

The Modern International Dead

by Damien Millar



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Contents

Playwright's Note vi

THE MODERN INTERNATIONAL DEAD

Part One 1

Part Two 35

Theatre program appears at end of playtext

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

On the punctuation:

— means an interruption.

... means the thought has trailed off.

/ indicates the beginning of an overlap in dialogue.

Words inside square brackets [like these] are thought but not said.

(There are not too many square brackets in this play. This is because the work began with interviews and often the directions of thoughts preceding the ellipses remain wonderfully mysterious to me.)

On the text:

This is a play that covers some major international events. All of these events happened. But it is a play and should not be mistaken for a work of history or objective journalism. Sometimes my interviewees changed dates, times, made sequences out of things that may not have occurred in exactly that order. Sometimes I did too and not just for dramatic purposes. I have compressed dual identities into the one, sometimes to protect the identity of the actual speakers. I have also, by request, changed and omitted names, including the name of one of our central characters, Luke, who is currently back in Cambodia. I have also changed or not included the official names of particular regiments, companies and religious orders, though I have on occasion stuck with their unofficial songs. The character of Bridgette is based on three people: a still-serving sister who worked with the dying and with the East Timorese resistance, a former nun who lost her faith over Rwanda and ended up a debriefer, and the playwright, who is not now nor has ever been a nun.

One of the toughest stories in the play is the one about the Australians in Kibeho, Rwanda. If you wish to read further about the Kibeho incident, I suggest you start with former SAS Trooper Paul Jordan's own testimony, *Witness to Genocide*, available now from www.anzacday.org.au, as well as from multiple other sources online. Peter Londey's *Other People's Wars: A History of Australian*

Peacekeeping (Allen & Unwin, 2004) provides a clear and concise account. Narelle Biedermann presents the stories of three Australians who were there—one of whom I also yacked to—as part of her book *Modern Military Heroes* (Random House, 2006). Gina Lennox’s *Forged by War* (Melbourne University Press, 2006) also contains a fairly devastating interview with an Australian peacekeeper who was there. George Gittoes, this country’s best war artist, has returned to the subject of Kibeho many times in his work. He was also there and was generous enough to point me in the direction of some of my subsequent interviews.

This play was built on many hours of interviews. They were mostly conducted by me but were also, on occasion, conducted by other members of the team. My longest set of interviews was with ‘Luke’. I ended up transcribing several hundred pages of testimony. I only incurred around a hundred and twenty pages of transcription from my interviews with Rod, but I also referred, as does he in the play, to a terrific autobiography he wrote called *The Weapons Detective* (Black Inc, 2007). The play is full of compressions and cuts. Rod’s book, also substantially cut down from its original manuscript form, ‘Adventures of an Ordinary Man’, is thrilling in its detail and tells you a great deal about what Rod is trying to do even now about prisoner abuse in Iraq.

I interviewed many other people, often at real length, whose accounts didn’t necessarily make it into the play but provided much in terms of the play’s world and shape. Some of these stories only disappeared in the first week of rehearsal and I’m still mourning for some of them, as necessary as the cuts were. Many of these people can’t actually be named or named fully, but I’d like to thank a few of them now, particularly doctors Peter, Ro, Felix and Caroline, Corporal Chris and Major Maryann, journalist and adventurer Mark, as well as nurses Anne and Margaret. I can also thank by name Sergeant Andrew Miller who was the first person since the Vietnam War to receive a Gallantry decoration, former Captain Temura Lee, occasional Sydney publicist and East Timorese election worker Will McIntire, as well as logistics man and old friend currently in the Sudan with MSF, Damien Moloney.

Sometimes the cast, along with Christopher Stollery in a workshop week we conducted in May, created improvisations based on what

they heard. I pilfered from these mercilessly. Deep thanks are due to company members Genevieve Blanchett, Ian Meadows and Colin Moody and Christopher Hurrell. I particularly need to thank Belinda McClory for the valuable insights and on-the-floor dramaturgy that she provided throughout the entire process. Outside the company, I'd like to thank Karen and James Bailey, Bill Walker and Veronica Gleeson for providing places of refuge for an often weary interstate traveller. Veronica also provided a terrific line or three, thought up many fabulous alternative titles and found one of the most important interviews for the play.

