell Do you want to go inside? I don't mind waiting. It's pleasant, after all the rain.

Julianna And let her separate us? What can you be thinking of?

Russell Nothing much. I hardly know her.

Julianna That, my dear man, is not going to change, let me assure you.

Russell Don't accuse me of things. I assure you I have no plans of any sort ...

Julianna That's how she works. Her plans will become your plans, and you won't even notice.

Russell Some people would say that's how marriage works ...

Julianna You're still saying that?

Russell They would also say, those same people, that the best way to reinforce, to increase, a superior power, is to claim that it's really inferior.

Julianna There are mind games, yes, which you know how to play as well as anyone. And there are simple realities ...

Russell Like?

Julianna The road is a road. Trees are trees ...

Russell ... and that figure approaching is Lesley, unless she's changed overnight!

Lesley appears.

Julianna How do you manage to dress in the very thing that seems right, every time?

Lesley (laughing) I cast my mind forward to where I'll first be seen. The colours, the light, the time of day. Then I imagine the mood I'm going to encounter. I don't

try to analyse it, I try to fit myself into it. That way, I'm a creation of the person I'm going to see.

Russell That's extraordinary.

Julianna Some things are easier for women than for men. Shall we go in?

Lesley Let's.

Russell You go in together. I'll join you in a minute. It's rather nice out here.

Julianna You really want that?

Russell I'll let you get close to each other, then I'll add myself on.

Lesley Come on Jules, let's take him up on it.

Julianna (to Russell) See you inside.

The women go off, Russell sits on something handy, and stares at the surroundings. Lewis Randall arrives, noticing Russell as he does so.

Lewis Good morning Russell. Is Julianna inside?

Russell She's just gone in, with Lesley.

Lewis With Lesley?

Russell They were going to look at something they'd been talking about ...

Lewis What was that?

Russell Oh I forget now. When those two talk about paintings they're way over my head. I prefer to join them when they've talked themselves through to a conclusion. I have some chance of understanding them, then.

Lewis Lesley's inside? With Julianna?

Russell Yes.

Lewis What part of the gallery are they in, do you know?

Russell (He thinks.) Ah, those African masks. They were talking about Picasso and people of his time borrowing from the primitive. European art was exhausted and trying to renew itself, that sort of thing.

Lewis Ah, thank you.

Russell Will that help you find them, or avoid them?

Lewis (sourly) Let me say it will be useful, either way.

He goes in, and after a moment or two, Russell follows. There is a pause, then we notice that an older woman – Mrs Wright, Lesley’s mother – has moved into a chair. Then Lesley joins her.

Mrs W Your father used to say we should have bought you an airline.

Lesley And a diamond field, a couple of oil wells ...

Mrs W Nothing too flash. Just give her the budget of a first world nation, that’s what he used to say. Then he’d look into the air and he’d say, Spain? Italy? France?

Lesley You gave me a car when I was twenty one. Remember?

Mrs W I’ve still got the picture we took that day.

Lesley Hang onto it, mother. Keep it in your secret box. Magic dissipates.

Mrs W Magic what?

Lesley It disappears if you expose it to unsuitable eyes.

Mrs W How do you know ...

Lesley ... whose eyes are unsuitable? That’s the trick, isn’t it? The skill?

Mrs W Always a trick.

Lesley The real trick is to find the other half of what you want to do. The mind that’s ready to receive because it already believes. The imagination is disposed, even though the person doesn’t know.

Mrs W Don’t go too far, darling. People fly into rages when they feel they’ve been tricked.

Lesley What you mustn’t let them know, if you want control, is that they surrendered themselves. Most people want to do it, but ... they don’t want to know.

Mrs W Don’t want to know?

Lesley Don’t want to know what they’re doing. If you make them think you’re responsible, then you can plead with them, saying how you regret everything you’ve done, they forgive because they’re in love, and you escape. The damage you’ve done is still inside them. In their heads, their hearts, their minds!

Mrs W And what about you?

Lesley That’s when you disappear. Another country, another name, whatever you need. Identity’s only a new set of clothes. Hair, make-up on your face ...

Mrs W I won’t be here forever, darling. Your father’s gone. The day will come when there’s no one at home, waiting.

Lesley Keep that photo, mother. For no one's eyes but yours and mine.

They disappear. Once again we see Juliana and Russell, this time outside another gallery, in another state. They are waiting, as before.

Juliana Before you go off for this talk you're giving, you must have a quick look around.

Russell I will.

Juliana Lesley expects it of you.

Russell She likes to show me her knowledge. And that's fine. It seems enormous to me. I have only to say ooh and aah and make her happy ...

Juliana That's the first stage. It doesn't stay simple for long.

Russell Here she is now. Not even late!

Lesley (entering) I tried to be early but I knew you'd get here first!

Julianna (affectionately) Are you happy, living up here?

Lesley I adore it. I'll show you my flat, later. It's got a view to die for.

Russell A funny expression ...

Julianna What is, darling?

Russell Why do we want to die for something, when it's better to live?

Lesley I've got an answer for you.

Julianna What's that? Tell us please.

Lesley If you live for something, then you stop seeing it. It's only when you give up something, when you leave it for the last time, that you know what you had.

Russell That means you've always got to be moving on. You can't build a nice big store of memories in one place ...

Lesley Oh yes you can, but ...

Julianna But?

Lesley ... it's inside your mind.

Russell Lesley, darling, I'm in a hurry. Take us around, once, quickly, then I must dash off, and you and Julianna can talk your heads off.

Lesley All day! But you'll have dinner with us tonight!

Russell Right!

She leads them into the gallery. The lights lower, and we are again with Lewis Randall and his psychiatrist.

Moran When did you know she was gone?

Lewis Funnily enough, she was with me. Right beside me. In bed. We'd been making love.

Moran You felt her moving away from you?

Lewis She wasn't there. I touched her and she didn't respond. I looked into her eyes and she was staring at the ceiling. Vacantly. I said, 'Do you want to sleep now, my love?' and she didn't say a word. Then she chuckled, she nodded, and she turned on her side and went to sleep.

Moran This hadn't happened before?

Lewis Never. Oh, she'd slept often enough. She'd sleep like a log, then she'd wake up, full of life, wanting me again. She exhausted me, but I grew to love it. I was like an engine running without petrol, I used to say ...

Moran To her?

Lewis ... to her, and all she'd ever say was, 'Enjoy!' Enjoy. I feel there was a threat in it, now. As if there was a time approaching when she wouldn't be there. Looking back now, I feel that she was giving herself not because she wanted me or anyone in particular but because she wanted to know what it was like to give herself completely. And ...

Moran And?

Lewis ... having found what she wanted to know, she'd disappear. I can just imagine her popping up in another country, with a new question in her mind.

Moran What sort of question?

Lewis I don't think I know the answer to that. I gave her all I had to give, I gave until there was nothing left, and I'm sure she put it in her storehouse and then asked herself what else there was to ask for ...

Moran She was asking you, then?

Lewis No, acquiring. When you work in the arts, as I do, you know that everybody contains a treasure or two, if you know where to look. She had a genius for

finding the treasures people store inside themselves. A new person, a new treasure!

Moran You're bitter?

Lewis Because I was robbed. I thought it was an exchange of love, and I lost. Of course I'm bitter.

Moran We'll stop there for this morning. Next session, I'm going to ask you to tell it all again, from her perspective if you can.

Lewis Oh yes I can. That won't be hard.

It grows darker, Moran disappears, then Lewis. When the lights come up we are in Florence's Uffizi Gallery, and Lesley and Julianna are talking about everything they can see.

Julianna There needs to be change in the air ...

Lesley With a class of people being made wealthier.

Julianna Feeling they've something new about them needing to be expressed.

Lesley That's what the movement's like when it's under way, but how does it start?

Julianna That's the hard question. It's easy for people like us to trace back, once we know what we're looking for ...

Lesley ... but how do we find the beginning? For that matter, how do we know there was a beginning?

Julianna There was a beginning if people say there was a beginning.

Lesley It's hard to make rules, isn't it, because new movements are different every time.

Julianna Look at this. There's something new in the air here.

They are looking at Botticelli's 'Primavera'.

Lesley Primavera!

Julianna What's it mean?

Lesley First spring!

Julianna Botticelli must have felt that. Some of his earlier paintings are cruel, brutal.

Lesley It's about the first beginnings of something and it works as a painting ...

Both ... because ...

They are laughing, now.

Julianna ... it's something new in itself.

Lesley What it's about ...

Julianna ... is what it is! Or what it is ...

Lesley ... is what it's about! Doesn't happen very often, does it. (There is a pause.) Jules, tell me, how is Russell travelling?

Julianna He's a better traveller than I am, by far.

Lesley How's that?

Julianna He's better organised. He reads timetables. He spots things long before I do.

Lesley Are they worth seeing?

Julianna He thinks so.

Lesley And you?

Julianna He's observant, but it's always on a level that doesn't mean anything to me.

Lesley Is it going to last?

Julianna I suppose so ...

Lesley You don't sound very sure.

Julianna I know I'll blame myself if I do anything to break it up ...

Lesley So?

Julianna What I wish is that something outside the control of both of us would break things up. Like a war ...

Lesley That's a bit extreme.

Julianna You know what I mean. Circumstances beyond control. We wake up one morning and we've been pulled apart ...

Lesley Moving further away every day.

Julianna And quite unable to help each other. Either that, or he finds someone else.

Lesley Is he looking?

Julianna All the time. But you'd never drag it out of him that he was.

Lesley And you?

Julianna I have to admit I'm just the same.

Lesley There's a lovely Caravaggio in here. Let me show you ...

Julianna (commenting on the gallery) They're good with flowers, aren't they.

Lesley Poinsettias.

Julianna I love flowers but I'm no good on their names.

Lesley Mother had a big tub of poinsettias outside our kitchen door.

Julianna A big tub? Was that a good idea?

Lesley No. They're better in something dainty. (pointing) But it's hard to criticise what you grew up with.

Julianna I wish I could say the same.

Lesley It's in here, Jules. When you first see it, stop! Then move up slowly, once you've got the drama, and see what else is there.

Julianna Have you worked out an approach for every picture?

Lesley Not yet. But I'm getting there.

They laugh, and disappear. After a time we are returned to the gallery space of the opening scene, with Circe on her platform, arms outstretched. Mrs Wright comes to one side of the scene and sits on a chair left for the attendant on duty.

Mrs W (looking at Circe) I don't think any of them know me. I can try to get in touch, here.

She is interrupted when Millicent, also from the first scene, enters the space.

Millicent (referring to the statue) She's hard to resist, isn't she? She's got such a presence.

Mrs W She's been moved a few times ...

Millicent ... but she finds her way back.

Mrs W How does she do it?

Millicent By capturing our hearts and minds, I suspect. If she's not here when I go through the gallery, I miss her, and I always ask where she is.

Mrs W And they know?

Millicent (surprised) Well, some of them are a bit dense, but ...

Mrs W She's like an oracle, isn't she. I'd like to question her.

Millicent A lot of people feel that. It's a strange thing, you know, how something like Circe can draw on things inside us that we only half understand.

Mrs W There are people like that. My daughter's one.

Millicent Ah ...

Mrs W I shouldn't have burdened you with that, but it's a burden to me.

Millicent (evasively) Well, if you need to think about it, you've chosen a good place.

She leaves.

Mrs W She's never going to come home. She's gone.

Mrs Wright leaves too. Circe and her gallery disappear, and then we are with Julianna and Russell. Julianna hands Russell a letter.

Julianna From Paris. You'll be there next week.

Russell God willing.

Julianna It's Lesley's writing.

Russell The mystery girl. What's she up to now?

Julianna You're going to find you're part of her plans.

Russell Well, let's see. (He reads.) She wants me to publish her book.

Julianna Is it written?

Russell No.

Julianna She wants you to shape it for her so it's an instant, overnight success!

Russell You're right.

Julianna Well?

Russell I'll be in Paris. On my way from London to Frankfurt.

Julianna (gesturing) Ooh la la!

Russell I don't have to be silly.

Julianna It would help, though.

Russell Look, I know as well as you do what she does. She uses people, then she disappears.

Julianna It's your turn now, dear man.

Russell I'm not as silly as some.

Julianna But are you as bright as you need to be?

Russell How bright is that?

Julianna Brighter than I am, because I've been dumped. She took my hand outside the Uffizi. See you tonight. Then a message ...

Russell She wasn't well.

Julianna ... and I never saw her again. And I never will. Where does she go? Why? How does she know it's time, that's what I want to know. She must achieve some perfection before she severs the link. That's the

power, isn't it, of knowing the other person's happy? The other person's fooled. That's when she cuts us off. Is it painful for her, or a tremendous, secret relief?

Russell Or both?

Julianna You'll have to see her. I need you to see her. When she's cut you off, and you're feeling wretched, and abandoned when you thought you'd been accepted ...

Russell ... as no one before me has been accepted ...

Julianna After all, if she gets rid of you, then you get rid of her. We might be able to start again, you and I.

Russell You and I?

They disappear, and we see projected on the rear wall a vast view of Paris. Russell and Lesley are going up the escalators on the outside of the Pompidou Centre.

Lesley Fire eaters and mime artists, they're something I never had back home. They're part of my life now, every day.

Russell What are we going to see, when we get to the top?

Lesley Paris, and an art collection the likes of which you've never seen. Then we'll find a little corner, and we'll talk about my book.

Russell That means talking about yourself.

Lesley In a very disciplined way. Control, sequencing, and management, they're the arts I need.

Russell I think you have those qualities, every one.

Lesley (pointing) That's Saint Eustache. I'll tell you a story about that later.

Russell Tonight?

Lesley Yes, tonight. Night's the time for telling stories.

Russell And creating them.

Lesley Here we are at the top. Take a good look, then in we go.

They disappear. For a time the audience sees the paintings and sculptures they're looking at in the Pompidou's collection, then we come across Russell and Lesley in a corner of the cafeteria, cups and glasses on the table before them.

Lesley So that's the plan.

Russell It's very bold.

Lesley Original?

Russell Most. I can't recall anyone starting out in that way before.

Lesley Publication worldwide?

Russell You give us the manuscript you've described and we'll do the rest. It's ...

Lesley ... a piece of cake?

Russell A bottle of champers, you name it, that's what we've got. Sorry, what we will have!

Lesley It's up to me now, isn't it.

Russell I think so. How far have you got?

Lesley Quite a way. I've got my opening done.

Russell Where's that?

Lesley You remember how Thomas Hardy starts one of his books. The whole of the first chapter's about ...

Both Egdon Heath!

Lesley That's what I've done. I've described the world as it was without me.

Russell Yes! And where do you enter?

Lesley Chapter Two!

Russell I mean ... where's that?

Lesley The world of my parents.

Russell You'll need to get to that quickly. It's already in the opening you described.

Lesley True, but I have to create myself out of my circumstances. Every one of us is something special.

Russell Except that nobody believes it until they're made to believe it. That's your job as a writer.

Lesley Strange. I never thought of myself as having a job.

Russell Don't. You go on writing. It's me and my people who worry about books as jobs.

