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Betty Roland

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War on the Waterfront - a banned play

Abstract
This play was originally published in the Communist Review, February 1939, 110–114. It was subsequently reprinted in Australian Dramatical Studies, 1986, 74–9. Betty Roland (1903–1996) was an Australian journalist, and author of books, plays, radio and movie scripts. She was a founding member of the Australian Society of Authors. During the late 1930s she was a leading contributor to the radical New Theatre in Sydney. Part of her literary output comprised short, topical, agitprop scripts which she regarded as a form of political cartooning. These scripts were regularly published in the organ of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), Communist Review, edited by her partner of the time, Guido Baracchi, a founder of the CPA. War on the Waterfront was one of these agitprop pieces. It was intended for performance without props, utilising informal venues like the backs of trucks, factory canteens, footpaths. Hastily written early in December 1938, during the heat of the Pig-Iron dispute, it was eventually staged at the New Theatre (Sydney), and in Port Kembla. However plans to premiere the play to an audience of 2000 in Sydney's Domain on December 11 created drama. The performance was closed by a police contingent after the first few lines had been delivered, and the actors each fined five pounds. Undeterred, the performers decamped to Watson's Bay and gave a public open-air performance there. Official permission from the NSW Ministry of Agriculture, which controlled the Domain, was sought for a December 15 Domain performance, but this was refused; no reasons were given. Hence reference to this being a banned play in the Communist Review title.

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War on the Waterfront

A 'banned' play

Betty Roland

This play was originally published in the *Communist Review*, February 1939, 110–114. It was subsequently reprinted in *Australian Dramatical Studies*, 1986, 74–9. Betty Roland (1903–1996) was an Australian journalist, and author of books, plays, radio and movie scripts. She was a founding member of the Australian Society of Authors. During the late 1930s she was a leading contributor to the radical New Theatre in Sydney. Part of her literary output comprised short, topical, agitprop scripts which she regarded as a form of political cartooning. These scripts were regularly published in the organ of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), *Communist Review*, edited by her partner of the time, Guido Baracchi, a founder of the CPA. *War on the Waterfront* was one of these agitprop pieces. It was intended for performance without props, utilising informal venues like the backs of trucks, factory canteens, footpaths. Hastily written early in December 1938, during the heat of the Pig-Iron dispute, it was eventually staged at the New Theatre (Sydney), and in Port Kembla. However plans to premiere the play to an audience of 2000 in Sydney's Domain on December 11 created drama. The performance was closed by a police contingent after the first few lines had been delivered, and the actors each fined five pounds. Undeterred, the performers decamped to Watson's Bay and gave a public open-air performance there. Official permission from the NSW Ministry of Agriculture, which controlled the Domain, was sought for a December 15 Domain performance, but this was refused; no reasons were given. Hence reference to this being a banned play in the *Communist Review* title.

CHARACTERS:

JOE and BILL, two waterside workers

A SHIPPING AGENT

SEAMAN off the Dalfram

BHP

Scene: The wharf at Port Kembla

[JOE and BILL stroll onto platform.]

JOE: I say, Bill, I wonder who this pig-iron's for?

BILL: Hanged if I know.

JOE: Wonder if it's going to Japan?

BILL: Shouldn't be surprised. They're the ones who seem to need it most these days.

JOE: Then they don't get me to load it, by crikey!

BILL: Garn, what's biting you? What's it matter to us where the flamin' stuff is going to?

JOE: What's it matter to us? Say Bill, don't you know what they use pig-iron for?

BILL: Sure I do. They use it for munitions.

JOE: And what do you think the Japs want munitions for?

BILL: To blast hell out of the Chinks, of course.

JOE: Bill, you've got a great mind. Works like a clock. And still you don't see why we ought to refuse to load the stuff?

BILL: Well, I'm sorry for the Chinks, but someone's always been ill-treating them poor cows.

JOE: So that's the way you look at it? Gawd, you ought to take a running jump over the end of that wharf.

BILL: Ah garn, what yer giving us? You been reading too much foreign literature. Affects the mind. I told you so last week.

JOE: Listen here, you poor, blind, son-of-a-seacook. I'm not making wisecracks. I'm just stating facts. It's China today and Australia tomorrow, see?

BILL: Can't say I do, but perhaps you're right.

JOE: And anyhow, I wouldn't load this stuff if it didn't mean a thing to me. The thought of what those Japs are doing to the Chinese makes me want to wring their dirty necks. I wouldn't do a thing to help them, not if it cost me the last bob I had.

BILL: But we don't even know if the stuff is going to Japan.

JOE: Here's the shipping-agent. Let's ask him. Hi mate! Is this pig iron for Japan?

[SHIPPING-AGENT comes in. A miserable little creature with a scared expression who tries to hurry away]

S.A.: Japan? Who says it's for Japan?

BILL: No one, we're just asking you.

S.A.: Then stop wasting time, my man. Get on with your job and let me get on with mine.

JOE: We're not getting on with no jobs till we know where the stuff is going to.

S.A. : How should I know?

JOE: Now, look here, brother, come clean. [Grabs him by the collar and lifts his face up close to his own.] Where's it going to?

S.A: I'm telling you! It's going to Singapore.

[JOE releases him.]

JOE: Singapore? Well, that's different.

S.A.: Now get on with your job, like good fellows, this ship's due to sail in two days' time.

[He scuttles off.]