This work would not have been possible without Veronica's hubby, Chris Mead. I owe him this play.

It also would not have been possible without Max Stafford-Clark and Nick Marchand, both of whom provided encouragement, one of whom provided much more than this: development and a season. Without Nick and Griffin not only would the play not be stretching its legs for the first time in the real world, it would not even have been conceived.

Damien Millar
August 2008

'Somewhere it's always this time. And somewhere it isn't.'
— Nick Enright, *Country Music*

CHARACTERS

ROD, an Australian biochemist, intelligence officer, weapons detective and gardener

LUKE, an Australian peacekeeper, aid worker and deminer

BRIDGETTE, a novitiate sister, smuggler, counsellor and collector of stories

SISTER ALFRED, a nun at the hospice

FATHER GREG, an Aussie priest with underground connections

FATHER FERDINANDE, an East Timorese priest

BOB, Rod's first boss at the JIO

SCHOOL FRIENDS 1 & 2, friends of Luke

BRITISH COLLEAGUES 1 & 2, Rod's co-workers

HARRY, Rod's second boss

PSYCHIC, a strange psychic in Kigali

DOUG, a Scottish worker from the ONA, Australian Office of National Assessments

THOMAS, an Australian journalist

SISTER MARGARITE, an East Timorese sister

CIA OFFICER, an American

DR SHARON WATSON, an American scientist

SECRETIVE AMERICAN SCIENTIST, she's secretive and she's from Aberdeen

SISTER MICHAEL, an Australian nun

ANNE, Bridgette's schoolfriend

MUM, Bridgette's mother

DAD, Bridgette's dad

FRENCH INTELLIGENCE OFFICERS 1 & 2, they're French and they're testy about the Australia Group

UN REPRESENTATIVE, an American UN worker at the New York Office

HAMISH, a Manx man and weapons inspector

DR FELIX, an Australian shrink

IRAQI WORKER, a worker at Al Muthanna
AMERICAN INSPECTOR, an American working for UNSCOM
DAVID KELLY, a British weapons inspector
WAITRESS, a Chinese worker in a Bahrain restaurant
GERMAN MASTER SERGEANT, a sergeant working with Gateway
IMAGINARY AMERICAN, someone not real at all, probably
outrageously Southern
HUMANITARIAN DIVISION, a UN worker in Mogadishu
INDIAN BRIGADIER, in charge of the UN presence in Baidoa, rather
likes *The Sound of Music*
TED, Luke's father
WILLIAM SAFIRE, a journalist with the *New York Times*
GENERAL RASHID, Amer Rashid, an extremely powerful and loud
Iraqi general and husband of Dr Rihab Taha
DR TAHA, Rihab Taha, head scientist of Iraq's biological weapons
program
IRAQI INSIDER, a mysterious Iraqi informant
FATHER EPHRAIM, an American priest, Southern, in Kibeho,
Rwanda
MARY, a Marion apparition at Kibeho, Mother of the Word, not to
be confused with Our Lady Help of Mothers
NURSE, a nurse in Kigali hospital
HANS BLIX, Hans Blix, head of UNMOVIC

PART ONE

1. TO WORK IN THESE SUITS

ROD: I don't think of myself as... I believed very strongly in what I was doing. I still do. I was working with the UN to disarm a country and... I was, we were there to help. I saw the beginning of the war and how it... So I believe in disarmament. But I don't actually think of myself as this, you know, especially good or humanitarian or... Actually I'm not very sure what you're [interested in]. I'm retired now. I like gardening. I mean, what are you interested in? I don't think I'm that interesting, it's just this life, this accidental life and... these events. Not me.

There was this funny time after Iraq with this suit. It was '91, just after the first Gulf War and not very far in time from the Iran-Iraq war. And these guys, remember, the Iraqis, they made a lot of weapons. I mean we found nerve agents and mustard gas and... an underground plant where they were making VX, the most poisonous substance invented. And anthrax. From analysing their production facilities, they could have made tons. And it was missing. Fairly serious. But not something they could admit because this was after the [ceasefire]... And they were trapped in their own lies and... Well, that's in my book.