Lesley I want to make things easy for you.

Russell You can't make that happen. It comes naturally, or it doesn't come at all.

Lesley You make it sound like love.

Russell Love surrounds us, waiting to walk in, uninvited ...

Lesley Look at us, Russell. Take a photo with your mind. You must do this often, sitting with a writer, advising ...

Russell (smiling) Occasionally we get a book!

Lesley The whole of Paris is pressing against us, telling us to go on. Rimbaud, Balzac, Debussy, Gabriel Fauré ... the men who built Notre Dame, the revolutionaries, crazed by shedding blood, Lully, Rameau, all the painters ...

Russell Don't let it sit too heavily on your shoulders. The past mustn't overpower today.

Lesley Today ...

Russell Today is you, my love. Today is your turn. All those people you named had their turn. They can't write any more music, or paint any more paintings. They can't sculpt, they can't even think any more.

Lesley Today.

Russell Today is you, my love.

Lesley And tonight?

Russell Tonight we'll be together. You and I.

Lesley What will we make of each other? Something lasting? Something nice to think about, when we're old? Something to leave like last night's sheets, as we move on? There's always experience, crowding in.

Russell We have fortnightly conferences. Work in progress. I won't mention your book until you give me the signal.

Lesley I won't be long. You've made me strong. Let's go outside, and then go down. We've got a world to enter. Paris! Here we come!

They leave. We catch a glimpse of them on the escalator, then Paris disappears and the scene returns to the exhibition space of the first scene, with the same paintings on the wall and Circe, arms still upraised. Enter Lewis Randall, with Millicent.

Millicent Have you thought of putting her out in the garden, somewhere? On the grass?

Lewis Oh, she's got her followers. Every time she gets moved, people complain. She's there to stay!

Millicent As you wish.

Lewis I wish she'd put her bloody arms down. Every time I walk through I feel as if I've got to listen to an incantation.

Millicent What's she singing, Lewis?

Lewis She says, I'm everything you wanted, and you couldn't make it happen. She says, You're not powerful, you can't even close my eyes. And I can't. She doesn't need to say a word. She's got her eyes open. I know, and she knows, and I know she knows, and all that sort of rubbish, and what can I do?

Millicent Not a thing.

Lewis Not ... a ... thing.

Millicent Powerless, aren't we.

Lewis We've got a meeting, Millicent. Two bloody hours of it, unless you shut them up. Do your best, will you?

Millicent We mustn't be late.

They leave. Julianna and Russell come into the space soon after.

Julianna Does this place unsettle you?
 Russell It troubles you, obviously.
 Julianna It troubles us. It's our trouble, in a way.
 Russell Then let's go somewhere else. There's nothing in here of any importance to me. (Julianna indicates the figure of Circe.) What about her?
 Julianna I think you connect her with you know who.
 Russell I do. I don't know why.
 Julianna She famously turned men into swine.
 Russell Hitler did that. Millions of people have done it. It's not so very unusual.
 Julianna That doesn't make anything any different for us.
 Russell (putting himself with his back to Circe) There's nothing more to tell. I saw her in Paris. I did exactly what you said I'd do. And we never got the book.
 Julianna That's the interesting part of it.
 Russell A wonderful opening, the week after I got back ...
 Julianna Last time you told me, she put it in your hands after a wonderful night together.
 Russell Well, I had to talk about it in meetings. So it came in the post.
 Julianna To your home address because there would be no record of it at the office.
 Russell The world's full of stories and sometimes we have to airbrush them a little.
 Julianna And you and I?

Russell We have skills that make people put us apart, but if we think we're any different from anybody else, we're fools.
 Julianna Do you want to see Lesley again?
 Russell I'd love to know where she is, who she's diddling now. And I never will, she'll make sure of that. The only power that's left to me is to invent a person to fill the gap. A story, an invention, and cling to it, hard!
 He says this vehemently, then turns.
 Julianna (moving a little closer to Circe) Are you still a swine?
 Russell No, but I'm a little bit wiser for having been one. And you?
 Julianna I came under the spell ...
 Russell She never gave us a bloody book. I'd forgive her anything if she'd laid the golden egg. (awkwardly) So to speak.
 Julianna Or had a child.
 Russell She's had lovers enough ...
 Julianna Including you.
 Russell And you, for that matter.
 Julianna It's the short-lived power of a beautiful woman. Everyone's looking, and she chooses. Having chosen, her glory's gone. She can only give it once.
 Russell Unless she disappears, and does it all over again.
 Julianna Which you can't go on doing forever ...

Russell ... unless you keep moving, so nobody knows you,
and you can do it again.

Julianna And move on, forever,

Russell The Flying Dutch-Woman!

Julianna A new name for a very old thing. Let's see something
new.

They leave the gallery to Circe, her arms upraised as they were at
the start.

Lifting The Lid

The scene is a tiny studio in an English newspaper office, October 1935. David Low is looking glumly at the sheet in front of him. The audience can see a large screen behind him, currently blank, which shows them whatever he draws.

Low What a rotten world.
Voices (not far away) And getting worse!
Low How can I produce anything?
Voices (cheerfully) Shoot yourself! Jump in the river!
Low (going to the door to answer) Shut up you miserable bastards. (He starts to grin.) This is serious!
Voices Stop laughing then!
Low It's my job to make you laugh!

A newspaper executive dashes past, then stops.

Egerton How's it going David?
Low Lousy.
Egerton Stuck for an idea?
Low I've got ideas like raindrops on a window.
Egerton Not happy with them then?
Low I'm scared.
Egerton (looking at him) What's got into you?
Low Fear. Pure, naked bloody fear.
Egerton Of what?
Low Of what's going to happen.
Egerton There's your idea then.

Low What?
Egerton Draw what it is that frightens you. Leave yourself out but make the readers face it.

Low Hmm.

He goes to his desk and as he draws we see, coming up on the screen behind him, his cartoon of October 4, 1935, "The Man Who Took The Lid Off." As he finishes, Egerton comes back.

Egerton Good one, David. We'll use that tomorrow! All we need now is someone to shoot Mussolini and that'll be the front page.

He takes the drawing away, but it remains visible on the screen for some time longer.

Low Why's Italy interfering? What's Abyssinia got to do with them?

We hear a sombre rumbling, as if a storm is approaching. Low comes out to have a look, and as he does so he encounters Pringle, another employee of the paper.

Pringle Looking for ideas?

Low I came out to have a look at the storm.

Pringle There's no storm, David. You're looking at a clear blue sky.

Low (as he hears more rumbling) Oh dear, it's in my head.

Pringle It's the world, I'm afraid.

Low Me too. Isn't everyone?

Another man comes beside them.

Johnson I told my wife that the minute war breaks out I'll see it as my duty to join up.

Pringle What did she say to that?

Johnson She said she thought most men of my type – those were her words – would feel the same way.

Low What did you make of that?

Johnson I thought she was one hundred per cent behind me, but now I'm not so sure.

There is another ominous rumble, louder this time.

Low Excuse me, I've got an idea that I have to get down.

He dashes into his room and starts to draw. As he does so we see, bit by bit on the screen behind him, his cartoon of September 20, 1939, 'Rendezvous', showing Stalin ("The bloody assassin of the workers, I presume?") greeting Hitler ("The scum of the earth, I believe?"): the two dictators have partitioned Poland. Meanwhile, in front of Low's office, the conversation goes on.

Pringle War's harder on women than it is on men. I was in the last show, and I had it bad enough. It took me years to realise that worry and responsibility for our children had put a heavier burden on my wife than I'd carried myself.

Johnson When you're in the ranks, all you have to do is obey.

Pringle And let someone else take responsibility.

Another huge rumble of war, though Low, at least, still thinks it's thunder.

Johnson (of Low) He's luckier than us. He gets to show everyone what he feels.

Pringle And he's paid more than we are. He's lucky, but it doesn't stop him grumbling.

Egerton returns.

Egerton Morning chaps. What's David working on? (appreciatively) Hmm ...

Pringle The worst news brings out the best in him, don't you think?

Egerton The Nazis hate it when David laughs at them. They ask our government to have his work stopped. Fortunately nobody's done it. Yet.

Pringle We won't be listening to them much longer. We'll be at war. Johnson's ready to enlist.

Egerton That so, Johnson?

Johnson It's my duty, sir. Don't you think?

Egerton I'm too old to go with you, Johnson, or I would. You're right in every way.

Johnson Thank you sir. It's what I hoped I'd hear.

Egerton We're going to need a scheme that guarantees men's jobs ...

Johnson Those of us that come back.

Egerton What? Oh. (Suddenly he's very sombre. The rumbling of war grows louder, then there's a blackout, with violent explosions very close. After one very loud explosion we see Johnson's wife Rachel, and her child, Jane.

Jane Where's our home gone, mummy?

Rachel It's been blown to buggery, darling, and what we'll do now, I've no idea.

Jane Where's buggery, mummy? Can we go there and get our home back?

Rachel (considering Jane's words) Can we go to buggery? We're there, darling! Why, this is hell, and I am in it! (loudly) Help!

Petford (rushing on) Anybody hurt? How's the little one?

Rachel She's alive.

Jane Of course I'm alive. But the big bang took away our house.

Petford You're lucky it didn't take you.

Jane I want to be where the house is. That's where my toys are.

Petford You'll get more toys, love. Someone'll give you some.

Rachel What am I going to do now?

Petford Was there anyone else in the house?

Rachel Only the two of us. My husband's at the front, except the war snuck in behind him, didn't it? The war's

here, isn't it? This is the war, there's nothing but war!

Petford I'm afraid you're right. Now you'll have to go down into the tube and wait for the All Clear. Someone'll give you a blanket, if you're lucky. When the All Clear sounds, you can come back and look for your things. But don't take too long. We'll have to organise a bed for you tonight.

Jane Where are we going to sleep, mummy?

Petford We'll do something for you darling. If we can. Now! Down to the tube, we've got to get you out of harm's way ...

The All Clear siren blows, surprising them. They stand a little foolishly.

Petford Come along to the Town Hall. We'll get your particulars on a list.

Rachel I don't feel ready for that yet.

Petford You mustn't hang around here, ma'am. It'll make you depressed.

Rachel I want to search for our things.

Jane My teddy!

Rachel Jane's teddy ...

Petford I'll come back in half an hour, ma'am. You'll really have to come with me then.

He leaves, and Rachel and Jane disappear into the wreckage of their home. Then the screen that showed us David Low's cartoons shows

us a beach crowded with British soldiers. Planes fly overhead, strafing. The blasts of small explosions appear from time to time along the beach. Johnson comes forward, clutching a piece of paper.

Johnson Rachel wants to be with me. She says she'd even bring Jane. (reading) "Anything's better than being separated. She sleeps beside me every night. I hear her breathing and I know she's alive. It's more than I know about you, darling, but I hope and pray. Sometimes I feel I'm as powerful as God himself because I can't see how anything could ever tear us apart. You're my man! Jane's got your photo and she wants to know when she'll see you again. Soon, I tell her. What else can I say?" Aaaaaaaahhh. (He looks up and down the beach.) Aaaaaaaahhh! (More blasts as bombs explode among the soldiers on the beach.) Let's get out of here! We've got our country to defend! (He looks around and the bleakness of the scene makes him despair.) Give me something to fight with and I'll fight them to the death! Death! Death! (There is another explosion, very close to Johnson. He screams for the last time.) Aaaaaaaahhh!

The beach scene disappears. After a time we see once more the screen which has given us David Low's cartoons. Piece by piece and line by line we see, appearing, "He must have been mad", from May 15, 1941. Then we see Low himself, in his studio, drawing, and Egerton, his boss.

Egerton Good one, David. "He must have been mad." But was he acting on his own? Is the Nazi leadership splitting? It's hard to say, isn't it?

Low I have to deal with what we know, and that's little enough.

Egerton Nobody knows what's going on. Both sides want to know if they're winning, yet there's nobody to ask.

Low You've given up hope of heaven?

Egerton Heaven knows if it still exists, I don't. There's not much evidence of it, is there? Look what we're doing to each other. (The rumblings make themselves heard again, though far away.) I don't like fighting, but once war starts, you've got to fight to win. So what's this Hess doing? Flying to Scotland to see our king?

Low His own people should have shot him down. Our people should have shot him down. If you take any notice of the propaganda, he didn't have a hope in hell. But he got through. So what's gone wrong? Who's going to tell me that?

Egerton (looking out the window) People out there think that we in here must know. Huh! (He laughs.) We print the news! And look what we print! If I made it up myself, they'd lock me up! And I'd bloody well deserve it ...

Low They say Hess came to offer peace.

Egerton On what terms, and on whose authority, though? I think he just cracked up. It's not hard to understand. In the first show, I was in the infantry. Men cracked up all the time. We spent half our time supporting each other. Nobody knew when they'd reach their limit. Today, I can't face it, so you support me. Next day, it'd be your turn, and I'd put my arm around you and say the same things that you said to me.

Low He wanted King George to make peace ...

Egerton But real peace, or protection for their backs while they invaded Russia? I think that's what it was, but what do I know?

Voice Hey mate, when's the next edition coming out?

Egerton (calling back) Tomorrow morning. We can't put out more than one a day!

Voice How d'you expect us to know what's going on?

Egerton (closing the window) How do they expect us to know any better than they do?

Low They think it's our job.

Egerton It's our job to give them all the news that's ...

Low ... fit to print?

Egerton And what's fit to print? Seriously, you tell me.

Low (referring to his cartoon) I say Hitler's in charge of an asylum. But is our side any better?

Egerton We've got to believe we are.

Low What if King George had said to Hess, That's a good idea.

Egerton He'd have flown back to Hitler, if he could avoid getting shot down ...

Low ... and Hitler ...

Egerton ... would have had him shot, probably.

Low In the interests of peace?

Egerton In the interests of winning Hitler's war.

Low We have to say that, don't we. It's Hitler's war, when it's ours as well. War is the continuation of diplomacy by other means.

Egerton I'll take this up to the editor. I think he'll be pleased.

Low Did you know that man who called out to you before?

Egerton Not personally. He spotted me and he called out.

Low He wanted news. New news. The latest!

Egerton (taking the cartoon) Tomorrow morning, this will be it.

He leaves. The stage darkens. We hear voices but cannot see the people.

Hitler Give me the dates for the invasion. (Apparently someone does so.) Goering?

Goering Mein Fuhrer?

Hitler I want clear skies. We have to beat them in the air.

Goering The skies will be clear, Mein Fuhrer. Six weeks.

Hitler From today?

Goering When our soldiers land, they will look ahead. Never up.

Hitler I need to think about ships, and tides. And the moon, shining down, or letting us work in the dark. Ha!

Low's office becomes visible again. Low is drawing, Egerton is at a window, looking out.

Low Something's on your mind. What is it?

Egerton Young Johnson. We've just had news.

Low Oh.

Egerton He was wounded in a blast at Dunquerque, before they got away. They got him back to London. He's been in hospital until this morning.

Low Oh.

Egerton I don't know how many times I saw it happen, the first war. Now it's happening, all over again. What a world! No wonder you draw cartoons!