BILL: See? It's going to Singapore to build a nice, strong battleship to fight the naughty Japs.

JOE: Yes, so he says.

BILL: Well, he's the one that ought to know. Isn't he the shipping agent?

JOE: Isn't he the boss's little lily-livered worm? He'd say just what he was told to say.

BILL: Aw, come on, don't stand magging half the day.

[They move off and are met by a SEAMAN off the Dalfram].

SEA: Hello, where are you chaps heading for?

BILL: We're going to load that pig-iron on the Dalfram.

SEA: You are? Then you ought to be shot for it.

BILL: Why?

JOE: What's the matter?

SEA: Don't you know where it's for?

BILL: It's for Singapore.

SEA: Singapore, me fat aunt! It's consigned to Kobe.

JOE and BILL: WHAT!!!

SEA: Sure, to Kobe.

JOE: How do you know?

BILL: But we just asked the shipping-agent and he said it was for Singapore.

SEA: Then, he's a flaming liar. I'm off the Dalfram and I know it's for Kobe.

BILL: My gawd, just let me get a hold of that double-crossing, lousey little sewer-rat.

[JOE grabs him.]

JOE: Here, wait on, he's not the one we've got to put the boot into.

BILL: What do you mean?

JOE: Let's go and tell the other chaps. There'll be no loading done today if I can stop it.

SEA: Good on you, lad. You stop work and the crew of the Dalfram will back you up to the last man.

JOE: OK, that's the stuff. We'll need support.

BILL: Too right we will. You wait and hear the row this makes. It's dog-collars for us, laddie.

JOE: [As they go off] 'Dog-collars' or not, it's time someone kicked up a fuss about the way the bosses have been helping on the Japs.

SEA: Here, here! Up boys and at 'em!

[WATERSIDERS go off one side, SEAMAN the other. SHIPPING AGENT comes running in, very agitated.]

S.A.: Sir, oh sir! Come quickly! Something terrible has happened.

[BHP comes in.]

BHP: What's the matter?

S.A.: Oh sir, you'd hardly believe it. Those impudent watersiders won't load the pig-iron. They say it's for Japan and have declared it black.

BHP: Who said it's for Japan? I said to tell them it's for Singapore.

S.A. : Oh yes, sir, I did tell them, I kept on telling them, but they won't believe a word I say.

BHP: Won't believe you! [Looks him up and down.] Well, perhaps they're right.

S.A. : And that's not all, sir. The crew is in support of them. They say they won't either load or fire her if she carries pig-iron for Japan.

BHP: What's that? But the firemen are Indians. You can't tell me that the niggers have developed principles.

S.A.: Oh, yes they have. I don't know what the world is coming to. They're talking quite intelligently.

BHP: Intelligence, be damned! It's rank, out-and-out bolshevism, that's what it is, and don't you let me hear you call that intelligence.

S.A.: Oh no, sir, not me, sir.

BHP: Who's at the bottom of this?

S.A.: Look, sir, that man over there. See, he's talking to a group of men now. Agitating, that's what.

BHP: Agitating! Bring him over here. I'll give him agitation.

S.A. : [Calling of.] Hi, you, come over here!

[JOE comes on. Sees SHIPPING-AGENT.]

JOE: Oh yes, I've got something to say to you. What the blazes do you mean by telling me that pig-iron was for Singapore?

[AGENT runs off. BHP blocks JOE.]

BHP: Now then, that'll do. He said what he was told to. And if I say it's for Singapore, it is for Singapore.

JOE: Well, if you say it's for Singapore, I say you're a flaming liar.

BHP: How dare you speak to me like that? What business is it of yours where the cargo goes to? It's your job to load it and ask no questions.

JOE: Oh yes, Adolph? Since when was I born deaf and dumb?

BHP: Will you get on with your work?

JOE: Not me, governor. I'm not going to make money out of the blood and suffering of helpless Chinese men and women. I leave all that sort of thing to you.

BHP: You'll pay for this!

JOE: You bet I will. I'll lose my wages, and my wife and kids will go short over Christmas.

BHP: You'll find what it means to try your puny strength in international affairs. I'll break you and I'll cripple you for years.

JOE: Perhaps you will, but, by God, not before I've made things pretty hot for you. There won't be a single man or woman in Australia who won't know all about the dirty game you're up to.

Iron ore is banned, so you turn it into pig-iron and you ship it out and dodge the law that way, Mister BHP, the fattest hog in Australia. Got your belly full of Chinese corpses, haven't you?

BHP: Now, by God …

JOE: Now, by God, I've had my say and everybody's heard me. Bring out your Lyons and your Menzies, and your Transport Workers' Act, and your scabs. I'm ready for 'em.

[He advances right up to BHP who backs away in alarm. JOE holds his finger against his chest and drives home every point.]

> And don't forget I'm not alone in this. There's not a union, not a member of the working class who won't support me. Maybe you'll be biting off a little more than you can chew.

[He begins to turn away.]

> And now I'm going back to call out every watersider on the wharves, and if I have my way there won't be a single ship on the waterfront that will load your dirty iron. That'll show you what we think of selling war materials to the Japs. So long! See you in hell sometime.

[He spits neatly on the other's boot and strolls off. BHP recovers his breath.]

BHP: [Shouting] Joe ! Bob ! Mr Lyons ! Mr Menzies ! Help! Help! Where's that dog-collar? Can't you hear me? Help! Help!!

[He runs off still shouting for help.]

THE END