But I was telling you about this suit. Very claustrophobic, this. Walking in this suit. It's a strange experience, but if you put your hands like this around your eyes you can [imagine]... And of course you're not very mobile. One of the dangers I've found, if you go into a chemical weapons plant that's been bombed and you've got bits of debris hanging off the roof, it's very hard to see. Normally your peripheral vision goes up and you don't hit your head but... You know, if you wear a cap, a baseball cap or a blue UN peacekeeper's cap, you hit your head a lot more. Well, it's the same with this suit.

But I remember walking along, and it's a hot day, and we're looking for this mustard gas, which we found. This is at a place called

Al Muthanna. And we had a little detector in our hands and I'm sweating. A lot. And I'm walking along looking for mustard gas and I start to smell this gas inside my suit. I think, hello, this is not good. And I'm walking and the smell is getting stronger and, and then I realise. I'm a biochemist, right? Sweat contains a substance called urea, which is a high nitrogen compound, and you have an enzyme in your skin which breaks down urea into ammonia and ammonia... Well, mums would know. It causes nappy rash. But that's the gas smell I was smelling. I'm tempted to lift the mask off and let it drain. But our detector's going and Hamish, my colleague, is looking, is looking, so I think, perhaps not.

When I come home, my house in Canberra has asbestos in the roof. And so the house was being de-asbestosised or whatever you'd call it, and I'm quite keen for this to occur because I was heading off again soon, back to Iraq. So my house is surrounded by scaffolding, sheets, workmen in their own special suits. And I'm saying to one of the workmen, 'When are you going to be finished with this job?' I'm being polite, diplomatic, and just want to... I mean it'd been going quite a lot longer than they originally told me, so I'm just saying when are you going to be finished? And the workman looks at me and says, 'You don't know what it's like to work in these suits'.

2. *FOLLOWING THE WATER*

LUKE: I'm following the water. If I just follow the water, I'll be safe. But I'm not sure how it started. First I'm in the laundry. Dad flooded it a little. My ankles are wet. And then, 'cause they're wet, I just, you know, strip off after cleaning up and have a shower. The water's running hot and I'm thinking of where the axe and my father are.

3. *GOING BACKWARDS*

BRIDGETTE: Start with a story. I like them.

LUKE: So I can say, what, anything?

BRIDGETTE: Yes.

LUKE: And no-one'll know.

BRIDGETTE: You'll know. I'll know.

LUKE: Yeah but no-one important.

BRIDGETTE: Make yourself comfortable.

LUKE: So you're not a shrink.

BRIDGETTE: No. I'm a counsellor. He thought... Your doctor thought I could / help.

LUKE: So he organises the paperwork for my pension and you what?

BRIDGETTE: I listen. I try to help.

LUKE: Reckons you used to be a nun.

BRIDGETTE: I was a novitiate sister for / a few years but—

LUKE: So nothing in the field.

BRIDGETTE: Nun's aren't the same as sisters. I've been to Timor.

LUKE: I knew a doctor in Rwanda. She... I killed a dog once when I was a kid and it was an accident but it still died.

BRIDGETTE: Oh.

LUKE: I went to New Guinea for my eighteenth birthday and vomited... Isn't this how you wanted to start?

BRIDGETTE: How about you?

Maybe you can tell me about the Mary of Kibeho.

Well. Um. Where would you... like...?

LUKE: Isn't that your job?

BRIDGETTE: Can I ask you a question?

LUKE: Will it help?

BRIDGETTE: I don't know.

LUKE: [Okay.]

BRIDGETTE: Do you think, overall, you know, that what you've done, that what you've offered in the world has been, you know, just in an overall sense, good?

LUKE: Jesus. Dr Felix was just interested in me guns.

BRIDGETTE: Oh.

LUKE: Collected them himself. I thought a doctor working with ex-grunts and he's interested in guns?