Low Have you ever wondered what it takes to do my job?

Egerton Every time I pass your table.

Low You have to admit that it's really going on. You can't block it out. It takes over your mind. Then, when you're frightened out of your wits, or in a rage with the world, you have to quell the fear, and ask yourself, what do I want to say? Then you wait. When something enters your mind, you must be ready to get it down. And it really matters, because millions of people are waiting.

Egerton That makes you a very powerful man.

Low It's only the power of comment. Real power is in others' hands.

The office goes dark again, and we hear the voices of Churchill and his wife.

Churchill If they come now, there's nothing I can do. I think the British people will fight.

Mrs C They're ready, Winston. They're stubborn, and strange. They'd rather die than be anything but what they are.

Churchill We've never done much for them. It needs a time like this to make us admit. We'll have to do better, after the war.

Mrs C You can see that far ahead?

Churchill Wars change everything. You go to war saying you're defending something, but when it's over, and you've won, the things you were defending aren't there any more.

Mrs C Why are we fighting, then?

Churchill Because we don't know what else to do. Isn't that crazy? You fight, or die and the two choices, if that's what they are ... they're not very far apart.

Mrs C But the difference is worth fighting for.

Churchill Worth dying for, my love.

After some time, Low's office reappears. The sounds of war give way to something that sounds like the rejoicing of bells. An older Pringle stops an older Egerton.

Pringle Excuse me, sir. There's a woman outside. A Mrs Johnson. With a young girl. Says she'd like to show the girl around ...

Egerton (scornfully) What?

Pringle Wants to show her where her father worked ...

Egerton Oh, Johnson. The Johnson who worked here?

Pringle His wife, and his child. The mother says she'd like the girl to meet anyone who knew her father.

Egerton We can hardly say no to that.

Pringle No sir.

Egerton Is David about?

Pringle. Any minute now, I'd say.

Egerton Well, I suppose you'd better bring them in.

Pringle goes off and returns with Rachel and Jane.

Pringle Mrs Johnson, sir, and Jane.

Egerton Good morning, Mrs Johnson. You'd like Jane (he bows to the girl) to see where her father worked?

Rachel Best to call me Rachel, I think. I feel I've known you a very long time. You're Mr Egerton?

Egerton I am.

Rachel We mustn't take up your time.

Egerton We're usually in a rush, but you've caught us in a quiet moment.

Rachel Not so busy, now it's over.

Egerton Busy enough, but no, it's not as hard on us as it was.

Rachel It's not getting any easier for me.

Egerton Does she remember her father?

Rachel A little. Bits and pieces.

Egerton And you're trying to find a few of the pieces for her?

Rachel Yes. I am. Whenever we can.

Egerton Well, Pringle can show you all the places where ... I'm sorry, I never called him anything but Johnson ...

Rachel Tim. That was his name.

Jane Tim.

They look at the girl, and she at them.

Egerton Your father was a good man, Jane. You must always be proud of him.

Rachel I think she knows that. I've told her that he felt it was his duty to go.

Jane Though he knew he might get killed. As he was, you know.

Pringle We know that darling. And we're very sorry. Ah, here's David now.

Low enters, surprised to see the group near his little office.

Low Good morning everybody. Anything new?

Egerton Ah, Low, you'd remember Johnson. This is his wife, Rachel, and his daughter, Jane.

Low Good of you to come in. There's something of his spirit, lingering here.

Rachel Jane's a great fan of yours. She wonders if her father ever drew anything for you.

Low No, Jane, I work very much on my own. Would you like to see me drawing?

Jane is silent so Rachel answers for her.

Rachel She'd love that. Anything at all so long as it's drawn by you.

Low This is the one I did yesterday. (On the screen behind him we see "Curtain", Low's cartoon for August 14, 1945.) It's a rather grim one, I'm afraid. There's been a lot of singing and dancing since peace was announced, but I'm finding it hard to be at peace with myself.

Rachel A great many of us feel like that. We've lost too much to be able to celebrate.

Low (looking through his things) If I had a funny one I'd give it to you, but none of them seem fit for a young girl. They're hardly fit for anybody, except the human race en masse.

Jane Sir?

Low We've been through some terrible years, Jane. The worst in the long history of the world. If you become a cartoonist ...

Rachel There's nothing she'd like more ...

Low ... I hope you're given a happier time to deal with. I don't think I'll go on much longer.

Egerton David? What's that you're saying?

Low I've seen humanity at its worst. I'm not sure that I believe it can be any better.

Pringle (to Egerton) Perhaps, sir, I might take ... Rachel ... and Jane and show them a few of the things that

Johnson ... er, Tim ... used to do. Places where he worked, that sort of thing.

Egerton That would be very decent of you, Pringle. I'll leave you, Mrs Johnson, Rachel, in Pringle's care. He'll show you where your husband worked, tell you what he did ...

Everyone goes off except Low.

Low ("Curtain" is still on the screen behind him) The whole world thinks I'm a funny man, but what do they give me to make me laugh?

Inspiration for *Lifting The Lid* came from a cartoon, "The Man Who Took The Lid Off", first published in London on October 4, 1935, and reproduced in *Years of Wrath: a Cartoon History, 1932 – 1945*, by David Low, Victor Gollancz, London, 1949. Low depicts a crazy-bold Benito Mussolini lifting the lid which had kept the devil in his underworld; this is a reference to Italy's attack on Abyssinia, one of the steps along the way to World War Two. Other Low cartoons referred to in this piece come from the same book.

Aux armes, consommateurs!

A large space, empty apart from a screen dominating all. As the piece opens, the screen is displaying activity – driving, putting – at a beautifully maintained golf course. A large crowd is watching the golfers. Three people appear: Johnson, Gwyneth, and, well back, and watching, is a man who calls himself Wheeler.

Johnson (observing the golf) They've got a good crowd.

Gwyneth I'd rather play than watch.

Johnson More exercise.

Gwyneth D'you know where they're playing?

Johnson Not the faintest.

The two of them wander idly towards the screen, as it shows, first, the ball being driven, second, the ball high in the air, and third, the ball rolling across a perfect green to a few metres from the flag. This means that it appears to roll between Johnson and Gwyneth.

Gwyneth (laughing) You'd think it was coming for us!

Wheeler Watch this. (as a player arrives to putt) It's the Australian, Cantelopee Brown.

Cantelopee's putt drops in the hole.

Commentators Hoh hoh hoh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Hoh, hoh, hoh!

Gwyneth How many commentators have they got?

Wheeler Barely enough. Now. Let's introduce ourselves. I'm Wheeler.

Johnson To rhyme with 'dealer'?

Wheeler Yes! And you, sir?

Johnson My name's Johnson.

Wheeler Let's make that a little more friendly. I'll call you Jackson, Jacko for short. And you ma'am?

Gwyneth My name's Gwyneth. My family call me Gwen.

Wheeler I'll call you Gwynny, to keep it nice and friendly. What brings you here this fine day?

Gwyneth It's a lovely morning for a walk.

Wheeler Living in the area?

Johnson We've thought about it.

Wheeler You couldn't do better. I'd recommend something just the other side of this stream ...

Johnson (scornfully) Does it ever flow?

Wheeler The plan is to develop this stream so that it flows between the houses, forming a lake.

The screen shows what the area's to become.

Gwyneth Why don't they leave it as it is?

Wheeler There's big demand down this way for high quality development. Schools will follow, if you're planning a family ...

Johnson Let's not rush into this!

Wheeler May I ask, Jacko and Gwynny, are you married?

The misnamed couple look at each other.

Gwyneth Well ...

Johnson We're ...
Gwyneth ... partners.
Wheeler This could be the place for you to settle.
Gwyneth We've been thinking about travel ...
Johnson ... before we settle down.
Wheeler Ah! (He signals to the screen and it shows pictures to suit what he's saying.) The Great Wall. It's a great walk, if you can manage a few steps on your own! Not easy in China, you know.
Gwyneth They've got a massive population.
Wheeler You've been there? (They nod.) Well, we'd better think of somewhere else. Variety's the spice of life. Fiji?

The screen shows us a beautiful island in the Pacific.

Johnson Been there. Two wonderful weeks.
Wheeler Excellent. What about London? Been there?

Pictures of London landmarks appear.

Gwyneth Not as yet.
Wheeler It's where our founding fathers and (he says this deferentially) mothers came from. Home, we used to call it.
Johnson Home? That was a long time ago.
Wheeler To be happy where we are, we need to be somewhere else.
Gwyneth Come again?

Wheeler (ignoring her query) Spain! (The pictures change to show us Spain.) A seductive land, with its greatness behind it now, but its wonders still on show. This is Seville Cathedral, they've got a statue of Columbus inside ...

We see the cathedral, then the Columbus memorial.

Johnson I suppose it's modern now, like the rest of Europe.
Wheeler Trains, planes, jewellery, fashions ... it's right up to speed. Yet the ancient rituals are still there; the church, the bull fighting ...

Gwyneth We'll have to save up to do this darling. We ought to buy ourselves a house first, so we've got a base.

Wheeler Ah! (The sound of his voice appears to make the pictures of Spain disappear from the screen, to be replaced by home after home, most of them with For Sale signs.) They call this a MacMansion because it's just down the street from Macdonald's.

Johnson Spare me!

Wheeler As you wish, Jacko. How's this for grandeur? Right on top of a hill, and everything below is smaller.

Gwyneth I'd rather have something that's not easily noticed.

Wheeler Discretion, Gwynny, that's what you're after. Right here, look! (A picture appears of a Victorian terrace in Fitzroy, Melbourne.) This is what you see from the outside, but when you open the door ...

A highly modernised home appears on the screen.

Johnson Not bad at all.

Gwyneth I can imagine myself living there. Where is it?

Wheeler I'll take you to see it in a minute. As we drive along, you can think about your lifestyle. Restaurants for when you don't feel like cooking ... (more pictures on the screen) ... and of course, when the time comes, where you'll send your kids to school!

Johnson Good heavens! Got it all worked out, haven't you.

Wheeler We serve the public. There isn't much that's new in their demands.

Gwyneth I don't think you've told us who you represent ...

Wheeler I'm representing you. I'm here to provide the best services that money can buy.

Johnson But who do you work for?

Wheeler I work for you. Your word is my command.

Gwyneth Good heavens. I don't know whether I'm the mistress or the slave.

Johnson It's like wheeling a trolley around a shop, except that paying for what you've bought takes the rest of your life!

Wheeler The trolley fills your home. The trolley is, in a way, your home. It feeds you. You sleep in it ...

Johnson Sleep in a trolley?

Wheeler You sleep in the bed you put in the trolley, so to speak. You chose the bed, you had it delivered, along with the best bedding available. They're making some wonderful sheets these days ... (The screen shows us

what he's talking about.) and you can have matching curtains, or covers on your chairs. The sky's the limit in the modern world!

Gwyneth I don't think our budget will reach the sky. It certainly won't cover it with curtains!

Johnson (anxiously) Darling ...

Wheeler I'll get Bettina to advise. Betsy!

Enter Bettina, a woman whose clothes and appearance create an impression of eternal youth.

Bettina I'm Bettina. Who are you?

Johnson My name's Johnson, but lately I've become Jacko.

Gwyneth I was Gwyneth, Gwen for short, and now I'm Gwynny.

Bettina I can see you're not comfortable. We should do better. Let's call you Victor and Marguerite.

Johnson (trying it out) Victor ...

Gwyneth Marguerite ...

Bettina Comfortable?

Gwyneth They're nice names ...

Johnson But I'm not sure that they're us. Not yet.

Bettina Keep using them until they become familiar. It won't be long. You'll get a letter from the bank, addressed to your old names, and you won't know who they're talking about.

Johnson Gwyneth. It is beginning to sound ... quaint.

Gwyneth Johnson, Jackson. You sound like a heavyweight boxer!

They all laugh.

Wheeler Betsy, I've talked travel with our friends, schools for their children ...

Gwyneth ... when we have them ...

Wheeler ... housing on the estate, boating on the lake ...

Johnson Did we talk about that?

Wheeler I was getting around to it.

Bettina These are things money can buy. You haven't talked about the sort of people they want to be.

Wheeler That's when I called for you.

Bettina (explaining) Everyone wants to better themselves. They think if they buy a bigger house or a luxury car, if they join the right club or hang great pictures on their walls, they'll have done the job.

Johnson But that's only half right!

Bettina This is marvellous, Victor. You're anticipating what I've got in mind.

Gwyneth You've called me Marguerite because it's a name steeped in story.

Bettina Right! Marguerite was many people in the history of the world. She was the lover of Faust when he sold his soul ...

Gwyneth ... and met a bad end!

Bettina Which you're going to avoid. As I was saying, everyone wants to better themselves, but they can't do it unless they change. Everything out of sight has

to become a superior form of what it was, or perhaps the new has to replace the old entirely.

Johnson It sounds awfully hard to do.

Bettina Not when you're in good hands. It won't be long before you're leading the way yourselves, and I'm only a lingering admirer.

Gwyneth I hope I don't get left behind.

Bettina Women are better at changing than men. And you'll have guidance when it's needed. You won't be lacking support.

Johnson (establishing something) I'm Victor, she's Marguerite, he's Wheeler ...

Wheeler That's me!

Johnson ... and you're Betsy?

Bettina (firmly) Bettina. That's my identity, at all times.

Wheeler And places.

He and Bettina look very assured.

Gwyneth What's the first thing we need to do?

Bettina We've got to build your confidence, so it's as solid as a rock.

On the screen we see pictures of models on their catwalk, wearing glamorous clothes, and moving so that their fabrics swish against their bodies.

Gwyneth Oh I could never do that.

Johnson Yes you could darling. Try!

Bettina takes Gwyneth's arm and leads her across the stage, building her confidence with admiring looks and remarks.

Bettina Beautiful. Stylish. Don't walk, slink. Like a tigress, or a cheetah. A lynx! Everyone's afraid of you, but they can't take their eyes away. Beauty's dangerous, and it's embodied in you. It's deep inside your self. Now a man comes up, admiring, and you show him what you think.

Wheeler goes through the motions as Bettina calls them, until Gwyneth indicates with a movement of her arm that he's not fit to be near her. Johnson applauds this.

Johnson Wonderful, darling. Gwynny my love.

Gwyneth (scornfully) Marguerite!

Johnson (humbled) Marguerite.

B & W Marguerite! Marguerite!

Bettina (looking at Johnson) Now for you.

Johnson Me?

Bettina What are we going to make of you? (She thinks.)
Ah!

Gwyneth What's he going to be?

Bettina A captain of men's souls.

Johnson I'm afraid.

Bettina Sit over here. (She puts him at a table, with a microphone in front of him. The big screen shows a greatly enlarged picture of him and his mike at the

table.) Annual report. Question time. Why have the company's earnings dropped?

Johnson (extemporising) A temporary slump. Forecast earnings for the next half are to rise seven point nine per cent. For the next twelve months, fifteen point seven. (aggressively) Next?

Bettina What's this increase in the salaries of directors?

Johnson Directors carry a burden of responsibility in an increasingly competitive world. Takeovers threaten at every turn. Shareholders would find their assets diminished if management wasn't vigilant. The increases are your guarantee that your shares won't fall in value.

Bettina Now let me ...

Johnson One moment. I move that we move to item four on the agenda, emoluments. I move that the proposed increases be agreed to!

Wheeler A query over here ...

Johnson (overriding him) Those in favour? Proxy votes give us an affirmative of ninety-eight per cent. (very loudly) Carried!

Bettina Good one Victor! You've earned the name!

Gwyneth Darling, I'm amazed.

Johnson I'm a little surprised myself. Am I to be tested any more?

Wheeler I've selected you a home. Question is, how do you want it, inside? Contemporary? Antique? Tasteful?

Alternative interiors are shown on the big screen. Johnson & Gwyneth consider.

Gwyneth Not the tasteful. It's too much of a mixture. It's either contemporary or antique.

Johnson I'm not going back in time.

Bettina Not now you're moving forward. Schools?

Jophnson We haven't got any kids.

Gwyneth Yet.

Wheeler Aha!

Bettina You've got plans.

Gwyneth Well, I have ...

Bettina We'll leave you with the brochures. And may I say, some of them are very selective ...

Johnson What's that mean?

Bettina Hard to get into. That's when a timely donation will do wonders.

Johnson How much?

Bettina It depends what they're needing. Most of them have a wish list. Pick anything out of the top three or four and you should be right.

Wheeler I didn't see what you drove up in.

Gwyneth We walked. We were out for a stroll, remember?

Wheeler That's nice, of course, but you've got to have a vehicle to match your home.

The screen shows a range of cars, sometimes individually, sometimes a long line, parked, sometimes in action whether speedy or picking up and letting down children.

Gwyneth We're looking at our future today ...

Johnson ... Victor.

Gwyneth And I'm Marguerite. A minute ago, it seemed a dream, but ...

Johnson ... it's turning into a reality, now ...

Gwyneth ... right before our eyes.

Wheeler Paying cash, or over time?

Johnson Time.

Wheeler We've got a scheme for you. Read the fine print though, because it's going to rule your lives.

Gwyneth Whose lives?

Wheeler Yours. You're still in command, you know.'

Gwyneth I hardly feel that any more.

Wheeler The decisive thing is when you sign your name.

Johnson Victor ...

Wheeler That's not your official name yet, but don't worry, we can have that changed.

Gwyneth And I'm to be Marguerite. Don't forget!

Bettina We'll get you to sign for a name change in a minute. You sign twice. With your old names and your new ones. It's the biggest thing you'll ever do!

Johnson It's hard to get your mind around it.

Wheeler It does take a bit of getting used to, but believe me, it's worth it!

Gwyneth Were you always Wheeler?

Wheeler There was a time when I was someone else.

Johnson (to Bettina) And you?

Bettina (challengingly) Do I look as if I was ever any different?

J & G No.

Bettina Well there you are. What did you decide about a car?

Johnson Darling?

Gwyneth Victor, my love?

Johnson Left to myself I'd go for something sporty ...

The screen shows us what he'd like.

Gwyneth ... but?

Johnson What we get has to suit you.

Gwyneth And you.

Johnson Of course. But what I wanted was only ...

Wheeler ... a young man's car ...

Bettina ... and you've got to plan for the years ahead ...

Johnson ... so ...

Gwyneth ... perhaps ...

Johnson ... keeping in mind the future ...

Gwyneth ... and what or should I say who it might bring ...

Wheeler ... you're more inclined ...

The screen shows us two or three of the larger, higher 4WD vehicles in the range on display.

Bettina This is the logical one for you.

On the screen, one of the 4WD vehicles rolls out in front of the others, which veer away, leaving the one they've chosen.

Gwyneth Darling, our family's got wheels!

Johnson Darling, our wheels don't have a family yet!

Gwyneth They won't be far behind!

Bettina We might leave it there for today but when we get back to you you'll have to decide about deportment, speech, manners, dressing the children, all sorts of crucial things we haven't touched on yet.

Johnson I used to think life was easy.

Gwyneth Not when you stop to think!

Bettina Count your blessings now, and we'll call again tomorrow. We'll serve morning tea on the patio of what we'll be recommending as your home.

Wheeler Home. It's a word that's loaded with meanings, all of them necessary. Good.

Wheeler and Bettina leave. The young couple look at each other, a little awkwardly, as if, perhaps, they no longer know each other.

Johnson Fortunately, life's pretty short.

Gwyneth It goes too fast. I'm already twenty-five.

Johnson And I'm twenty-six.

Gwyneth We've had a third of our lives already.

Johnson Only fifty years to go.

Gwyneth Do you think ...

Johnson What darling? Sorry, Marguerite.

Gwyneth Those names ...

Johnson I know ... but we're stuck with them now.

Gwyneth I was going to say ...

Johnson Were you thinking about life insurance?

Gwyneth Everyone says you ought to have it.
 Johnson Why?
 Gwyneth Because ... you need it.
 Johnson Nobody's ever told me why.
 Gwyneth I suppose that if you died ...
 Johnson Died ... young, you mean?
 Gwyneth It does happen. Car accidents, some fatal illness picked up ...
 Johnson ... overseas ...
 Gwyneth ... of course ...
 Johnson ... you'd need money to live on, raise the kids ...
 Gwyneth Everybody needs money ...
 Johnson So why the hell are we giving it to everybody? Tell me that?
 Gwyneth That's the way it goes around.
 Johnson Why doesn't it stay with us?
 Gwyneth It's got to get to us first. That's why it has to pass around. Can't you see?
 Johnson I sort of see ... but I've got a funny feeling ...
 Gwyneth What is it, darling?
 Johnson Victor. That's my name.
 Gwyneth Victor. It means you'll always be victorious.
 Johnson We know that isn't going to happen.
 Gwyneth Marguerite. It's strange how that became my name.
 Johnson You're happy with it, though, aren't you? Marguerite?
 Gwyneth It gives me a feeling ...

Johnson ... of ...
 Gwyneth ... of destiny. Of great fates and forces swirling through the universe, looking to download themselves on me.
 Johnson Aren't you frightened?
 Gwyneth Yes.
 Johnson Do you want to go back to being called ...
 Gwyneth I'd rather be Marguerite.
 Johnson Then it looks like I'm Victor for the rest of my life.
 Gwyneth You'll win every contest you're in.
 Johnson That's unlikely. And yet I'm not afraid.
 Gwyneth Me neither. I wonder why that is.
 Johnson It's because we've got false names. If you're fighting for yourself, there's no way you're going to win, but ...
 Gwyneth ... when it's an idea you took from someone else ...
 Johnson ... you can't lose. You hear me, love of my life? We can't lose!
 Gwyneth We're never going under to anybody!

The screen shows the golf course once again, with someone blasting a mighty drive. The camera follows the ball for a flight of what seems like a minute, and then the ball tumbles on the green and runs to within a few centimetres of the hole.

Voices Hooooaaooohhh! Hoh hoh hoh! What a shot! She can't be beaten now. Pure magic! You could wait for years before you'd see a shot like that!

Johnson We're going to win! But first, we've got to join the club! Where are you, Wheeler? Bettina, where are you when we need you?

Wheeler Yes my boy, what can I do for you?

Johnson We want you and Betsy – Bettina if she insists, what's it matter to me? – to get us in the golf club.

Wheeler This is great! They've been waiting for their hundredth member before they started. Now they can level the greens, dig out bunkers, it won't be long at all.

Bettina (to Gwyneth) By the time you're ready to have your child, it'll be lush and lovely. Life's all right you know. You can make it into anything you want.

Johnson Yes sir! Are you with me, Marguerite? Ready to start? All engines firing?

Gwyneth We've found our path, my love. We'll never be lost again.

Bettina You're doing well. There's a world out there that doesn't know what you know.

Johnson A world of lost people, groping in the dark ...

Gwyneth We're people of the light, my love, and our children will be the same!

All four Aaaaaaaahhh!

Paul

An empty space. In the foreground, a table, at which two men are seated: Paul Keating, Prime Minister of Australia, and Don Watson, his speechwriter.

Keating This'll take a while. They'll bring us in some lunch.
Watson What do you want to say?
Keating It's been a bit gloomy lately, so we need ...
Watson ... a message of hope.
Keating So where's the ray of sunshine?
Watson Not in the polls, PM. They've got us on the nose.
Keating Arrgghh, someone picks up the phone, hoping it's
 their lover, and it's a weirdo with questions. They
 take it out on us, mate, us!
Watson Not me, PM. I'm out of sight.
Keating You're in my line of sight, mate. Don't lose sight of
 that!
Watson (notebook open now) What do you want to say?
Keating Ah! (Enter Don Russell, his principal advisor.) What
 am I going to say, Don?
Russell About what?
Keating Aboriginal Australia. The moment I get up, they're
 going to jeer. Catcalls, whistles, the lot.
Watson You could take a gumleaf and charm them with a
 tune. Or dance?
Keating (ignoring this) So the first part of the speech I'm
 ploughing ahead through a hell of a row. The first

five minutes is a throwaway while they get their
anger off their chest. But they do have to hear a
couple of things that make them dimly aware that
I've got something to say.

Watson Unexpected.
Keating Exactly. Don?
Russell It's no good making promises. They won't believe
 you.
Keating They've heard it all before.
Watson It's got to be something they don't expect.
Keating Not easy, is it. (He stands and wanders about. A
 woman comes in with a large tray, which she places
 on the table. She lifts a lid or two and invites the men
 to serve themselves.) Thanks Molly. Looks delicious.
 (She leaves; the PM speaks to Russell.) You going to
 join us? Get yourself a plate.
Russell I'm due at the airport in ten minutes and I'm late.
 Now, Redfern. For Christ's sake don't talk about
 money. A million for this, a million for that. No
 money talk. Talk about ...
Watson It's not a matter of what he talks about, but where
 he's talking from. It's got to sound like their own
 minds are up on stage, talking back at them, and
 they're amazed because their thoughts are coming
 out of a white man.

Keating	And an Irishman at that! You've got the idea. So in a way I'm talking to white Australia because when they see snatches on telly, they'll be amazed that someone who's supposed to represent them has taken on board what the black people have been saying. So I'm talking in one direction but my real message is going over my shoulder somewhere ... (to Russell) How're we going, Don?	Keating	A feeling that they've got it already. It's always been theirs.
		Watson	What's it?
		Keating	(picking up some chicken with his fingers) Bloody delicious. You enjoying it?
		Watson	The chicken or the job?
		Keating	Nobody enjoys their job. If they do, it's too easy. They ought to have a job like mine.
Russell	Sounds okay. We might have to send out a few preliminary messages to make sure the white audience knows there's something coming ...	Watson	You weren't content to let Hawkey keep it.
		Keating	He'd had it for ever. He wasn't doing anything any more, except having an ego trip. I did him a favour!
Watson	We'll get Redfern written first. Then you can work on that.	Watson	(amused) What favour did you do him, exactly?
Russell	(looking out the window) There's my car. Seeya gents.	Keating	(laughing) I made him a man of virtue! Did you ever notice? People take up virtue when they're too old for vice!
Keating	Seeya Don. (to Watson) Serve yourself. A bit on my plate too, if you don't mind. Now. (He thinks as he prowls about.) The trouble with the buggers is they've always got the sulks. They think we're shits, even the best of us. They won't tell us what they need because they're sure we wouldn't give it to them. And what do they need?	Watson	He's still dangerous ...
		Keating	He's like a reef, and you don't let your ship get close.
		Watson	Keep out of sight of the reef. Any reef.
		Keating	No, I think you're wrong there. If anything's dangerous, you want it right in front of your eyes, where you can watch it. You know almost everything about a creature if you look in its eyes.
Watson	Self respect. They think we refuse it. So your speech has to give it to them.	Watson	(as Anne Summers comes in) What next?
Keating	I can't give them self respect. It's a contradiction in terms, isn't it?	Keating	Anne?
Watson	Well, what are we going to give them?	Summers	Sorry to interrupt.

Watson People who think they have every right to interrupt say they're sorry when they do it.

Summers (ignoring this) I've been meeting with focus groups. Women with opinions. Minds of their own.

Keating They didn't buy'em in a bargain basement.

Summers What?

Keating Go on Anne. Give me both barrels.

Summers They think you're aloof. Not like them. Not in touch ...

Keating Christ, what would they say if I was touching them?

Watson In the middle of my back, please PM. Same as the Queen.

Summers (bitterly) Men. (going on) They hate your suits. Every time you buy a bit of furniture, they get hostile. Why's it Thai, not Australian?

Keating Oh tell them to stuff it! I don't tell them what to wear. What to eat their meals on. Have a bit of chicken. It's cold, I'm sorry. I've been talking ever since Molly brought it in. Have some Anne. It's good.

Summers I'm going out in a minute.

Watson Where to?

Summers That Indian place in Manuka.

Keating Nobody ever took me there.

Summers Take your wife and kids. They must want you to take them out sometimes.

Keating (mournfully) They do. I'm so bloody busy they hardly know me. Who's that guy poking around in

the fridge, they say. Must be dad's brother, he looks a bit like him.

Watson Buzz off, Anne. You're upsetting the boss. Redfern, PM. What are we going to say?

Keating (making an effort) I think it goes something like this. (Summers and Watson withdraw to the side of the room, and the Prime Minister moves to the table as if it is the rostrum for his speech. On a screen behind him we see a hall full of people, mostly aboriginal, and they are in no mood to be generous to their visitor until, as he goes on, he wins them over.) I'm here today to answer the calls I hear from you all, or maybe it's only some of you. (noise) My office gets lots of calls, usually late at night, (noise) telling me in no uncertain terms what you think of the way you've been treated. (noise) We listen, you know. People listen to recordings of those calls because we know they come from people who are not used to being heard. (loud noise) There's a lot of unhappiness in those calls. (noise) Contempt for the whitefellas who think they're your overlords. (noise) But let me tell you something, you, and anyone else who's listening. We're stuck with each other. Whitefellas are not getting on ships and going back to Europe. And black people are not going to some other country where they don't belong. We are stuck with each other, and – there's no escaping this, no getting around it – we have to make

the best of each other. You think it's hard for you, but sometimes it's the things in the mind that are hardest to accept. To do. And what has to happen, to start with, is for white people to recognise you people and what it is we have done to you. It was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. (The audience is silent now.) We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us ... we failed to ask, how would I feel if this were being done to me? As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us ...

He sits, exhausted. Don Russell comes back, with a heap of newspapers under his arm, and drops them on the table. Watson and Anne Summers move to see how the speech has been reported. There is a long, musing silence. Russell gets up and goes to the door.

Russell Any tea, Molly? Four, please.
Watson You have to do it sometimes.
Keating It's all about turning hate into something else.
Russell Trouble is, it's hard to get votes back, once you've lost them.
Summers (referring to the papers) According to these people you said what needed to be said.

Keating Is there poison in the chalice, or do they mean it?

Molly brings in the tea and cups, and she takes away what's left of the chicken she served earlier.

Russell It's grudging, but it's genuine, as far as they can be.

Watson There's no pleasing the buggers, is there.

Keating We'll put'em on a plane and take'em with us. Tokyo, Jakarta, Beijing.

Watson They won't report the right things.

Keating They don't know the right things. That's what we're elected to do.

Summers You're the elected one, PM.

Keating And I se-lected you. You're all a part of the team. Funny, isn't it. Look how out of hand it's become. We need forty people to make up one. My mind's in forty bits. I have to remember what each one's doing. If I ever knew. (He laughs.) I've got a wife and four kids. I try to remember them, but honestly, there's times when I wonder if I've deserted them. What are they thinking? I never know ...

We hear the adagietto from Mahler's 5th Symphony, rising wistfully, and slowly, to a golden bloom. Keating stands as the music intensifies, and moves around the room as if in a dream. His wife and children appear on the screen above his head, as if they are thoughts conjured up by his mind.

Russell Tokyo? Beijing?

Keating Tokyo ... They shut themselves away for two hundred and fifty years. When they came out of that, their warrior tradition took over. That's all over now, but they need a new tradition. They ought to look at us.

Russell Tourism's increasing.

Keating But what sort of tourism? When they get here they go to Japanese hotels, and travel in Japanese buses. If they can't see what they think ought to be here then they think there's nothing. We've got to break them out of that.

Watson That means we've got to teach them how to see us.

Keating Well, that's our job, isn't it. (decisively) There's our theme ...

Watson What is?

Keating (ignoring him) Beijing. Much the same.

Russell Nothing like the same!

Keating Same job for us to do. The big powers pushed their way into China. The Chinese pushed them out. They think in a big-power way. We have to show them how they can learn from a little power.

Summers Women's rights. There's a place to start.

Keating That's a follow-up. They've got to get used to listening to us. They'll do it if we get experts working there, but our people have to excel. We've got to force them to admit, even if it's only in private, that our way of doing things gives us an advantage.

Watson No lecturing.

Keating Dead right. All charm, the way they do it. Bless'em, they really know how to be polite. (He grins.) Did I ever tell you ...

Summers On the track, PM. Who're you speaking to in Beijing?

Keating Oh ... who are they? (Watson rummages in his papers.) What I'd really like to do is speak over the heads of the party bosses and let the people know what we've got for them. Trouble is, the party controls the media. Your message won't get out unless the party wants it out. I'm not going up there to say Keep Swatting Flies! (to Watson) Don? (to Russell) Don?

Watson We've got the same problem here.

Keating Don't I know it. Put'em down the back of the plane.

The office transforms itself into an aeroplane, nose at one side, tail at the other. Many journalists come on and sit at the tail-end, laptops in hand or on their knees. Molly, dressed as a hostess, starts serving drinks, and considerable quantities of grog are consumed. Keating's wife Annita joins him, looking lovely.

Keating Kids okay, love? (She smiles to say they are. He muses.) I love to go on trips with you.

Annita It's how we first met.

Keating I thought if I could have you I could have anything in the world.

Annita (pointing down) Now you've got the world ...

Keating ... and I wonder if I've still got you.

Annita When you're in the air you see it for the country it is.

Keating Best in the world. Trouble is, it's full of people who won't let their imaginations rise ... The bloody fools!

Annita (gently) You have to make possibilities for them.

Keating Which they won't take up. Won't use.

Annita Then that's their choice. Everything we do uses us up in some way, and when we're ready to die, we have to ask, was it all worth it?

Keating How can we tell? Darling, give me your answer to that.

Annita You have to ask, is there anything I'd like to change, out of all the things in my life? (pause) Look down darling.

Keating Cape York. We're leaving our country behind.

Annita We're taking it with us.

Keating It's your country now, my love.

Annita I love it because it's yours.

Keating It's big, isn't it. We used to think it was blank, but now it's a spiritual space, and that's where we've got a richness, right at our heart, that nobody else has got. I don't know whether to say that, or whether it might stir the buggers up to try and grab it off us.

Annita Don't put up barriers. Make them welcome, every one.

Keating You're better at my job than I am, darling.

Annita Put your seat back, and have a sleep. You need all the rest you can get.

Keating (doing so) Poor bastards down the back of the plane. Oh well ...

The plane lands, a Japanese flag appears above it, and the journalists get out, laptops and/or mobiles in hand. They look about hurriedly, and send messages back to their papers or stations.

Courier Mail PM queries need to visit shrine.

WANews Eyebrows raised at reference to Pacific War.

SMHerald We've got more to offer, PM tells Japanese hosts.

Watson (almost out of sight, to Keating, still lying down) Don't read it. Let Russell and I do that. You keep focussed on what you have to do.

Then a mighty flag above the plane tells us that the touring party has reached Beijing.

Russell They want to know if you'll back this city for the Olympics. I told them that after Sydney, we would.

Summers They want to know why you've got me aboard your plane. I gave them a copy of my job description, and I told them, it fits!

Watson I reckon if I was doing the same job here in China, I'd last five minutes. Before they sent me to the rice paddies.

We hear Keating's laughter, but he doesn't raise his head.

Sun-Herald PM begs for trade.

Russell Begs! The bastard! I ought to throw him off the plane.

Age (a woman's voice) Annita struts her stuff.

Annita The woman who wrote that spends more in a month than I'd spend in a year!

Watson These shits are supposed to report what's happening, but they use us to advance their careers.

Advertiser China swallows industry, and what do we get in return? The dole ...

Mercury They make themselves rich at our expense.

WANews What have they invented since gunpowder?

Advertiser PM squibs chance to raise human rights.

SMHerald China's chairman has closed door talks with PM.

Russell (very loudly) At which?

Summers Keep your voice down, Don.

Russell They never ask the right questions. They're always playing to some interest group, back home.

Watson So are we, really.

Russell It's all about having the numbers when you need them. It's called election night, and it's never out of anybody's mind.

The Chinese flag is replaced by the elaborate screen of electorates and figures from the National Tally Room in Canberra, which remains the backdrop until the end of the opera. The tail, nose, etc of the PM's aeroplane disappear slowly.

Annita Of course I want him to win. I love him, but if I want what's best for him, it might break his heart.

Watson The country doesn't know how to get the best out of him.

Russell The country doesn't see that as its job.

Summers The country needs enough sense of leadership to push him further in the ways he wants to go.

Annita That means, you know, to drag even more out of an exhausted man.

Summers I'm sorry, Annita, it does. (They look at each other with understanding and, on Annita's part, forgiveness. She moves out of sight. Summers comes forward to let the audience overhear her thoughts.) I'll say something terrible. We should sacrifice him for everything we can get. When we see hope after centuries of oppression, we can't stop ourselves draining every drop.

She steps back, leaving Watson, Russell, the still-recumbent PM, and a roving pack of journalists.

Courier-Mail Government in decline.

WANews Opposition ahead.

SMHerald Eight per cent gap unlikely to be closed.

Russell Bastards are right, but we can't let ourselves think so.

Watson We're unstuck. It's fatal.

Summers (from the side) A period's coming to an end.

Keating (suddenly appearing, full of energy) Bullshit! I'll tear them limb from limb. (He mimes dragging the meat off a bone with his teeth.) Aaarrghh!

Russell (waving a sheet of paper) Schedule of speeches, PM.

Keating (ignoring the paper) Tactics, Don, tactics. Strategies follow after.

Watson Isn't it the other way round?

Summers Who cares? What are you going to do, PM?

Keating I'm going to have a nice hot bath, then I'm listening to Mahler.

He goes off, and we hear the adagietto of Mahler's 5th again.

Summers He knows he's not going to win.

Russell We're going to make a fight of it.

Watson He's got to do something for the true believers ...

Summers ... when he doesn't believe himself any more.

Watson (thoughtfully) Everything he promises, let's add another step or two that people can take for themselves. Empowerment's our theme, but we won't use the word.

Russell The lackeys will soon point it out, and they'll do it on their terms. They'll hand the Opposition a stick to beat us with ...

Keating (offstage) I'll be with you in a minute. Annita's ironing a shirt!

Summers (laughing) He'd be impossible to live with!

Watson Better than most of us, I think. Less cranky. Everything that's dark in himself he finds in music, and then he can lock it away.

Russell He likes the wrong music. He should be mathematical as Bach.

Summers Dry.

Russell What would you know?

Summers (before listening to the press) More than you'd think.

Age Poll gives Opposition hope.

Advertiser Two South Australian seats likely to fall.

Mercury The Premier should seek federal help. The desperation of a doomed administration could be turned into assistance for our state.

Sun-Herald Don't put your shirt on Labor!

Keating (off stage) Thanks love. Nearly ready, guys. Coming!

Australian Voter frustration can't be turned around.

SMHerald For those who remember a fabric when it was new, the hardest thing to bear is a badly patched piece of rag. It's not pleasing to the eye any more.

Watson They shouldn't be allowed to use metaphors, those people.

Russell The trouble with you, mate, is you're too far ahead of the common man.

Summers Woman?

Russell If all we can do is squabble we might as well go home.

They stare glumly at each other. Keating comes on, refreshed.

Keating (taking a look at the polling figures on the screen behind him) The numbers are shithouse. It's got to go up from here, you can't get lower than that.

Russell (sourly) We could try.

Keating Come on, we've worked miracles before. (He thinks.) Queensland's bad. We're right for three seats in Tasmania, it's the two at the top that swing. We need a deal with the Greens, and jobs in the bush. Anne?

Summers Women in the cities. There's eight to ten per cent of votes that could swing, if you knew how to move them.

Keating Tell me how to do it.

Summers Become another man.

Keating (laughing) I wouldn't know myself! What name would I go under?

Russell Bob Menzies might be worth a try.

Keating A bloody old rascal, but he had skill, I have to say. Nobody's bluffed the people the way he did since he left the scene.

Watson I don't want the people bluffed, you know. I want them led. With full and conscious approval of what their pollies are doing.

Russell You poor bloody bleeding heart!

Watson What's wrong with that?

Russell doesn't deign to reply, but walks to the screen at the back, where the election results are starting to come in. The journalists who've represented various newspapers are now used

as commentators on the results. For ease of allocating words to voices, they are cued in here by the newspaper names used earlier.

SMHerald Western Sydney's crumbling, eastern and northern areas are down!

Age No lift for the government where it's needed.

Mercury Bass is the litmus test as usual.

Keating (watching the results appearing on the screen) Good job we're not a drinking family. We'd be tasting the bottom of the barrel tonight.

WANews Opposition is now very close to a majority.

Courier Mail Queensland strong for change!

Keating Oh shit, we're done.

Russell We'll concede in a minute.

Watson Not just yet.

Summers Hope still springing? I don't think so ... mate.

Kerry (chair of the commentary panel) By my count, the opposition's got a majority now. You agree Anthony?

Anthony (staring into his screen) It's all over for the government. After thirteen years in office, they're out!

Keating That's it, then. (He gets up, buttons his coat, and moves to a microphone at the front of the stage.) Ladies and gentlemen, I think it's clear that my government has to accept defeat. It's not easy, because governing's become a habit. I think we're all going to be lost when we wake up tomorrow morning. I congratulate the other side and wish them

well. They've been handed the job of running the country and it's hard, but I won't go on about that. I hope they're ready to hit the ground running because that's what you have to do if you want to stay ahead. I want to thank every one who supported us over the years, my cabinet colleagues, my party, those who worked out of sight, the wonderful people in my office, who were never out of sight, and first and foremost, my family, who tolerated me when I was difficult, particularly my wife.

Annita stands prominently at the side of the stage. He goes on, addressing the nation.

If you're feeling lost and lonely, don't play the political game. You won't survive without someone strong, behind you, at home. There's got to be somewhere you can go, someone who matters more than the things that are worrying you. Without it, you're lost.

He steps down, entering the audience, and starting to wander about, shaking hands occasionally, chatting to this one and that. The commentators clap politely, then look puzzled as the former PM fails to reappear.

WANews We're expecting the Leader of the Opposition any minute, claiming victory.
Age Where's Keating gone? Anyone see him?
Mercury That's him down there, isn't it?

Voice (a black woman) You give us a bit of hope, there, for a while.
Keating (out of sight) Thanks love.
Voice (bitterly) You ran the country into the gutter, you stupid arse.
Keating We couldn't stay the way we were. We were getting left behind.
Voice You should've shoved it up the Yanks.
Keating They have to live with what they are. We've got the Pacific to keep us clean.

These exchanges are spaced out by music which reflects on the Keating prime ministership. Each exchange is an addition to the impetus of the orchestral reflection.

Voice You should have got the job earlier. You'd have done a lot more if you had.
Keating Good of you to say so. Trouble is, the further you go in politics, the more you realise you're governed by events.
Voice What's life going to be like, after you've been PM?
Annita Paul? Where are you love? We're waiting ...
Keating I don't know, mate, I truly don't know.
Voice You could run that pig farm.
Keating I sold it, mate. I'll be keeping my suit on, I think.
Voice You going into the media, Paul?
Keating Firmly, mate, very firmly, no!
Annita The children are starting to wonder, Paul ...

Keating If all you people got in here, there's got to be a
 door ...

Voice There was, but I've lost sight of it ... for now.

Voice Might be over there ...

Keating Let me know if you find it, would you?

Voice Anything for you, after what you did for us.

Keating Thanks mate. It's hard to make a new start ...

Annita (plaintively) If anyone sees him, would you please
 turn him this way?

But we don't see him because he's lost in the crowd by now.

This libretto owes much, especially its inside vantage point, to *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart: a portrait of Paul Keating PM* by Don Watson, Knopf, Sydney, 2002. Also useful was *Keating: the inside story* by John Edwards, Penguin, Melbourne, 1996. The strongest influence, however, was my feeling that in Paul Keating Australia had a peacetime leader like no other.

Sideshow Nation

Crocker is operating a sideshow. A couple of dozen heads, large mouths open, are turning, rather jerkily, from left to right and back again. Behind the heads are rows of garish prizes – dolls, jars of doubtful-looking lollies, wigs of plastic blonde hair, bandido eye-masks, flags on sticks, and so on. One or two people are looking idly at the show but nobody is playing. Then along comes John, wearing a suit.

Crocker Pick the head you fancy, pop three balls in the gob and if you score ten or more, you win a prize! What about it, mate, I reckon it's your lucky day.

John You could be right. You want to sell this show?

Crocker I do as a matter of fact. I'm too old for the road. I'd like to settle for the rest of my days.

John You're in debt of course.

Crocker Only a trifle. You'd soon be free of that.

John I know how much it is. I'll take it on. You hand over to me.

Crocker You know how much it is? How'd you find out that?

John There's ways and means. But nothing beats keeping a close eye on things.

Crocker You been watching me?

John Showing an interest. (abruptly) Let's do it now.

Crocker Yairs ... might be a good day, today.

John The debt collectors will be here in a minute. You don't have the money to pay them. They'll sell you up for peanuts and you'll still have your debts. Better to hand over to me. (He hands him a paper to sign.) The whole box and dice. (Crocker is stunned, but then he notices that a sherriff's man has come to the edge of the scene, watching. He signs.)

Crocker It's yours. (He looks around, sadly.) I've got nothing, and I'm free.

John (as Crocker wanders off, sadly) How much does he owe?

SM You've got your cheque ready, haven't you?

John (amused) I didn't know you knew so much. (He hands over a cheque. The Sherriff's man looks at it and then puts it in his pocket.) I need a receipt for that. (The sherriff's man obliges.) Thank you. (John folds the receipt and the paper signed by Crocker, and he puts them in his coat.) We're in business. Now! (John sets to work and in the next few minutes the sideshow he's acquired is transformed.) We'll keep the turning heads. We'll add the shooting gallery. (The adjoining show slides swiftly sideways.) And, for those who'd rather use their hands than guns ... (Another show joins the turning heads, but on the other side; it's a show where players throw balls at

a range of faces which appear to resemble people in national politics.) If you hit the target, you get a prize. One of our all-new, highly select, personal prizes. We're tossing out this rubbish. It might have been good enough for the previous government, but not today! Not now! (He stands centre stage and proclaims loudly.) Under new management! Come and try your luck!

A few people gather, interested. John indicates the ball-throwing gallery.

Anybody there you'd like to have a go at? (Sandra and Sid take the balls John offers them.) Pick your target! You won't hurt their feelings!

Sid throws; when he misses narrowly, we hear a cry of alarm; when he hits, there is a terrible cry of pain.

John Sound effects only. Makes the game more realistic!

Sandra throws, and when she hits there is a distressing cry.

Target 1 Oh! This is the end for me!

Sandra What have I done?

John No no, only an effect. It's super-realistic, that's all. No harm done.

Les and Verity step forward to receive balls. They whisper to each other. Both throw together and both hit the same target, whereupon they exult.

Verity Aaaaaaaaahhh!

Les Done him like a dinner!

John Ready for another go?

Les (taking up a rifle) We'll be fair dinkum this time. They won't get up again. You ready, love?

Sandra takes up a rifle too.

Les (boastfully) She's deadly. She's a better shot than me.

Sandra shoots and there is a piercing scream from her target, which flops over.

Target 2 Aaaaaaaaahhh! What did I do to deserve that?

Sandra (getting her gun ready) They're slow to reload.

John I've only just taken over. We'll have new guns by the next time you're here.

Sandra (moving to the middle show, the turning heads) Let's have a go on this one.

Les These'll be hard to control.

Les and Sandra examine the turning heads, particularly one which is slightly larger; it's a female with bright red hair.

Sandra It keeps opening and closing its mouth. You don't think it wants to say something?

Les It's only a swivelling head. They've got nothing to say.

Pauline (the head he is referring to) I've got a lot to say and it's time you listened.

Les I'll be buggered!

Sandra What have you got to say?

Pauline (loudly, strongly) This country's ruined! There's good people everywhere going broke, and governments are propping up the lazy. The useless! The undeserving! It's time we did something about it!

John Nobody told me she could talk!

Les (loudly) Hey, everybody! Come and listen to this!

Sandra (surprised) This is going to change our lives, you know ...

John (thoughtfully) Mine, anyway. What a prize!

More people come on, and others follow as people hear about Pauline's talking head.

Pauline There's good people out of work, everywhere you look. People I know and people you know too. They deserve a chance! But the government hands out money to bludgers who don't want to work, and the biggest bludgers are the blacks! I saw them near the shop I ran. Pissed as newts at ten in the morning. Been pissed all night! Never done a day's work in their lives. And they're getting taxpayers' money as a hand-out! (full of contempt) Hand-outs! I'd lead them by the hand to the edge of town and say On your way! We don't want your sort around here!

Voices She's got a point. What's she doing in your show, John? You should put her into politics.

John (piously) She's got a right to her opinion. It's a free country after all.

Pauline (standing up, now, and revealing that there's a whole human figure beneath the mouth) We've got an immigration scheme. They let in thousands of Asians in the business category. That's a nice way of saying these people buy their way in. But what about our own people if they have a run of bad luck? Nobody says Here, we'll give you a loan and get you on your feet! We can starve and suffer and nobody looks after us but if you've got a fat wallet and a plane ticket to bring you here, the government embraces you. (loudly) Whose idea was that?

Official (to John) You've got a licence to run your shows but not to make political speeches in these showgrounds. You get her to shut up or we'll have to make you go somewhere else.

John She's a free citizen, and it's her that's making the remarks, not me. I don't know what she's going to say next, don't put the blame on me!

Official We want people who come here to spend, not stand around arguing politics. That's not our idea at all!

About ten or a dozen new arrivals come on stage, each of them, whether male or female, resembling the red-headed Pauline.

Paul 1 (coarsely) We heard about you, Pauline. Let's hear it from you now!

Pauline What do you want me to say?

Paul 1 Tell it so we can understand it.

Pauline That's easy enough. We've been told all our lives that this is a wealthy country, so how come I've got no more than I've got? I ran a fish and chip shop until they hijacked me onto this racket.

John Steady on!

Pauline I said it was a racket, and it is. If you don't shut up I'll tell people how you came by this little stall where you had me working.

John She was very good. People used to come solely to get a chance of seeing her!

Pauline A fish and chip shop! It's bloody hard work, let me tell you. The cleaning! Any little sign of dirt or grease and the health inspector shuts you down. You've no idea the hours of cleaning ... Anyway, I couldn't make a go of it, for all my work. I had to sell up and let some other idiot take it on. I fell down a rung or two, and this is where I ended up. (gesturing around her) This! Here! This here! This is my outcome, my result, all I've got after a life of work and dream! While smart bastards clean up all the big bikkies at the other end of town. And bloody migrants from China and Malaysia get invited in to share the spoils. Get rid of them! Australia for the Ozzies, that's how I want things to be!

Official Who's in charge of you? Isn't it you, Mister ...

John She speaks for herself. I got her as part of the show when I bought it, but if she wants to do something else, that's for her to decide.

Pauline I can look after myself, mate, better than you might think. I'm going to form a new party ...

Paula 2 Party! She's going to have a party!

Paul 1 Party! Now you're talking!

Paula 3 Party! What am I going to wear?

Paul 2 Party! Sounds good to me!

Pauline It'll be a party for all the ones who reckon they've missed out!

Paula 4 Party! Nobody's going to miss out. Sounds the right sort of party for me!

Paul 3 A party for everybody! Where's it going to be?

Pauline It's going to be held right here!

Official Outside the gates, if you don't mind. City Council owns this land.

Pauline Then it's public land! That means it belongs to us because we're the public.

Official You might be but you can't have a demonstration here unless ...

Paula 5 We're not having a demonstration, we're having a party!

Voices Party! Party!

Official Not here you're not. It's my job to see that this show is run according to the rules.

Voices Whose rules? You reckon we can't have a party? Bullshit! We'll have a party if we want to. Public

land. That's our land. It's party land. Party land.
Nobody's going to stop us now.

John moves close to the official.

John (whispering) You can't fight them on your own.
Make peace with them, then come back with the
cops.

Official Suppose you're right. (to the party mob) I don't
think you want me. I'll get out of your way, if you
don't mind.

The crowd bustle him as he tries to get through.

Voices Party-pooper! Tried to stop a party! Piss off, turd,
and don't come back.

Official (leaving) You give me a rough time and I'll give you
one.'

John (to crowd) Just to get that party started, what about
having a go at my prizes? Anyone here you'd like to
knock down? (gesturing at the ball-throwing contest)
And if you're handy with a gun, you could win a
prize over here!

The crowd starts shooting and throwing balls with lots of whooping.
As targets fall, they cheer.

Pauline Go for it, everybody! True sons and daughters of
Australia. This bloke is giving you the chance to
show what you feel!

John I want people to be relaxed and comfortable. That
way, we're all happy.

Pauline Everybody happy, that's my motto. Go for it,
everybody!

More shooting and more throwing. The targets scream as they're
hit. The national figures' voices fill the air with their agony. John is
smirking, but trying to stay out of sight. The showground official
returns with Inspector Rice.

Rice What's going on here? (He spots John.) Are you the
cause of this?

John No sir! Never was, never will be. It's all happened
right here under my nose. I'm only the new owner, I
never had any intention ...

Rice Yes all right. (to Pauline) You're the ringleader.
What are you trying to do?

Pauline I'm gonna put this country to rights. The way it's
being run is rotten. People like us, and you too, if you
could only see it, are not getting their deserts. Good
people are missing out! We're going to get a bit of
what we deserve. I'm not accepting crumbs when it
was people like me that made the cake!

The crowd, which is large by now, and quite unruly, supports her.

Paula 1 She's right on! Pauline for PM!

Rice What?

John Aha!

Paul 1 Pauline for PM!

John This is good!

Rice One minute you're causing a riot, the next you want to run the country!

Pauline Well?

Rice Well? Well ... I'll be blown.

Pauline (to the crowd) He doesn't know what to do. Know why? Because we're right. Canberra, here we come!

Crowd Canberra, here we come!

Pauline They stuck it out in the country so people couldn't get there, but today we can. By cars and planes, but above all, by votes! Votes! Vote for me when you see my name on the ballot. Pauline's my name, and Pauline's my nature ...

Rice What the hell are you talking about?

Pauline You want to clear us out of this showground, don't you?

Rice That was my intention, yes.

Pauline You can have your way, mate. (to the crowd) Canberra, everybody. You know what it means. I'm standing at the next election and I want your support. All the people who think they know how politics works, they're gonna wake up with egg on their faces. Egg! You hear me? Egg!

The crowd start hurling eggs. Rice waves his arms, trying to stop them. Pauline leads her supporters away, and we can hear her even after they've left the scene.

Pauline The people united are people undefeated. The people victorious are people enchanted. The people's wishes

are the holy river that flows across our land. Mobilise your votes and get behind good people. Make the world the way you want it, not the way they want to hand it to you.

Pauline's crowd repeats snatches of these thoughts, and variants on them, as they march away.

Official Well we're rid of them sir, thank you.

Rice No thanks to me. It was going to take about four busloads of men to get'em under control when they decided to go for themselves.

John Now Canberra's where the action is.

Rice Not my problem, thank God.

Official Bit of a whirlwind, isn't she?

John A voice of the people. They've all got votes, every one.

Rice You'd like to think they'd use them wisely. Or that's how I see it.

Official Yes. Just so.

John Everyone thinks their vote's a wise one. Tell me, do you know anyone that'd like to buy my business?

Official It was pretty run down. You build it up a bit and you'll sell it.

John Good thinking. I'll do as you say. Meantime, it's on the market. Please tell anybody you know who'd be interested.

John, Rice and the official leave the stage, after which the sideshow clears itself away. In its place we see the Parliament of Australia, set imposingly in its hill, with the national flag held aloft by mighty metal legs. For a couple of thunderous bars, we hear a snatch of the national anthem, before the hill opens to reveal the House of Representatives in its lustreless light green. John, in the same suit, is sitting in the PM's chair, and among the members behind him, and facing him, there are a few of those turning heads we saw in his sideshow tent. Their heads are turning still, without any coordination, sometimes left to right and reverse, sometimes nodding up and down in agreement with what John is saying.

John It will be this country, Mr Speaker, the government of this country, Mr Speaker, that determines who comes into Australia. People smugglers and others who claim – claim – to be refugees will not take control of our processes. Some of us in this Chamber have fought for our country, and almost all of us are proud of members of our families who have done so. We remember these people every year on Anzac Day. They died so that we who come after can maintain the highest possible standard for what shall happen inside our borders, and I for one, Mr Speaker, will fight to maintain our control of who comes through those borders to become part, Mr Speaker, of a nation in which we can all take pride!

Loud 'Here Here's from the members behind him, and some heckling from those in front. Then an official enters the chamber to whisper in the PM's ear.

John I've been reminded, Mr Speaker, that it's our business today to welcome a new member to this house. The orders of the day lead me to believe that we are about to hear her maiden ... maiden ... ahem, ahum, maiden ... speech.

He sits and Pauline rises from a seat at the rear of the House. As she speaks, we notice that quite a few on the government side, and even one or two on the Opposition side, reach down to pick up masks, or false faces, rather resembling the turning heads we saw in John's sideshow.

Pauline There's not much to boast about in my background, Mr Speaker, and for me that's a matter of pride. I suppose my claim to fame is that I'm an ordinary Australian and I've been elected to this place to make sure the thoughts of ordinary people are not forgotten. That's what I intend to do as long as I've got strength to do it.

Just as the parliamentary hill opened a couple of minutes before to show this scene, it closes now. A bugle blows, and the great flag that flies above the legislature is brought down, folded and taken away. Night falls, then a single light reveals an office, deep inside the hill.

John We'll get rid of her at the next election. She won't hold her seat, I tell you now.

Deputy Are you sure of that?

John It's easy. There's a million votes behind her, yet she can't do a thing.

Deputy So?

John There's not much in their minds. They won't be hard to capture.

Deputy What's that going to mean to us?

John We're going to take on their disguise. If they want something, they shall have it. Other business will proceed as usual.

Deputy Throw her out and keep ourselves in?

John It worked with refugees, it'll work with anything.

Deputy We'll have opposition in our own ranks.

John Oh no. Any opposition will be removed.

Deputy We'll have a party meeting, right away.

John Ring the bells!

Bells and alarms start ringing. From one side of the stage the members of the governing party file on, every one of them dressed in a white and yellow clown suit, and their heads covered with the sort of mask we saw on the turning head dolls at the beginning of the opera. They pass through a band of light, then move into the darkened House.

Voices Switch the light on, someone. I can't see in the dark.

Deputy The PM wants it that way. Watch me. When you see me raise my hand, you do the same. We need a unanimous vote.

Voice On everything?

Deputy On everything.

Voice Unanimous?

Deputy It means of one mind!

Voices (groaning) Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Deputy Where's the opposition?

Another group of members file in, most of them dressed like those on the government side, though a few of them are still wearing the suits they've been wearing for years. Their procession, too, is from darkness through a band of light to darkness. As the last of the opposition moves into the House, the parliamentary hill is again shrouded in darkness, with one small area of light representing the PM's office.

John Captives all, let us unite ...

Members In one eternal brotherhood of night ...

John To ensure our standards never rise too high!

Members Let darkness shroud our doings this day ...

John With only publicity to make our faces bright

Members Preventing us from having our souls on show!

John (coming out to the front and addressing the audience) You expect us to run an efficient workplace, not a talk shop. We're going to give you what you want. Be sure that your wishes are listened to in here. There'll be no unexpected developments except the ones

you'll get used to. You relax with your drinks, we'll make sure you get nothing but what you expect. This is the people's house! That means it's for you to look at, confident that everything that happens within is in your interests. You won't even need to think. Any little grumbles of discontent will be listened to, and everything put right. (He takes another step forward, inviting the audience to sing with him.) Captives all, let us unite ... In one eternal brotherhood of night ... To ensure our standards never rise too high! (He pauses.) Not too keen on singing? I don't have a trained voice, I'm sorry. My voice has been spoiled by barracking for our olympians, our cricketers. And our soldiers. Our firefighters. What a mighty people we are, all of us! Captives all, let us unite ... Mmm, I was hoping you'd sing along with me, but oh well. I've got a lot to do inside, I'd better get back to it now. (He goes in.)

Deputy PM! That Pauline woman's been defeated. She's out of parliament. Great stuff!

John It is. Listen, grab her headpiece before she goes. I'd like to try it on.

That Beam of Light

A crowd of people fill the stage. Suddenly a light from above illuminates Josie, an otherwise unremarkable woman of middle age.

Josie (looking up) Hey, I've got an idea! It struck me ...
(The crowd wait for her to go on.) ... that ...

Others Yes?

Josie ... things don't have to be the way they are.

Others No?

Josie If we don't like what we've got, we can make things different!

Others Great!

Josie Like ...

Others Like what, Jose?

Josie Well ...

Others Go on.

Josie Well ... ah ... like ...

Others Come on Jose, tell us what you see.

Josie I'm not sure that I see anything, but if I did, I could let you know!

This flattens them. Is this all she can say? Mark stamps on the ground, a light shines down on him, and Josie's no longer lit up as she was before.

Mark (after thought) I see what Josie means.

Others Yes?

Mark We live by our ideas. If you haven't got a thought in your head, you're dead.

Others Dead!

Rupert As the dodo! Let's have some light on the matter!

Lights shine upwards from various parts of the floor. The crowd is quite surprised, and shies away from these spots, which are quickly taken over by Rupert's people.

Rupert You can have'em any colour you like, you realise?

The floor-lights turn green, orange, purple, red, et cetera, and they change, altering the appearance and the mood of the crowd.

Mark (desperately) It's not the same any more!

Josie I forget what I was going to say.

Mark We never knew. That was our problem.

Peter Speak for yourselves. Those who want control of their own minds, move to one side. Stay away from the centre! (A number of people do as he says.) It won't be long before he installs lights over here. Until it happens, we have to think! Think!

Mark It's starting to come to me now.

Josie I think I know what I want.

Peter Tell us, Josie, let's hear it now.

The coloured lights belonging to Rupert flash, brighten, weaken and change colours, performing all their tricks.

Josie What I want is control of my own mind. No church, no party, no bosses.

Mark No thoughts that someone else rams between our ears.

Peter We'll have to work hard for this. Anyone got any ideas?

Journo 1 (from inside a red light) Shock horror. Tidal wave swallows village.

Journo 2 (yellow) Children torn from their mothers' arms!

Journo 3 Supplies not getting through. Military accused!

Josie I can't think with that going on in my ears.

Peter It's what we're up against. Don't give in now!

Journo 1 (lights still flashing) Polls have Libs one point up.

Journo 2 Today's question: how far do you approve of spin?

Rupert Keep'em on that as long as you can. Couple of weeks, perhaps.

Peter The bastard! Hello, hello, he's caught up with me. (The floor under Peter's feet has lit up, sending a stream of light up his body to his face. He hops around to avoid it, but other parts of the outer floor light up wherever he goes.) There's no avoiding you, Rupert, is there. Okay! It's going to be war ...

Journo 3 Thousands in parking fines still owing.

Journo 1 Custody battle cripples freedom of speech campaigner.

Journo 2 Councillor says mud-slinging forced him to resign!

The crowd has by now given up the outer positions, and has returned to the centre, where the lights are firmly controlled. Four or five singers with microphones in hand keep them amused.

Mike 1 I've got you in my arms, where I'll hold you evermore!

Mike 2 Cats and Bulldogs ...

Mike 3 ... a mighty clash!

Mike 4 Grand Prix spectacular wows the nation!

Mike 5 Catwalk claws in near-naked duel!

Two glamorous models, clad in very little, fight to get rid of each other, while photographers push cameras close to their bodies and their snarling lips.

Josie I'm lost now. I wish I had a body like those two.

Mark We're bugged, we're finished, there's no hope for us now.

Peter Bullshit. It's only Round One. We have to make a fight of it.

Rupert Let's restore a bit of dignity. Come on now!

Journo 1 Airbus announces super plane.

Journo 2 Champagne launches liner. Bookings snatched by wealthy ...

Journo 3 ... patrons and matrons!

Journo 1 Wolfgang Schneiderhahn takes trophy again!

Journo 2 Auditor General says Grand Prix making a loss!

Journo 3 Katrina pays heavy price for stardom!

Katrina makes her way through the crowd, swerving here and there to be close, and visible, to as many as possible. She contrives to look both ravished and sexually ready, and she has a flower in her hand to play with.

Katrina If you'd been through what I've been through, you'd care for me a little. (She moves about the crowd, getting nods from Rupert which tell her where to go.) I don't have much to give, but I don't mind if you want to make me yours. (She moves about again, and this time, in response to Rupert's signals, the lights in the floor follow her, giving her dramatic glamor.) It takes courage to live in the open. You need one hell of a heart! (She weakens, and is about to fall.)

Rupert (pushing Peter) Go on, give her all you've got. Man or mouse?

Mark (rushing in) Take her inside. Where she can lie down. Josie and I'll look after her.

Josie Anything we can do!

Peter Don't be bloody fools. Find out where he (Rupert) got her from. Then you'll know what's going on.

Rupert You've got a battle on your hands now, my boy. We'll see what sort of a fighter you are.

Peter You might be surprised, little man.

Katrina Quarrels. It's like my lifeblood's draining away ... (Rupert nods to the journos.)

Journo 1 Lost princess desperate for love!

Journo 2 Blazing star forgets her origins!

Katrina I'm not lost, I'm searching!

Journo 3 Mysterious arrival surrounded by love!

Most of the crowd is now close to the beautiful Katrina, admiring her, their curiosity rampant.

Crowd Oooooooooohhh ...

Katrina Oooooooooohhh ...

Crowd Oooooooooohhh ...

Rupert Get busy. What do you think you're paid for?

Journo 1 Cult leader says Katrina brought mysteriously to earth!

Journo 2 Rumours of extra-terrestrial powers.

Mark I want a better life.

Josie We've got no hope of getting it now.

Peter (indicating Rupert) We've got to smash this bastard. Oh shit, she's going to talk.

Katrina There are people spreading rumours about me. None of them are true.

Peter (challenging) I used to know you when you were a kid. Leigh Creek, South Australia. That's where she comes from.

Rupert (to his journos) Onto it. Check it out!

Katrina (flaunting herself) Do I look like I come from a little coal town? What do your eyes tell you? Eeeeeeeehhh?

Journo 1 Earth's magnetic field starting to wobble.

Journo 2 Mysterious currents originating in remote outback.

Journo 3 Mysterious beauty offered contract ...

Rupert (coming forward) ... to read the news!

The lights in the floor where Katrina's standing become even more brilliant. Rupert hands a cheque to one of his journalists, who passes it to Katrina, who raises her brows at the figure, while camera men surround her, pressing their cameras and sound booms sensuously close.

Katrina None of this turns me on. If you think this is worth having, think again.

Crowd She's sick of us. We're sick of her.

Mark Let's plan our futures. Let's make ourselves a better life.

Josie Most of us have got kids. What sort of a world are they going to live in?

There is an almighty crash, Katrina disappears, and when the crowd settles again, it's clear that they surround a mysteriously glowing egg.

Crowd Aaaaaaaahhh! An egg, is it? An egg?

Rupert Worth every million it cost me. (He signals, and music, full of mystery and stimulation, starts up.) Very promising. Now we have to persuade it to hatch!

Journo 1 Golden mystery fills city square!

Journo 2 Archbishop condemns fertility rites.

Journo 3 Cult figure claims Katrina to be reborn!

Rupert Hey, that's a good idea!

Peter The bastard's outsmarted us again.

Amid shimmering music, the egg begins to glow even more strongly. People tap on it, and listen. A thin crack appears. The crack opens a little, and a woman's hand can be seen, trying to lever the egg apart.

Crowd Oooooooooohhh!

Katrina (inside the egg) Oh glamorous world, let me know what you are!

Crowd Aaaaaaaahhh!

Peter It's going to take twenty years to get this behind us.

Josie Whoever she is, she's going to have it better than me.

Mark They're so silly. There's no such thing as superhuman.

Rupert That's precisely where you're wrong, my boy. Superhuman is what the public desires to be ...

Mark ... and they can't! It's not possible, you awful bloody shonk!

Rupert Watch, my boy! Peel the skin of ideology away from those eyes, and tell yourself what you see!

Mark The most beautiful woman ...

Katrina pushes some fragments of shell away. It's not clear whether she's naked or not.

Josie My kids should be here to see this.

Peter Did I say twenty? Call that a couple of centuries.

Katrina Is the world ready, yes or no?

Journo 1 Are you the Katrina that was here before?

Katrina ignores the question.

Journo 2 How do you see the world now? Is it changed?

Katrina looks over his head to the people beyond, who are in raptures at her magical birth.

Journo 3 What's the deal? Are you with us, or just visiting?

Katrina tries to break the shell containing her, but appears to hurt her hand.

Crowd (distressed by the accident) Oooooooooohhh ...

Katrina I can't live in a world without love.

Crowd Aaaaaaaaahhh.

Peter She's got 'em by the short hairs. Two hundred years before they recover.

Mark They'll hand it down to their kids.

Rupert Bliss! I wouldn't sell my company for anything on earth. You know why? Because it's going to represent everything there is on earth! Ha! (He laughs triumphantly.)

Katrina Perhaps nobody's ready. I see adoration in your eyes, but not the welcome required for a woman like me.

She starts to sink back into the shell.

Crowd (variously) Make the world ready for her. Get the Pope to give her a blessing. Get her a beautiful gown, she's got nothing to wear! (At the thought of seeing the blessed Katrina's body, the crowd rushes forward, but Katrina lifts her hand, causing them to stop.

Katrina (inside the egg) The earth is not ready. Take me back where I came from!

The crowd carries the egg away, some of them trying to get a look at the hidden Katrina as they go. Left on stage are Rupert, Peter, Josie, Mark, and of course the journalists.

Rupert Funny without a crowd. What's going to happen next?

Peter You've still got the numbers you bastard. So tell us what's going to happen.

Journo 1 Mysterious disappearance leaves vacuum ...

Journo 2 Vacuum ...

Journo 3 Vacuum ...

Rupert That's enough. Fill the vacuum, or you're off the payroll. Why should I pay you for silence when I can have it for nothing?

Journo 1 Mysterious blight affecting the roses at Flemington.

Rupert Boring!

Journo 2 Bring back the drop kick says Brownlow hope.

Rupert Clear your desk! Out of here in five minutes!

Journo 3 Supremo's wife wants family wealth.

Rupert Shut up or you'll find there's worse things than being sacked.

Journo 1 PM says world needs magic to make it whole.

Rupert How does he spell it? H - O - L - E?

Josie I thought we were on the way up, for a while. I didn't want to be stuck, like this.

Mark I thought we could make the world better, but I was wrong.

Peter We need an idea ...

Rupert leaves. The floor lights extinguish themselves. There's no light from the ceiling, only a glimmer from the sides of the stage. Peter wanders about aimlessly. Josie and Mark stay where they are, depressed by their inability to create the world they'd hoped for. Suddenly a light blazes down from the ceiling. Peter stares at the spot on the floor where, it seems, illumination might be provided. He walks close to it.

Josie Take care, Peter. You don't know what might happen.

Mark Hang on, mate. (He clings to Peter's arm.) You'll cause something worse than the egg-woman. No! No, mate, no! Don't do it! I see you're tempted, but what you do affects everyone else, and I say no.

Crowd (returning at the edges) We say no! No!

Peter You, you cranks!

Crowd No!

Peter Stuff the lot of you! Anything would be better than what we've got!

Rupert (also returning at the edge to have a look) Game bastard. I hope he doesn't get hurt too much.

Peter (stepping under the light) We only die once.

Crowd Mmmmmmmmm?

Peter says nothing.

Crowd Mmmmmmmmm?!

Rupert (to Journo 1) Interview him. See what he's got to say.

Journo 1 goes close to Peter, but finds him locked in his own thoughts, ignoring the cheque being waved in front of him.

Rupert Well?

Journo 1 No contact as yet. Will try. Repeat, will try.

Peter Boring little turd. (looking at Rupert) Boring big turd. What I feel's like growing pains. They've cramped me in a space that's too small. I'm like that woman that came in the egg. She couldn't get out. Remember? (He's musing to himself.) Beautiful. Had everything but a brain. That's what he's about (indicating Rupert). Keeping our brains switched off. Or switched to his channel. What a fate! Having your mind filled by Rupert's hirelings!

Journo 1 Egg man still in a trance.

Journo 2 Still incommunicado. World left waiting.

Journo 3 Doctors to rub his brow with Katrina-based ointment. World waits.

Rupert Don't repeat yourselves, you lazy bastards. Cut back on grog and use your imaginations. There's a story to tell.

Peter Now the battle's really on. I've got Rupert's boys hanging on my every word. Hey!

He clicks his fingers furiously, and Katrina appears yet again, dressed in a gown of flame which the newly resurrected lighting, from floor and ceiling, enhances.

Katrina Who's calling me? What do you want?

Rupert Not me, my dear. Him.

Katrina inspects the silent Peter, under his light.

Katrina You're in the spotlight, darling. What have you got to say?

Peter Let's take a step together.

Katrina Sounds okay. Where do you want to go?

Peter I want to take such a step that once it's taken, we can never go back. Never fall, never lose hope. Never want to turn. One step! And when it's taken, we have to go on together, you, me, every single one of us. One step! And there's no turning back. No backsliding, no Wall Street collapses, no hydrogen bombs, no disasters. One step, and it's all systems go, everybody looking forward, nobody making money out of disaster and defeat. No failures any more because if one of us stumbles the rest of us pick him up. Know what I mean?

Katrina I think I do. Which direction you want to go?

Peter Not sure. (She starts to walk around him, and he turns so that he's facing her at all times.) Slowly darling. Take it really slow. I've got to know when the moment's right because I can't afford to fail.

Journo 1 Magic man in a spin!

Journo 2 Egg woman condemned to wait.

Journo 3 Beauty and brain – a world away and a step apart!

Rupert Nice line that. I like it. Beauty and brain ... what was it?

Peter This has got to be right! We're on the verge of something more wonderful than the world's ever known.

Josie He hasn't given up hope yet. I suppose that's something.

Mark Something's not very much.

Katrina I'm waiting, darling. I'm not very patient, and I want you to move.

Peter You're very beautiful, darling, but there's something behind you that's even more beautiful. I think it's called an idea ...

He keeps turning. Katrina circles him again and again, a little further away each time.

Rupert The poor boy's lost. I thought he had something there. Unfulfilled promise, I have to say. A pity but the world's full of it.

Journo 1 Strange attraction beginning to fade.

Journo 2 Beauty and truth fail to find a bed.

Journo 3 World keeps spinning in the same old way.

Rupert Shut up you bastards. You're getting a twenty percent pay cut. The world has to do better, even if it's sure to fail. There's got to be someone trying, or we wouldn't have a paper to sell!

The Ship of State

Night. We are on the bridge of a ship. The Captain and his officers, male and female, are discussing what to do.

Captain Let's have a look at the map.
Terry (f) Something's eaten it sir, you can't make out a thing.
Captain Call ahead. Get our bearings that way.
Lily Radio's stuffed. Nothing doing, sir.
Captain Bugger it! We'll take our bearings from the stars.
Sam Nobody knows how to do it, sir. Unless, maybe, one of the passengers.
Captain Passengers? You want to end up on the rocks?
Sam No sir, not really.
Captain Not really! Where did you do your training, lad?
Sam With you sir. On this ship. Remember?
Captain I'm not sure that I do. I don't remember the ship being launched.
Terry I remember the last time we were in port.
Lily I thought I was pregnant when I got back on board. Thank the lord I wasn't.
Captain Women ...
Lily It takes two to tango, sir, and two to do lots of things ...
Terry I've got a nice bunk, welcoming and warm ...
Sam You might let me see it. One starry night, when the sky's full of love ...
Terry If I thought you were full of love, I might ...

Captain The ship has to be kept on course. We've got hundreds down below ...
Terry ... finding their own course, through the night ...
Sam It's the end of our watch, captain. Mind if we go below?
Captain I suppose none of us would be here if there wasn't such a thing as lust. Off you go. Don't rock the boat!
Sam I'm not that vigorous sir. Unless Terry stirs me up ...
Terry I'll be doing my best. I want to know what you're made of, Sammy.

Sam and Terry go below.
Captain Who's replacing them? Oh those bloody fanatics ...
Philip and Tricia, two new officers, join the group.
Tricia Still lost, I presume?
Captain Got something to offer?
Tricia A fresh mind's an advantage on a ship as old as this.
Philip I suggested a change of name before we set out, but nobody would listen.
Lily What did you want to call the ship? Remind me, Phil.
Philip I wanted 'Hope Reborn'. Something of that sort. I thought we'd have a competition. The passengers, instead of dancing, could sit and think.

Captain You're at war with human nature, expecting it to change.

Philip You never give it a chance. You're so sure of what it's going to do.

Captain I'm sure enough. They want to dance, then take someone to bed. And when they wake up, they start thinking ...

Tricia Thinking?

Philip Yes, Tricia, they're thinking all the time.

Captain ... of how to do it all again. The same but ever so slightly different, so they don't get bored! Fuck them! Let them be bored stiff! The last thing they want is to take control of themselves.

Tricia They want to sail from one port of pleasure to the next ...

Captain ... on a mindless cruise. Grog and glamour and bed, bed, bed!

Lily (sexily) Anything so very terrible about that?

Captain We recruited you in the south sea islands ...

Lily It's a wonder you let me on, with your European minds!

Philip You exploited us to benefit yourself.

Captain Shut up the pair of you. We've got to work out where we are.

Philip Surely you've kept records ...

Tricia Or have you lost them too?

Captain Well, we did have a log ...

Tricia So where is it now?

Captain Lost, of course.

Tricia And the historians?

Captain Nobody listens to them.

Philip Because nobody cares, and that's your fault.

Lily Blame, blame, what a game. Getting into bed is better. There's pleasure there.

Philip Pleasure! You don't seem to realise, Lily, that we're lost.

Tricia The sea's a dangerous place when you don't know where you are.

Lily The sea? We might be on land.

Captain I don't think so but you can't always tell.

Philip On land? What on earth put that idea in your head?

Tricia Maybe he knows his abilities well? If we're not on water, Captain, how far inland are we?

Captain We'll get an idea when the sun comes up.

Lily Which I think it's doing now.

Light enters the sky, and the mood of the music too. The Captain, Lily, Tricia and Philip look around them and it becomes clear after a while that what they thought was a ship is a wonky and ridiculous structure so far inland that they are surrounded by flat, dry plains.

Captain Well, I'll be blessed!

Lily If you can get someone to love you, you will be.

Tricia What a fraud you turned out to be.

Captain It was only ever a ship of state, not the ocean-going vessel you thought it was.

Philip The ship of state? You pulled the trick of metaphor. Clever man. How are you going to make peace with the people down below?

Captain May I suggest ... Lily?

Lily A good breakfast, service at table, a newspaper, then they all move into the lounge ...

Captain ... for a sustaining cup of tea!

Philip Followed by?

Captain Conversation, games, either strenuous, or just a pack of cards, and ...

Lily ... a mid-morning snack ...

Captain Tiffins, wasn't it? Or was that in the afternoon?

Lily You could have it either way, sir. Oh look who's back! (Terry and Sam return, still in their night attire.) Have a good night, darlings?

Terry I've had better but I've had worse. I'll have him again tonight, unless we arrive in port.

Sam I want to keep the ship at sea until she tires of me.

Philip We've got a problem, Sam, and it's more than you can solve.

Sam (looking around at last) Good heavens. (to Terry) My darling, I was so caught up, I didn't even know.

Tricia You dill, we haven't moved since you went to bed. We've been here for years.

Sam Long night then!

Terry But we've woken up. Where do we go from here?

Lily My darling, hasn't it occurred to you that there's nowhere to go? We arrived a thousand years ago and we've been digging ourselves in ever since.

Captain A very long night indeed.

Philip Well, we're not helpless. We've got to move things along a bit.

Captain The engines haven't fired in years.

Tricia What a hopeless bastard you are! You haven't had a thought in years.

Captain (nonchalantly) Well, not a useful one. I'm not a very practical man.

Philip The first thing we've got to do, then, is take that uniform off you.

Lily He looks nice in it, though. I mean, he gives an appearance of someone who knows where he's going.

Captain Let's do a deal. You run the ship, I'm the figurehead. You take the power and I keep the uniform. Eh?

All officers Yes! (The captain bows.) Yes! (He bows again.) Yes!!!

He lies down, putting his cap beside him as he does so.

Philip Good riddance, but where does that leave us?

Tricia Considerably better off.

Philip In the middle of nowhere.

Tricia Nowhere's somewhere. Get the passengers on deck.

Captain (murmuring from his bench) May I suggest, after morning tea.

Tricia Ratbag. We need them when their minds are fresh.
Blow the siren, long and loud, till we've got their
attention.

A sombre siren booms, endlessly, it seems, then the whole
accompaniment joins in, with the maximum variety of possible
sounds, until the crowd of passengers becomes quite lively.

Tricia That siren's mournful. It makes me feel there's no
hope. And did you notice? It doesn't affect the
land.

Philip There's nothing there to listen. The siren's for us.

A number of the passengers feel in no way reduced by their
situation. Some of them see it as an opportunity to have been called
on deck.

Bluey (gazing over the rail) A whole wide land to explore,
and conquer.

Tracey I want to have my family out there, and I want things
got ready.

Ox I'm your man, love. At both ends of the stick ... so to
speak.

Tracey Let's get started.

Miles The space looks frightening. We need to build a wall
around the ship.

Milly I'm not going out. I want to be safe inside.

Tricia (to the crowd) Now listen everybody, and get your
thinking caps on. We're in danger, because we don't
understand our position. What land this is, we don't

know. We've been living on supplies we had on the
ship. They're going to run out. We'll do a stocktake
and let you know how long our supplies will last.
We've got to explore, we've got to make peace with
natives, and we've got to start growing food. Food,
you hear me ...

Ox My oath I can hear you. My belly's rumbling.
Where's the cook?

Cook (appearing, in whites) There's enough in the fridge
to last a fortnight. After that, it's every man for
himself.

Tricia Chauvinist pig!

Cook Women belong with men, you can't keep us separate.
It just isn't true.

Philip We need an ideological correctness commission.
Without it, we've got no hope.

Captain (murmuring) Why?

Philip Because we'll stray from the path that saves us, and
we'll get lost. (pointing over the rail) I don't want to
be lost out there.

Milly You stay here with me. We'll be safe as long as we
stay out of sight.

Tricia That's no way to think. Out of sight of what?

Milly Of danger, stupid. Find a safe place and stick to it,
that's what I say.

Tricia Isn't it smarter to find a dangerous place and make it
safe? And who are you calling stupid?

Milly Anyone who doesn't think like me. Aren't we all the same?

Captain (still on his bench) Oooooooooohhh ...

Lily He thinks he's retired, but he's still stuck with the problems he couldn't solve.

Sam So how do we solve our problems?

Lily We live with them. It's not so simple, but it's not so stressful, either.

Tricia What?

Lily (looking over the rail) There'd be somewhere out there where flowers would grow.

Philip But you wouldn't own them. They'd be public property.

Lily Nobody owns a flower, darling. We look at it while it has beauty, then it dies, and we forget.

Philip Your thinking's corrupted by an improper image. None of us are flowers ...

Lily That why you never call me by my name?

Philip Your name is not an officer's name!

Lily (moving her hands around her face like mirrors) Lily. Lily.

Tricia (enraged) Throw that bloody woman overboard! We've got problems, and all she can do is sing about herself!

Milly She's not hurting anybody! What's the use of you? Get that uniform off and do some work, you bitch!

Some of the crowd gather to enforce Milly's will. Tricia takes off her navy jacket, reducing the threat from those who've gathered.

Milly (indicating Philip) Him too!

Unruly crowd members hustle Philip into taking off his jacket too. Nobody disturbs the captain who appears asleep.

Captain (very quietly) Oooooooooohhh ...

Tricia (looking out) It's really a whole new ball game, isn't it.

Philip These people aren't up to it. I suggest a breakaway group.

Ox Commonsense, that's all we need.

Philip You think you've got it?

Ox My mind's as broad as my shoulders, mate. Look at'em. Eh?

Philip It's what happens in your mind that counts, and ...

Ox And?

Philip You take over and we'll see how we get on.

Captain (murmuring) Hmmmmmmmm ...

Ox (loudly; to all) Morning tea's off, I'm sorry. We'll be leaving a few volunteers with the cook to organise dinner. The rest of us are breaking into four parties, to explore. North, south, east, west. Take hats, water, and sensible footwear. Off you go. See you tonight ... all being well.

The crowd starts to move away. The cook comes forward.

Cook (to Tricia) You look like you know what you're doing. Want to stay and help me?

Tricia I'd like to, but I'm leading the party north.

Cook Good luck, sir!

Tricia There's no rank any more. We're all in this together.

Cook The big bloke thinks he's in charge, but we're in the hands of what's going to happen. If we were still a ship we could chart a course, but ...

Tricia You're right. It's in the mind. Whoever understands the situation best can run it best. Those with the wrong picture are lost.

Lily Lost? I never thought I was found.

Terry Which way are you going, Lily?

Lily South. It's where I came from.

Terry Sam?

Sam Wherever you go, I follow. (She looks at him curiously, and he continues.) To the end of the world.

Captain (still on his bench) Oooooooooohhh ...

Tricia He's not going anywhere.

Lily Governor General they'll call him.

Tricia What's that mean?

Lily Not much. But when we're lost out there (pointing), we'll think of him as home.

Terry Home ...

Lily This is it, darling. There is no other.

They all look around at the rickety thing they stand on, the vast world beyond the rail, the distant horizons, the absence of meaningful signs, and it makes them pause.

Philip I never thought it would be as bad as this.

Tricia Explore. Ox is right. It's the only thing we can do.

Ox (coming back) Someone talking about me?

Tricia I was. Which party are you leading? East or west?

Ox We'll need a strong headquarters to hold the ship together.

Sam Except we're not a ship any more.

Ox Speaking ... what do you say? ... metaphorically of course.

Tricia Speaking politically, that is. Metaphors obscure. The perfect politician sees very clearly, but doesn't describe what he sees. He wants to keep the populace deluded, but in the way that suits himself. How does that sound, mate?

Ox I think north is the risky direction. I'm glad someone with courage will be leading the party there.

Tricia You hope I come back?

Ox Oh well ...

Tricia Who's going east, who's going west?

Ox (to Philip) You my boy are going east. (Philip slumps.) And you ... (he looks around and sees Milly) ... can lead the party west.

Milly Not me. I'm a homebody. Staying right here.

Ox (to Tracey) What about you?

Tracey I haven't had my children yet. I'm too precious to send away.

Ox (seeing Sam) Ah!

Sam I'm going with Terry.

Ox And Terry ...

Terry ... is going west.

Sam Sounds ominous.

Terry No more than going downhill. Uphill. There's no nice words once things get hard.

Ox The main thing is to make the right decisions.

Tricia You're not doing too badly. You've got the party split in four ...

Cook Five! Don't forget me.

Captain Hmmmmmmmmmm ...

Terry Six, it seems, if we count him.

Ox We don't. He's our figurehead. Any problems there, we get rid of him, and carve another one, out of wood! (He's very amused with himself.)

Lily Been done for a long time in the south seas. You have your carving to represent power, and your axe ...

Ox What are you going to say?

Lily It's already in your mind. Everybody's mind.

Philip The mind is the great unknown.

Lily Not when we're talking about this. Everybody knows everything about power. Think what's going to happen. Cook's got ten people. They get dinner on the table. Is it good to come home first, or last?

With no news, good news, or bad news? Which is best to be? Depends how you play what you know. Nobody knows how the other groups are going to play their cards. Maybe one group won't come back. They'll do a deal with the natives to wipe out the rest of us, then they'll wipe out the people who wiped out us. Maybe. Hard to say, isn't it.

Captain Mmmmmmmmm ...

Lily (pointing to the horizon) It's all in the future, still to be found.

She beckons to her party to follow.

Philip Tricia! I'm coming with you!

Tricia You're going east, Philip. East, remember? I'll see you when we get back. If. If, Philip, if!

She glares at him and he, weakening, goes off, looking lost. She looks contemptuously on Ox, who's staying, then calls to her group.

Tricia Those who want to go north, follow me. Got your hats, bottle of water? There'll be an inspection of footwear once we're down on the ground. Anyone wearing stupid shoes will be sent back to change them. Okay, everybody, swallow your fears, abandon your hopes, and follow me!

She leads her party off. Terry looks at Sam, her recently acquired lover.

Terry It's called commitment, Sammy, and you're going to show it now. West.

Sam West!

Terry This way. Follow me.

Ox Three quarters gone. The ship's feeling deserted.

Captain Not a ship any more. Only the memory of a ship, that's all it's got.

Ox It won't have that for long. Lily? You ready to go?

Lily The sunny south. There's an age of greatness out there somewhere. And (to her party) if we find it, we won't be coming back.

Ox (as Lily's party goes) Good luck to'em. Got courage, that girl. Clear head, I reckon. Okay Cook, you've got everything you want. Give us a good dinner tonight.

Cook Those who are here.

Ox Those who are here. Yes. (He watches Cook and his party go below, then turns to the Captain.) What do you think? Are we going to see any of them again?

Captain I think we don't know. I think it's a great experiment.

Ox What would you like to happen?

Captain I'd like to get the ship out to sea again, but we can't do that.

Ox We're stuck, mate, stuck. Right where we are.

Captain That being the case, I'll snooze till tiffin. I assume we're still having tiffin?

Ox Dunno mate. There's been so many changes I'm not too sure.